

TECHNOLOGY

Smartphones? We used to fret over radio

From comic books to TV: Kids' obsession with the 'new' thing always worried parents

Barbara Ortutay *Associated Press*

When Stephen Dennis was raising his two sons in the 1980s, he never heard the phrase "screen time," nor did he worry much about the hours his kids spent with technology. When he bought an Apple II Plus computer, he considered it an investment in their future and encouraged them to use it as much as possible.

Boy, have things changed with his grandkids and their phones and their Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter.

"It almost seems like an addiction," said Dennis, a retired homebuilder who lives in Bellevue, Washington. "In the old days you had a computer and you had a TV and you had a phone but none of them were linked to the outside world but the phone. You didn't have this omnipresence of technology."

Today's grandparents may have fond memories of the "good old days," but history tells us that adults have worried about their kids' fascination with new-fangled entertainment and technology since the days of dime novels, radio, the first comic books and rock n' roll.

"This whole idea that we even worry about what kids are doing is pretty much a 20th century thing," said Katie Foss, a media studies professor at Middle Tennessee State University. But when it comes to screen time, she added, "all we are doing is reinventing the same concern we were having back in the '50s."

True, the anxieties these days seem particularly acute — as, of course, they always have. Smartphones have a highly customized, 24/7 presence in our lives that feeds parental fears of antisocial behavior and stranger danger.

What hasn't changed, though, is a general parental dread of what kids are doing out of sight. In previous generations, this often meant kids wandering around on their own or sneaking out at night to drink. These days, it might mean hiding in their bedroom, chatting with strangers online.

Less than a century ago, the radio sparked similar fears.

"The radio seems to find parents more helpless than did the funnies, the automobile, the movies and other earlier invaders

of the home, because it can not be locked out or the children locked in," Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, director of the Child Study Association of America, told *The Washington Post* in 1931. She added that the biggest worry radio gave parents was how it interfered with other interests — conversation, music practice, group games and reading.

In the early 1930s a group of mothers from Scarsdale, Arizona, pushed radio broadcasters to change programs they thought were too "overstimulating, frightening and emotionally overwhelming" for kids, said Margaret Cassidy, a media researcher at Adelphi University in New York who authored a history of American kids and media.

Called the Scarsdale Moms, their activism led the National Association of Broadcasters to come up with a code of ethics around children's programming in which they pledged not to portray criminals as heroes and to refrain from glorifying greed, selfishness and disrespect for authority.

Then television burst into the public consciousness with unrivaled speed. By 1955, more than half of all U.S. homes had a black and white set, according to Mitchell Stephens, a historian at New York University.

The hand-wringing started almost as quickly. A 1961 Stanford University study on 6,000 children, 2,000 parents and 100 teachers found that more than half of the kids studied watched "adult" programs such as Westerns, crime shows and shows that featured "emotional problems." Researchers were aghast at the TV violence present.

By the end of that decade, Congress had authorized \$1 million (about \$7 million today) to study the effects of TV violence, prompting "literally thousands of projects" in subsequent years, Cassidy said.

That eventually led the American Academy of Pediatrics to adopt, in 1984, its first recommendation that parents limit their kids' exposure to technology. The medical association argued that television sent unrealistic messages around drugs and alcohol, could lead to obesity and might fuel violence. Fifteen years later, in 1999, it issued its now-infamous edict that kids under 2 should not watch any television at all.



Kathy and Steve Dennis pull off the cover of their 1980's-era Apple II+ computer bought for their then young sons in Bellevue, Washington. Three decades ago they never heard the phrase "screen time," nor did they worry much about limiting the time the kids spent with technology. *Associated Press, Elaine Thompson*

Video games presented a different challenge. Decades of study have failed to validate the most prevalent fear, that violent games encourage violent behavior. But from the moment the games emerged as a cultural force in the early 1980s, parents fretted about the way kids could lose themselves in games.

Some cities sought to restrict the spread of arcades; Mesquite, Texas, insisted that the under-17 set required parental supervision. Many parents imagined the arcades where many teenagers played video games "as dens of vice, of illicit trade in drugs and sex," Michael Z. Newman, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee media historian, wrote recently in *Smithsonian*.

This time, some experts were more sympathetic. Games could relieve anxiety and fed the age-old desire of kids to "be totally absorbed in an activity where they are out on an edge and can't think of anything else," Robert Millman, an addiction specialist at the New York Hospital-Cornell University Medical Center, told the *New York Times* in 1981. He cast them as benign alternatives to gambling and "glue sniffing."