Preventing Addiction

~ Nancy Blanning

This article first appeared in the 2015 Winter issue of Lilipoh*, directed to a public audience rather than to teachers, per se. It is reprinted here to offer an approach as to how we might bring to parents thoughtful consideration to screen usage by children, especially very little ones, without moralizing, lecturing, or scolding. Hopefully the argument speaks for itself.*

Discussing addiction prevention is something that usually comes along toward middle school, perhaps fifth grade these days. It may seem strange to discuss this with regard to early childhood. But it is in the earliest years of life when addiction prevention forms its bedrock. It is urgent that we see what helps to strengthen our young children to meet dangers that may lie ahead.

Addiction prevention begins when the child is very young. This realization was startlingly emphasized at an international Waldorf educators' conference in Dornach, Switzerland in spring, 2015. Teachers from all levels of Waldorf education—early childhood, grades, high school—gathered with physicians to discuss how to support critical moments of development in our children's lives. The once-typical landscape of childhood has changed with life's fast pace, use of technology, fearfulness, and general sense of uncertainty and insecurity that surround our lives. That children will achieve healthy development in our modern world is not a given at all anymore.

One change intruding more and more into daily life is the use of screens. It is common to see very little children with screens in hand, totally still and absorbed in whatever they see in this tiny, virtual world. The child's first seven years is the essential time to develop a sense of inner strength, initiative, confidence, and competence that can protect them when facing the challenges of the future. Adults consider screens as useful tools. They can also be fascinating, even alluring. But this media use with young children can whisper them away from developing strong and independent selfhood.

Screen use is a crucial question we must consider for our children. It is subtle to consider, but exposure to screens can play a part of this picture of addiction. This is a bold and challenging statement, no doubt offensive to some. But please read on. The following picturing of child development will describe where pitfalls await but also where possibilities to support a healthy sense of self and resilience also lie.

A first question addressed at the educators' conference was, "What is addiction?" Dr. Bettina Lohn, school doctor with Waldorf students for grades 8-12 in Switzerland, defines addiction as dependency upon a substance or a behavior. There develops a compulsion for an external experience in order to "feel good." A surprising statistic indicates that addictions to substances—alcohol, tobacco, coffee, chocolate, marijuana—are not increasing. But behavior addictions—such as gaming, internet media use, video gaming, shopping, self-injuring, cutting, and anorexia—are all on the rise. Participation in some of these activities is common in moderation in ordinary life. But a threshold has been passed when the consumption or behavior becomes a compulsion. It is hard to discern where addiction actually starts. But once established, there can be enormous consequences to health, finances, personal development, emotional and psychological well-being, and social relationships.

To "prevent" means to do something to keep the addiction from happening. We have substance-abuse education programs in schools to inform children of the dangers of experimentation with different substances. We know that young people, particularly adolescents, have not developed the discernment or maturity in neurological development to make sensible decisions. They tend to be risk takers and feel invulnerable. Many young people experiment with substances or risky behaviors, but only a few develop addictions. Why do others not? What makes the critical difference that some can "taste" but then say "no, thanks," and move on?

We want to protect our children from harmful influences. These education programs are important, but something more must come much, much earlier as a general prevention for every child. Warning and moralizing about the dangers of addictions will have little effect if the foundation of inner strength has not been supported very early in life. We have to consciously encourage and allow our children to strengthen themselves.

Here is where we touch upon the nature of early childhood. When we think about young children, we see that they are *doers*. They want to *do* everything, sometimes to our frustration and chagrin. The child has a natural drive to explore and discover the world. In doing so, the child begins to develop his or her own experience of individual competence. To push and pull, take apart and put back together, to dig and fill, to lift and carry, to dump and pick up, to twirl and spin, to climb and jump, to fall and stand again are things children repeat over and over until they feel competent. This is one way that they develop confidence and "feeling at home" in their physical bodies. To feel confident and trust that the body will do what the child intends allows her to "feel good" as a result of her own actions. No outside substance or distraction is necessary. The child has strengthened her own will and sense of competence through doing. Being active in the world rather than passively receiving or timidly holding back is a first step in preventing vulnerability to addiction.

All children have a natural drive to find their own independence. This is a gradual process that needs approval and support from the caring adults around them. To begin with, little children are at the mercy of their environment. They have no discrimination. All is interesting and equal to their experience. They cannot discern what is good or bad, and they imitate what they see around them. We adults have to play that discriminating role in their lives so this inner, independent self longing to grow is not "hijacked." Screens may make life seem easier by engaging children's attention to keep them quiet. But screen time is a will-breaker. It supplants the independent self that is longing so deeply to establish itself in this earthly life with something artificial, something "in place of self."

