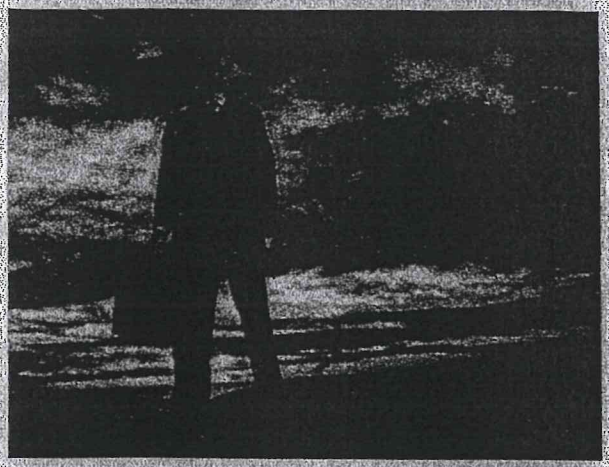
'Pre-Adulthood' Separates The Men From The Boys



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Author Kay Hymowitz says young men are stuck in extended adolescence — putting off the adult responsibilities that once "defined" manhood.

February 28, 2011 text size A A A

Once upon a time in America, boys "became men" when they went to war or started a family. Those milestones still hold true for some, but Kay Hymowitz, author of *Manning Up: How The Rise Of Women Has Turned Men Into Boys*, says too many young men today are stuck in a stage of extended adolescence. In the new "pre-adulthood," she argues, young men are choosing video games or reruns on the Cartoon Network over adult responsibilities — namely, marriage.

"There simply never has been this ... large a percentage of single young people with so few family responsibilities and lots of entertainment out there," Hymowitz tells NPR's Mary Louise Kelly. "The idea that men were going to eventually be husbands and fathers really provided a kind of structure ... an understanding of their role within the society."

But with the onset of "pre-adulthood," which Hymowitz dates roughly to the 1990s, "we don't really know what it means to 'man up' anymore. We're in a society that has a lot of confusion about what men are good for."

Men are often criticized for being confident or aggressive, Hymowitz says, but are also chided for being incompetent and foolish. They are told they are important as fathers, but "we also sing the praises of strong single mothers."

The resulting message to young men, says Hymowitz, "is that they're sort of optional to family life. And I think when you tell a whole generation of men [that] we can take them or leave them, you're going to get a rebellion on their part."

Sociologist Michael Kimmel, author of *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, has also documented a shift in the roles and expectations of young men in America. In the 1950s, Kimmel tells Kelly, most people completed the transition to adulthood — finishing school, finding their first job, marrying and having children — "by age 21 or so. ... My mom finished all of those within three months ... as did all of her friends."

But times have changed dramatically, says Kimmel, a professor at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and he sees simple demographics as the primary driver behind the reluctance of young people to marry before their late 20s.

"My students today ... they're going to live, if demographers are right, into their mid-90s," says Kimmel. "So they look at me and they say, 'Now wait, get married at age 20? I'm not sure I want to be married to

the same person for 76 years.' And they have a point."

Young, single adulthood is a "stage of development," says Kimmel. "It's not going away."

Both Kimmel and Hymowitz agree the changing American economy has played a tremendous role in shifting young men's attitudes toward marriage.

"It's much harder to find your way into your first good job," says Hymowitz, and takes longer still to move to the next professional level. "In this new economy young people will take much, much longer to grow up."

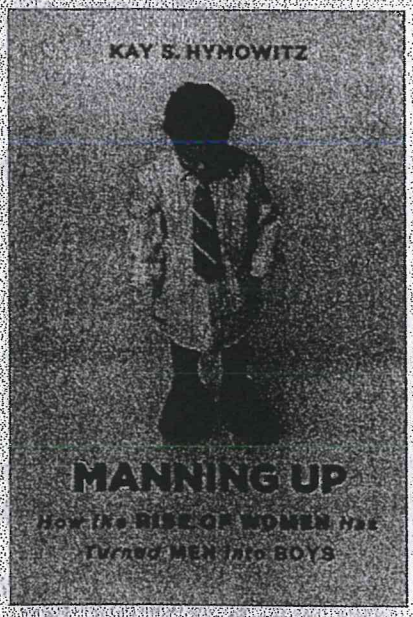
But whatever the causes, Hymowitz argues, these shifts ultimately favor men and disadvantage women, who face unique, biological pressures to enter adulthood.

"Although we're living a lot longer, we haven't conquered biology completely," she says. Many women in their early 30s, she argues, find themselves seeking a mate among peers who don't yet have the same priorities.

There is a gap, Hymowitz says, "between biology and pre-adulthood that we still haven't figured out how to negotiate."

Excerpt: 'Manning Up'

by KAY HYMOWITZ



Base Books

Manning Up: How The Rise Of Women Has Turned Men Into Boys
By Kay Hymowitz
Hardcover, 248 pages
Basic Books

Where have the good men gone? I'll bet you've heard some version of that question before. Laura Nolan, a commonsensical British woman in her thirties who lived in New York for five years and would like a husband and children but is hardly what you'd call desperate, put it this way: "We have an overload of man-boys — which leaves a generation of single, thirtysomething women who are their natural mates bewildered ...

An odd thing happens to man-boy brains at about the age of 30. Some neural pathway, hitherto well oiled through a diet of normal relationships and an awareness of such terms as 'compromise' and 'I'm sorry,' tunes in to a specific area of the brain labeled 'navel-gazing.'"

Next time she's in New York, Nolan might like to have coffee with Julie Klausner, comedian and author of I Don't Care About Your Band, and one of many similarly disgruntled American women, though their beef is more often with men in their twenties.

"We are sick of hooking up with guys," she writes, and by "guys" she means males who are not boys or men but something else entirely. "Guys talk about Star Wars like it's not a movie made for people half their age; a guy's idea of

List price: $25.99

a perfect night is to hang around the PlayStation with his bandmates, or a trip to Vegas with his college friends. Guys feed you Chipotle and ride their bikes in traffic. They are more like the kids we babysat than the dads who drove us home." One female reviewer of Klausner's touchingly funny book wrote, "I had to stop several times while reading and think: wait, did I date this same guy?"

