

# A Perspective on Childhood and Adolescence: On the Roles of Focus, Learning, and Social Imperative

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## Commentary

I am flattered (and rather surprised!) to be asked, and not accustomed to being much noticed. Being re-tweeted or “liked” by social media is not my goal - which, rather, is to positively impact lives. In fact, I value anonymity and privacy. But beyond that, I value the sanctity and importance of “mindfulness” and celebrate the human potential to influence self and society, along with loved ones, students, and our situational realities, for good. “Positive psychology”, before it became so branded.

[Though I rarely focus on myself as a subject, if somehow my biography is of interest, here's a rare - and best-ever - interview about my work in psychology and technology - <http://ikaros.cz/michael-fenichel-nejen-o-online-poradenstvi-a-vztahu-internetu-a-psychologie>].

Below begins my attempt to respond to your request for something! Feel free to use, and would appreciate seeing the context when/if it's published! Thank you! - “Dr. Mike”.

We all know about the bad news swirling everywhere, hate and killing and proselytizing in both media and politics, echoed throughout the “hive” of social media and always-attached “external brains”. Today is different than yesterday, and tomorrow. Still, experience is both unique, and within a frame, shaped by individual, culture, and society. That's the “big picture” as I see it, extending out from work and daily-life experience in urban settings, in clinics, schools, and private consultation. Although I would prefer to present a research or case study ordinarily, here is a snapshot of my current foci. Channeling Mark Twain, I'd have written this shorter if only I had the time!

## Context and Perspective

For years I underscored and focused upon the importance of “context” - “Context is everything”, I would often say. When I administered and interpreted psychological tests, a mainstay of my activity for many years, I was often amazed and heartened by the ways in which individuals adapted to, and reflected, unique situations and often I would ‘discover’ unique abilities which were rarely utilized as they might be. Over time I watched the notions of “multiple intelligences”, “EQ”, and controversies over the type of thinking or real-world applications reflected in the various cognitive tests. Could they all be right? Could they all be wrong? Is thinking primarily done in “fluid” vs. “concrete” or “abstract” styles? Visual “versus” verbal? How do we translate our worlds,

what we see, what the text before us is trying to convey, into our own “schema”. How can a child best use “natural ability” or dust off barely-used but present skills? How do tests translate into school or job performance?

Over time, as technology became elevated to the point of being the new deity for marketers, gadget lovers, and younger generations, I watched as student behavior among teens and pre-teens morphed dramatically, not in evolutionary ways but revolutionary, condensed into just a few years. We have the notion now about generational categories, the “boomers”, Gen X, Millennials, and so on, and now the “Millennials” are all on the side of the former ‘digital divide’ where, as one student said to me, “We don't know anything else! What do you expect? You had television and walkman, we have Internet ...” And devices. [1] And sharing and collaboration styles both helped and hindering ‘processing’, focus, goal setting, and utilization of digital resources and distant people. Technology does great things, and that's without even getting into the huge benefits being seen in hospitals - VR for burn treatment pain relief, and PTSD among other applications - and seen in everyday life. It seems I go from “early adapter” to Luddite every few years, as I react to some of the excessive reliance on tethered devices and always-on screens, or grapple with computer-based, now device-based behavioral addictions.

Today - and you don't need me to cite the studies and numbers - it is fairly “normal” to sleep with, wake up to, and be permanently tethered to, a “device”. The idea of “relying on one's own devices” has shifted so that the very idea of devices is synonymous with our idea of life itself, for many. The device does everything for us except brush our teeth. Very cleverly, the phone is no longer a phone meant for “tele” (distant) “phone” (voice) communication, but a one-stop place for on-demand feeding of every whim, 24/7. Some device dependents actually eschew the use of the device to, you know, talk. Some only text, some only socialize, some are

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self-absorbed with image-grooming via “selfies”.

I recall sharing the optimism and finding it exciting as I watched 12-18 year olds come into my office, where a few memorable students immediately sought to lunge at my computer to show off their latest game skills, or MySpace page, or joke page. It took a while, but soon I found the computer to be a reinforcer (“talk for 20 minutes, you can play computer for 10”) as well as a great tool for watching the thinking and learning preferences and talents. I saw world-class gamers including some gifted students who found the computer easier to master than social interaction, or studying for a test.

