

AlbertMohler.com

Does a Computer Belong in the Crib?

Friday, November 30, 2007



We are constantly advised that this generation of children is growing up in a digital world. That much is pretty hard to deny. Just watch teenagers in the mall, each with a cell phone at the ear. Or observe school kids in the library, who are more likely to be at a computer screen than with a book.

But *The New York Times* now reports that toddlers and preschoolers are demanding a digital Christmas — complete with laptops, cell phones, and all the rest.

“Cell phones, laptops, digital cameras and MP3 music players are among the hottest gift items this year. For preschoolers,” explained reporters Matt Richtel and Brad Stone. “Toy makers and retailers are filling shelves with new tech devices for children ages 3 and up, and sometimes even down. They say they are catering to junior consumers who want to emulate their parents and are not satisfied with fake gadgets.”

This trend has been noted carefully by retailers and marketers, who are pushing “toys” like the “Easy Link Internet Launch Pad” (from Fisher-Price) and similar products.

As the reporters explain:

Jim Silver, editor of Toy Wishes magazine and an industry analyst for 24 years, said there had been “a huge jump in the last 12 months” in toys that involve looking at a screen.

“The bigger toy companies don’t even call it the toy business anymore,” Mr. Silver said. “They’re in the family entertainment business and the leisure business. What they’re saying is, ‘We’re vying for kids’ leisure time.’”

Technology has been slowly permeating the toy business for a number of years, but the trend has been accelerating. On Wednesday, six of the nine best-selling toys for 5- to 7-year-olds on Amazon.com were tech gadgets. For all of 2006, three of the top nine toys for that age group were tech-related.

Now, let’s think about this for a moment. We are talking about toddlers and preschoolers here. Do children these ages really have “leisure time?” Do they have jobs?

For years now, prophetic observers have warned that we are turning children into young adults. As David Elkind warned in his book, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, the adult world is pushing children and adolescents into adult roles long before they are ready. Now, toddlers demand (real) cell phones.

It doesn’t take much imagination to see that much of the blame lies with permissive and indulgent parents. Consider this section drawn from the paper’s report:

Yunice Kotake, of San Bruno, Calif., recently purchased a Fisher-Price Knows Your Name Dora Cell Phone for her twin year-old daughters. But a few days later, she returned the play phone to a local Toys “R” Us, after she found that the girls seemed to prefer their parents’ actual phones.

“They know what a real cell phone is, and they don’t want a fake one,” Ms. Kotake said.

This passage is troubling at so many levels. Ms. Kotake has twin year-old girls who are not satisfied with “play” cell phones. The real phones are so much a part of their lives that “they don’t want a fake one.”

The reporters also pointed to the demands made by children. They took readers into a leading national toy retailer:

Standing near the front of the store, a 6-year-old named Sabrina, with a gap-tooth smile, explained that her No. 1 choice for a Christmas gift is an adult laptop.

“Cause it’s cool,” she explained.

“Maybe when she’s 8,” said her mother, Amina, who declined to give her last name. She might, she said, have to yield when her daughter turns 7. “These kids are different from the way we were,” she added.

Might have to yield? Has anyone told this mother that she is not required to meet her daughter’s demands? This 6-year-old girl demands an adult laptop computer because it is “cool.”

Here is a newsflash for you — elementary school kids do not “need” adult laptops and will survive without digital entertainment products as well.

This is not an argument for keeping kids away from all computers and digital technologies, but it is a plea for parents (and marketers) to let children be children.

As for the kids, it is telling that so many are absolutely uninterested in any toy lacking a disk drive or an electronic screen.

More from [the article](#):

Donald L. Shifrin, a pediatrician based in Seattle and the spokesman for the academy, said tech toys cannot replace imaginative play, where children create rich narratives and interact with peers or parents.

“Are we creating media use as a default for play?” Dr. Shifrin asked. “When kids want to play, will they ask, ‘Where’s the screen?’”

But to the toy industry, the so-called youth electronics category is a bright spot and now accounting for more than 5 percent of all toy sales. Overall toy sales have been flat at around \$22 billion a year for the last five years, according to the market research firm NPD Group.

“If you’re just selling traditional toys like board games or plastic toys, you can survive but you can’t grow,” said Sean McGowan, a toy industry analyst with Needham & Company. “This industry has to redefine what a toy is.”

Toy makers are also worried that they might be losing their youngest, most devoted customers to the consumer electronics and video game companies. Mr. McGowan said the industry has even coined a term for the anxiety: KGOY, which stands for Kids Getting Older Younger.

Children should be respected as children and not reduced to younger consumers. Parents must protect their children from growing up too fast — such as the “Kids Getting Older Younger” syndrome.

Keep the family computer in the kitchen or the family room where use can be monitored and limited. Don’t let your kids — all the way from toddlers to teenagers — spend too much time in front of a screen.

Parents must learn to say no, and to make it stick. There is something downright creepy about the thought of a toddler or preschooler who feels more at home in front of the computer screen than on the playground.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.