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# Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

## Pooh Bear has a lesson for us Xbox doesn't

**K**EEPING our house free of technology is not easy. Increasingly, I am coming under pressure to invest in those gadgets and games that occupy the living space of most modern homes. That I am steadfast in my opposition to virtual 'reality' invites disbelief from parents and sadness from my sons.

The problem is that when my children visit their friends, they enter a virtual oasis in which all their fantasies are fulfilled. Exploding with adrenalin, they bound ecstatically across cyberspace like newly liberated slaves. Then it is back to 'boring' reality, to a world of duties, chores and books.

Explaining to my sons why their existence is so much better than one in which they are perpetually plugged-in, is both challenging and rewarding. Challenging, because I must say why depriving them is to their benefit, and rewarding because they instinctively understand why fantasy cannot compete with imagination. That is why it is never too long before they are back reading their books.

Trying to convince other parents that I am right is, however, another story. When, for example, I suggest that hooking a child up to a screen is a recipe for social and moral inadequacy, they tend to look at their feet before quickly making their excuses. Perhaps this is because they think I am judging them as parents.

If I am judging anything, it is our cyber culture and the devastating impact it can have on our children. I have often written about the dangers of internet pornography and online grooming. The most recent study, by the University of East London, revealed that of the 177 students surveyed, 97 per cent had viewed pornography, while 23 per cent said they had tried to stop watching it but could not. Seven per cent of those aged between 16 and 20 wanted 'professional help' to break their habit.

I am not saying that game consoles or iPads inevitably lead to such problems. What I am saying is that they interfere with children's social skills and have profoundly negative effects on their moral emotions. Most alarmingly, they are equally addictive.

A flourishing child is the first duty of any parent. But what does it mean to flourish? It means possessing the skills to negotiate life's challenges with ease. It means recognising that we share our world with others and it is only through compromise that the

common good can be served. Neither fantasy nor addiction can serve the common good. Fantasy lures us into a world without prohibition, one in which every desire is immediately satisfied. It is a solipsistic world where the demands of reality have been suspended and where the ego reigns supreme.

From that, it is hard to return to the real world. If I can be sovereign on the battlefield or in the bedroom, why bother with the burden of reality? Why bother risking rejection and defeat when I can be master of my own destiny? Addiction divorces people from social reality and diminishes their sense of moral responsibility. While it is a scourge to which we are all susceptible, children are particularly vulnerable. That is because they have yet to acquire the moral and emotional intelligence that is their only real defence against it.

Giving a child a console will not equip him with that intelligence, but giving him a good book will. In fact, reading to a child is the best form of moral education a parent can provide. Not only does it build a loving bond, it also magically enlivens the imagination.

**I**F fantasy suspends reality, imagination enhances it. By idealising certain characters, and exposing those with fatal flaws, we see the human condition in all its complexity. We learn how to respond to people and situations with courage, wisdom, prudence and mercy.

Still, we live in a culture that is all but finished with good books. Visit any bookshop and you will invariably find classic literature stuffed in a small corner going for next to nothing. That is tragic, because it denies children what they need to flourish in a society addicted to addiction. It is heartbreaking because it has made my eight-year-old son feel embarrassed reading AA Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh. For a long time, he believed that were his friends to discover this fact, they would label him 'a baby'.

The truth is, of course, that we can learn more about the human predicament in one page of Winnie-the-Pooh than we ever could by playing Xbox or Wii.

My son may not yet have grasped the deeper significance of that profound book. But one thing he has learned is that there is nothing babyish in saying No to a culture that 'plugs-in' its children.

Thanks to the wise teachings of a little bear, he now understands that 'the things that make me different are the things that make me'.

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