



Katz

Chapter 11

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Children are at the epicenter of the information revolution, ground zero of the digital world. They helped build it, they understand it as well as, or better than, anyone else. Not only is this new machinery making the young more sophisticated, altering their ideas of what culture and literacy are, it is transforming them—connecting them to one another, providing them with a new sense of political self.

Children in the digital age are neither unseen nor unheard. In fact, they see and hear more than children ever have. They occupy a new kind of cultural space. They're citizens of a new order.

After centuries of regulation, sometimes benign, sometimes not, kids are moving out from under our pious control, finding one another via the great hive that is the Net. As digital communications flash through the

most heavily fortified borders and ricochet around the world independent of government and censors, children can for the first time reach past the suffocating boundaries of social convention, past their elders' rigid notions of what is good for them.

In many ways, fears for children are more understandable than fears for other groups, and the decisions made on their behalf are more complex. Since they can't always articulate their own values and feelings, it is often harder for adults to know how able kids are to take responsibility, and when to offer it to them. They are obviously more vulnerable. Parents, teachers, even well-meaning politicians, feel an obligation to protect them from perils they are presumed unable to understand or ward off.

Yet many of these fears seem misplaced, exaggerated, invoked by adults mostly to regain control of a society changing faster than their ability to comprehend it.

The idea that children are moving beyond our absolute control may be the bitterest pill for parents to swallow in the digital era. The need to instruct and protect children is reflexive, visceral, instinctive. All the harder then, to change.

THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF CHILDREN

While it seems logical that limitless exposure to violence or sexual imagery isn't healthy, few serious students of child psychology think culture shapes the moral sense of children.

For a century, the study of the creation of conscience was chiefly the province of Freudians, who theorized that every boy lusts after his mother and, as a consequence, sees his father as a powerful rival. Because he cannot have his mother or overcome his father, he represses his erotic love for the former and his anger at the latter. These feelings are replaced by a set of rules—the superego—that control the child's impulses. This process is the beginning, Freudians argued, of the formation of human conscience.

Over time, Professor James Q. Wilson of UCLA writes in *The Moral Sense*, these Freudian notions have become less plausible. Modern studies suggest that conscience—sympathy, fairness, self-control—is formed not primarily by repressed lust and rage but by the innate human desire for attachment. People with the strongest consciences, Wilson writes, are those with the most powerfully developed sense of affiliation. When we disappoint others by acting immorally, we feel shame; when we disappoint ourselves by failing to honor an obligation, we feel guilt.

Conscience is a conditioned reflex, psychological researcher Hans J. Eysenck believes. Like Pavlov's salivating dogs, people develop automatic, unthinking reactions. Punished consistently by a beloved parent for telling a lie or stealing a cookie, we become nervous when lying or stealing, even if there is no chance of being caught.

So if parents teach morals, live moral lives, discourage and punish immoral behavior and treat their children in a moral way, the children are much more likely to act morally as adults. If children are left to fend for

themselves, are given no such encouragement, they may grow up without a strong moral sense. A child watches the moral judgments and decisions of his parents, his siblings and his peers, and factors in the degree of rationality and respect with which he is treated, in forming his own value system.

The idea that a TV show or a song lyric can transform a healthy, connected, grounded child into a dangerous monster is absurd, an irrational affront not only to science but to common sense, to what we know about the children in our lives. It is primarily the invention of politicians (who use it to frighten or rally supporters), of enduringly powerful religious groups (which can't teach the young doctrine and dogma without control), and of traditional journalism (which sees new media and new culture as menaces to its own once-powerful and highly profitable position in American society).

We have reason to worry about violence: Americans kill one another eight times as often as citizens of other industrialized countries. Notice, however, how the media make little distinction between underclass and middle-class problems. Consequently, parents who complain that culture is dangerous seem not to grasp that middle-class children are pretty safe and usually enter the mainstream of American life and opportunity.

