

Transcript for Professor Gernsbacher's Lecture Video: "The Internet and Development"

CLICK – The Internet and development

CLICK – Did you know that toddlers learn new words just as well through conversations on Skype as through conversations in person (and much better than simply watching a passive video)?
(Roseberry, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2014)

CLICK – Did you know that children develop their reading skills just as well and sometimes better by using interactive, talking books, for example, off their iPads, as by working one-on-one with an adult tutor and paper copy books?
(Wood, 2005; Masataka, 2014)

CLICK – Did you know that grade school age children who spend more time surfing the Internet report feeling less lonely?
(Caixia, Rude, & Wang, 2013)

CLICK – Did you know that grade-school age children who spend more time on the Internet improve their reading skills and that

CLICK - grade-school age children who spend more time playing video games on the Internet, improve their visual-spatial skills? These positive advantages are particularly pronounced for low-income children who might not otherwise have access to the Internet in their homes (but who were given computers and Internet access through a research study).
(Jackson, von Eye, Witt, Zhao, & Fitzgerald, 2011)

CLICK – Did you know that for adolescents, their amount of Internet use does not significantly predict how lonely they feel, but a perceived lack of family support surely does?
(Appel, Holtz, Stiglbauer, & Batinic, 2012)

CLICK – Did you know that in a U.S. survey of over 600 teenagers, the majority of teenagers have had social media experiences that make them feel good about themselves?
(Pew Research Center, 2011)

CLICK – Did you know that significantly fewer teens are bullied online than are bullied in person?
(Pew Research Center, 2011)

CLICK – Did you know that first-year college students feel considerably less adrift if they email and IM to stay in touch with their high school friends?
(Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006)

CLICK – Did you know that a wealth of data show that children of all ages who play pro-social video games are more likely to help and empathize in real life?
(Prot et al., 2014)

CLICK – If you didn't previously know about any of these positive effects of the Internet on development, you're not alone. We rarely hear about the positive effects of the Internet. Why not?

First, as we've discussed before,

CLICK – we have always feared new technology. In past centuries, parents have feared

CLICK – Children reading novels

CLICK – Children listening to the radio, and

CLICK – Children playing chess, which is now considered a brainy activity

CLICK – As illustrated in the Broadway musical, The Music Man, even playing pool, as compared with playing billiards, can be feared, if enough anxiety is whipped up in the community.

CLICK – When I was a child, pinball was so feared that it was banned in many cities, due to the fear that it would corrupt American youth.

CLICK – And rock and roll! Oh my goodness, parents were aghast at the attraction groups like the Beatles inspired in young children.

CLICK – Douglas Adams, author of the incredibly popular book, Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy, wrote,
QUOTE

everything that's already in the world when you're born is just normal;

anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it;

AND anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilization as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really. UNQUOTE

Because by fiat, parents are usually about 30 years old when they parent grade-school age children, one can see why parents fear things that their children embrace.

Second, there's a well known journalistic principle that states

CLICK - If it bleeds, it leads. Meaning, that the provocative, the salacious, and the fear-mongering stories are those the media print because they believe that's what fascinates the public.

Thus, the media thinks we want to see stories like

CLICK - WIRED's article, asking whether touchscreens are melting your kid's brain and

CLICK - CNN's Op Ed, asking whether the Internet is hurting children? There are also concern troll articles such as

CLICK - This New York Times article espousing fear about "The Child, the Tablet and the Developing Mind," and from my hometown newspaper,

CLICK – The Dallas Morning news, concerns about "What the Internet is doing to our children." In none of these articles was there any hard science showing any harms being done to children by the Internet. But if it bleeds, it leads.

CLICK – Third, there is the universal sense that children are vulnerable and need protection. The con man in the Music Man plays off of this universal sense when he says, "Now, I know all you folks are the right kinda parents," meaning, I know all you folks know that it's your responsibility to protect your vulnerable children.

CLICK – For over 30 years, the American Academy of Pediatrics has been issuing recommendations to parents about what media their children should and shouldn't be exposed to. These policy statements tend to err on the conservative side. No television at meal times, only limited access to video games, no reading under the covers in bed with a flashlight.

However, for the most recent American Academy of Pediatrics' policy statement, one of the authors subsequently wrote a rebuttal noting that the policy statement had not been built upon actual research, but just seat of the pants fears.

(Christakis (2014)

Fourth, as Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter pointed out in a 2009 article,

CLICK – Socializing on the Internet during its first decade used to be scary.

We tend to forget that Facebook was launched only in 2004 – more than a decade AFTER the Internet's founding. Before Facebook became popular, the primary way people socialized on the Internet was through mostly anonymous Chat Rooms. These mostly anonymous Chat Rooms could be troublesome, particularly for youth.

But times have changed, which is why most all Internet-studies conducted prior to the past 5 years are unrepresentative of the current day Internet. Currently, very few teens or other Internet users use anonymous Chat Rooms to socialize. We use social media. And as the Pew Research Center reports, the majority of teens have set their social networking accounts to private or to friends-of-friends. Things are not so scary anymore.

Similarly and fifth, as Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter also point out,

CLICK - Few people were on the Internet in the 1990s, which means that the loners were probably lonely. Over a decade ago, a study reported by APA found that particularly for children of low-income families, introducing them to the Internet wasn't all that helpful because they didn't have anyone to talk to. None of their friends were on the Internet. Therefore, it's not too surprising that early studies of the Internet suggested that Internet users were more lonely; they were indeed loners – on the Internet.

But that's not the case today. Today we worry about the so-called digital divide in which low income families are less likely to have Internet access – and therefore they are more likely to miss out on the positive effects of the Internet.

Sixth, as with any new technology, there is the

CLICK -- Fear that Internet will be unduly addictive

David Finkelhor in a 2014 commentary in the peer-reviewed Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, wrote [QUOTE] If you have spent any time with young people in the last 10 years, you know how enthralled they are by the electronic technology.

Is this because the technology is indeed a new 'pied piper' seducing innocents into dangers unaware? Or is this the sign of a generational-gap alarmism that has discounted what youth are really experiencing? UNQUOTE.

Finkelhor wisely comes down on the side that the fears are driven by generational gap alarmism. And he's right.

Every new technology, be it

CLICK – Short wave radio in the 1950s or the Internet in the current day has been feared to be addictive. And it rarely is.

Lastly, there is

CLICK – the fear of displacement of time spent, and that is a real fear. Time is finite. There are a fixed 24 hours in each day. Spending three or more hours on the Internet means NOT spending three or more hours elsewhere.

But if the time adolescents spend on the Internet socializing is taking the place of time feeling lonely, OR if the time grade-school-age children spend on the Internet reading is taking the place of time not reading, OR if the time toddlers spend on their iPads learning new words is taking the place of time watching passive media, then we need not worry.

CLICK – The Internet offers many positive affects on development.