Star LIFE Style

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PARENTING

Childhood unplugged

Play is the highest form of research,
—Albert Einstein

She collects all sorts of things for her crafts. These things range anywhere from bottle caps, egg cartons, cereal boxes, Styrofoam to ribbons, empty cans and cosmetic containers, old T-shirts and paper towel rolls. My 7-year-old daughter has taught me that you can make a new "something" out of (almost) anything. However, to let this creativity happen, you have to bear with a lot of mess, tears, frustration over failed projects, and a small investment in children's craft supplies. Don't worry, it's all worth the trouble.

Screens are enticing. True, they can keep your child occupied for hours. And, why not? Digital entertainment options available to children are literally unlimited! But unfettered screen time comes at a price.

Some of the negative effects of too much screen time in children include being overweight and obese for the lack of physical activity; poor vision; sleep deprivation; pains and aches, such as text thumb and text neck; loss of or delayed social skills as children spend less time on face-to-face communication; and even aggression, if your child is into violent video games.

We live in a tech-saturated world, so there is no escaping the digital entertainment. But as consumers, it's our responsibility to figure out how much of digital entertainment is healthy for ourselves, especially our children.

One of the biggest downsides of screen time is it reduces creativity in children. A child needs to spend time in the 3-D world for their optimal growth, to stimulate their senses, to solve problems, and to think outside the box. Spending more time in front of the "Idiot Box" or a
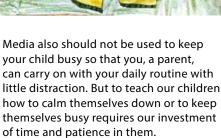

laptop may be harming our children in ways that we perhaps cannot grasp at this point in time.

A digital device cannot replace the value of "unplugged" play time, where multiple senses are at work at the same time. Unless you get your child off the screen, they will never know the joy of climbing a tree, watching a full moon, sitting in the balcony to read a book, walking barefoot on grass, getting dirty in the mud, getting drenched in the rain, or delight in the joy of making something with their own little hands. Don't worry about those soiled hands, feet, clothes, and shoes; they can always be washed clean!

While it's easy to calm your child's tantrums with technology, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that parents should not use media as the only way to calm down their children.

Media also should not be used to keep your child busy so that you, a parent, can carry on with your daily routine with little distraction. But to teach our children how to calm themselves down or to keep themselves busy requires our investment of time and patience in them.

Ideally, this process needs to begin early childhood when parents need to allow children to explore the world around them. Parents also need to invest in children's arts and crafts supplies, and creative toys like building blocks, play dough, puzzles, etc. instead of too many toys with buttons, lights, and sounds. As a matter of fact, small children cannot differentiate between a toy and a non-toy. Research has shown that children with fewer toys learn to be creative and imaginative. These children use their basic surroundings to come up with new games, make-believe games. But to let

this happen, you have to create for them the right environment. Remember that a child can derive as much pleasure from a cardboard box as they can from an expensive tablet.

There is an infinite number of apps for children on an App Store. However, it's one thing to dress a doll on an app, but a whole different thing to make a dress out of fabric scraps for your own doll. In real life, you can also dress up and become someone else — pretend play teaches children to walk in someone else's shoes. Similarly, a child can draw and colour on an app, but it's not the same as using pencils, crayons, or watercolour to create a real-life art that their mother can hang on the refrigerator door.

An app can never teach a child what it feels like to play in the rain. An app can never teach a child how to negotiate with her mum when it comes to cleaning up after that messy art project! There is no glitter, glue, paint, ribbon, felt, foam paper, plastic scissors, beads, pompoms, or googly eyes on a mobile application. There are also no bottle caps, egg cartons, cereal boxes, Styrofoam, empty cans, old T-shirts, or kitchen towel rolls on an app to spark creative thinking in a child.

There will be messes, big messes, but bear with the mess, because your child is wondering, exploring, researching, discovering, or even, inventing! If possible, designate a space in your house where all this creative madness can take place.

The future belongs to those who are creative. Look at the world around us. Don't you see that the world is run by creative people who can think outside the box? It's never too late to help your child think outside the box. Or even better, help them think like there is no box!

By Wara Karim
Photo courtesy: Wara Karim