Not so long ago, average mid-twentysomethings, both male and female, had achieved most of the milestones of adulthood: high school diploma, financial independence, marriage, and children.

These days, they hang out in a novel sort of limbo, a hybrid state of semi-hormonal adolescence and responsible self-reliance.

The limbo — I'll be calling it preadulthood — has much to recommend it, especially for the college-educated men I'll be writing about in this book. But it seems about time to state what has become obvious to legions of frustrated young women: it doesn't tend to bring out the best in men. I know what you're thinking: that description bears no resemblance to your prince of a son/nephew/friend/boyfriend. That may well be true. I've met a few such princes myself. Young men, like everything else in a postmodern world, come in many varieties, and there are numerous counterexamples to the child-man. But at this point, it's looking pretty clear that ten or fifteen years of party-on single life are a good formula for producing navel-gazing, wisecracking childmen rather than unhyphenated, unironic men.

To understand why that is, we need to take a good look at this cultural habitat of preadulthood. Decades in the unfolding, the limbo of the twenty- and early thirtysomething years probably strikes many readers as not especially noteworthy. After all, the media has been crowded with preadults for almost two decades.

Adolescents saturated the cultural imagination from Elvis in the 1950s to the Beatles in the 1960s to John Hughes in the 1980s, but by the 1990s the media jilted the teen for the twentysomething.

Movies started the affair in the early 1990s with such titles as Singles, Reality Bites, Single White Female, and Swingers. Television soon deepened the relationship. Monica, Joey, Rachel, and Ross; Jerry and Elaine; Carrie, Miranda, et al.; these singles were the most popular characters on television in the United States and just about everywhere else on the globe where people own televisions.

But despite its familiar media presence, preadulthood represents a momentous sociological development, much as the appearance of adolescence did in the early twentieth century. It's not exaggerating things to say that large numbers of single, young men and women living independently while also carrying enough disposable income in their wallets to avoid ever messing up their kitchens is something entirely new to human experience. The vast majority of humans have spent their lives as part of families — first, the one created by their own parents, and then soon after that, the one they entered through marriage — for the simple reason that no one (well, almost no one) could survive on their own.

Yes, during other points in Western history, young people waited to marry until their mid- and sometimes even their later twenties (though almost never living independently before they wed), and yes, office girls and bachelor lawyers have been working and finding amusement in cities for more than a century. But their numbers and their money supply were small enough to keep them minor players in both the

social ecology and the economy. Pre-adults are a different matter; they are a major demographic event.

What also makes preadulthood something new and big — and what begins to explain why the "Where have the good men gone?" question won't go away — is its radical reversal of the sexual hierarchy. Among preadults, women are the first sex. Women graduate from college in greater numbers than men, with higher grade point averages; more extracurricular experiences, including study abroad; and as most professors tell it, more confidence, drive, and plans for the future. They are aggressively independent; they don't need to rely on any man, that's for sure. These strengths carry them through much of their twenties, when they are more likely to be in grad school and making strides in the workplace, to be buying apartments and otherwise in aspiring mode. In an increasing number of cities, they are even outearning their brothers and boyfriends.

By contrast, men can come across as aging frat boys, maladroit geeks, or unwashed slackers. The gender gap was crystallized — or perhaps caricatured is the better word — by the director Judd Apatow in his hit 2007 movie Knocked Up through his 23-year-old hero Ben Stone and Alison, the woman Ben accidentally impregnates after a drunken meeting at a club. Ben lives in a Los Angeles crash pad with a group of grubby friends who spend their days playing video games, smoking pot, and unsuccessfully planning the launch of their porn website. Alison, though hardly a matron, makes Ben look as if he's still in middle school. She is on her way up as a reporter at E! Entertainment network and lives in an apartment in the guesthouse of her sister's well-appointed home with what appear to be clean sheets and towels. Once she decides to have the baby, she figures out what needs to be done and does it. Either under the influence of mind-altering substances or in his natural state of goofball befuddlement, Ben can only stumble his way to responsible adulthood.

Here we have the two sexes of young urban singlehood, male and female, one lazy, crude, and immature, the other put- together, smart, and ambitious. (Think also of Bart and Lisa Simpson, Anthony and Meadow Soprano, and the male and female characters in just about every coed commercial on television.) Skeptics will be quick to object that these are just popular-culture confections, and so they are. But they reflect real trends in the predicament of the sexes in the contemporary world. Articles and books with such titles as "The End of Men," "Are Men Necessary?," The Decline of Males, "The Death of Macho," "Women Will Rule the World," and Is There Anything Good About Men? point toward a growing recognition that men are not thriving in today's cultural and economic environment. Preadulthood, a time of life when the middle-class kids first become independent, when after two decades of high-stakes schooling and helicopter parenting no one is telling them when papers are due or summer vacation starts, when, in short, the future is finally pretty much in their own hands, should be able to cast fresh light on the question of what's the-matter-with-guys-today.

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The Tethered Generation

With access to technology since a young age and a perpetual connection to parents, the millennial generation brings new challenges to the workplace.

By Kathryn Tyler

At 11 years old, Kate Achille had a pager for her parents to reach her when necessary. At 13, she had a cell phone. Now 22 and working for a school, she e-mails her mother as many as five times a day and calls her on the cell phone several times a week.

Her mother, Jeanne Achille, CEO of Shrewsbury, N.J., public relations firm The Devon Group, says technology allows her to communicate regularly with Kate and her other daughter, who is 18. "I know where my daughters are constantly because we use these communications technologies to update each other: 'I'm still at work,' 'I'm going to the gym,' 'I'm picking up dinner,' etc.

"I would have never given my parents visibility into this level of detail in my day!" she admits.

