

television spectator habit does not," according to Librarian of Congress James H. Billington.³¹

Despite the intentions of well-meaning parents, children whose television time is limited when they are toddlers tend to watch more and more television as they grow older, and reading time decreases. Parents interested specifically in weaning children from television to books can begin with the suggestions in *The Magic Bookshelf*.³²

Video Games

Video games demand more participation than television, but they, too, take time from physical activity and schoolwork. In addition, there are concerns about violence and isolation. However, not all video games are violent—among the most popular games at the time of this book's printing are Guitar Hero and Rock Band, which involve a group of gamers playing guitars and drums. The Wii, also hugely popular, uses a motion sensor that allows for games like golf and bowling. For many teens, video games are a focal point for socializing; a recent report states that most teens who game are not isolated but instead play with other people who are playing in the room with them.³³

A gifted high school junior whom I interviewed provided a more reassuring view. He is doing well in school, plays guitar, and writes music. He has a close group of friends, and unlike most teens, he continues with as much leisure reading as when he was younger—which was a lot. And he has played video games since he was seven. Here is his story:

Although he spends considerable time each day on the Internet, Chris doesn't have as much time for games as he did in middle school. Instead, he reads online, researching topics of interest through Wikipedia and Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>). He reads so much online that it seems strange to him that "reading books is seen as the best way to gain knowledge." In addition, he watches television programs, follows political events, and plays card games, all during his online time. He continues to read books in his leisure time, and he believes that his friends—who are also gamers—read about as much as he does.

Here is another story:

To counteract the potential negative effects of TV and video games on the school performance of their sons, writer Daniel Akst and his wife initiated changes in their home. Telling their sons that they know the boys can do well in school and that they as parents expect them to, they make it clear that the boys' education is the family's top priority. The parents do not help with homework, but they do ensure that it is done on time and without distractions, and while the children are young, the parents look over their homework every day. "Computer time is limited; there's no gaming system and, during the school week, virtually no television. Extra-curricular reading is constantly encouraged," notes Akst. It's not all serious; the family finds time for fun together, and the boys have learned that, in addition to carefully chosen movies, "acing exams is lots of fun for kids, too, and once they got going, my guys wanted to keep it up."³⁵

The key to confronting the potential negative influence of television or video games seems to involve several factors, including:

- how much time the child spends with television or video games
- the content and quality of the shows she watches or the games she plays—including the presence or absence of violence
- whether the reading habit has already become well established
- whether the child's activities incorporate a balance that includes mental, physical, and social activities unrelated to television or video games

One of the mental activities that a child should engage in is reading a good book. Reading seems so simple that it can easily be taken for granted. In fact, we may need to worry less about illiteracy than about *aliteracy*—citizens who know how to read at a functional level but who do not choose to read, thereby avoiding the mental demands

In Chris's opinion, children should not begin playing video games too early—he is glad that his parents insisted he wait until he was seven. He points out that the complexity of video games has rapidly increased, and current games require more mental activity than earlier games did. "Teens [unlike younger children] can do things with games; a steadily increasing number of games allow you to create content within the game. Kids playing with friends can change the rules, explore within the game and expand it. Generally, younger kids play them more linearly, but older ones can deliberately break the rules of the game and watch the results to see how the game responds."

Asked for his opinion about a statement that teen gamers often confront aggressive gaming behavior in others, Chris agreed: "Generally, if any gamer detects anyone creating a negative environment within a game that he loves, he will attempt to stop it.... [H]ateful behavior of any kind, whether by someone in the room with you or someone you're interacting with online, is almost always actively discouraged."²⁴

My conversations with Chris gave me new insight into the role of video games for him and his cohorts. It also made me think about reading in a new way. For more than 500 years, the surest path to lifelong learning was reading books and newspapers. Some people (like myself) still carry the subliminal assumption that a habit of reading printed material is required for those who would be well-informed; it therefore follows that those who do not read print must be ill-informed. Obviously, that is changing. The Internet is a lifelong source of information for readers around the world. Although Chris still waits eagerly for the latest book in his favorite fantasy series, his major sources of information are on the Internet: newspaper, news and educational sites, and Google and Wikipedia.

of reading and losing the benefits of the mental exercise, as well as the information that can be learned. This trend begins in our middle schools,³⁶ and gifted students as well as average ones are at risk.