As I began to see a direct, strong, undeniably real impact on attention span, social behavior, planning and study skills, etc., I also began using the communication power more for work with adults and in my clinical work and supervision. My “claim to fame” if there is one, might be to have co-founded the first online-based training and peer-supervision forum for practicing or aspiring web-based clinicians [2]. Access, stigma-reduction, portability, and instantaneous resources were all harbingers of the great potential which has been largely realized. Healthcare systems now tout self-help or therapist-supported “apps” for supporting mild disorders. Institutes and large companies now have online components. There are support groups and (still) near-infinite sources for people to (anonymously) seek anything from health or mental health information, to anything else - it’s like a 24/7 candy store full of instant reinforcement and “platforms” (like Facebook) assiduously working to coral and own every set of eyeballs on earth. Again, with both positive and negative result, from helping one feel “connected” and appreciated (“liked”) to the real and powerful phenomenon of cyber-bullying. And spam.

Returning to teens and pre-teens. I have been stunned to watch both the brilliance and speed of many young people with “their” technology. Yet I am and equally impressed by the deficits in sustained concentration and focus which now seems epidemic. It’s not only children of course, as young parents may in fact be even more “attached” to their later-in-life toy/device which gives them anything, instantly. Yet, parenting is related to child development and mediated learning and role modeling both exist still today. Reports this past week describe a large and new study [3] impaling what I’ve long called “the myth of multi-tasking”. Citing the Stanford study and neuroscience, the study, drives the point home, as does sociologist Sherry Turkle in her observations about how “disconnecting” rather than “connecting”, a life reflecting what I charitably call ‘device devotion’, can be. Our tiny screens are never turned off (as in Orwell’s 1984) and act as “Big Brother” with reminders to like, follow, etc., what the marketers or propaganda want to propagate or influence.

I spoke in Moscow last year, invited to address the role of communication and shared experience in the Internet age. One of my presentations was beamed to remote places in the Ural region, a talk about the benefits of distance learning and remote access, and I met with several students who greatly benefited from access to distant lectures. I visited crisis centers which used online anonymous help pages, and I learned of sophisticated new treatments using technology. But what several of my hosts most wanted me to speak about was “Internet Addiction”, another

early interest of mine, and addressed in depth my colleague Kimberly Young (“Caught in the Web”). Over time, the “context” became more of my mantra. Being a world away from the familiar, I also came to appreciate still more, the importance of perspective. Some seem to think of me as the Grinch stealing the joy of Internet by highlighting some of the downside - FOMO, etc. . Others want to hear about the successes in online mental health endeavors. So, especially given international audiences of vastly different cultures and health system, I ended up feeling obliged to highlight both differences and similarities. In the end I sometimes defer to HS Sullivan: ***“All of us are much more human than otherwise.”***

One universal among humans (aside from liking cat and screaming-goat videos) is having a sense of the world, of who we are, and how they interact. Adolescence in particular is a time of taking measure, soliciting and bathing in peer acceptance and approval (“popularity”, etc. at one end, victims of “bullying” at the other, and various levels of confusion or searching for meaning in between). Add a keen awareness of what’s “cool”, what’s normal, and what “everyone is doing” or saying, and you have a big slice of adolescence for many. But, as the cartoons and daily advice columns are now highlighting, many are now relating far more to their devices than to the people next to them. (Not only teens, to be sure!) They cannot conceive of being not attached and parental “digital-free” restrictions are seen as cruel and unusual punishment. The show I watched last night on Public Television (discussing the new study) accented this phenomenon and took it to the level of parents’ role in setting limits \*and\* setting examples. I completely concur, with the caveat that “context and perspective” may differ from our own. Still, as the study clearly illustrated, hours of playing face-to-face, reading without divided focus, doing homework without self-distractions (more than before), and other “normal” developmental stages, have been short-circuited by focus on one thing... the device. Between FOMO (fear of missing out) or simply the addictive power of a device which can find you whatever you want whenever you want it, and with society and the media reinforcing the “like us, follow us” one-click life style, anyone who doesn’t “get with the program” might be seen as an alien.

