



Book Review

***Tech Tonic: Towards a New Literacy of Technology,*
Alliance for Childhood
(College Park, Maryland: Alliance for Childhood, 2004).**

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T*ech Tonic: Towards a New Literacy of Technology* is an outstanding follow-up to the Alliance For Childhood's earlier report, *Fool's Gold*. *Fool's Gold*, published in 2000, informed readers as to how introducing computer technologies into children's lives prematurely can undermine healthy psychological and neurological development. It went on to elucidate developmental imperatives and sound educational principles. *Tech Tonic* takes this cautionary tale a step further by introducing developmental guidelines for technology literacy as well as guidelines for teachers, teacher education, and citizen action.

If I sound enthusiastic about this book, it is because in the 1990s I witnessed a growing emphasis on early academics and computer-based technologies in preschool and kindergarten settings, and a dramatic increase in the number of children being diagnosed with psychiatric disturbances, such as ADHD, learning disabilities, depression, and anxiety. I believe that these concurrent trends are linked, because a relentless and uncritical emphasis on early literacy and "screen time" does not support young children's developmental needs for experiential and emotionally grounded learning through play and sensitive, one-on-one mentoring. When children are required to learn in settings that are not developmentally appropriate, they are more likely to be

disturbed, either because they cannot meet the demands that are being made of them, or because the stress of trying to do so may push already vulnerable children towards illness.

In December 2004, UNICEF released a document entitled *Childhood Under Threat* which states that the survival of more than half the world's children, numbering more than a billion, is now at risk. Twenty-nine thousand children are dying every day—mostly of preventable causes. More than three million are enmeshed in the sex trade, and more than 120 million, most of them girls, do not attend primary school. These statistics refer mainly to "third world" countries. But children in wealthy nations are also suffering, and record levels of obesity, mental illness, and violence provide eloquent testimony to our failure to meet their needs. For now, rich and poor nations differ dramatically in the ways that they fail children, but we will likely see these patterns merge in the fate of the next generation of children. Prior to the 1992 Rio De Janeiro summit that led to the Kyoto Accord, half the world's Nobel laureates warned that we are on a collision course with nature, and many believe that we have only a generation in which to replenish and detoxify the earth. Meanwhile, industries continue to spew deadly toxic chemicals from their sweatshops into our air, water, and soil. These toxins do

not recognize national borders or socioeconomic status and can be found in human tissue, blood, and breast milk half way across the globe from their point of origin.

How do we rescue our children's future? While scholars and policy makers propose various solutions to address the economic, political, ecological, or psychological dimensions of the problem, we must seek out new solutions that effectively integrate them. A new approach called "Child Honoring," articulated by Raffi (Cavoukian), beloved children's singer, song writer, and child advocate, recommends that all vital decisions about environmental matters, the economy, and education should be based on criteria that obligate us to focus on and promote *what best serves the needs of young children*. *Tech Tonic* could thus be described as a "child honoring" document.

A child's exponential rate of development in the early years renders her exquisitely vulnerable to environmental influences. Her brain, body, and psychological integrity are easily derailed by exposure to physical or psychic trauma. Conversely, wholesome and loving environments enable children to fully actualize their full human potential. A healthy, intact child is imbued with unfettered curiosity, enthusiasm, initiative, and a growing sense of kinship with and respect for other living creatures. She is grounded in her family and her community, she is connected to the natural order, and at the same time she is able to express herself and place her own personal stamp on the world. Her thinking is aligned with her emotional and bodily experience, and infused with artistry, imagination, and soulfulness. But also, and above all, only a healthy child can become an adult with the will, wisdom, and creativity to harness new and emerging technologies in a way that is humane and ecologically sustainable.

Tech Tonic reminds us that the current generation of youngsters will be the stewards of a world that is changing at a mind boggling pace—a world marred by terrorism, environmental degradation, and weapons of mass destruction. It is imperative, therefore, that teachers consider not only academic performance and curriculum content, but how to foster children's ethical, emotional, and creative

potential. *Tech Tonic* provides educators, policy makers, and parents a guide by which to teach children to learn how to develop and use modern technologies in the service of the preservation of nature and the development of peaceful global relationships. It is a *must read* for educators, policy makers, and parents alike, and should be required reading for education majors.

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