The Power Beyond Doors

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Abstract

The media today impacts the lives of children constantly. Young adolescents watch and learn the behaviors displayed to them on the screens they’ve become addicted to. Media has become so distracting that children spend more than half the time they are awake each day using it. The time spend involved with media is teaching children what gets them attention, and what doesn’t. This “new” teacher isn’t instilling values that last and matter, like communication skills and making connections to the environment. Breaking away from the media centered world, and going beyond the doors of classrooms can teach children lessons that last a lifetime. The outdoor environment offer children more space, freedom, and ways to challenge themselves on new levels. Connections develop and children pay more attention to and bond with those around them, distraction free. Changing the environment makes for situations that matter and stand out in the memories of children. The outdoor world makes adolescents’ think for themselves without being influenced and distracted. Their perspective grows and changes, molding them with real life lessons that they can apply for the rest of their lives.

The constantly changing world of technology makes the media a significant distraction in the daily lives of children and young people everywhere. “Youth spend an average of 7+ hours per day using media, and the vast majority of them have access to a bedroom television, computer, the Internet, a video-game console, and a cell phone” (Children, 2011, p.1). With this much exposure to electronic media, children are constantly absorbing what the media has to tell them, whether it be good, or bad. This constant distraction from ‘real life’ can have harmful effects, and teaching children concepts that truly matter can be difficult in a world of buzzing distractions.

Every single day children as well as adults are bombarded with media.

“Both “old” media (television, movies, magazines) and “new” media (the Internet and social networking sites, video/ computer games, cell phones) can have an impact on virtually every health concern that practitioners and parents have about young people, including aggressive behavior, risky sexual behavior, substance use, and disordered eating” (Children, 2011, p.2).

The media may not be the completely at fault for these behaviors, but research shows it to be very significant. “Children and adolescents spend more time with media than they do in any other activity, except for sleeping” (Children, 2011, p.3). The more time that is spend consumed in electronics, the more that children absorb and live out the messages the media sends them. The Pediatric Policy Review says this, “According to social learning theory, children and adolescents learn by observing and imitating what they see on the screen, particularly when these behaviors seem realistic or are rewarded” (2011, p.4). Every child learns by what they see, and if they are spending more time involved in media than any other activity, the media is becoming their “new” teacher.

Digital media can also be an important source of information. An entire database of information is available at almost everyone’s finger tips. This constant, easy access to information, while being very helpful, can also be extremely harmful. But not everything the media portrays sends out positive or correct information. Young children who don’t quite understand persuasive advertising and the content in adult shows and programs may start to think some behaviors shown are okay because of what they’re seeing. More and more children are learning from their “new” teacher what gets them attention and what doesn’t. This “new” teacher isn’t one that’s setting them up for success though; it’s one that consistently tearing them down.

“By the age of 18, the average adolescent will have seen an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. Much of the violence on television and in movies is presented in a sanitized and glamorous fashion, and in children’s programing it often is presented as humorous” (Children, 2011, p.5).

This increasing trend of violence spreads to music too. Much of today’s popular rap music includes violence as a nonchalant cool thing, making it okay in the ears of its’ young listeners. “Children and teenagers see 4400-7600 ads per year for junk food and fast food on television alone” (Children, 2011, p.8). This massive exposure impacts the way that children think about food and what they want to eat. It can also increase food consumption. While at the same time pressuring children to make decisions based on the marketing’s messages.

“The frequency with which youth report being cyber bullied has varied between studies, but it is clear that on-line bullying and harassment happens to a significant minority of youth, sometimes distressing, is frequently correlated with other risky behaviors and psychosocial problems, and may be as strong a predictor of serious aggressive behavior as exposure to more traditional media” (Children, 2011, p.6).