David Berliner (an Arizona State psychology and education professor) and Bruce J. Biddle (director of the Center for Research in Social Behavior of the University of Missouri) point out in *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud and the Attack on America's Public Schools*, that nationally, 90 percent of students say they

felt "very safe" or "somewhat safe" in their schools. Nearly three-quarters say they live in neighborhoods with "hardly any" crime or "none at all."

V-chips and other blocking software will not help the children, mostly from the underclass, who are suffering from epidemic violence. Nor will they make already safe middle-class children any safer. They simply help us to buy into the great lie that violence comes from culture rather than from endemic racial, social and economic problems. It suggests that we are helping children at risk when we are, in fact, abandoning them to their fate.

As for the idea that children are being made dumber than their elders, what most research shows, again, is that well-tended, well-off American children do well academically, while the abandoned and impoverished struggle. Not much news there. The odds of academic achievement and economic success have little relationship, one way or the other, to cultural preferences.

In fact, though Americans are always telling pollsters they fear for their children's brain cells amid the perils of TV and computers, in August 1995 college-bound seniors earned their best cumulative scores since the early 1970s on the Scholastic Assessment Test, making most of their long-term gains in math. "This is the best-prepared class in recent memory," said Donald M. Stewart, president of the College Board.

Test scores like these—far less prominently reported than studies showing that kids don't know who Harry Truman was—make no sense in the context of the mediaphobic concerns about children and culture. How could students boost their SAT scores so dramatically

when they were buying gangsta rap CDs, watching vulgar TV talk shows, surfing the Net and watching cable in record numbers?

Berliner and Biddle even question the conviction that American public school students are losing ground intellectually. Responding to the intensifying attacks, Berliner and Biddle decided to learn why so many politicians were scapegoating public education for the nation's social problems.

"Some of those who have accepted hostile myths about education have been genuinely worried about our schools, some have misunderstood evidence, some have been duped, and some have had other understandable reasons for their actions," they concluded. "But many of the myths seem also to have been told by powerful people who—despite their protestations—were pursuing a political agenda designed to weaken the nation's public schools, redistribute support for those schools so that privileged students are favored over needy students, or even abolish those schools altogether."

Typical of the media's dim view of our educational system was a 1995 survey by the Pew Research Center (formerly the Times Mirror Center) for the People and the Press. On average, said the report, only 20 percent of respondents aged eighteen to twenty-nine paid close attention to the kinds of stories listed in the Center's "News Interest Index," which included business and financial news, legal stories, international policy/politics, domestic policy, sports, crime and science. (Interestingly, the young paid less interest to "celebrity and scandal"—only 13 to 15 percent followed those stories closely—than to any other category of news).

What surveys like this, which shape both journalism and public perception, really demonstrate is that the interests of the young are different from those of their parents, and that traditional journalism doesn't address them. Having different cultural and social interests from one's parents isn't quite the same as being stupid, although journalists seem to think it is.

WHEN I WAS A KID

So much was expected of the boomers. They went off to college in record numbers. They helped stop the Vietnam War and bring down a dangerous president. They talked much about Revolution, embracing radical new music, defying their parents, making popular culture a national religion, raising hell about racism and poverty and a degraded environment.

It seems that most of their dreams and ambitions collapsed somewhere between the Reagan era and the digital revolution. A dispirited group, they're presiding over a legacy of poverty, homelessness, corporate downsizing, and debased politics, among other sad outcomes.

But there are about sixty-nine million of them alive, according to demographers, and they continue to exert great influence in one sphere, at least—as parents, they are shaping the conflict over children and culture. "As Boomers have charted their life's voyage," write William Straus and Neil Howe in *Generations*, an exploration of American social history, "they have metamorphosed from Beaver Cleaver to hippie to braneater to yuppie to what some are calling 'Neo-Puritan' in a

manner quite unlike what anyone, themselves included, ever expected."