But this is a different day. Kate Achille and her sister are part of the so-called millennial generation, now ages 8 to 29. This group, also called Generation Y and the Net Generation, is made up of 80 million people in the United States born between 1978 and 1999. They are the first generation to use e-mail, instant messaging (IM) and cell phones since childhood and adolescence.

Especially as millennials born since 1985 begin to show up in the workforce, HR professionals and psychologists are just beginning to see what effect the constant "tethering" to technology has had on the way millennials work, communicate, make decisions and interact. That effect, along with a tethered relationship to their peers and parents—sometimes to the extent that they have been deemed "helicopter parents"—presents challenges for HR professionals integrating millennials into the workplace.

For those who remember life without cell phones and the Internet, it may be difficult to understand how ingrained technology is in millennials' lives. To prepare for millennials, it's important to understand how cell phones and computers have changed their brain development, the enormous role their parents play in their lives well into adulthood, and what policies and training programs HR professionals will need to implement to transition these young people into the workplace.

Millennial Connectivity

Older generations that couldn't wait to proclaim their independence can't comprehend this generation's need for parental guidance and influence. Years ago, "most college dorm rooms had one land line, and, if parents were lucky, kids called home once a week. Now, students may be going across the country, but they call their parents on the cell phone three to five times per day," says Claire Raines, author of *Generations at Work* (AMACOM, 2000).

Another big influence on this generation is their peers. While previous generations also looked to their friends for advice and direction, today's technology allows a perpetual connection to peers, leaving little time for autonomy. "Except for their mothers, these kids don't have relationships with people outside of their generation. They spend 72 hours per week of connected time—by phone and IM"—seeking advice and input on the smallest decisions, says Jim Taylor, a futurist, author and vice chairman of Waterbury, Conn.-based The Harrison Group, a marketing consulting and research services firm, which has consulted for large companies on tapping the teen market.

What could be wrong with young people using cell phones and IM to keep mom and dad abreast of their every move? New research reveals a lot.

Scientists once believed the brain was almost completely formed by age 13. But, in the past two years, neuroscientists have discovered that parts of the brain—specifically the prefrontal lobes, which are involved in planning and decision-making—continue to develop well into the late teens and early 20s.

"The prefrontal cortex is important for decision-making, planning, reasoning and the storage of knowledge," explains Jordan Grafman, chief of the Cognitive Neuroscience Section at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Md.

That means millennials' brains are still developing reasoning, planning and decision-making capabilities while they are depending heavily on technology—cell phones, IM and e-mail—as well as parents and friends at the other end of the technology. As a result, some experts believe millennials struggle to make decisions independently.

When parents give teens cell phones, it's a double-edged sword. "On the one hand, this arrangement gives the adolescent new freedoms. On the other, the adolescent doesn't have the experience of having only herself to count on; there's always a parent on speed dial," says Sherry Turkle, licensed clinical psychologist and professor of the social studies of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

Stephen P. Seaward, director of career development for Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn., agrees. "The majority of millennials never experienced life without a microwave, computer, ATM card or television remote control. Many had their first cell phones in their early teens with parents footing the bill," he says. "This instantaneous gratification ... may have fostered unrealistic expectations with respect to goal-setting and planning. That, in conjunction with extreme parental influence, can prohibit creative problem-solving and decision-making."

A 2006 research report bears this out. Roughly three-quarters of executives and HR managers at 400 companies surveyed said that recent four-year college graduates displayed only "adequate" professionalism and work ethic, creativity and innovation, and critical thinking and problem-solving. Only one-quarter reported an "excellent" display of those traits in recent college graduates, according to Are They Really Ready to Work?, a report by the Society for Human Resource Management, The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

Helicopter Parents

While technology has enabled children's dependency, it has also abetted parental oversight, making it easier for overbearing parents to "hover" well into adulthood. "Some hovering is good since some mistakes can be catastrophic. But small errors induce critical thinking," and if children are not allowed to make small errors, they don't learn through experience, argues Grafman.

"Parents' most important task is to help young people to become independent and autonomous. When we infantilize our young, we stifle their development," says Robert Epstein, visiting scholar at the University of California in San Diego, and West Coast editor of Psychology Today.

Epstein tells the story of a helicopter parent meddling in his college-aged daughter's courses. "In class, I announced I expect hard work and sacrifice from my students and any professor who said less than that was cheating his students. This young woman's father—a California Superior Court

judge—sent a letter to the chair of my department saying his daughter was intimidated by my warning. His letter arrived on judicial stationery."

Epstein brought the matter to the attention of the judicial regulatory board, which later reprimanded the judge. Imagine when this young woman enters the workforce and her father dislikes her workload, he wonders.

"Parental involvement in the lives of their offspring seems to be increasing every year. I've seen parents come to campus protesting a low grade. When I caught one student cheating on a paper, his mom called and demanded I let him write a new paper," says Epstein.

Most colleges now hold orientation sessions for freshman students and their parents, separately. The parent orientation talks about how to "cut the apron strings."

However, it often doesn't achieve the desired effect, says Robert W. Wendover, director of The Center for Generational Studies, a research and training company in Aurora, Colo.

"The kids leave everything to mom and dad," says Wendover. "The kids encourage it; they're used to it. It's easier to use the parent as a surrogate than to think for yourself. There is a point at which the child fails to learn resourcefulness. It's a learned helplessness."

Not everyone agrees this is detrimental or even prevalent. Barbara Dwyer, CEO of The Job Journey, a soft-skills training firm for high-school and community college students in El Macero, Calif., says, "This generation is closer to their parents than any other generation. They see their parents as friends. It's a good thing." Dwyer believes helicopter parents are a small percentage of the total parenting population.

However, many college professors and career counselors say otherwise. "Parents have called to set up interview appointments for their children. The students lose a sense of self-reliance," says Toni McLawhorn, director of career services at Roanoke College in Salem, Va.

Helicoptering in the Workforce

As millennials move into the workforce, their hovering parents do, too. "Parents are writing resumes, applying to jobs and even attending interviews," reports Steven Rothberg, president and founder of the CollegeRecruiter.com career site, headquartered in Edina, Minn.

