

Childhood Environment Today vs Yesterday

We often hear people remark that children are more different today in the way they learn than ever before.

They have shorter attention spans and bore easily. They fail to “invent” play. For example, when the suggestion is made to “go outside and play”, they haven’t a clue where to begin.

Why is that? Is there something happening in the environment of learners that alters the way they approach the learning process?

The Environment of the Past

The home environment for many children several years ago was quite different from that of today. For example:

1. The home was quieter, some say boring compared to today.
2. Parents and children did a lot of talking and reading.
3. The family unit was more stable and ate together, and the dinner hour was an opportunity for parents to discuss their children’s activities as well as reaffirm their love and support.
4. If the home had a television, it was in a common area and controlled by adults. What children watched could be closely monitored. There were fewer programs available.
5. School was an interesting place because it had television, films, field trips, and guest speakers. Because there were few other distractions, school was an important influence in a child’s life and the primary source of information.
6. The neighborhood was also an important part of growing up. Children played together, developing their motor skills as well as learning the social skills needed to interact successfully with other children in the neighborhood.

The Environment of Today

In recent years, children have been growing up in a very different environment.

1. Family units are not as stable as they once were. Single-parent families are more common, and children have fewer opportunities to talk with the adults who care for them. Their dietary habits are changing as home cooking is becoming a lost art.
2. They are surrounded by media: cell phones, multiple televisions, movies, computers, video games, e-mail, instant messaging and text messaging, and the Internet. Teens spend nearly 17 hours a week on the internet and nearly 14 hours a week watching television. (Guterl, 2003)
3. Many 10 – 18 year olds can now watch television and play with other technology in their own bedrooms, leading to sleep deprivation. Furthermore, often with no adult present, a moral compass is evolving in the impressionable pre-adolescent mind as a result of watching programs containing violence and sex on television and the internet.

4. Young people now share the most intimate details of their personal life on social-networking Web sites. Every day people post more than 65,000 videos on YouTube. In 2006 MySpace surpassed 100 million profiles. Since 1999 the number of blogs has grown from 50 to 50 million. More than 50 percent of blogs are written by children younger than 19.
5. They get information from many different sources beside school.
6. The multi-media environment divides their attention. Even newscasts are different. In the past, only the reporter's face was on the screen. Now, the TV screen is loaded with information. Three people are reporting in from different corners of the world. Additional non-related news is scrolling across the bottom, the stock market averages and current time and temperatures are changing in the lower right corner, and the background is no longer static but constantly changing. These images force the viewer to split their attention into several components. Children have become accustomed to these information rich and rapidly changing messages. They can pay attention to several things at once, but they do not go into any one thing in depth, unless it is a computer game. Often called *attention deficient* disorder.
7. They spend much more time indoors with their technology, thereby missing outdoor opportunities to develop gross motor skills and socialization skills necessary to communicate and act personally with others. One unintended consequence of spending so much time indoors is the rapid rise in the number of overweight children and adolescents, now more than 15 percent of 6 – 9 year olds.
8. Young brains have responded to the technology by changing their functioning and organization to accommodate the large amount of stimulation occurring within the environment. By acclimating itself to these changes, brains respond more than ever to this increased novelty seeking behavior. Some adolescents who perceive little novelty in their environment may turn to mind altering drugs for stimulation. This rug dependence can further enhance the brain's demand for novelty to the point that it becomes unbalanced and resorts to extremely risky behavior.
9. Their diet contains increasing amounts of substances that ca affect brain and body functions. Caffeine is a strong brain stimulant, considered safe for mot adults in small quantities But caffeine is now found in many of the foods and drinks that teens consume daily. Too much caffeine causes insomnia, anxiety, and nausea.
10. Some teens can also develop allergies to aspartame (an artificial sugar found in children's vitamins and many "lite" foods) and other food additives. Possible symptoms of these allergic reactions include hyperactivity, difficulty concentrating, and headaches
11. The worst additive is **high fructose corn syrup**. Not only does high fructose corn syrup lead to obesity as it is addictive, it floods the hippocampus with glucose affecting concentration. Developed in Japan, it can be found from soft drinks to hamburger buns.

When we add to this mix the changes in family lifestyles and the temptations of alcohol and drugs, we can realize how very different the environment of today's child is from that of just 15 years ago.

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