The boomers aren't true Puritans, of course. They aren't committed enough. The original Puritans are remembered for their sacrifice, brutality and joylessness. But there are striking similarities. The boomers' parental ideology embraces simplistic notions of good and evil. It is censorious, increasingly disapproving, turning more and more to banning and blocking. It posits narrow definitions of what virtue is. And it is doomed, no more effective at stemming the great tidal waves of pop and technoculture than Cotton Mather was at banishing dancing, profanity, frivolity on the Sabbath and general godlessness.

From the end of World War II onward, say Straus and Howe, whatever space the boomers have occupied has been the cultural and spiritual focus for American society. This, of course, is no longer true. New technologies and social change emanating mostly from the digital world are red hot, the new political and cultural focal points, leaving many boomers glowering from the sidelines. They don't seem to like watching other people's revolutions.

Even though the boomers have seen many of their hopes—for benign government, racial equality, economic opportunity—collapse, they do seem intent on offering their children lives of unending enrichment, as if, having been unable to make the world as good a place as they intended, they have made their children the last repositories of their idealism and aspirations. As if their children's perfection can somehow serve as an antidote to their own disenchantment.

Of course, many boomers were bitterly at odds with their own parents. The men and women who fought World War II had no use for rock and roll, hippies or political radicalism. The boomers are determined to be closer to their children. But as they become the untrustworthy over-thirties, the reactionary parental impulse to condemn whatever is new or different as tasteless and inferior has simply mutated into new forms. As it has a habit of doing, history repeats itself. The kids have again gone to war with their parents, and the parents have about as much chance of winning this round as their parents did the last.

There's a lot to fight about.

The evidence suggests that the young are different from, not inferior to, their elders. Surveys by Peter Hart, Yankelovich and Simmons Market Research have exhaustively documented growing differences in the way the old and young gather information. The young love cable and online communications, for example, appreciating their diversity and outspokenness. They don't take culture as literally as journalists do, grasping that art forms like rap can be hyperbolic, shocking, exaggerated. They inform themselves interactively rather than passively. They like media that take themselves less seriously than *The New York Times* or CBS News; they are allergic to men in suits telling them what to think.

As *American Demographics* has reported, young adults are also more liberal than their elders, including the self-admiring boomers. And they are more generous: 49 percent of those age eighteen to twenty-four "approve of giving preferential treatment to minorities

to improve their situation," compared with only about one in three boomers.

Maybe the thing that would most help the country's civic life would be for the young to start teaching moral values to their parents.

JOHN LOCKE AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

John Locke, the seventeenth-century English philosopher and essayist, was, along with Paine and Jefferson, a pioneer architect of modern democracy. The son of a prosperous Puritan lawyer, he wrote extensively about government and psychology but is perhaps most remembered for his political philosophy. Locke introduced what was at the time a jarring idea: that people should have some say in the way they were governed.

Locke preached that people naturally possess certain rights—life, liberty and property. Rulers, he wrote, derive their power only from the consent of those people they rule. Government, then, is essentially a social contract: subjects give up certain of their rights and submit to the authority of government and laws in return for just rule and the safeguarding of what is rightfully theirs; the ruler holds his power only so long as he uses it justly. If that sounds familiar, it's because Locke's intellectual fingerprints are all over the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; he was a primary influence on the leaders of the American Revolution.

Under Locke's contract, if the government violates the trust placed in it by the people, if legislators "en-

deavor to take away and destroy the power of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under power," then government forfeits the authority the people have given it. The contract requires mutual responsibility, and an arbitrary or destructive ruler who does not respect his subjects' rights is "justly to be esteemed the common enemy and pest of mankind, and is to be treated accordingly." Locke was always vague about just what "accordingly" meant, but at the very least, he suggested, subjects have the right to protest and challenge authority when the social contract is breached.

The idea of a social contract emphasizing mutual responsibility rather than arbitrary power seems especially relevant to the rights of children and the extent of parental authority, as the cultural battles rage in America's households and its political arenas.

There are frequent discussions of children in Locke's writings. He strongly challenged the belief, widespread then and now, that the power of parents over children is "absolute," like the power of monarchs over their subjects.

