

'Wow!' factor deleted from the wired-up world of screenagers

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Life's simple pleasures seem lost in our kids' digital drowning.

Advertisement

THE chorus of whinging children fell silent, their faces blank. It was as if something had died at the very time when most magical moments were made - the summer holidays!

What happened to that spark of passion for life? Even the unwrapping of Christmas gifts and watching the New Year's Eve fireworks failed to elicit a "Wow!" from this screen-savvy sample of children.

Every suggestion from my list of boredom-busters was dismissed with shrugs of apathy.

They could not be "bothered" flying a kite, baking a dessert, exploring with a magnifying glass, planting strawberries, borrowing books from the local library, researching their family tree, playing chess or learning card tricks - simple pleasures in which money is no barrier.

Apparently, these veterans had "been there, done that", either at school or vicariously, having watched it on some screen somewhere. Although they were rich with opportunities and technologies, they seemed so poor in imagination and spontaneity.

By the time these children become teenagers, they are wired up for a plethora of contradictions and "iKonies". In his 1997 book *Playing the Future*, American author Douglas Rushkoff coined the term "screenager" to describe this generation.

They will have more communication technologies than ever before, yet communicate with family members less than ever. Parents may need to log in to check their screenager's ever-changing emotional "status".

The social network Facebook actually becomes anti-social as addicts rely more on their hands to communicate via a keyboard. Worse, Facebook sucks up time that used to be given to book reading. Despite access to more TV channels and faster media than that available to past generations, the word "bored" continues to replace the word "Wow!"

The latest gadgets are ironically coded with an honest prefix: iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad, iTunes. Marketed as social tools to get connected, they really are more about personal entertainment for a self-centred I than a shared social space for We.

While the screenagers are switched on to numerous applications simultaneously, they are switched off from the real world in their immediate family environment. Conversations are treated as intrusive interruptions to more urgent cyber-chat.

They may be watching a repeat of an American sit-com about families and relationships in 2D, but are oblivious to some similar 3D situations a few footsteps away from their iSpace. A sobbing sibling or a visitor's doorbell can be reduced to white noise. Why watch a rerun of *Friends* on YouTube if you can have real friends drop in to your real couches and share a real "Wow!" moment?

They become unconnected from other problems such as the fair distribution of chores in a family home. In my



family, watching a 30-minute American sit-com is equivalent to doing all our day's dishes, ironing and laundry. Now that's a wow statistic!

The constant gazing at screens produces a hypnotic trance akin to a drug addict. The digital drug tells the screenagers: "Don't go away. Stay right there. We'll be right back", so even the advertisements are compulsory, even if nature calls.

Withdrawal symptoms can be experienced when these toys are unplugged. The drum-roll promotions of television shows "coming soon" is so inflated with the wow factor that it ironically leaves the viewer feeling all deflated and wowed out.

As a widowed parent, I could understand the experiment conducted by a fellow sole parent of three teenagers. In *Winter of our Disconnect*, Susan Maushart describes her family's "self-imposed exile from the Information Age".

After six months of this digital detox, they found that "having less to communicate with, her family is communicating more".

Imagine the melodic wow factor of returning home and not hearing the monotonous tapping of keypads. Imagine the smiles in SMS messages were no longer imitations of real life but real smiles beaming from the real faces of your children. Imagine the resuscitation of the wow factor in your family.

The wow factor is now an endangered species, in need of protection and rejuvenation.

We should not need to drip-feed the wow factor intravenously. A simple start is if screenagers looked out their own windows in their own neighbourhood rather than the windows of a computer.

Parents can lead by example by pursuing their own passions and inviting their children to participate. This could involve making music, learning massage or planting herbs.

When their peers were envious of our quality time, dad became dude!

So, parents, please don't despair. Your screenagers need you. They have data and information, but you have knowledge and wisdom. Rescue them from a digital drowning and open their eyes to the wonders of life that have always led humans to sing a chorus of wows.

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