



Switching Off

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As educators, we will tend to take the view that a busy child is a good child. However, when we finally give our boys free time, what do they do with it? Do they immerse themselves in a solitary voyage into the virtual world or do they choose to enjoy each other's company?

Do not worry—this will not be an anti-tech rant. The boys at Caldicott are digital natives and they move in a world of staggering access to information and entertainment. We must champion the use of technology to enhance learning. The working world for which we are preparing boys to enter will undoubtedly be technology-led; so having technology know-how is crucial. Nevertheless, it is one thing to be tech savvy, and quite another to have the self-mastery to know how and when to switch on; or off. Many are concerned that our societal reliance on devices is harming our children and we risk turning them into a zombie generation who cannot entertain themselves without access to Wi-Fi and an electric current. Dr Aric Sigman talked cogently about this on Saturday to our senior boys and then parents.

We have all had the experience of sitting in a restaurant – a fundamentally social and interactive human space – and looking about to see children plugged in, eyes down. This is a sad sight if you believe in the art of conversation and a worrying indicator of the tendency to use technology as an easy pacifier, filling time that could be used more creatively – or even by just being bored. Dr Teresa Belton, visiting fellow at the University of East Anglia's School of Lifelong Learning, recently argued that cultural expectations about children being constantly active and occupied was harming creative development. She put forward the theory that being creative "involved being able to develop internal stimulus" and "children need to have stand-and-stare time, time imagining and pursuing their own thinking processes or assimilating their experiences through play or just observing the world around them."

Quite right. When you walk around the boarding house at free time, you might see the odd boarder plugged into an iPod listening to music, but you are much more likely to see them engaging with one another, making their own entertainment, Scalextric, board games, story time, reading, enjoying a hot chocolate and treat night, or just passing the time together. Boarders do not tend to be zombies.

To keep our sanity, and our face-to-face conversations alive, please see below four suggested ways to help:

1. Device-free dinners - this leads to engaging conversations, especially when we don't have easy access to answering questions about topics that come up.
2. No phones during homework or study time - make it a habit to keep phones in another room for when they are studying. They could spend about 30 minutes at a time studying and then take a 10-minute break and use their phone. It is not without temptations, lapses (I can relate!). We can stay involved by asking how things are going and by looking at their revision. Try to focus much more on the positives than the negatives—saying how great they have done when staying on task rather than complaining that it is not long enough.
3. Screen-free bedrooms at bedtime. No phones, tablets, TV's or computers in the bedroom when the lights go out.
4. Leave your phone at home during family outings. You will get a lot of resistance to this one, but stand firm. The boys will concede.

There is some more advice on this from Bill Gates here: <https://sg.theasianparent.com/best-age-smart-phone-kids/>