Locke believed the real source of parental authority was moral clarity, trust and rationality. He believed in the moral education of children, rather than the arbitrary imposition of rules. Children, like adults, were entitled to a measure of freedom that was appropriate to their status in the world as rational human beings.

"Parental power," he wrote, "is nothing but that, which Parents have over their Children, to govern them for the children's good, till they come to the use of Reason, or a state of Knowledge, wherein they may be supposed capable to understand that Rule, whether

it be the Law of Nature, or the municipal Law of their Country they are to govern themselves by.”

The young will probably never have their right to culture and information legally spelled out or enforced. And nobody wants a government—particularly one that can’t cope effectively with social problems or environmental concerns—to take on family life as well. Besides, the lives of children are far too complex to generalize about. Degrees of maturity, emotional stability, rates of development and learning, and the patience, thoughtfulness and resources of parents, vary too widely to set forth rules. Five-year-olds aren’t like fifteen-year-olds. And when it comes to culture, at least, boys are often not like girls.

But that’s why the notion that all children—good or bad, mature or not—have some rights in the digital age is so critical. Their choices ought not to be left completely to the often ignorant whims and fancies of individual educators, religious leaders or parents, any more than people ought to be subject to the total control of kings. Parents who thoughtlessly ban access to online culture or lyrics they don’t like or understand, or who exaggerate and distort the dangers of violent and pornographic imagery, are acting out of arrogance, imposing brute authority. They endanger their own future relationships with their children, since they will surely be resented. Rather than preparing their children for the world they’ll have to live in, they insist on preparing them for a world that no longer exists. Such parents are to be esteemed the common enemy and pest of children.

The young have a moral right of access to the machinery and content of media and culture. Culture is

their universal language. Media are their means of attaining modern literacy, which in the next millennium will surely be defined as the ability to access information more than to list the presidents. Media savvy may mean the difference between economic well-being and opportunity and economic barriers and hardship.

Kids should not have to battle for the right to watch MTV, particularly if they have been given the chance to develop a moral and responsible ethic and are willing—as in Locke’s notion of the social contract—to meet their responsibilities.

THE RESPONSIBLE CHILD

The big difference between children and other groups that seek political equity is obvious: some children *can’t* take care of themselves. Some are too young; others are physically or emotionally unable; most are not trained to make rational decisions about their own lives.

It is impossible for our legal system to cover the culture disputes between children and their families. No one can spell out every circumstance in which a child is or isn’t ready and entitled to assume more responsibility for his or her decisions. And wildly varying family values make it difficult to codify universal rights.

But start with the notion of the Responsible Child. He or she is a teenager, or close to it. She meets these criteria:

- She works to the best of her ability in school. She may not be a straight-A student, but she’s engaged

with, and reasonably responsible about, her education and functions successfully in a classroom.

- She carries her weight at home. She does the tasks and chores she has agreed on or been assigned to do. She doesn't have to do them cheerfully.
- She's socially responsible. She avoids drug and alcohol abuse and understands that smoking is dumb. She doesn't have to be angelic.
- She does not harass, steal from or otherwise harm other people—siblings, friends, fellow students—though she will screw up from time to time.

The Responsible Child is not the embodiment of some utopian vision; she can at times be difficult, rebellious, obnoxious, moody. But the Responsible Child makes a good-faith effort to resolve differences verbally and rationally. Saintliness is not required.

The vast literature on children and child psychology contains arguments about almost every conceivable child-rearing issue. But respected experts conclude nearly unanimously that dominant character traits don't magically appear during the teen years. They get formed much earlier, in the interaction, attention and environment provided for small children from infancy.

Advocating children's rights is not synonymous with permissiveness. Scholars of childhood agree that children need clear boundaries, occasional discipline and guidance in shaping their characters. But if children have never had the opportunity to make cogent, informed decisions about themselves—what to eat, when

to sleep, what to wear—they can't be expected to suddenly control their cultural lives at age fourteen without help.

