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THE JUGGLE ON SUNDAY, BY DEMETRIA GALLEGOS | February 17, 2013

Kids Are Logged On—and Tuned Out

By DEMETRIA GALLEGOS



Lars Leetaru

I've been listening this month to the conversation at our house, and it is deflatingly predictable: "Have you finished your homework? Then why are you playing computer games?" "Your room is still a mess, put that down until it's done." "Have you gotten off the couch today?" And this recent favorite, "You are banned from playing games until the end of the school year."

We have a bad case of digital distemper, but it has been hard to find a solution. As with going on a diet, you still have to eat. Our girls have hours of computer-based homework almost every night. We have a terrible time knowing when the work is done and when the play has begun.

On one infamous Sunday in December, we watched 14½ hours of Netflix. I knew it was bad but didn't know how bad until I looked back at the log and spotted a dozen episodes of "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody." I immediately canceled Netflix. But that's like cutting the head off the hydra.

What would Hercules do?

John isn't the least bit interested in the shows, games and websites that the children are drawn to. He feels that they're big time wasters, and that our lives would be improved if the girls had zero access. I have a less-draconian attitude—in part because I see no harm in some online entertainment, and in part because I think spending leisure time online helps prepare children for tomorrow's workplace.

Still, I know something has to change. But what?

The Juggle

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Some parents I know have taken the tough approach. My friend Suzanne has simply banished the iPads her 12- and 14-year-old daughters brought home from their dad's house. "They were immediately completely addicted," she says. In addition, other devices must stay in common rooms and can't be taken to bedrooms. She insists her children finish everything else before relaxing with computers. And between community service, sports, music and schoolwork, she says, "they never get to the place where they have spare time."

Convinced there was something between Suzanne's approach and mine, I decided to call a family meeting.

My opening proposal: hats for each child, festooned with colorful feathers to signify homework done, room cleaned, workout accomplished, so that we wouldn't even have to ask when we spot them lying around like unblinking zombies.

The children immediately countered.

Isabella, 11, thought everyone should be limited to one hour of goofing around on the computer every weekday, with a higher limit on weekends. Using the honor system, time would be logged on a notebook near the computer, and could be saved up for longer sessions.

Anna, 13, wished we could set a time limit on every device, so that it would just shut off when the time was up.

Emily, 14, suggested I change the passwords every day and only give them to the children when homework is demonstrably done.

Jamie, 16, wastes the least time among us online, but she does miss the documentaries she used to watch for her history class. She agreed it would be nice if we knew exactly who on shared accounts is doing all the watching.

Jamie's boyfriend, Daniel, pointed out that computers already have parental controls along the lines that Anna was suggesting. He told me how to turn off the desktops at 10 p.m., for example.

Daniel offered himself up as an example of someone who, until recently, was addicted to PlayStation 3. He said he would play for hours every day after

school until his parents got home at 7 p.m. Just last fall, as his junior-year workload intensified, he began to recognize "the fact that I need to worry about college rather than beating my friend's high score."

"After a while you get used to not having it, and it becomes such a minimal thing in your life that you don't think about going back to it that much," Daniel said.

We kicked all these ideas around, really digging into Isabella's honor-system idea, but acknowledging we would all be mentally clocking each other, leading to more tiresome nagging. Emily objected most strenuously to the bedtime curfew, pointing out how frequently her homework takes her past 10 or 11 p.m.

I had looked into getting an automated report on the time each family member was spending, broken down by website. Apps can do this, but we have so many disparate devices, we'd have to manually correlate the data. The idea of entering personal ID codes for every session seems onerous and nanny-state-ish.

In the end, it was John who put out the winning solution.

"The key is not to lock them out—having them learn to decide what's right and what's wrong is 10 times more important," he said. John proposed that grades decide the access issue. If a child is holding a 95 or higher average, we simply won't interfere with her digital consumption choices. Between 90 and 95, as long as report cards show an upward trend during the six grading periods our school uses, again no interference.

Anything below a 90 will merit restrictions on discretionary computer time, including a girl losing the privilege of working in her bedroom.

Additionally, the girls are willing to be more clear with us about where their work stands before they shift gears. They'll be more on top of their chores and the chaos in their rooms. They agreed to look for things other than screens to entertain them.

Otherwise, they know I'll be measuring their heads for feathered hats.

—Demetria Gallegos is community editor for WSJ.com. Write to her at SundayJuggle@wsj.com. You can also join the conversation at WSJ.com/Juggle.

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