The IT Era and the Personality Formation of Children


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Torrential Changes in the Information Environment

Pursuing the theme of “crisis of life” in modern times, I have been engaged in expressive activities in the nonfiction genre. I visit the scenes of various affairs and social issues, investigate documents, and hear the opinions of specialists to uncover the changes taking place in people and society. Even with the facts, grasping the truth and entirety of an affair or a social issue requires imagination, as well as intuition.

Intuition supported by accumulated professional experience plays an important role in pinning down a problem occurring deep within a person and the complicated problems of modern society. In particular, when we consider the problems related to the personality formation of children and their minds, we need to base our thinking on the intuitive perception of whether “something is wrong.”

The influence of television and electronic games on the mental and psychological development of children has long been discussed since the dawn of the TV era. In particular, a relationship between the tendency of children toward violence and the use of television and games was claimed in the 1980s reflecting the spread of violence in families and schools. However, no effective solutions were proposed.

The technical advancement of games accelerated in the 1990s. Those played on a TV screen became more and more complicated and exciting with the evolution of software. Portable games became smaller and cheaper, gaining overwhelming popularity among children. Personal computers and cell phones subsequently came onto the scene, and email (mobile and PC), websites, BBS, 2channel, and other media on the Internet became familiar to children. In the 2000s, these became explosively popular among children, and the information environment around children underwent an extraordinary transformation. The new curriculums introduced to elementary schools and junior high schools in April 2003 declared that schoolchildren should be able to use PCs.

In parallel to these dramatic changes in the information environment over the past two decades, delinquencies and felonies committed by children and adolescents came to be characterized by motives beyond the comprehension of people with traditional common sense and ordinary sensibility. Workers in child nursing and education are concerned about children having retarded linguistic development and their tendencies toward self-centeredness and aggressive behavior. Furthermore, these childcare workers are disturbed by the self-centeredness of the parents of such children, which is making the situation even more difficult.

TVs Are Harmful to Children Age 2 or Younger

In this article, the terms “electronic media” and “the IT (information technology) era” include not only the information revolution promoted by PCs and cell phones but also TVs, videos, games, and other visual media, because TVs and other conventional media transmit strongly influential information when combined with new IT media.

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The effects of the changing information environment on the mental and psychological development of children, which have been my intuitive concerns, are given a clearer shape and a concrete direction by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). At the end of the 1990s, Dr. Ryota Hosoya, director of the Department of Pediatrics, St. Luke’s International Hospital sent me a copy of his essay published in Kurashi-No-Techo magazine.

In the essay entitled “Face-to-Face Talks Rather Than TVs,” Dr. Hosoya wrote about his observation of the children in his pediatric ward. With great concern, he noticed that children would start playing Game Boy® and video games as soon as they got up in the morning. In addition, he was astounded by the news that several junior high school students beat a homeless man to death, and suspected that modern children tended to lack a sense of pity that should have grown during their development. Dr. Hosoya introduced us to the AAP recommendations addressing the concern about the harm of TVs, videos, and computer games on the mental health of children. The AAP does not recommend television for children age 2 or younger irrespective of the contents of programs. For older children, the Academy recommends that parents should watch TV with the child, plan the child’s viewing and set tight limits on the viewing time. The recommendations also emphasize the responsibility of pediatricians themselves in providing information to the general public and educating parents and children.

I felt like shouting “Bravo!” after seeing that the subject of my intuitive concern had been tackled squarely by an authoritative academic society in the U.S. As I read the copy of the original text of the AAP recommendations sent from Dr. Hosoya, I was surprised to learn that the Academy had been issuing such recommendations repeatedly since as early as 1990. I was very impressed by the statement that the direct exchange of words with parents or other caretakers is the most important thing for the development of the brain during the first 2 years of life, and for the development of social skills including the ability to accurately perceive the feelings of other people around.

Much had been discussed about the harm of violence, murder, and sex scenes in TV shows and games that might be inflicted on children and adolescents who have not yet developed their critical ability. However, the AAP’s bold assertion that excessive use of TVs and games by itself distorts the normal development of the brain and the formation of personality struck me as very significant.

Self-Centered and Aggressive

Triggered by this information, I read a number of books from Japan and the rest of the world, including “Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word” by the American linguist and philosopher Barry Sanders (translation by Taku Sugimoto, Shin-Yo-Sha, 1998). Electronic media is heavily loaded with visual information, and visual information is extremely stimulating. The high-speed presentation of images does not give us time to digest our thoughts or experience our emotions fully.

Particularly in the case of computer games, the only things that occur in the brain are fierce negative emotions such as aggression, anger, haste, and vexation and motor reactions for reflective manipulation. As the opponent is a one-way stream of virtual visual information, there are no mutual emotional interactions—the process of continuously sensing the reaction of the other person and correcting or reinforcing one’s own words and attitude, which is essential to rich emotional differentiation and the development of sympathy with others. Where there is no mutual exchange of emotions or the time for consideration, there is no room for the acquisition of linguistic abilities or the development of verbal expression.