By that age, children may already have rejected narrow adult definitions of culture, literacy and education—which tend to involve piano lessons, “serious” books, and proper spelling. They are probably already embracing the rebellious culture described by Alison Lurie: They'd rather be Peter Rabbit than obedient Flopsy or Mopsy. What's changed is that children are now connected, through technology, with one another and with much of the planet beyond. For the first time, they can instantly reach far past their individual experiences. They are much less dependent on parents, siblings, clergy or educators for their perceptions of the world outside their own houses and schools. Using bulletin boards and online archives, autobiographical and linked Web pages—the whole array of new media—middle-class kids now have immediate access to unimaginable resources of their own, the most significant and potentially political of which is one another.

THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

The Responsible Child has certain inalienable rights, not conferred at the caprice of arbitrary authority, but recognized by society as inherently belonging to every person.

Children have the right to be respected, to be accorded the same sensitivity that other disenfranchised

minorities have grudgingly been granted by the rest of society. They should not be viewed as property, as helpless or incompetent to participate in the decisions affecting their lives.

They should not be called "stupid," not have their culture blamed, without evidence, for "dumbing them down," not be branded ignorant or inadequate because their educational, cultural or social agenda is different from previous generations'. They have the right to help redefine what education, literacy and civic-mindedness are.

Children have the right to communicate with clergy, politicians and educational leaders who claim to know what is best for them.

Children who meet their personal and educational responsibilities ought to have access to their culture, particularly if they demonstrate an ability to regulate their use of it and balance their lives in appropriate ways. They ought to have exposure to the new technology—computers, cable channels and, soon, PCTVs—which allows them to experience culture, information and education.

Children have the right to form like-minded communities through personal Web sites and home pages, on-line services, e-mail, the range of possibilities created by the existence of Net.

Children have a right to have new media and technology included in their school curricula.

Children have a right to challenge the use of blocking software and other technologies like the V-chip which arbitrarily deny them choice, exposure to ideas and freedom of speech.

Children have the right to refuse to be force-fed other generations' values, as in Bennett's expensive moral tales. They have the right to factual information about violence and pornography—to government and academic studies that transcend the shrill debate about "values," tell the truth about the sources of violence and explore just how dangerous pornography is or isn't.

Children ought to share their culture with their parents and to insist that parents view their television programs, go online, play their computer and CD-ROM games with them before condemning their culture and their choices out of ignorance, prejudice or misinformation.

NEGOTIATING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

So, how would a social contract about media and culture, a truce between adults and children, work?

The social contract envisioned by Locke applies eerily well to kids. A contract by definition is agreed to, not imposed. Its power comes not from arbitrary power but from a moral base, a desire to do the right thing for everyone, to respect and understand all parties' rights and needs. Parents and children would both have to want an agreement that ratifies the children's rights and makes it possible for responsible parents to feel safe about yielding some of their power.

It follows that families with a history of being able to resolve conflicts are good candidates for a formalized agreement. Those plagued by eternal bickering or

By arbitrary and unquestioned authority will have trouble sorting out a social contract, at least by themselves.

Under a cultural social contract, families would first recognize that new culture and technology present a different reality, in which traditional ideas about discipline, censorship and control have become insufficient. The members of the family would think through their own notions about children and culture. What kind of a household do they want to live in? How much power and control are the elders willing to cede? A parent would spell out how much TV or online time he or she finds appropriate, and define what else is expected from the child: religious obligations, domestic chores, school performance.

The child would spell out what access to culture he or she wants: which TV shows, which CDs, how much time online. And she has to specify what she's willing to do in exchange. She must also agree to follow rules of cultural safety: not giving out telephone numbers or home addresses to strangers online, telling parents about pornographic contacts, such as files with sexual content. Media access is granted as a right, but subject to some conditions.

It has to be a good-faith contract. Parents who ask too much will lose their moral authority to make an arrangement like this. Kids willing to do too little will jeopardize it as well. The kid has to demonstrate a capacity to be the Responsible Child. Few parents will trust their offspring to uphold their contracts—to turn off the computer after the agreed-upon time, for instance—otherwise. Some parties would probably have to set aside their broken contracts and keep on fighting.

