Wired Child: Debunking Popular Technology Myths

## A Simplicity Parenting Interview with Richard Freed, Ph.D

Traci McGrath and Richard Freed, March 2015

Today, I'm speaking with child and adolescent psychologist, Richard Freed, who recently published the book *Wired Child: Debunking Popular Technology Myths.*

Please tell us about *Wired Child*.

Wired Child explains the disconnect between what's promised about children's technology use and what many parents experience for themselves. We are told that technology will bring the family closer, yet we watch as kids ignore their parents in favor of mobile devices. Assurances that technology is the key to our kids' 21st-century success are contradicted by their overuse of video games, social networks, and texting that drag down their success in school.

In *Wired Child*, I show that our children's and teens' tech use is defined by powerful myths—many of which are fostered by the makers of kids' tech products. These myths have encouraged the "wiring up" of a generation of youth at the expense of real-world activities vital to kids' emotional health and success. I show how families benefit when we move beyond tech-industry hype to use the science of behavior and brain function to guide the raising of our kids.
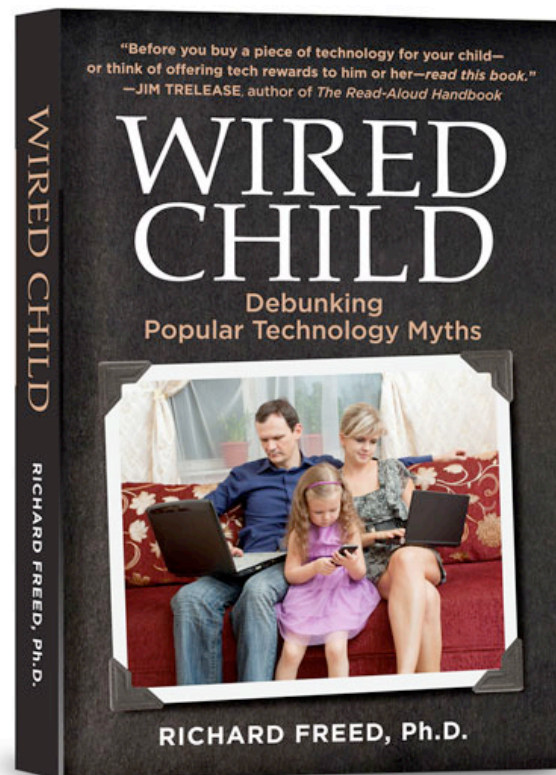
Is there a technology myth that you feel is particularly harmful to children?

At the heart of all the technology myths I highlight in *Wired Child* is the *digital native-digital immigrant* belief. This common notion suggests that kids are experts with technology simply by virtue of being born surrounded by gadgets, while parents are relatively clueless in this digital age. However, while parents may not be able to access all of a phone's features or score points in a video game with the ease of a child, parents, because of their more advanced brain development and life experience, are better able to understand something far more important: how kids' use, or more frequently the overuse, of technology can affect their emotional health and academic success.

So, as a parent, have the confidence to make decisions about how your child or teen uses technology. Such parenting, in which parents provide their kids' high levels of guidance in a loving context, is reflective of *authoritative parenting,* the parenting style that most contributes to our kids' happiness and success.

Some suggest that parents guiding kids' tech use is reflective of *helicopter parenting*. Do you think so?

Helicopter parenting is doing for children and teens what they could do themselves, e.g., completing our kids' homework for them, or bailing kids out of trouble they got themselves into.
One of the most troubling findings of my research is the increasing involvement of psychologists and neuroscientists in the creation of video games. These experts create digital products intended to suck users away from other aspects of their lives. For children, that would include time spent with family, playing outside, or putting effort into homework. Our kids don't stand a chance. They need our help.

Interestingly, I find that it's often parents of tech-obsessed kids who have to rely most upon helicopter parenting. Their children—caught up with gaming, social networking, and texting—are more likely to skip homework or turn it in unfinished. The result is that these parents have to constantly hound their kids to get their work done or intervene with the school on their behalf because of incomplete assignments.

Many parents are describing that their children develop an addiction to tablet computers or video games? Is there evidence that technology can be addictive?

The US health community is moving towards recognizing the addictive potential of certain technologies, something that is fully recognized in China, South Korea, and Japan. I see many preteens and teens who are addicted to technology, mostly video games but also social networks. Parents bring their kids to see me because they can't understand why they have given up on school and family in order to live in cyberspace. These are kids who often react to their parents' attempts to limit their beloved devices with aggression or thoughts of suicide.

How can parents protect their kids from tech addiction?