Ann Reynolds, director of university career services at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, says she has received feedback from employers about "parents calling to find out why their child was not hired or offered more money. A few want to be involved in negotiating salary."

Susan Revillar Bramlett, PHR, an HR generalist for a defense research contractor in Fort Wayne, Ind., and a millennial herself, "overheard a parent yell at the HR person because her daughter was turned down for a promotion."

Wendover has another disquieting but increasingly common tale from a pharmaceutical company. "They had a 23-year-old new employee with a pharmacy doctoral degree show up for the first day of work with her dad. He wanted to see where she worked. The dad stayed for about four hours. The manager was aghast," he says.

Another HR professional, who asked not to be identified, tells of withdrawing a job offer from a young candidate after he failed a required drug test. "Within 24 hours, his mother called me to say their

family takes a lot of herbal supplements and we shouldn't hold this against him. Then she kept talking about what a good person her son was and how he could do great things for our company. After I refused to discuss the situation with her, I didn't hear from them again."

When it comes to dealing with helicopter parents, there are two schools of thought: beat 'em or join 'em. HR professionals will need to decide to which school they subscribe and develop policies and procedures accordingly.

Some companies are courting the parents and applicants simultaneously. At many Enterprise Rent-A-Car offices, for instance, the company offers to provide information to the parents of prospective candidates, and about half of the candidates accept. Remember, though, any parental involvement should always be at the request or discretion of the candidate.

In contrast, if a company chooses not to communicate with helicopter parents, it will need to enforce strong privacy policies and train managers on how to deflect parental interference. The unnamed HR professional above refuses to discuss anyone's employment with his or her parents. "I remain polite and explain we don't discuss employment-related issues with [outsiders]. If they continue to push, I suggest they discuss the matter with their [child]. If the employee follows up with me, I say why it's inappropriate, and I hope it won't happen again."

How To Prepare for the Millennials

Policies to manage helicopter parents aren't the only preparation companies will need to consider for the millennial generation. Experts suggest HR professionals plan to:

- **Increase basic skills training**. Many millennials may lack basic spelling and writing skills because they have come to rely on spell check. Moreover, some millennials have become so accustomed to using IM abbreviations, such as "b/c" for "because," that some don't know how to spell it correctly. Wendover recommends asking candidates to write a letter from scratch without the benefits of grammar or spell check. "Then, you'll know what their writing skills are," he says.

In addition, millennials need to learn how to conduct old-fashioned research in books and other primary sources. "It doesn't occur to them to go to the library, but there's a whole bunch of stuff not on the web," says Wendover.

Millennial Bramlett agrees. "New college grads strongly believe all Internet information is valid, and if it's not available on the Internet, then it doesn't exist. This can create problems in work quality if someone is relying 100 percent on Internet resources."

- **Explain the reasons behind processes**. To gain compliance from millennials, you need to give the rationale behind your instructions, says Wendover. If you tell a person to stock a grocery shelf but to be cautious opening the boxes, he won't be. "This person takes a box knife to open a case of Wheaties and slices across all the boxes. Then you have to discount that box. But, if you explain, 'In the grocery industry you only have a 1 percent profit margin, the box sells for $5, you're only making 5 cents, and by being forced to discount the box you have lost any profit that could have been made,' [this is how] you engage them. You need to teach them why they're doing what they're doing," says Wendover.

- **Place clear parameters on communication frequency and methods, particularly IM**. Millennials need to be told when it is acceptable to call and how to reach their superiors. Don't assume they have traditional standards for appropriate behavior, such as knowing it isn't acceptable to make a business call in the restroom.

"Some of our interns expect staff members to be available to them instantly, even when the issue is not urgent. They don't appreciate that our workdays are full and we need to prioritize our tasks. Sometimes, their requests must wait," says Rothberg.

- **Provide more frequent job performance appraisals and other feedback**. "This generation has grown up sitting in front of a monitor playing video games. Players always know how they're doing by the score on the screen," says college career director Seaward. "Therefore, this generation won't want to wait for a semiannual or annual performance review. They will require ongoing feedback."

Bramlett agrees: "If I do something wrong, I expect my manager to let me know immediately, not at my next performance evaluation. If I've given a major presentation to company executives, I immediately follow up with someone who sat in on the call to gain feedback on how I did and how I can improve."

- **Focus on outcomes**. "They can do their job, surf the web, IM friends, have a chat with colleagues on the side and pay attention to everything," says Wendover. "It's unrealistic to expect them to have no personal calls during the workday."

HR must measure outcome-based performance. "If they are getting the job done faster than you anticipated, give them more to do," says Wendover. Don't settle for poor quality, but don't fuss if they are also conducting personal conversations while they're working.

- **Keep them engaged**. "I will stay with a company as long as my skills are developing. If something major doesn't change, I move on. This happened with my last HR position," says Bramlett. "The only reason I didn't leave [right away] was because I felt responsible for a major project where employees were depending on me. Millennials can be loyal, but it's based more on relationships than on the company."

Therefore, HR professionals will need to be vigilant about helping millennials with career planning and job rotation assignments. "If a company doesn't have a good internal placement program, they may find many of these folks leaving to gain new experiences," says Bramlett.

- **Expand work/life balance programs**. According to a study by Spherion, a recruiting and staffing firm headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., millennials highlight "time and flexibility" as the most important thing in keeping them loyal to their employers (followed by financial compensation and benefits). No other age group named "time and flexibility" in their top three retention drivers.

Bramlett confirms this. "Just because a person is single or doesn't have kids doesn't mean they will accept responsibility of having to work a majority of the overtime or travel more than others in the same position," she says. "Work/life balance is important to this generation, and it shouldn't matter why they want the time off."

Great Expectations

"My generation is going to be high-maintenance," acknowledges Bramlett. "We were brought up to reach for the stars. Many millennials don't recognize the idea of starting at the bottom and working their way up. Millennials come to work on their first day with great ideas on how they're going to change the world. Management will need to be sensitive to their aspirations when responding to their ideas so as to not shoot them down."

