

Teach Your Children Well

The aquarium hobby might be the antidote for some of your children's digital addictions.

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Modern public aquariums still hold up well compared to digital entertainment. If you have the opportunity, consider taking your kids to visit a public aquarium.

Teaching children to care for fishes can lead to all kinds of benefits as they mature and develop their own interest in the hobby. I think parents today are very worried about their children's addiction to mass media and digital information, and with very good cause. What child doesn't beg for an iPod, moan for a new Wii video game system, or spend hours in front of a computer screen, doing who knows what?

The New Media is Everywhere

The new media paradigm is addictive. There's no question about it in my mind. Just read news reports of recent deaths allegedly caused by excessive video game playing if you want evidence of this (google "death caused by video games" and "video game addiction" to get started). I think any parents who've tried to pry their kids away from video games or a computer would probably agree with me on some level that video games and computers can be at least a little addictive.

Last year, video game sales produced more revenue than the home movie industry. This is true even in a time when a great deal of media is essentially free for anyone with the willingness and technical know-how (it doesn't take much skill) to steal it via file sharing technology.

Social networking is huge. Text messaging is everywhere. File sharing, or peer-to-peer technology, where individual computer users (often illegally) exchange digital information over an Internet connection, is now estimated to account for more than one-third of all Internet bandwidth usage.

Some suggest it is even more prevalent than this. One study carried out by a private bandwidth-management systems vendor analyzing North American bandwidth usage found that peer-to-peer file sharing accounted for 44 percent of all Internet traffic.

In fact, after a new Swedish law came into effect in April allowing copyright owners to request personal information about those involved in file sharing, Internet traffic in that country dropped overnight by 30 percent.

Your Computer is Pulling the Outside In

For anyone worried about increased immersion in digital media, ominous developments are taking place in the video game and computer worlds. Increasingly, video game systems, smart cell phones and computers in general are incorporating interactive systems into their user interfaces. The trend is only going to get bigger.

The success of the Wii and the iPhone are perfect examples of this move to more immersive experiences. Technology like this signals the move toward true "virtual reality" applications for computer users everywhere.

Google "augmented reality" if you're interested in this idea. If you think you have a hard time getting your children to put down their video game controllers to go play outside, think what trouble you'll have when their minds are literally buried in a virtual fantasyland, where they get to play with all of their favorite cartoon characters in a realistic setting all day. After that becomes reality, all I can say is, "Good luck."

I want to make it clear that I don't think new technology is a bad thing at all. I think new technology is great. But, like anything, new technology and immersive virtual environments have the potential to be put to negative uses.

Those Kids Today

The line between the digital world and the real world is growing increasingly thin. This trend toward immersion in digital media is real, and I think it's disturbing to many parents. I'm not a parent yet, but I see the tendency toward isolation in a digital world in many of my peers and in younger children, and I know it disturbs me.

But there's another side to the story. For all of you Boomers and Gen Xers out there, take it from me, a Millennial: If you

would have had access to a Wii, Play Station or a high-powered PC gaming desktop system, you would have played video games until your eyes bled and you developed tendonitis.

This stuff is instantaneously engaging. It's entertainment on steroids. Don't get me wrong; I love to read, and I think it's terrible that more nuanced forms of entertainment have largely lost out to their technologically superior shiny new brethren, but we have to face facts.

Also, I don't buy into the jeremiad argument that kids today just aren't what they used to be. No, technology isn't what it used to be. I believe the pace of development and availability of technology over the last 20 years is astounding.

I see this tendency toward digital immersion as a problem with human nature, and I don't think modern kids are somehow unique in their tendency to be interested in digital media. I believe that if any previous generation of children had been exposed to digital media during their developmental years, they'd have taken to it like fish to water. Modern kids just happen to be the generation growing up at the start of the revolution.

They know it. They've lived it. On a large scale, they appreciate its intricacies. Their world is shaped by it. It defines their paradigm, and many parents don't fully understand it.

However, for those of us who lament the changes we've made in our behavior because of new technologies, there is hope.

The aquarium hobby can help combat this trend toward immersion in the digital world. If you want to pull your kids away from potential digital addiction, help get them into the hobby. You'll be surprised at all the many benefits.

Benefit One: Slowing Down

The prevalence of digital media is great in a lot of ways. It certainly is entertaining. But it comes at a very high cost: our lives increasingly require hyper-intensive concentration and a very fast pace of living.

An aquarium is a natural antidote to this kind of lifestyle. The act of planning, setting up and caring for fishes, plants and invertebrates is anathema to our fast-food, instant-gratification tendencies in modern life.