The Internet can be a dangerous tool. It is more often than not becoming a simple way for bullying and harassment to increase on a new level. Without being face to face with someone else people often feel like it’s okay to do or say something they wouldn’t if that person was physically in front of them. Media also creates unrealistic expectations in the development of body image. The state of perfection that is presented constantly pressures adolescents to want to be something they’re not, which leads to more disappointment and fear of rejection. With this information overload being thrown at society every day you would think people would see they connections and how they are being affected. “However, the “third-person effect” (a well-documented phenomenon in the communications literature) shows that teenagers and adults think the media influences everyone except themselves or their children” (Children, 2011, p.4). Clearly that isn’t true.

This crazy world of media messages and distractions constantly is messing with young people’s heads, but how do young people react when the media disappears. In a survey of high school students, 80 percent of students surveyed said they felt like there was a break from life’s normal pressures when they were outdoors and disconnected. The outdoors creates an atmosphere unlike the comforting inside world. This change in environment can really help grow people in understanding themselves and those around them. 92 percent of students surveyed said the change in environment and comfort made them feel more connected to the people around them. Being outside changes how we as people use our senses. According to Matthew Auer, “sensory perception makes students aware (literally, *sensitive* to) their own biological connection to the environment and each other” (2008, p.10).

“The brain places higher value on things that make sense and have meaning. When something “makes sense,” there is understanding on the basis of experience and it fits into what the person knows about the world. When something has meaning, it is relevant to the person and imbues purpose” (Strother, 2007, p.19).

When adolescents step out of their comfort zones and unplug, they begin to see things that distractions blinded them from before. A break from the distractions and media in student’s lives bring learning to a whole new level. The outdoor environment is a perfect match for this breakaway scenario. 84 percent of students said that being outside is more meaningful, and that they grow more in that environment. These moments become more memorable because the surroundings have changed and challenge increases.

“Adolescents seek novelty and take risks as a way of developing and defining themselves. They do this by taking on new challenges in areas that they often understand very little about and engaging in behaviors that can result in both catastrophe and significant growth” (Strother, 2007, p.19).

Being outside can be a safe and challenging place at the same time. Adolescents can find many ways to be adventurous and challenge their limits while being watched by adults and given tasks to do and solve. The outdoors also creates an experience that can be harmful, forcing children to learn how to be safe and keep those around them safe as well.

The outdoors brings so much to the table when it comes to learning from small children to young adults. “Play is the most important activity for young children outside; play is the means through which children find stimulation, well-being and happiness, and is the means through which they grow physically, intellectually and emotionally” (Ricardson, 2007, p.93). By simply playing outside, children can explore a whole new world with their senses, something a room with a door could not offer. “The outdoors is a significantly different environment and one that can complement and extend what is offered indoors” (Ricardson, 2007, p.93).

The outdoors offers children more space. New levels and perspectives are experienced. They can move sideways and upwards and the sky is the ‘ceiling’. The space outside just ‘feels’ very different. The light is always changing as does the air and temperature. There is a freedom that comes with doing things not possible indoors, like riding a bike or jumping in a puddle. Children can go explore, make messes, and noises without disrupting others. Being outdoors connects children to the natural world and the plants and animals around them. Creativity grows outside and questions are sparked and answered. The conditions outside are always changing with uncertainty providing the perfect opportunity to be patient, flexible, and learn how to adapt. The element of surprise is always in action. The outdoors also enriches relationships. Children have plenty of opportunities to cooperate, negotiate, and collaborate with each other. “When outdoors, adults can take more time to sit and chat with children, get involved in play and exploration or simply stand back to observe and listen to children’s play” (Richardson, 2007, p.95). Adults benefit from the outdoors too, by connecting and being more active themselves.

The outdoors is dynamic, spacious, and free of doors. When explored by adolescents, challenges arise and lifelong learning develops. The consumption of media distracts children from challenging and growing themselves in a different environment. But when this breakaway from media occurs, students connect with each other and learn more by creating memories with meaning. The media tells children how to act, what to wear look like, and eat, all while consuming more than half of the time they are awake each day. No real values are being taught by what teaches children the most. Getting out the door, and off the screens, while at first may seem to have little value, can teach lessons un-teachable anywhere else. When nothing is influencing thoughts and decisions, when passion and exploration is set free, and the sky is the ceiling, children can learn who they are. That is the power beyond doors.

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