Dwyer agrees: "This generation is going to come to work with higher expectations than any other. They will be quickly disappointed if it's not as good as they had hoped. With one click of the mouse, they can tell thousands of other people, 'Don't go to work for XYZ company.' It's going to be challenging."

Concludes Taylor, "The main thing HR people have to deal with is how to take people who are well-educated, intelligent and quick to draw remarkably accurate conclusions and immerse them in the organization."

Kathryn Tyler is a Generation X freelance writer and former HR generalist and trainer in Wixom, Mich. She has written business-related articles for the past 12 years.

Good News ...

Millennials have a lot of skills and enthusiasm to offer companies. Experts say they are:

- Techno-savvy. "They're enormous consumers of information and can locate details about anything within seconds," says Jeanne Achille, CEO of The Devon Group and mother of two millennials. "We employ millennials to help with research because they can find in-depth data through sources we older employees don't even know exist." (The flip side is training millennials to adequately vet the research they find on the Internet.)
- Adept at global and diversity issues. "Millennials' world is far more expansive than previous generations' because, through online social networks, they can reach well beyond the confines of geography and establish relationships with others. They're ideally positioned to support our global workplaces, and HR people should tap their skills accordingly," says Achille.
- Team-oriented. With millennials, "decisions are made in a team environment," says futurist Jim Taylor. "They measure themselves by their peers. They will form communal tribes and communicate astonishing amounts."
- Multitaskers. "For today's young people, multitasking is as natural as eating," says Robert Epstein, visiting scholar at the University of California in San Diego, and West Coast editor of Psychology Today.

According to a study by the Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based staffing firm Spherion, 90 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds feel that listening to an iPod while working improves their job satisfaction and productivity. Susan Revillar Bramlett, an HR generalist for a defense research contractor, and a millennial herself, confirms this phenomenon. "The constant stimuli from video and computer games have caused millennials to be bored if there isn't enough information coming in to keep our brains busy."

—Kathryn Tyler

... And Bad News

According to experts, the millennial generation as a whole lacks the following traits:

- Discretion. "If you give up your privacy on MySpace about everything from your musical preferences to your sexual hang-ups, it is harder to" understand others' concern for privacy invasions, says Sherry Turkle, a licensed clinical psychologist and MIT professor. "They get the idea one's privacy is dispensable."

  Clearly, this lack of confidentiality can have dramatic repercussions in the workplace. "There will be no secrets," futurist Jim Taylor warns. "A conversation that would normally be judged as a private discussion between a boss and subordinate" will become public.

- Independence. "Because parents overscheduled their lives, they don't know what to do next. They will need more direction" in the workplace, says Jean M. Twenge, associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University and author of *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Free Press, 2006).

  Claire Raines, author of *Generations at Work* (AMACOM, 2000), says millennials may look to managers to "take on that 'mom role' in some ways. We have to show that we really care about the person, know what their goals are and help them with their career paths," she says.

- Realistic expectations. Barbara Dwyer, CEO of The Job Journey, a soft-skills training firm, notes this generation believes they can change the world on the first day of work. "The problem is that they don't have the track record to support these statements. When they're told their entire lives how wonderful they are, and then they're challenged in the business environment, they are crushed," she says.
- Patience. "They're used to instant gratification. They tend to be impatient and want things yesterday. From an HR perspective, the advantage is that, in their impatience, they may become more efficient, but the disadvantage is that they may not have the patience to work through a complex problem," says Twenge.
- Work ethic. When asked how the work ethic of today's young professionals compared to that of previous generations, 49 percent of executives polled by Korn/Ferry indicated that it was worse.

  "One problem HR professionals are already facing is many young people entering the workforce have unrealistic expectations about what it means to work," says Robert Epstein, West Coast editor of Psychology Today. "Many are unwilling to work hard or make personal sacrifices to get ahead."

- Soft skills and the basics. "Students' grammar may suffer from an over-reliance on computer programs that correct language errors, which will perpetuate poor written communication skills. E-mail and instant messaging reduces the opportunity for face-to-face interpersonal interaction. The lack of strong interpersonal skills impacts other soft skills, such as conflict resolution," says Stephen P. Seaward, director of career development for Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Conn.

—Kathryn Tyler

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Junior Varsity Soccer (Boys)
2012-2013

Day	Date	Opponent	Place	Time
Tuesday	Aug. 21	Galesburg High School	Geneseo High School	4:30PM
Thursday	Aug. 30	@ United Township HS	United Township HS	4:30PM
Tuesday	Sep. 04	Moline High School	Geneseo High School	4:30PM
Thursday	Sep. 06	@ Rock Island High School	Rock Island High School	4:30PM
Saturday	Sep. 15	Alleman High School	Geneseo High School	11:00AM

November 21, 2010

Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction

By MATT RICHTEL

REDWOOD CITY, Calif. — On the eve of a pivotal academic year in Vishal Singh's life, he faces a stark choice on his bedroom desk: book or computer?

By all rights, Vishal, a bright 17-year-old, should already have finished the book, Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle," his summer reading assignment. But he has managed 43 pages in two months.

He typically favors Facebook, YouTube and making digital videos. That is the case this August afternoon. Bypassing Vonnegut, he clicks over to YouTube, meaning that tomorrow he will enter his senior year of high school hoping to see an improvement in his grades, but without having completed his only summer homework.

On YouTube, "you can get a whole story in six minutes," he explains. "A book takes so long. I prefer the immediate gratification."

Students have always faced distractions and time-wasters. But computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning.

Researchers say the lure of these technologies, while it affects adults too, is particularly powerful for young people. The risk, they say, is that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks — and less able to sustain attention.

"Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing," said Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston. And the effects could linger: "The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently."