I like to think of aquariumkeeping as the modern answer to meditation. There are a number of studies suggesting keeping an aquarium can reduce stress. With information overload being what it is, you can use aquariumkeeping to teach your children the value of slowing down and stopping to see the fishes.

You have to get into it, too, however. You've got to lead by example, in my opinion. It may seem difficult at first, but slowing down can completely change your point of view. Use it to help change your kid's point of view, too.

Benefit Two: Learn to Appreciate Nature

I've often pointed out in this blog that aquarists are primed to educate others about conservation because their proximity and obvious interest in aquatic fauna and flora make them ideal ambassadors for endangered aquatic species and environments.

This can apply to our nonaquarist children, as well. By keeping an aquarium and involving your children, you can inspire the same love of nature you've developed through keeping your aquariums over the years.

Also, there's potential to take your kids out into nature on a collecting trip. What better way to get them off the couch (or out of their virtual-reality simulator) than to put them knee deep in mud, looking for native North American fishes and invertebrates?

Benefit Three: The Value of Delayed Gratification

Video games, TV and the Internet make everything about the "now." This teaches children to expect instantaneous satisfaction. Patience is no longer a virtue in the all-digital age.

Luckily, aquariums teach the exact opposite impulse. Ask anyone who's ever painstakingly planted a natural planted tank or tried to raise a difficult species: nothing happens instantly.

This takes us back to the "meditative" aspect of keeping aquaria. A breeding project is the perfect thing to help you instill the virtue of patience in your kids. Or, if you don't want to deal with a task as specific as a breeding project, just try something new like keeping a planted tank and pushing the bounds of your hobby.

While you learn, your children will, too. Have you only kept freshwater fishes? Branch out and try keeping some aquatic plants. Are you interested in marine aquaria? Bite the bullet and dive into reefkeeping.

Take it upon yourself to learn about something new, and I'm willing to bet you'll be able to inspire interest in your children.

Benefit Four: Science Education

This benefit is pretty obvious. Aquaria can basically act as all-encompassing science education centers. You can cover everything from chemistry and engineering to genetics and natural selection.

In fact, I'm shocked every science classroom in the country doesn't have a fish tank in it. The learning opportunities are nearly endless. Also, if your kids are ever hurting for a science fair idea, you need look no further than your home's aquarium.

I think education begins at home. Keeping an aquarium will give your kids an advantage in this area right out of the gate.

Benefit Five: Responsibility? What's That?

This is an oft-cited and oft-misused aspect of petkeeping. I think many parents have justified buying their kids a new puppy based on the idea that the pet will "instill character" by requiring children to accept responsibility for the pet's care. Of course, this often ends with parents doing all of the work, much to their dismay.

I think this comes from misplaced expectations to be honest. Sure, kids should share in the care of a new pet, but we have to remember, they are kids, after all. They generally haven't accepted responsibility yet (though some are better at it than others, of course) and need our guidance.

A youthful, immature person is bound to be irresponsible on some level. Because of this, we can't just trust a pet to the sole care of an unreliable youth.

I think this is doubly true for fishes and aquaria, as well. It's easy to see puppies for their "awww, how cute," factor, but when we get into the realm of aquatic husbandry, we soon realize the cuteness factor just doesn't play as much of a role. It's hard to cuddle with a crustacean.

Using aquaria to instill responsibility is a good idea, as long as it's carried out appropriately. Accountability has to be maintained. I think we have to guide our young people in the hobby. Give your children tasks, make sure they carry them out and create rewards and consequences for compliance and noncompliance.

The hobby is meant to be fun, but we're still dealing with responsibility here, and we can't just expect the aquarium to do all the teaching.

Start 'em Young

I know many parents would probably balk at my suggestions, arguing that their children just aren't interested in aquaria. Pulling kids away from their video games can be difficult, I admit. But I don't think we can just give up the fight for our children's attention.

That's why you have to catch your children's interest when they're young. I suggest you consider expanding your hobby as your children grow. This will keep fishkeeping exciting for them and introduce them to new topics.

Ultimately, I believe we can become better people by learning the lessons our aquaria have to teach us. Responsibility, stewardship and a love of nature are timeless and will not fall to the whims of immersion in new technology and the prevalence of digital information.

Persistence is your best ally here. Don't give up on your hobby because there are too many distractions. With the help of some fish and a tank to keep them in, I believe you can do your children a great service. Persevere, and I believe your own character will shine through and foster your children's growth as well.

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