

Linda Burch: Raising Teens With Common Sense In A 24/7 Digital World

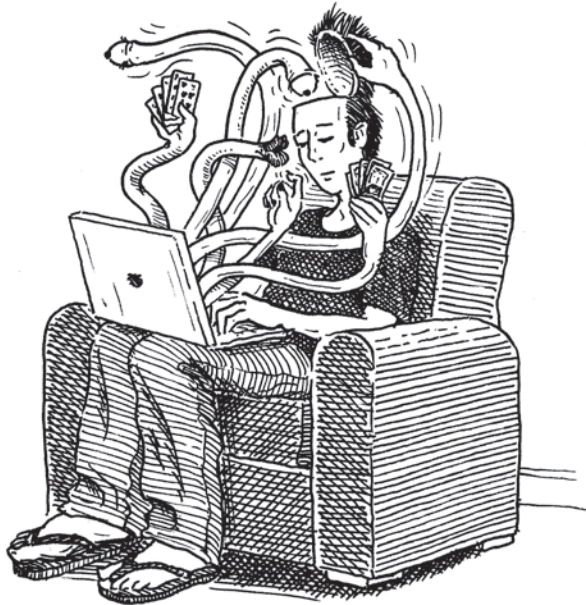
By Stephanie Levin

When communication theorist Marshall McLuhan published *Understanding Media* in the 1960s, he noted that the media of our time will shape the way humans think, act, and ultimately perceive the world around them. Although he coined the expressions, "The medium is the message" and "global village," he could not have foreseen the 24/7 digital world our teenagers inhabit today and the angst their on-line media habits create for their parents.

Linda Burch, co-founder of Common Sense Media, a non-profit dedicated to educating and improving media for families, tried to both allay some of the angst as well as educate and inform her audience when she spoke to parents at Bay School on October 20th at the **Parents' Coalition of Bay Area High Schools**. Burch's topic, "Raising Teens with

Common Sense in a 24/7 Digital World" brought McLuhan into the 21st Century.

Burch wasted no time in getting to the crux of the conflict between how parents think their kids should engage in the digital world and how teens believe they



should engage. Scanning the audience, Burch noted, parents did not grow up in a digital world, while our kids are born with digital antennae. We use email, Power Point and spreadsheets to simplify our lives while our kids think, socialize, play and live via digital media. We are consumers of digital media, our kids are participants. And there is a perception that teens blur the distinction between the online world and the real world. They are more knowledgeable about technology, less

fearful, and more empowered and emboldened with it than parents are. That's what worries many of us.

Latest Research

Burch pointed to a seminal study, the Digital Learning and Media Initiative, in which UC Berkeley School of Information doctoral candidate and blogger on new media, danah boyd, (her spelling) crisscrossed the country interviewing and observing teenagers regarding their participation in sites such as MySpace, Facebook and YouTube. Boyd found that kids think of the Internet as a public space in which to hang out, socialize and connect. According to boyd, teens do not have as much access to physical space as they once did. Couple this with being overscheduled and overprotected, as well as dependent on adults to drive them places, and congregating online becomes easier and more accessible than going out.

Private or Public Space

"Teens also have a different notion of space," said Burch. "Private space is what the parent controls; public space is what the teen controls. But teens may be very innocent

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Why Do Parents Seem "Hella Paranoid?" *The Fall Teen Panel Meeting*

By Mikiko Huang

The Parents' Coalition sponsors a Teen Panel each school year. A group of teens from various Bay Area high schools typically meets four times during the year before giving a culminating public presentation in front of an audience of parents. This year Marilyn Gradeck, educational and clinical psychologist and mom of two high school graduates, continues her longtime facilitation of the Panel along with James O'Dowd, School Counselor at Lick-Wilmerding High School, co-leader for the second year. The Panel is not a support group, but rather a forum for teens to express their perspectives on topics that will help parents better understand them and become more effective parents.

The group had its first meeting on October 5th with a diverse representation of female and male students from public, parochial and independent schools. As the students brainstormed topics they thought would be helpful, they jumped right in with insights and advice.

One teen wondered why parents are "hella paranoid," always ner-

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Raising Teens

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when it comes to public space.”

Burch suggested that parents educate teens about four areas of public space on the Internet:

1. Permanence: What goes online like personal information or photos can never be erased. It is there forever.

2. Liability: The online world is a cut and paste society. Photos can be doctored and sent around the Internet in a second.

3. Scale: The Internet is public, like a billboard, and mistakes can be amplified over and over. Its audience is invisible and enormous.

4. Digital Footprint: With the click of a keyboard and cell phone we leave a digital footprint. Every stroke is captured. Anonymity is a myth. We seldom ask the poignant question: what are we creating with the loss of our identity? All the information is being cached. No one knows where it will end up.

The Digital Ethics Discussion

The ethics of using the Internet is a challenging discussion. If our teens can get something on it for free, why pay for it? Parents may have heard that argument when they suggested that free downloading of music or software that has a copyright is not the most ethical way of obtaining it. Teens may greet

this suggestion as if parents just dropped in from outer space. Kids download without respecting ownership all the time, and Burch suggested that this is an important ethical discussion for parents and teens to have.