But even as some parents and educators express unease about students' digital diets, they are intensifying efforts to use technology in the classroom, seeing it as a way to connect with students and give them essential skills. Across the country, schools are equipping themselves with computers, Internet access and mobile devices so they can teach on the students' technological territory.

It is a tension on vivid display at Vishal's school, Woodside High School, on a sprawling campus set against the forested hills of Silicon Valley. Here, as elsewhere, it is not uncommon for students to send hundreds of text messages a day or spend hours playing video games, and virtually everyone is on Facebook.

The principal, David Reilly, 37, a former musician who says he sympathizes when young people feel disenfranchised, is determined to engage these 21st-century students. He has asked teachers to build Web sites to communicate with students, introduced popular classes on using digital tools to record music, secured funding for iPads to teach Mandarin and obtained $3 million in grants for a multimedia center.

He pushed first period back an hour, to 9 a.m., because students were showing up bleary-eyed, at least in part because they were up late on their computers. Unchecked use of digital devices, he says, can create a culture in which students are addicted to the virtual world and lost in it.

"I am trying to take back their attention from their BlackBerrys and video games," he says. "To a degree, I'm using technology to do it."

The same tension surfaces in Vishal, whose ability to be distracted by computers is rivaled by his proficiency with them. At the beginning of his junior year, he discovered a passion for filmmaking and made a name for himself among friends and teachers with his storytelling in videos made with digital cameras and editing software.

He acts as his family's tech-support expert, helping his father, Satendra, a lab manager, retrieve lost documents on the computer, and his mother, Indra, a security manager at the San Francisco airport, build her own Web site.

But he also plays video games 10 hours a week. He regularly sends Facebook status updates at 2 a.m., even on school nights, and has such a reputation for distributing links to videos that his best friend calls him a "YouTube bully."

Several teachers call Vishal one of their brightest students, and they wonder why things are not adding up. Last semester, his grade point average was 2.3 after a D-plus in English and an F in Algebra II. He got an A in film critique.

"He's a kid caught between two worlds," said Mr. Reilly — one that is virtual and one with real-life demands.

Vishal, like his mother, says he lacks the self-control to favor schoolwork over the computer. She sat him down a few weeks before school started and told him that, while she respected his passion for film and his technical skills, he had to use them productively.

"This is the year," she says she told him. "This is your senior year and you can't afford not to focus."

It was not always this way. As a child, Vishal had a tendency to procrastinate, but nothing like this. Something changed him.

Growing Up With Gadgets

When he was 3, Vishal moved with his parents and older brother to their current home, a three-bedroom house in the working-class section of Redwood City, a suburb in Silicon Valley that is more diverse than some of its elite neighbors.

Thin and quiet with a shy smile, Vishal passed the admissions test for a prestigious public elementary and middle school. Until sixth grade, he focused on homework, regularly going to the house of a good friend to study with him.

But Vishal and his family say two things changed around the seventh grade: his mother went back to work, and he got a computer. He became increasingly engrossed in games and surfing the Internet, finding an easy outlet for what he describes as an inclination to procrastinate.

"I realized there were choices," Vishal recalls. "Homework wasn't the only option."

Several recent studies show that young people tend to use home computers for entertainment, not learning, and that this can hurt school performance, particularly in low-income families. Jacob L. Vigdor, an economics professor at Duke University who led some of the research, said that when adults were not supervising computer use, children "are left to their own devices, and the impetus isn't to do homework but play around."

Research also shows that students often juggle homework and entertainment. The Kaiser Family Foundation found earlier this year that half of students from 8 to 18 are using the Internet, watching TV or using some other form of media either "most" (31 percent) or "some" (25 percent) of the time that they are doing homework.

At Woodside, as elsewhere, students' use of technology is not uniform. Mr. Reilly, the principal, says their choices tend to reflect their personalities. Social butterflies tend to be heavy texters and Facebook users. Students who are less social might escape into games, while drifters or those prone to procrastination, like Vishal, might surf the Web or watch videos.

The technology has created on campuses a new set of social types — not the thespian and the jock but the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato.

"The technology amplifies whoever you are," Mr. Reilly says.

For some, the amplification is intense. Allison Miller, 14, sends and receives 27,000 texts in a month, her fingers clicking at a blistering pace as she carries on as many as seven text conversations at a time. She texts between classes, at the moment soccer practice ends, while being driven to and from school and, often, while studying.

Most of the exchanges are little more than quick greetings, but they can get more in-depth, like "if someone tells you about a drama going on with someone," Allison said. "I can text one person while talking on the phone to someone else."

But this proficiency comes at a cost: she blames multitasking for the three B's on her recent progress report.

"I'll be reading a book for homework and I'll get a text message and pause my reading and put down the book, pick up the phone to reply to the text message, and then 20 minutes later realize, 'Oh, I forgot to do my homework.' "

Some shyer students do not socialize through technology — they recede into it. Ramon Ochoa-Lopez, 14, an introvert, plays six hours of video games on weekdays and more on weekends, leaving homework to be done in the bathroom before school.

Escaping into games can also salve teenagers' age-old desire for some control in their chaotic lives. "It's a way for me to separate myself," Ramon says. "If there's an argument between my mom and one of my brothers, I'll just go to my room and start playing video games and escape."

With powerful new cellphones, the interactive experience can go everywhere. Between classes at Woodside or at lunch, when use of personal devices is permitted, students gather in clusters, sometimes chatting face to face, sometimes half-involved in a conversation while texting someone across the teeming quad. Others sit alone, watching a video, listening to music or updating Facebook.

Students say that their parents, worried about the distractions, try to police computer time, but that monitoring the use of cellphones is

difficult. Parents may also want to be able to call their children at any time, so taking the phone away is not always an option.

Other parents wholly embrace computer use, even when it has no obvious educational benefit.

"If you're not on top of technology, you're not going to be on top of the world," said John McMullen, 56, a retired criminal investigator whose son, Sean, is one of five friends in the group Vishal joins for lunch each day.