I believe the key is *prevention*, as treating tech-addicted children and teens is remarkably difficult for both parents and kids. As a culture, we need to be more thoughtful about the age of children when we introduce them to technology, as there is evidence that the younger kids are introduced to video gaming, the more likely they will develop obsessive habits later. I also suggest that parents understand the realities of providing their kids mobile devices such as smartphones, as this tends to dramatically increase kids' entertainment screen use, and it makes it more difficult for parents to guide their kids' use of technology.

What about the claim that limiting kids' technology hurts their ability to be successful in this digital age?

There's no doubt that our kids need to grow up to be able to use technology effectively; however, our kids' wired lives are doing anything but that. What is important to recognize is that *how* kids use technology—whether it's learning- or entertainment-focused—makes a big difference. Used constructively at the right ages, technology advances our kids' success, but an overindulgence in digital self-amusements from a young age is wreaking havoc on our kids' happiness and chances of success.

Today, our kids' tech use is marked almost exclusively by self-amusement, not learning. For example, teens now spend 8 hours each day at home with amusement-based screens, such as video games, online videos, social networks, TV, as well as texting and talking on the phone. Yet they only spend 16 minutes a day on a computer at home for school. It's this immersion in entertainment technologies which is pulling kids away from the two most important elements of their lives: family and school.

How can we get our kids to use technology productively?

There are a number of actions we can take. One of which is to build kids' *self-control* skills, as it takes remarkable restraint for kids to stay focused on the productive use of technology when digital playtime is always a click away. So how can we foster our kids' self-control? This is accomplished by limiting kids' exposure to quick-trigger screen media such as video games and high-action TV, and instead immersing them in real-world activities such as creative play and reading.

There's a tremendous irony here: It's engaging kids in *lots of real-life activities* that promotes their ability to use technology wisely as they grow older.

What do you say to parents who are concerned about raising their child with more serious limits on technology than other kids at school or in the neighborhood?

It's understandable that parents would wonder about the effects of raising their children with less tech immersion than some other kids. However, it's important for parents to know that there isn't evidence that early tech immersion benefits kids. I also suggest a good place to look for guidance is the serious tech limits leading tech executives provide their own children. For example, a *New York Times'* article disclosed that Steve Jobs and other tech execs strictly limit their own kids' tech use, and instead emphasize activities such as shared meals.

Why is the approach to parenting provided by many industry leaders so different than the way American kids are typically raised? I believe these tech execs' insiders' knowledge keeps them from being deceived by the many digital-age myths I highlight in *Wired Child.*

These business leaders are well aware that our kids' tech use is marked by long hours spent with self-amusements that can take kids' away from families and interest in school, and also pose the risk of addiction.

How do you help families limit their kids' use of entertainment technologies if two parents who live together feel differently about limiting kids' use of screens and technology?

If you're on a different page with a parenting partner about kids' use of technology, or would like your partner to be a better role model on the issues of screens and phones, the first step is to talk with him or her about your concerns. If this isn't effective, encourage your partner to look at the American Acad emy of Pediatrics media/technology recommendations. Alternatively, the next time you visit your child's doctor, have both parents attend and ask your pediatrician for advice, as kids' doctors are often aware of research-driven guidelines for kids' screen time.

Has the writing of your book influenced how you've raised your own children?

I think, even if I hadn't studied children's technology, my wife and I would have limited our kids' screen time—as we believe in the importance of creative play, reading, and other activities that can get pushed aside by digital devices. That being said, I think that my research steeled my resolve to overcome the challenges of raising kids with fewer screens.

I can remember times when our girls were toddlers when I would be reading to them at night after a long day of work and childcare, and I'd be the first one to fall asleep. Sometimes, I would say to myself that screens would sure be the easier choice. But researching the effects of kids' wired lives and seeing firsthand what happens in my practice made me more determined than ever to do what I could to limit our kids' early tech exposure.

Issues related to children's technology can feel overwhelming to parents, as there seem to be "must-have" devices and applications released daily. What's a message you feel is helpful for parents?

There are many, many self-interested parties that are telling parents to load their kids up with devices and back away, to leave their kids alone to find their own way

with video games, tablets, smartphones, etc. Yet what I find is that parents often know deep in their hearts that their kids need their help, need their guidance. Science is now clearly showing us that parents are right, our kids need our help to be happy and successful in this digital age. So, I suggest that parents follow their intuition and have the confidence and determination to lead their kids on matters of technology and screen time.

Richard Freed, Ph.D., is a child and adolescent psychologist with more than twenty years of clinical experience. He completed his professional training at Cambridge Hospital/Harvard Medical School and the California School of Professional Psychology. Dr. Freed lives in Walnut Creek, California with his wife and two daughters. He is the author of Wired Child, a book for parents, teachers, and others who care for kids. It exposes destructive digital-age age myths and helps parents provide children and teens the strong family they need, promote their success in school, limit their risk of tech addiction, and encourage their productive use of technology. Learn more at
www.RichardFreed.com