While the adverse effects of electronic media on the personality formation of children have been discussed in a wide variety of literature, we have long been sensing the danger of electronic media using everyday common sense before such professional analysis. During the period from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s, when I was raising my children, there were no computer games and television was in its early stages. Although TV shows did not contain shocking scenes such as the murder scenes of today, we limited the viewing time to somewhere between 30 minutes and 1 hour, and we chose which programs we wanted to watch.

In and after the 1980s, with the improvement of income standards and the trend of leaving children to themselves, as well as the introduction
of smaller inexpensive TV sets, popularization of video recorders, and popularization of game machines, it became common for children to be allowed to use television, video, and games as long as they wanted. The penetration of video recorders made it possible to watch a scene repeatedly, intensifying the impression of images etched in the brain. The development of computer graphics (CG) enabled more powerful expressions of fighting, killing, and violent scenes.

Another important aspect of games is the ability to control the situation with the push of a button. If the situation becomes unpleasant or annoying, the player can reset or cancel the game at will. A special variety of such game was Tamagotchi in the earlier half of the 1990s. On the screen of this game, one can keep a virtual doll (person), pet, or plant and take care of it. If dissatisfied with the progress, one can always delete (kill) the character and restart the game. In this way, the player is tempted to think that he or she is at the center of the world and can rule the world at will. Indulgence in such games distorts the state of mind and personality formation.

This concern was evidenced by data from a questionnaire survey on the recent changes in parent-child relationships felt by 456 nursery teachers in Japan conducted by Naoki Ogi, educational commentator, in 1998. According to the results, a majority of nursery teachers pointed out the following traits of recent children: 1) staying up late at night, 2) self-centeredness, 3) tendency to panic, 4) aggressiveness, 5) lack of basic discipline, and 6) being good in the presence of parents. The data clearly demonstrated reasons for concern.

The nursery children mostly ranged in age from 4 to 6, and there were some 3-year-olds. These children would become higher graders of elementary schools 5 or 6 years later and reach puberty, when they start to reveal their ego. I was seriously concerned about what would be the personality makeup of these boys and girls.

**Another Alias, Another Personality**

This concern was to materialize as a horrendous incident exactly 5 years later. A series of appalling juvenile cases preceded this incident, including the succession of vicious crimes committed by 17-year-olds in 2000. The involvement of the Internet in the factors affecting the mind and behavior of delinquents was an undeniable fact.

The 17-year-old boy M, who hijacked a Nishitetsu highway bus in western Japan, was exchanging violent expressions in an Internet chat with others using aliases. He wrote “I’m going to kill them all” before the act. Another 17-year-old boy N, who hit a stranger with a hammer in a JR train in Yokohama City, also commented “Bus hijack is not enough” in a chat and wrote “I’ll silence the world when the sun rises tomorrow.”

Boys such as these use aliases on the Internet to pretend to be heroes. By condemning unidentified others, they exhibit their superiority as if they were monarchs. Although it all belongs to the virtual world, they are so deeply soaked in the virtual world that they become unable to distinguish between virtuality and reality, and bring their self in the virtual world into real society. They are not aware that they have committed awful deeds. A 17-year-old boy S killed a 67-year-old woman in the neighborhood in Aichi Prefecture simply because he did not like sleeping in peace and wanted to experience homicide. When the public prosecutor asked if he did not feel pity, he answered, “But she is already dead,” without showing any sign of emotion.

The late Dr. Keigo Okonogi, psychoanalyst, analyzed the traits of these new vicious juvenile crimes in his book “Ketai Netto Ningen No Seishin Bunseti—Otona Mo Kodomo Mo Hikikomori No Jidai” [Psychoanalysis of Cell-phone and Net Persons—The Age of Withdrawn Children and Grownups] (Asukashinsha Publishing, 2000). He pointed out that indulgence in the Net, because of the convenience and fun, causes the risk of falling into the following pitfalls:

1. One uses an alias to assume another personality and unabashedly expresses words and information lacking human dignity and ethical values.
2. One may have a sense of omnipotence in that one can move other people and the world at will with the push of a button. Repeated experience of such sense may lead to the development of a self-centered personality.
3. One can terminate the relationship with another person at any time. Although email seems to facilitate close communication, it is often the case that email communication is nothing but a superficial exchange of words.

Of these problems, (2) and (3) are common to the problems seen among children addicted...
to games. Problem (1) of personality alteration resulting from the ability to transmit information under aliases is a new negative problem of net communities. (Both in the communities for grownups and those for children, the Internet is now flooded with slander and abuse targeted at individuals. Although I do not browse such parts of the Internet, my friends report that there are many ill words against me as well. Even persons with respectable intellectual levels can easily change personality and lose ethical discernment in an anonymous world. It is no wonder that children discovering the hidden fun of anonymous speaking lose control.)