The first seven years of life particularly is the time for the will to develop. We speak about will power, which needs to develop in two directions. We speak on the one hand of having the will power to restrain, to hold back, to "just say no." The other side of will power is having the will to *do*, to have initiative and follow through, even if the task is not inherently fun or interesting. To resist is an act of will that is born out of the will to do. **With screens, the only real act of will is to turn it off.**

All human beings seek confirmation that we have a meaningful place in the world around us. We want to know that it matters that we are alive on this earth and that the things we *do* contribute. Many people who fall prey to addictions do not see how their lives have meaning. They turn to substances or compulsive behaviors to distract themselves from the feelings of meaninglessness. In addition to our parental care and nurturing love, we show our children that they matter by giving them meaningful work to do that contributes to our social welfare. As soon as it makes sense, engaging our children in the work and running of the home is a step in addiction prevention. Small chores to begin with—silverware on the dinner table, carrying one's plate to the sink, washing dishes by hand, folding napkins, sweeping with whisk broom and dust pan, and so on—help the young child begin to develop habits that strengthen selfhood.

Children want to be self-sufficient, so they need the opportunity to develop self-care skills. Allowing them to do this takes lots of time. In our fast-paced lives with tight schedules, this is hard. But allowing the time in these early years to struggle into snow pants and boots again and again is a step toward addiction prevention. A three-year-old little girl proved this strongly. She struggled and struggled to take off her snow wear, hang her sweater on a hook hard for her to reach, and put on her indoor shoes. It took time, but it was the most important thing happening in the world for her at that moment. When

she had succeeded, she turned with a smile and said, "I do it myself." Being both challenged and allowed from early childhood onward "to do it myself" strengthens the child against the lure of seeking this satisfaction from something external in the future.

Young children are naturally imitative and mirror back whatever they see others do. If what they see is purposeful, this is what they will reflect back to us. If they experience what looks to them like passivity, doing nothing, they will imitate this too. Children are hard-pressed when they mostly see adults speaking and texting on cell phones or working on computers. If children do not see steps of preparation in cooking a meal, shoveling snow with shovels, clearing leaves with rakes by hand instead of using leaf blowers, mending something that is broken, or stitching closed a tear in a piece of clothing, they have few examples of meaningful things to do. Watching people use technology has no content or result in practical life to the children's perception. Children are longing for what is real and purposeful, not for what is virtual. To help our children strengthen here, we must give them examples of real activity where something is accomplished through human effort. This means that we have to shovel the snow ourselves with the children at our side with their own shovels, and so on. We may have to come out of our technological, convenient life-style habits to go out of our way to give children these experiences. Yet anything that will help our children toward a healthy future and strength in personhood is a huge investment and a small sacrifice in the long term.

Modern technology has relieved us of much arduous work that kept earlier generations busy from dawn to dusk. We have more time and energy to explore opportunities to develop our humanity in fuller and richer ways. We have leisure time. How will we use it? Media producers of all sorts are waiting to fill that void for us with videos, electronic games, educational programs, and films. The things we see on screens are alluring, fascinating, exciting—and addicting. As described above, early childhood especially is the time for activity, to develop one's own will forces to purposefully *do* and experience one's effectiveness in the world. It is the time for reaching out into the world to explore. It is the time for seeing and imitating purposeful activity as a template for acting purposefully in the future. It is the time for strengthening self-initiative.

When our children sit in front of a screen, they are not reaching out into the world through their own initiative and activity. They are being *pulled into* a world created by someone else's intention. They are not moving; they are not exploring and creating their own experiences of the natural world. They are not strengthening their independent will forces. They are being carefully enticed to enter more and more deeply into a virtual world created by someone we do not know, whose motivations are not revealed to us.

To the defenseless children who innocently accept everything in the environment as of equal value, screen time predisposes them to look outward for engagement and "feeling good." It distracts them from growing strength inwardly. It predisposes the child to depend upon a substance or to engage in a behavior that directs and controls him, instead of directing himself from his inner place of strength.

So we come back to where we began. The foundation for preventing addiction lies in early childhood. We give our children strength to face perilous future temptations if we give their forces of will meaningful and potent chances to develop. We do children a service by protecting them from technological distractions that rob them of the opportunity to be active. The possibility of addiction for any of us is frightening, most especially when we think of our children. We all wish to give them the chance to develop their own self-confidence and competence, so that to addictive invitations to "feel good" through something external, they can say, "No, thanks. I do it myself." ◆

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