Digital natives and digital immigrants: parental supervision in the digital age

The concept of "digital natives" describes some of the powerful changes that have been brought upon our society due to the "digital revolution". Now a day's children are "growing up online" thus developing different skills, communication patterns, interpersonal relationships and cognitive abilities. This cultural change has created a new situation in the family; children are born digital while their parents are digital immigrants. This situation, known in different times of history is interesting and meaningful in terms of parental supervision and authority.

The concepts of "natives" and "immigrants" encompass a theoretical premise regarding the digital revolution; a premise stating that there is actually a revolution to speak of. Many parents and psychologists claim that technological advances have very little bearing on our psychological lives – that by changing the venue one cannot change the psyche. When speaking of a generational gap one might state that there's nothing new under the sun: isn't every generation of children more advanced than that of his parents? However, it is also possible to view ourselves as going through a major cultural change, one that affects us in ways that history last knew during the industrial revolution. One of the most fascinating changes has occurred in the sphere of family relations, as the concept of digital natives and immigrants describes.

An interesting question might be: can we use some of the concepts from immigration families to better understand the change families are undergoing in face of the digital culture?

As in immigrant families, the digital natives are a vessel to the main culture (the digital culture), better understanding the language, the norms and the rapid paste of occurrences than their parents. Is there a reversal of roles? Are parents considered irrelevant to this aspect of their children lives in a time in history it is becoming more and more central to their lives?

To give but a few examples to some of the changes occurring in the digital family, let us view the following:

1. It seems that the children are much more independent in the online world, setting their own set of social norms and rules, seemingly without an adult around. Parents have argued that cyberspace is somewhat of a "wild west" and that they feel fearful for their children for this very reason.

2. At the same time it seems that the technological options for parents to follow, track and spy after their children has exponentially grew. Some parents report the use of spyware, hidden video cameras and other gadgets in order to receive

information about their child's whereabouts. This has raises some interesting questions regarding parental monitoring practices.

The "new authority" theory s' principles can offer us a new way to examine some of the challenges parents face now a days to the aforementioned changes.

When examining some of these challenges it seems that parental responses vary from apathy and lack of involvement in the child's media life on the one side and moral panic on the other. Let's attempt to break down these parental responses and strive to understand some of the challenges to parental authority and parent-child relationships.

a. Knowledge:

Lack of technological knowledge: many parents claim that they feel excluded from their child's virtual world due to lack of internet proficiency. And it's not only technological knowledge, but also – an approach to the virtual world, they feel culturally distant from it.

In the spirit of the "New Authority", technological knowledge in itself should not be a deterrent. The traditional authority was based sometimes on knowledge. The internet shattered this possibility completely. Therefore authority should not rest on knowledge as its source but rather on the parents caring and presence. Whether the parent understands the technology or he should still be able to be a present and involved parent.

b. Privacy:

The question of children's privacy as the concept of privacy itself has become a prominent issue in parent-child relations now a days. The internet offers digital natives contradictory means of self representations: complete anonymity on one hand and extreme self disclosure (photos, personal details) on the other. As this confusing change in privacy grows, parents may ask themselves: Should I read my child's correspondents on the internet? Use spying software? Is monitoring his activities via online information (Facebook profile for instance) efficient in the sense of Vigilant Care? Some parents feel it is imperative for them to spy after their children as their only means to gather information about them. It is not uncommon for parents to use software allowing them to view from work their child's online activity in real time. One child described how managed to split the screen so his father would see as if he were surfing encyclopedia websites while he was really doing whatever he wanted….

One of the "new authority's" principles includes the notion of transparency. Trying to hide your actions from your child and reveal information about him without him knowing it, will introduce an element of secrecy and distrust. Also, an important key element in parental supervision in general is the child's experience of being looked at, cared for and supervised – so this supervision voice could be internalized. Therefore, parental actions should be visible and clear to the child and as such they will be felt as parental actions of supervision and care. This is more important than the actual knowledge that might be achieved by spying.

Technological spying methods might increase parents' knowledge but not their parental supervision. Knowledge in itself is not important as the covert act of searching for it; asking the child about his internet activity, requesting an "internet tour" etc will increase the child's feeling that his parent is present in this aspect of his life.

c. "Media Tsunami":

I our work with parents we have encountered a feelings of parental helplessness in the face of the media. One father explained: "I'm not sure what you want from us, it's the Wild West out there no matter what I do. If I supervise on internet content, he goes online on his cell, if I try to manage that, I remember that television is a source of problem in itself. I feel like Mickey mouse in fantasia, whatever I do the water keeps pouring in…".

This feeling of "media tsunami" is leaving parents feeling as though any actions of involvement and supervision in this subject are worthless. It is possible to postulate that this feeling is leaking to other areas in the child's life.

The "control illusion, is the illusion you have the option of controlling your child's actions or other main aspects of his life. We suggest that parents exercise self control and leave this illusion behind. This message in the field of internet activity is extremely important - you cannot "block" everything out, you cannot close your house hermetically, as much as you can't "block" a tsunami. However, a parent can escort the child in the media freeway, understanding that some unwanted content will be present, and your parental role is to assist in dealing with this content.

d. "What is normal?" – "How much computer time is recommended for children?"

At times parents become paralyzed by questions regarding how much is too much time? What content is appropriate and which isn't? They wish to receive a checklist

describing the appropriate rules. These questions are difficult to answer, almost impossible. However, the act of defining a stand, creating rules and setting ways to enforce them is much more important than the content of the rule itself.

In conclusion, "Vigilant Care" in the field of internet activity is becoming a relevant issue in almost every family's life. It seems that whether the child is a light or heavy user, parents can benefit greatly by familiarizing themselves with the specific challenges of this aspect of the child's life. Therapists would also benefit from understanding the family dynamics regarding computer and internet use as well as the child's "digital life".