Parenting in the iPhone Age
Yin and yang messages on how to cope

The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life
by Anya Kamenetz
Public Affairs, 2018, $27.00; 266 pages.

Be the Parent, Please: Stop Banning Seesaws and Start Banning Snapchat
by Naomi Schaefer Riley
Templeton Press, 2018, $24.95; 192 pages.

As reviewed by Michael J. Petrilli

By virtually every indicator, today’s upper-middle-class American children are enjoying advantages that make them perhaps the luckiest cohort in the history of the world. Most are being raised by two loving parents; the incidence of violence and abuse is at record lows; teenage pregnancy is rare and getting rarer; even drug and alcohol use is down dramatically.

But we humans are hardwired to worry, so worry we do. And in the case of us neurotic upper-middle-class parents, what we worry about the most when it comes to our kids are screens. We worry that smartphones are giving our children attention deficit disorder. We worry that violent video games will turn them into the next mass shooter. We worry that sexting will ruin their reputations and self-esteem, or that a thoughtless post will ruin their college applications. We worry, we worry, we worry!

Into this arena of angst march two new books, each offering advice to parents (and given the book market, that means mostly upper-middle-class parents) about how to cope with the ubiquitous screens in our children’s lives. The first offers a mostly soothing message—don’t worry so much, your kid will probably be fine!—while the other ratchets the alarm up to an 11. As a father of two school-age children, and the more permissive parent when it comes to screen time, I certainly enjoyed the former more than the latter. Still, I can’t help but—yes—worry that I’m just deluding myself.

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With The Art of Screen Time, Anya Kamenetz has all the makings of a best-seller on her hands. As NPR’s ed-tech reporter, she’s got the perfect credentials for the project and quite the platform to boot. Being the mother of two young girls only enhances her credibility. The book itself is well-written, easy to follow, and exceedingly balanced, taking readers through the research on screens and kids in a lay-friendly yet technically accurate way.

That research, alas, is more limited than anyone would hope, almost all of it correlational rather than causal, the bulk of it coming from the television era, with very little about the smartphones and tablets that now rule our lives. Still, from Kamenetz’s perspective, most studies point to what some in the field call the “dandelions-versus-orchids theory.” In short, most kids are resilient and hardy, like dandelions, and can spend time on screens without suffering ill effects. (Within reason, of course; passively watching television for hours on end is associated with more snacking and thus obesity; and nobody who wants a good night’s sleep should be on screens right before bedtime.) Harried parents of “dandelions” shouldn’t feel too guilty about giving their kids a little screen time, Kamenetz argues, especially if it helps Mom and Dad stay sane.

A small group of kids, however, are fragile like orchids and face real dangers from excessive screen time or certain activities like gaming. Internet addiction is real and devastating for some children and their families. And while violent content per se doesn’t typically lead to greater aggression, for some kids it’s associated with greater fear and anxiety, as well as diminished sensitivity to the suffering of others. Kamenetz is clear that, if you’ve got an orchid child, you have to parent accordingly.

Another helpful analogy she offers is to food. Riffing off Michael Pollan’s famous adage, she advises: “Enjoy screens. Not too much. Mostly with others.” The focus on joy is refreshing, given the anxiety that dominates most of the debate. “To return to the healthy-diet metaphor, we have some idea what excessive consumption looks like, what kinds of ingredients are toxic, and the symptoms of dangerous allergies. But what is the media equivalent of the family dinner prepared with farmer’s market...
Both authors worry about screen time crowding out more wholesome pursuits, like reading and outdoor play.

A deficit of judgment and a surfeit of liberalism are not things you’ll find in Naomi Schaefer Riley’s new book. A fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Independent Women’s Forum, Riley is unafraid to admonish parents to limit screen time. That’s partly because she doesn’t discount correlational studies as Kamenetz does and partly because she has a greater focus on the orchids: the relatively few kids who are suffering mightily thanks to screens. She comes close to adopting a “abstinence-only” approach to screen time, lauding parents who manage to raise children the old-fashioned way in 21st-century America.

When kids get old enough to navigate their communities without supervision, Riley recommends buying them a flip phone, or even just a watch, instead of a smartphone. “You may think that you need your kid to have a phone to arrange pick-ups and drop-offs,” she writes. “But you don’t. Agree to meet at a time. You are not Uber. If something goes wrong, teach your child how to ask the adult present to sit still for long periods of time. If the data indicate that your kid’s phone is contributing to poor academic performance, higher rates of obesity and social isolation, and other negative outcomes. It’s hard to know how to tackle this problem, but we might start by following Charles Murray’s adage to “preach what we practice.” Parents who read these books are already grappling with how to deal with the screens in their kids’ lives. We need the parents who aren’t reading these books to grapple with this issue, too.

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