But digital communities could help by setting up counseling and arbitration services to provide advocates for parents and kids, to settle disputes, to distribute sample contracts and sponsor forums and discussions.

If children meet their end of the social contract, parents would concede that they have a moral right to access the TV programs they want, the CDs they want to listen to, the online services they choose and can afford. Families could begin to rely on trust, negotiation, and communication rather than phobias, conflict and suspicion.

If they are economically able to do so, parents would further agree to provide reasonable machinery—computers, cable, new software—that gives their children access to their own culture.

They would not arbitrarily ban cultural offerings like MTV or gangsta rap simply because such things offend them, but would discuss their reservations and objections with their kids. In most cases, the parental objection would give way to the kids' preference, assuming the other conditions are met. This is part of the power these particular rulers would be ceding.

Parents would agree to take political and journalistic hysteria with a grain of salt. To challenge distorted or undocumented assertions about the dangers of new media. To not accept reflexively the idea that violence is caused by pop culture or that the online world is a dangerous, perverted place. They'd agree that definitions of what's "offensive" vary widely—rap might horrify one adult but pass muster as an acceptable form of political and cultural expression to another.

Accordingly, parents won't deride their kids' culture. They'll have to accept that definitions of culture and

literacy are changing too rapidly to impose such narrow-minded definitions.

Naturally, if either side violates its agreement—if kids fail in school, refuse to participate in the care of the household, start drinking—all bets are off. But the millions of American kids who can handle a racy chat room or an episode of *NYPD Blue* won't be denied cultural freedom because of their parents' fears about the kids—often very different—who can't.

THE POLITICAL POWER OF CHILDREN

Cultural conservatives, politicians, parents, teachers, adults in general—and especially journalists—have greatly underestimated just how political an issue assaults on kids' culture are.

In topics online, on Web sites, on countless live chats, the young have vented their anger at congressional efforts to legislate “decency” on the Internet and to curb free speech in this freest of environments. They've generated e-mail, bordered Web pages in black, sparked campaigns and protests, letter-writing efforts, even traditional street demos.

This is as intensely aroused and political as kids have been since the seventies. The digital generation has an organizational weapon no previous generation had: the ability to find and talk to distant allies just a modem away. In this way, they measure their own lives against others'; they separate rhetoric from their own experience. They know their culture isn't dangerous. Their connections and alliances, although almost completely

out of sight of parents and beyond the consciousness of journalists and politicians, could transform the politics of the young.

Journalists have underreported the extent to which culture is politics, to the young; they've underestimated how much the young resent media suggestions that their culture is rendering them stupid, indifferent, violence-prone. Since children are almost without a voice in traditional media or in the political debates on issues affecting them, it's not surprising that their outrage goes largely unnoticed.

But the press is learning the high cost of relentlessly patronizing and offending kids—it has alarmingly few young consumers. Politicians may soon be learning the same lesson. The battles over new media are likely to spark enormous youthful politicization, reminiscent of the movements launched by racial minorities, women and gays.

It won't be that hard to organize. Under the very noses of their guardians, the young are now linked to one another all over the world. They already share their culture online, trading information about new movies and CDs, warning one another about viruses, sharing software and tech tips. At times they band together to chastise or drive out aggressive, obnoxious or irresponsible digital peers. They steer one another to interesting Web sites. And they have developed a fierce proprietary feeling about their online freedom.

Rights have little meaning without some measure of political franchise. Children need concrete political power.

By now, they should have had some help with this. The online culture should perhaps fund a Children's

Digital Freedom Center, similar to the idea behind the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). It could provide children with truthful information about violence, pornography and online safety with which they could educate their classmates and confront ignorance and misinformation about their culture. It could also provide legal support to young people penalized for free expression online or unfairly denied their right of access to culture in school.

THE V-CHIP: DIGITAL PLACEBO

A group calling itself the National Television Violence Study issued yet another “definitive” report in 1996 that concluded that “violence predominates on television, often including large numbers of violent interactions per program.” This study, like previous and similar ones, generated substantial publicity and was invoked by members of Congress to justify passage of legislation requiring the V-chip.