No Mental Development beyond the Level of Age 6 to 8

The length of time a child is exposed to electronic media is another important problem. Out of 24 hours in a day, a child has only a few hours that can be used at will. When I was a child, I used to play various games with children in the neighborhood on the street and in rice fields. Because I grew up in a large family, I experienced a lot of physical contact with other children even when I was at home. In contrast, children nowadays have few children around them, both in the neighborhood and at home. Except for the time spent at private tutor courses, they spend most of their time watching TV or playing computer games. As a result, the development of their ability to get their feelings across using language and the ability to think using language is compromised. The lack of sufficient emotional differentiation may cause significant distortion in personality formation.

Ms. Kinuyo Uozumi, a home education supporter of Neyagawa City, Osaka Prefecture, where a vicious juvenile crime took place, conducted a questionnaire survey of junior high school students and their guardians in Neyagawa City, Tokyo Metropolis, and Nagasaki Prefecture in the spring of 2005 to investigate the effects of computer games and other media on the life and personality formation of children. This was a fairly large-scale study in which questionnaires were sent to 4,762 persons and effective answers were obtained from 3,555 persons. Dr. Takashi Okada, a psychiatrist working for Kyoto Medical Juvenile Training School, analyzed the data from the Neyagawa survey from various aspects. Combining the results with insights into juvenile crimes in Japan and other countries and adding his own experience with juvenile delinquents at the Kyoto reformatory, he wrote the alarming book “Nounai Osen” [Contamination in the Brain] (Bungeishunju Ltd., 2005).

Dr. Okada presented the data concerning the game addiction of children and resulting distortion of personality formation with unprecedented credibility. The essence of the data includes the following: (1) Children who were deprived of the love of parents in infancy show stronger tendency toward game addiction. (2) Children who started playing games before entering elementary schools show stronger dependence on games after entering junior high schools. (3) Children playing games for a longer time each day show a stronger tendency toward lethargy and apathy. In the condition of game dependence, the brain demands increasingly strong excitation and eventually “burns out.”

As the conclusion from comprehensive evaluation of various data, including the personality characteristics of adolescents he saw at the reformatory, Dr. Okada claims that children of today (from elementary school children to junior high school students and high teens including high school students) are tending to stop mental development at the level of age 6 to 8. This, he argues, is the result of too much time spent in using various media and the lack of person-to-person contact. Of course, this does not apply to all children, but most juveniles causing problems show this tendency.

Mental development at the level of age 6 to 8 means the propensity to show the following tendencies: ► The distinction between reality and imagination is not clear, and the ability to predict the outcome of one’s deeds is insufficient. ► The ability of sympathy to consider the position and feelings of others and be kind to them is underdeveloped. ► The need to search one’s conscience and objectively reflect on one’s past deed is hardly felt. ► The child tends to believe in a simple dichotomy between right and wrong, and easily runs headlong in either direction.

Self-Control in Electronic Media Use

As mentioned earlier in this article, the report of Mr. Ogi on the propensities of nursery children in 1998 made me seriously concerned about what
these children would be like when they became high graders. This concern was representatively materialized in an incident that occurred 6 years later. In the spring of 2004, a 6-grader (11-year-old) girl of an elementary school in Sasebo City killed her classmate in the school. I used the word “representatively” because there were a number of other cases committed by boys and girls of similar age.

The final decision by Nagasaki Family Court Sasebo Branch recognized the following four points regarding the personality characteristics of this girl:

1. She was not good at verbalizing her feelings.
2. In her infancy, she rarely wanted a hug and spent most time playing with toys and watching TV alone. As she had little sense of security from being loved by her parents, she felt little affection toward others. Emotional differentiation was primitive, and she habitually suppressed emotions such as anger and sadness.
3. She was not good at understanding the context of a statement and grasping the entirety of a person. Rather, she responded to detached words.
4. She dealt with the emotion of anger either by suppressing anger or by explosively attacking the other person. She had only two extreme alternative reactions.

For a girl with such personality characteristics, the only places in which she could safely express herself and reconfirm her existence were exchange notebooks and the Internet, rather than in interaction with real friends. In such situation, her indulgence in horror videos (movies) and horror novels enhanced her aggressive ego.

This girl can be seen as the embodiment of the effects of the parents’ lack of intimate demonstration of affection and the effects of the modern media environment. She was pitiable in a different sense to the victim.

When I learnt the background to this incident, I recognized anew the crucial importance of parent-child attachment, which the parents (or other caretakers) should demonstrate constantly by hugging the child in infancy, and also the need for controlling the exposure of children to electronic media. I was convinced that the practice of parents reading out picture books to their own children everyday is all the more important for the sake of reconstituting parent-child attachment and for the sake of children’s mental development (development of linguistic abilities and emotional differentiation). Furthermore, I propose that every family should have a “no-TV, no-game, no-Net week” about once every 2 months.

Reports from families following this advice are encouraging. When television is not turned on in the morning, both children and parents have breakfast peacefully before leaving for school and work. There is more conversation among family members, and parents become more perceptive about friend relationships and the mental development of their children—a suggestive observation that may help in bringing self-control back into the lives of grownups and children in the IT era.