Sean's favorite medium is video games; he plays for four hours after school and twice that on weekends. He was playing more but found his habit pulling his grade point average below 3.2, the point at which he felt comfortable. He says he sometimes wishes that his parents would force him to quit playing and study, because he finds it hard to quit when given the choice. Still, he says, video games are not responsible for his lack of focus, asserting that in another era he would have been distracted by TV or something else.

"Video games don't make the hole; they fill it," says Sean, sitting at a picnic table in the quad, where he is surrounded by a multimillion-dollar view: on the nearby hills are the evergreens that tower above the affluent neighborhoods populated by Internet tycoons. Sean, a senior, concedes that video games take a physical toll: "I haven't done exercise since my sophomore year. But that doesn't seem like a big deal. I still look the same."

Sam Crocker, Vishal's closest friend, who has straight A's but lower SAT scores than he would like, blames the Internet's distractions for his inability to finish either of his two summer reading books.

"I know I can read a book, but then I'm up and checking Facebook," he says, adding: "Facebook is amazing because it feels like you're doing something and you're not doing anything. It's the absence of doing something, but you feel gratified anyway."

He concludes: "My attention span is getting worse."

The Lure of Distraction

Some neuroscientists have been studying people like Sam and Vishal. They have begun to understand what happens to the brains of young people who are constantly online and in touch.

In an experiment at the German Sport University in Cologne in 2007, boys from 12 to 14 spent an hour each night playing video games after they finished homework.

On alternate nights, the boys spent an hour watching an exciting movie, like "Harry Potter" or "Star Trek," rather than playing video games. That allowed the researchers to compare the effect of video games and TV.

The researchers looked at how the use of these media affected the boys' brainwave patterns while sleeping and their ability to remember their homework in the subsequent days. They found that playing video games led to markedly lower sleep quality than watching TV, and also led to a "significant decline" in the boys' ability to remember vocabulary words. The findings were published in the journal Pediatrics.

Markus Dworak, a researcher who led the study and is now a neuroscientist at Harvard, said it was not clear whether the boys' learning suffered because sleep was disrupted or, as he speculates, also because the intensity of the game experience overrode the brain's recording of the vocabulary.

"When you look at vocabulary and look at huge stimulus after that, your brain has to decide which information to store," he said. "Your brain might favor the emotionally stimulating information over the vocabulary."

At the University of California, San Francisco, scientists have found that when rats have a new experience, like exploring an unfamiliar area, their brains show new patterns of activity. But only when the rats take a break from their exploration do they process those patterns in a way that seems to create a persistent memory.

In that vein, recent imaging studies of people have found that major cross sections of the brain become surprisingly active during downtime. These brain studies suggest to researchers that periods of rest are critical in allowing the brain to synthesize information, make connections between ideas and even develop the sense of self.

Researchers say these studies have particular implications for young people, whose brains have more trouble focusing and setting priorities.

"Downtime is to the brain what sleep is to the body," said Dr. Rich of Harvard Medical School. "But kids are in a constant mode of stimulation."

"The headline is: bring back boredom," added Dr. Rich, who last month gave a speech to the American Academy of Pediatrics entitled, "Finding Huck Finn: Reclaiming Childhood from the River of Electronic Screens."

Dr. Rich said in an interview that he was not suggesting young people should toss out their devices, but rather that they embrace a more balanced approach to what he said were powerful tools necessary to compete and succeed in modern life.

The heavy use of devices also worries Daniel Anderson, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who is known for research showing that children are not as harmed by TV viewing as some researchers have suggested.

Multitasking using ubiquitous, interactive and highly stimulating computers and phones, Professor Anderson says, appears to have a more powerful effect than TV.

Like Dr. Rich, he says he believes that young, developing brains are becoming habituated to distraction and to switching tasks, not to focus.

"If you've grown up processing multiple media, that's exactly the mode you're going to fall into when put in that environment — you develop a need for that stimulation," he said.

Vishal can attest to that.

"I'm doing Facebook, YouTube, having a conversation or two with a friend, listening to music at the same time. I'm doing a million things at once, like a lot of people my age," he says. "Sometimes I'll say: I need to stop this and do my schoolwork, but I can't."

"If it weren't for the Internet, I'd focus more on school and be doing better academically," he says. But thanks to the Internet, he says, he has discovered and pursued his passion: filmmaking. Without the Internet, "I also wouldn't know what I want to do with my life."

Clicking Toward a Future

The woman sits in a cemetery at dusk, sobbing. Behind her, silhouetted and translucent, a man kneels, then fades away, a ghost.

This captivating image appears on Vishal's computer screen. On this Thursday afternoon in late September, he is engrossed in scenes he shot the previous weekend for a music video he is making with his cousin.

The video is based on a song performed by the band Guns N' Roses about a woman whose boyfriend dies. He wants it to be part of the package of work he submits to colleges that emphasize film study, along with a documentary he is making about home-schooled students.

Now comes the editing. Vishal taught himself to use sophisticated editing software in part by watching tutorials on YouTube. He does not leave his chair for more than two hours, sipping Pepsi, his face often inches from the screen, as he perfects the clip from the cemetery. The image of the crying woman was shot separately from the image of the kneeling man, and he is trying to fuse them.

"I'm spending two hours to get a few seconds just right," he says.

He occasionally sends a text message or checks Facebook, but he is focused in a way he rarely is when doing homework. He says the chief difference is that filmmaking feels applicable to his chosen future, and he hopes colleges, like the University of Southern California or the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, will be so impressed by his portfolio that they will overlook his school performance.

"This is going to compensate for the grades," he says. On this day, his homework includes a worksheet for Latin, some reading for English class and an economics essay, but they can wait.

For Vishal, there's another clear difference between filmmaking and homework: interactivity. As he edits, the windows on the screen come alive; every few seconds, he clicks the mouse to make tiny changes to the lighting and flow of the images, and the software gives him constant feedback.

"I click and something happens," he says, explaining that, by comparison, reading a book or doing homework is less exciting. "I guess it goes back to the immediate gratification thing."