With kids obtaining much of their information online, credibility and how to obtain information is also a topic parents should not shy away from. It's important to convey to teens that everything they

read online isn't always trustworthy, and a lot of it is opinion, not fact. This conversation is a perfect segue into a discussion about the perils of plagiarism.

Pitfalls and Possibilities

We all know that inappropriate behavior is part of the digital world, and it's not going to disappear any time soon. But that doesn't mean that parents can't monitor or have frank discussions with teens about inappropriate behavior online.

Burch recommended that parents discuss three types of inappropriate on-line activity with their teens: inappropriate content (pornography, violence and risky behavior); inappropriate contact (sexual liaisons, sexual predators or cyber bullying); and inappropriate conduct (cheating, plagiarism and computer addiction). Warning signs of computer addiction are missing meals, losing sleep, dropping activities, skipping showers, and missing homework assignments or school.

What does the online world offer? According to Burch's research, it offers fleeting friendships, not long lasting ones. The question that Burch posed to parents is what does this do to the nature of our teens' friendships? That is still an open-ended question that has not yet been answered for the first generation of digital multi-taskers and prodigious social networkers.

What parents can do

Digital media has phenomenal possibilities and in many ways it has made our lives and that of our children easier.

Burch's parting message was not one of doom and gloom but rather to embrace the world we live in and keep communication open. She concluded her informative talk with the following suggestions:

- Encourage balanced use on the computer. In 1960-'70, we spent approximately 15 hours a week in front of media; today kids spend 30-40 hours a week.

- Agree on acceptable time to spend on the computer and acceptable content.

- Discuss and agree upon a privacy setting.

- Self-select before self reveal: Remind teens to think about what they're exposing about themselves before they put something online. Remember, they can't erase it.

- Seek out positive digital media and share it.

- Teach digital ethics and citizenship.

Stephanie Levin is the parent of an eleventh grader at International High School. When she's not on Skype, the Internet, or email, she writes, teaches, and tutors.

Hella Paranoid

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vously asking "Where are you going? Who are you going with?" These teens wanted to remind parents that they don't like the feeling of being interrogated with the implicit assumption that they're not being straightforward and may be harboring some ulterior motive. They wondered why parents don't take statements at face value.

One student theorized that some parents may have misperceptions about what their own teens' lives are really like from watching too many TV shows like "Gossip Girl"



and jumping to incorrect conclusions from the hyped-up situations portrayed in the media.

Another suggested that it wasn't only a curfew issue that made parents upset. "I think sometimes my parents just miss me not being at home as much," this girl said. Sometimes parents' needs are at odds with their sons' and daughters' needs. The facilitators acknowledged that meeting these different needs can

be a murkier challenge to solve as the relationship between teens and their parents evolve during high school and beyond.

The basis of a healthy bond between teen and parent is mutual trust, the group agreed. Teens want to feel trusted and felt that if parents trusted them more, they, in turn, would be better able to trust their parents. One teen said if he is talked to as a contemporary, it is easy to level with his parents and speak honestly. If he feels he is being talked down to, it



makes him feel less comfortable and less trusting.

The students offered parents some practical advice about how to deal with teens when they come home late: it's reasonable for parents to want to know what's going on, but parents would do well to use a calm tone rather than an accusatory one to ask if everything is all right. An aggressive tone of voice from a parent puts teens on the defensive, one of

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the students reminded us. And teens asked that they be given the benefit of the doubt. One teen described how he text messaged his mom that he was running late. He felt he was acting responsibly, as indeed he was. But his mom didn't check her messages and was upset that her son was late.

These teens recognize, and hope parents will also recognize that reactions are not just based on one specific encounter, but also on past experiences. This may not always feel 'fair' to teens, but they agreed that sometimes adjustments are necessary to maintain an agreeable relationship with parents. The group encouraged parents to find a way to honor honesty if a teen admits to a mistake. If teens feel punished for being candid about an error in judgment, they may not feel they can be truthful in the future.

To hear more from this year's Teen Panel, please join us on Monday, March 2 from 7:30-

9:00 pm at the San Francisco Waldorf High School in West Portal. **P**

Mikiko Huang is the mother of two sons, 15 and 20, and a pediatrician who has been active in Bay Area schools for 15 years.

College Talk

By Laura Shumaker

I had just returned from touring colleges with my son, Andy and ran into some friends at Peet's Coffee.

"Did he have any favorites?" one asked politely. "Well," I said, "he loved Yale. Princeton and Brown are possibilities, but right now, it's between Yale and Dartmouth."

"Good for him," she replied halfheartedly, and I felt my face flush. Had I become one of "those women." the kind I promised myself I would never be?

I thought back to the day I was in the cookie aisle with Andy's older brother, Matthew, who is autistic. Matthew was in second grade at the time and in a special education class. A pair of women that I knew from Matthew's preschool days stood in front of the Oreos gushing that their boys had been accepted into our local school's gifted student program.

