'Free' children from the cyberworld

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Childhood is a stage where children express ideas, are curious, have fantasies and engage in exciting activities. As they pass through this stage once in a lifetime, parents, teachers and society should provide an environment that is conducive for children to learn all that is good and morally acceptable, and to avoid the unpleasant.

During this period, too, children learn an enormous amount of new things through parental guidance, role-modelling, books and play, and by exploring the environment. Adequate attention and proper guidance by parents and others in this crucial phase are potent to inculcate good moral values, discipline, good character, and creative and positive thinking in children as growing adults.

Traditionally, all communities, be they in the East or West, have earnestly paid attention to the many vital needs of a child. This attention is given in the hope that later in life, the child will blossom into a good and holistic person. As an individual, he or she will be a responsible person towards him or herself, the community and the nation at large.

Today's reality shows that this age-old idealism is slowly changing with the emergence of modern means of telecommunications. Computers, laptops, iPads, smartphones and social media have dramatically transformed our lifestyles. The advent of modern technology has revolutionised the way we communicate. Information and images are shared at a super-fast rate as never before in the history of humans.

Besides the many positive and interesting developments brought on by technology-mediated communication and learning, it has its downside in not being able to educate children on the real meaning of life. As a result of this, children's lives have become mechanical.

For a great number of children, their lives revolve around computers, video games and the like. They don't take interest in outdoor activities, such as playing games, meeting their peers, going through stamp and coin collections, making and flying handmade kites, and top spinning, like how children used to spend their school holidays in the past. Nowadays, the word "game" means computer and the latest version of PlayStation.

Children's obsession towards the computer, Internet, iPads and online games is phenomenal the world over. Those addicted to online games and electronic gadgets are known to perform poorly in school. Sitting and facing the monitor too long has many health hazards and psychological effects on children.

In July 2012, a news portal reported that a teenager had died of exhaustion and dehydration after playing online games for 40 hours straight. It was also reported that researchers had found that addiction to computer games could deprive children of sleep, rest, sports and exercise.

The other matter that cannot be denied is that they experience a high level of stress. Unable to understand and cope with stress, children sublimate their psychological state of mental lethargy and restlessness by rebelling against their parents and those who have authority over them.

Children who do not to have access to the Internet at home because of poverty and strict parental control visit cybercafes to fulfil their obsession. A visit to cybercafes reveals the activities that children indulge in.

During the school holidays, cyber-cafes are filled with schoolgoing children. Such places can be noisy, with children playing video games. Only a few go there with their parents to work on school projects. Some even play truant during school hours to play video games. The possibility of children picking up bad habits, like smoking, doing drugs and using bad language, is high when they visit cybercafes.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of parents to monitor their children's visit to cybercafes. The owners of such places should also be responsible in not allowing underage patrons in the premises.

Children who surf the Internet unmonitored are in a vulnerable situation. Their childhood innocence can be tainted when they cross educational and recreational parameters when they explore the darker side of the Internet.

There is always the risk of them wandering into pornographic websites, and participating in anti-social and immoral activities in the form of free downloads. There have been many reports on parents finding out the truth about their children's activities through random checks, and were horrified by what they had discovered.

It is of vital importance to state Albert Bandura's research on social learning theory (1961, 1965, 1977), that children have the tendency to imitate acts of violence after watching videos or real acts of others. Based on Bandura's findings, one of the factors that contribute to the increase in juvenile delinquency cases today is children's emotional involvement in the act of violence when they play video games.

Besides that, children who communicate with strangers on the Internet are easy prey for criminals. They can be lured into drugs, prostitution, criminal acts, abduction or human trafficking.

To remedy the situation and as a precaution, parents and teachers are obliged to educate children not only on ways to use the Internet and other communication tools wisely, but also on the dangers that lurk in the cyberworld.

They say charity starts at home. Likewise, smart users of the Internet should also start from home. Parents who are overly engaged in social media at the expense of neglecting their parental duties should learn how to control their use of the Internet and social media.

For example, parents should refrain from using mobile phones or going on social media during family time, such as meals and holidays.

Many experts on parenting and family management have highlighted that families should sit together at the dinner table during meals, so that they can communicate with each other. Such conversations may be helpful to strengthen family bond and inculcate positive values.

Because children spend more time engaged in the cyberworld, they lack touch with reality. Metaphorically speaking, today's children are stuck or trapped in the cyberworld. We need to bring them out to face real-life challenges.

Parents and teachers have a responsibility to explain to children what life is about; what education, in the real sense, is; why they need to follow the values system; why religion is important; and many others. Providing answers to such questions helps mould a child's character and personality.

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