Groups of coders, selected from undergraduate volunteers at two participating universities, were asked to watch shows and tabulate violent acts based on the following definition: “any overt depiction of the use of physical force or the credible threat of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings.”

The group conceded that Wile E. Coyote’s being pushed off a cliff would probably count as violence in their survey, because “there was intent to commit harm.” Presumably, then, millions of parents will use

the V-chip to protect their offspring from *Road Runner* cartoons.

At about the same time, *Newsweek* ran a story called “Parental Control Ware,” a cheerful consumer guide to blocking software, “the alternative to censoring the Internet.” *Newsweek* recommended four programs—Cybersitter, Surfwatch, Net Nanny and Cyber Patrol. The very names are patronizing and demeaning.

One program would automatically block children from a Web site on the poet Anne Sexton because her name includes those three scary letters *s-e-x*.

This approach is the antithesis of trust and rational discourse between adults and children, and more evidence of the growing need to protect children from adult abuses of power.

Blocking software is noxious and potentially unlimited. Once applied, the censoring and restrictions will spread inevitably beyond violence into other areas adults want to place off-limits: political topics that differ from their own values, music and movie forums that don’t conform to their adult tastes, online friends they don’t approve of.

Although it’s being introduced in America as a means of protecting children, this technology, as it evolves, it could easily become the tyrant’s best technological, offering ever more ingenious ways to control speech and thought. Some children reared on this stuff will inevitably grow up thinking the solution to topics we don’t like is to remove them from our vision and consciousness. In any other context, defenders of freedom and free speech would be bouncing off walls.

Like the movie industry’s silly ratings codes, blocking software gives the illusion of control. It doesn’t ensure

safety, since sophisticated evildoers will circumvent it even more quickly than kids will. And it doesn't teach citizenship in the digital world.

As parents withdraw, secure in the conviction that their Net Nanny will do the work they should be doing, count on this: Children, many of whom helped build the digital culture, will circumvent this software, and quickly. They would be much better off if their parents accompanied them when they first set out online, showing them what is inappropriate or dangerous.

Blocking deprives children of the opportunity to confront the realities of new culture. Some of it is pornographic, violent, even dangerous. They need to encounter those situations in a rational, supervised way in order to learn how to truly protect themselves.

WHAT CHILDREN NEED IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Children need to get their hands on the new machines. They need equal access to the technology of culture, research and education. Poor and working-class families have few computers compared with the educated, affluent middle class. And we are learning that some minority children are resisting computers as the toys of the white nerd.

But if new technology can create a gap between haves and have-nots, it can also narrow it. Cheap, portable PCIVs with computers and cable modems would equalize access to the digital revolution in a hurry. Making that happen should be the first and most pressing moral issue of the digital generation.

Children also need to learn to use the machinery of culture safely and responsibly. That means grasping the new rules of community in the online world, acquiring digital manners and courtesy, transcending the often abrasive, pointlessly combative, disjointed tone that permeates many online discussions. They need to learn how to research ideas, history and culture as well as to chat and mouth off.

They need to understand from an early age that their culture poses challenges and responsibilities, even some dangers. That time with TV or computers needs to be managed, considered, kept in proportion. That they need to get help if they can't do this themselves. New technology can enhance social skills and broaden experience, but it also raises all sorts of unexplored political and civic issues for the young—how ideas travel and are debated, how the like-minded can link up, how to sort through the growing options.

Children need help in becoming civic-minded citizens of the digital age, figuring out how to use the machinery in the service of some broader social purpose than simply entertainment or technology for its own sake; how to avoid the dangers of elitism and arrogance; how to manage their new ability to connect instantly with other cultures.

But more than anything else, children need to have their culture affirmed. They need their parents, teachers, guardians and leaders to accept that there is a new political reality for children, and the constructs that governed their own lives and culture are no longer the only relevant or useful ones.

They are never going back.