"Wow, that's great!" I said bravely, holding the hand of the boy I loved so much who faced so many challenges. Was he invisible to them?

Matthew, I knew, would never be in a gifted student program, or have to choose between Yale and Dartmouth. His choices would be more humble, though no less noble than his brother's. When Andy was accepted into the gifted program a few years later, I kept my mouth shut—the day in the grocery store was still a recent memory. As my boys grew older, I heard mothers boasting about their children's accomplishments and remained silent. I learned

about AP classes and sky-high test scores. When my friends with disabled children gathered we often discussed the insensitive behavior of "those women." We didn't want to hear about honors classes when our kids were still struggling to tie their shoes.

But as Andy approached his senior year, a friend warned me that college talk would soon take over. "Not after what I went through with Matthew," I told her, but I'd already taken the plunge." As soon as Andy's SAT scores were out I was sharing them with just a few people. In no time, his scores would be all over town. "He's taken three AP classes," I gloated "and will take five next year. I hope he still has time for soccer. It's

his second year on varsity!" I was on a roll.

But the look on my friend's face after my college tour put me back in the cookie aisle holding Matthew's chubby hand. The grief flooded me once again, and I wondered how I could let myself forget it.

Andy is now a junior at an Ivy League school and Matthew graduated this past June from a special school in Pennsylvania. He's starting a new chapter of his

life in Santa Cruz, where he is an important part of the community of disabled people he lives with. I applaud each of their steps forward and support their challenges—but I do so in private. **P**

Laura Shumaker (www.laurashumaker.com) is the mother of three sons and the author of A Regular Guy: Growing Up With Autism.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years

by Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D., Three Rivers Press, 2007

By Diana Divecha

The popular media would have us believe that parents should dread the teen years and their storm and stress, rebellion, raging hormones, and risk-taking. But developmental psychologists have known for years that

most teens do just fine, are not any more troubled than the general population, have good relationships with their parents, and grow into competent adults. Now Tufts University's Dr. Richard Lerner, a premier researcher on adolescence, finally combats the old myths and illuminates for the general public the map of positive qualities that can successfully transition teens to adulthood. Unlike other parenting advice books, this one is based on decades of research from across the country and from his own Institute for Applied Research on Youth Development at Tufts which looks explicitly at what promotes positive development in teens.

In The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years, Lerner says "it is a mistake to embrace the stereotype" of the troubled teen. By focusing our adult conversations and edu-

cational programs on the risks and dangers of adolescence, we perpetuate a notion of teens that is based on deficits. By emphasizing the negative, we handicap our ability to parent, to create successful programs for teens,

"In The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years, Lerner says it is a mistake to embrace the stereotype of the troubled teen."

and to form social policies that create positive change. A new vocabulary, he argues, would promote teens' competence, their moral compass, spirituality, social relationships, compassion and sense of justice, commitment to a right path, and caring for the well-being of their families and society...qualities that almost all teens possess but are often overlooked.

The book is organized around the set of traits that studies found fostered a healthy transition to adulthood, a list Lerner calls the five Cs: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring; when they are all present, another characteristic emerges, Contribution. He describes in detail each of these strengths which, he says, most teens already possess but need good nurturing to solidify. This list is not just for middle

class white kids; he found that extremely disadvantaged kids who succeeded in overcoming great odds possessed these same pivotal traits.

How do these qualities grow? Lerner identifies the important "developmental assets" that are key to bringing out the five Cs, such as structured activities that support the development of life skills, and leadership opportunities in the community. And over and over, Lerner emphasizes that relationships with adults are key bridges to adulthood.

The book describes micro- as well as macro-level change agents. Lerner shows parents on the home front how to avoid focusing on the negative and instead identify and amplify a teen's competence in a variety of situations, even giving specific language to use in conversations. In the policy arena, Lerner describes what a good teen program should look like. I'll forgive his somewhat list-y format and baseball metaphors, and say that *The Good Teen* is the handbook that should accompany anyone embarking on a relationship with a teen. It peels back the fear and demonization of teens that is so prevalent in our culture, and keeps us focused on the treasure that our teens are and the great potential that lies within them. **P**

Diana Divecha, Ph.D. is a Lick-Wilmerding parent, developmental psychologist, and has two teenage daughters.

Coalition Mission

"To support, educate, and inspire parents of adolescents in order to promote the health and safety of our youth."

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Readers are encouraged to submit letters to the editor, ideas for articles or articles themselves.



For upcoming forums and other resources, please visit parentscoalition.net

Upcoming Parents Coalition Forum:

Monday, March 2 2009
Annual Teen Panel Discussion
Teens Share Their World Views and Personal Perspectives
San Francisco Waldorf High School, 470 West Portal Avenue

Monday, April 20, 2009
David Sheff, journalist and New York Times bestselling author of *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction*
The Bay School of San Francisco, 35 Keyes Avenue in the Presidio