Teachers - for whom I have tremendous respect - are often remarkable at imposing rules in the classroom to facilitate at least temporary focus. But once the student is home, when it comes to say, homework, they settle in, not with background music or whatever might help maintain focus (for some), but with the device chirping, ring-toning, vibrating, and calling one’s name (figuratively, mostly), is it really possible to study or organize and process information? Simultaneously, without error? The new studies powerfully affirm the obvious and already-researched truism: Multi-tasking is something for RAM (computer memory) but NOT something humans can do well, beyond one or two simultaneous things. The brain simply cannot process like a high-powered RAM chip. It is not physically possible within the old fashioned human brain, and claims that today’s students’ brains are “different” is pure nonsense. Evolution occurs over centuries and millennia, not between the time of two iPhone models or generations. Moreover, for all the certainty that “multi-tasking is efficient”, it is simply not true - do 4 things simultaneously and

each may be 1/4 the accuracy of what would be done with full concentration and focus. With 4 times the errors. But who notices? More productivity? Wrong. More errors. More highway deaths than ever before among teens (due to texting) is a reflection of trying to attend to two things at a time, like driving and texting. The scary thing is that so many people choose answering a text or taking selfies, etc., over the more important task such as staying alive by focusing on driving, and 'data' from the rear view mirror, lights and signs ahead, etc.

Contextually, though it is hard to believe, device attachment as a way of life, with Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc., is still relatively new as a cultural phenomenon. There are still those adults who remember a world with boundaries between "TV", "radio", "phone", etc. As someone who witnessed both side of the divide (both students and parents), a great deal of my work for some years evolved around "ADD/ADHD" - attention deficits. What is it? I learned early on that functionally, it is not at all the case that ADD reflects a deficit of attention. To be accurate, these people have an abundance of attention, to everything in fact, and are reacting to a flood of information which they cannot screen out. "TMI" evolved in the vernacular - "too much information". Now it's the norm. It is not "attention" which is lacking, it is the cognitive control - call it executive functioning, working memory, focus, sustained attention/concentration,

"mindfulness" - whatever paradigm works. But the root of digital distraction and of attention deficits appear too similar to dismiss. Too much information, and the idea that it's a good thing, and that multi-functioning is a good thing for efficient, accurate human cognition.

There are surely wonderful uses of technology - in PTSD treatments, in fashion, communication, healthcare, industry, you name it [4]. And there are benefits to "connected society", short of being one big "hive" where all focus is on the common platform (or, as in Orwell's 1984, the ubiquitous "screen"). And there are surely parents and teachers who will provide limits, boundaries, and positive examples of how to balance life between the present setting and the always-there world of what's on the device.

As the studies note, along with daily cartoons - which provide smiles & LOL's but little impetus for change) - children no longer spend time playing outside together (off-screen), families and relationships are challenged by devices becoming the sole focus of love and devotion, and many parents are reluctant to set limits,

perhaps preoccupied with tweeting or Facebook themselves, and horrified of "disconnection" (from the device) as well. And the special offers for more and more digital, renting space "in the clouds" for all those selfies on one's "phone" are non-stop. The new models are out before the last is a year old. (How often did people "need" to update actual telephones?)

What was "social networking" has become "social marketing" (what it's long been called, accurately, in Europe).

But back to psychology: The notion of "executive functioning" is critical. "Who", I ask clients, "is the "executive"? "The boss", is a common response. It's the overseer, the one who makes decisions. We all have "executive functioning", whether viewed as a cognitive mechanism or simply our "consciousness", or "mindfulness" of where and who we are, what we're doing, what a situation calls for, and what a plan might be to accomplish a given goal. But who owns our focus and attention today? Do we ever really have a calm, focused, moment away from non-stop digital flows of "buy me" and "friend me" and "play me" messages? It is becoming rarer, and there are few left who seem able to absorb the world beyond the device, or care about studies or consequences, even.

Of course, there are still "traditional" parent-child relationships, schools adapt to new technology and try new ways of keeping students engaged (and now, *focused*, which is more daunting). Some even have sufficient attention span and interest to read for a short time without twitching or otherwise feeling the need to grab that device. It is still possible to walk without being tripped by someone attending only to their screen, but driving is now even more dangerous, as who knows what the driver in the next lane is attending to - the road and vehicle, or a screen.

The times they are a changing', though the medium has again become the message, and the message is, buy more devices and never be without it, be it a "phone", "pad", "watch" or other. If life is about relationships, what relationship is celebrated as more important than anything else today? Our relationship with streams/floods of data and 24/7 non-stop stimulation. It's great for business and image grooming and having a tool for communication, information, and "connecting" to social or educational or health resources. But the digital deluge's impact on sustained focus, productivity, and genuine interpersonal (face to face) connection? Not so much... Your mileage may vary.

## References

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