The $2,000 computer Vishal is using is state of the art and only a week old. It represents a concession by his parents. They allowed him to buy it, despite their continuing concerns about his technology habits, because they wanted to support his filmmaking dream. "If we put roadblocks in his way, he's just going to get depressed," his mother says. Besides, she adds, "he's been making an effort to do his homework."

At this point in the semester, it seems she is right. The first schoolwide progress reports come out in late September, and Vishal has mostly A's and B's. He says he has been able to make headway by applying himself, but also by cutting back his workload. Unlike last year, he is not taking advanced placement classes, and he has chosen to retake Algebra II not in the classroom but in an online class that lets him work at his own pace.

His shift to easier classes might not please college admissions officers, according to Woodside's college adviser, Zorina Matavulj. She says they want seniors to intensify their efforts. As it is, she says, even if Vishal improves his performance significantly, someone with his grades faces long odds in applying to the kinds of colleges he aspires to.

Still, Vishal's passion for film reinforces for Mr. Reilly, the principal, that the way to reach these students is on their own terms.

Hands-On Technology

Big Macintosh monitors sit on every desk, and a man with hip glasses and an easygoing style stands at the front of the class. He is Geoff Diesel, 40, a favorite teacher here at Woodside who has taught English and film. Now he teaches one of Mr. Reilly's new classes, audio production. He has a rapt audience of more than 20 students as he shows a video of the band Nirvana mixing their music, then holds up a music keyboard.

"Who knows how to use Pro Tools? We've got it. It's the program used by the best music studios in the world," he says.

In the back of the room, Mr. Reilly watches, thrilled. He introduced the audio course last year and enough students signed up to fill four classes. (He could barely pull together one class when he introduced Mandarin, even though he had secured iPads to help teach the language.)

"Some of these students are our most at-risk kids," he says. He means that they are more likely to tune out school, skip class or not do their homework, and that they may not get healthful meals at home. They may also do their most enthusiastic writing not for class but in text messages and on Facebook. "They're here, they're in class, they're listening."

Despite Woodside High's affluent setting, about 40 percent of its 1,800 students come from low-income families and receive a reduced-cost or free lunch. The school is 56 percent Latino, 38 percent white and 5 percent African-American, and it sends 93 percent of its students to four-year or community colleges.

Mr. Reilly says that the audio class provides solid vocational training and can get students interested in other subjects.

"Today mixing music, tomorrow sound waves and physics," he says. And he thinks the key is that they love not just the music but getting their hands on the technology. "We're meeting them on their turf."

It does not mean he sees technology as a panacea. "I'll always take one great teacher in a cave over a dozen Smart Boards," he says, referring to the high-tech teaching displays used in many schools.

Teachers at Woodside commonly blame technology for students' struggles to concentrate, but they are divided over whether embracing computers is the right solution.

"It's a catastrophe," said Alan Eaton, a charismatic Latin teacher. He says that technology has led to a "balkanization of their focus and duration of stamina," and that schools make the problem worse when they adopt the technology.

"When rock 'n' roll came about, we didn't start using it in classrooms like we're doing with technology," he says. He personally feels the sting, since his advanced classes have one-third as many students as they had a decade ago.

Vishal remains a Latin student, one whom Mr. Eaton describes as particularly bright. But the teacher wonders if technology might be the reason Vishal seems to lose interest in academics the minute he leaves class.

Mr. Diesel, by contrast, does not think technology is behind the problems of Vishal and his schoolmates — in fact, he thinks it is the key to connecting with them, and an essential tool. "It's in their DNA to look at screens," he asserts. And he offers another analogy to explain his approach: "Frankenstein is in the room and I don't want him to tear me apart. If I'm not using technology, I lose them completely."

Mr. Diesel had Vishal as a student in cinema class and describes him as a "breath of fresh air" with a gift for filmmaking. Mr. Diesel says he wonders if Vishal is a bit like Woody Allen, talented but not interested in being part of the system.

But Mr. Diesel adds: "If Vishal's going to be an independent filmmaker, he's got to read Vonnegut. If you're going to write scripts, you've got to read."

Back to Reading Aloud

Vishal sits near the back of English IV. Marcia Blondel, a veteran teacher, asks the students to open the book they are studying, "The Things They Carried," which is about the Vietnam War.

"Who wants to read starting in the middle of Page 137?" she asks. One student begins to read aloud, and the rest follow along.

To Ms. Blondel, the exercise in group reading represents a regression in American education and an indictment of technology. The reason she has to do it, she says, is that students now lack the attention span to read the assignments on their own.

"How can you have a discussion in class?" she complains, arguing that she has seen a considerable change in recent years. In some classes she can count on little more than one-third of the students to read a 30-page homework assignment.

She adds: "You can't become a good writer by watching YouTube, texting and e-mailing a bunch of abbreviations."

As the group-reading effort winds down, she says gently: "I hope this will motivate you to read on your own."

It is a reminder of the choices that have followed the students through the semester: computer or homework? Immediate gratification or investing in the future?

Mr. Reilly hopes that the two can meet — that computers can be combined with education to better engage students and can give them technical skills without compromising deep analytical thought.

But in Vishal's case, computers and schoolwork seem more and more to be mutually exclusive. Ms. Blondel says that Vishal, after a decent start to the school year, has fallen into bad habits. In October, he turned in weeks late, for example, a short essay based on the first few chapters of "The Things They Carried." His grade at that point, she says, tracks around a D.

For his part, Vishal says he is investing himself more in his filmmaking, accelerating work with his cousin on their music video project. But he is also using Facebook late at night and surfing for videos on YouTube. The evidence of the shift comes in a string of Facebook updates.

Saturday, 11:55 p.m.: "Editing, editing, editing"

Sunday, 3:55 p.m.: "8+ hours of shooting, 8+ hours of editing. All for just a three-minute scene. Mind = Dead."

Sunday, 11:00 p.m.: "Fun day, finally got to spend a day relaxing... now about that homework..."

Malia Wollan contributed reporting.