Schools Respond

Education is a creature of trends, in part resulting from our efforts to teach many different kinds of learners in public schools. Since no one approach reaches all students, educators continually revise teaching methods. A long look at the history of education in the United States, such as the one offered by Ravitch,³⁷ reveals that revision is often accomplished by returning to older methods, once rejected but now seen in new light. Educational reform can be seen as a pendulum, swinging from one theory to an opposing theory, and then when it has gone too far, moving back again.

An example of the effect of this sway in educational trends on gifted education is the response to the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, which resulted in efforts not merely to reform but also to restructure the public school system in this country. Echoes of this restructuring include a swing of the pendulum away from ability grouping (sometimes thought of as tracking), which is arguably the most effective classroom strategy for gifted children, toward others that not only do not work as well, but in some instances are seen as harmful. According to Colangelo and Davis, "Detracking is one recent damaging reform movement; cooperative learning is the other."³⁸ Both are described below, along with two other possible approaches: acceleration and differentiation.³⁹

The descriptions that follow are by no means complete—we are getting rather far afield from books and reading at this point—but are offered here to give a picture of the lay of the land and to point educators and parents toward resources that cover each topic in more depth.

Ability Grouping

Ability grouping is a century-old mainstay of gifted education—a strategy that meets the very real need of gifted children to learn with others of like ability. It brings gifted students together and enables teachers to provide specific instruction aimed at their level, as in homogeneous reading or math groups in a heterogeneous elementary school classroom.

Unfortunately, ability grouping is too often perceived as tracking, the term originally used for the European system of testing students at an early age to determine whether or not they would follow a college-bound curriculum. In the mid-1980s, an opposing “detracking” movement gained momentum in the United States, often resulting in the elimination of special classes for the gifted and, sometimes, of the entire gifted program.

To answer charges that ability grouping harms students of average ability, Kerr cites research concluding that “ability grouping has minimal effects, either positive or negative, on the achievement of average or below-average students. Substantial evidence shows, however, that ability grouping has a positive effect on the achievement of gifted students.”⁴⁰ James Kulik concurs, noting that with ability grouping, the *achievement* of low-ability students is not harmed, but instead the *self-concept* of average and below-average students tends to rise, since ability grouping results in more opportunity for them to shine. Further, he states that in ability grouping, “the gains [in achievement] associated with advanced and accelerated classes are especially large.”⁴¹

Cooperative Learning

Often used to replace gifted programs, cooperative learning places children in small, short-term groups which include students of all ability levels. The group is responsible for the learning of all its members. Thus, the top learner in each group typically leads the others, without the opportunity for expanded learning of his own. This practice can exploit gifted children when it deprives them of appropriate curriculum and time with intellectual peers.

Research indicates that cooperative learning in heterogeneous groups is not academically beneficial to gifted and talented students.⁴² If used excessively, it may be resented by gifted students, who prefer to work individually and to be responsible for their own learning.⁴³ Proponents suggest that gifted students benefit by learning to work with less able students, but "from the gifted students' point of view, it teaches that they are being asked to do the work of the teacher; that the lesson will be at a non-challenging level for them; and that a high level of knowledge and skill are not valued in this classroom."⁴⁴

It is not surprising, then, that when detracking results in the loss of ability grouping in favor of cooperative learning, the outcome is strongly disliked by gifted students and is of serious concern to leaders in gifted education.

Acceleration

Like ability grouping, acceleration is a time-honored strategy that often meets resistance in the current cultural climate. But for some children, it is the best answer, according to the authors of *A Nation Deceived*, who analyzed more than 100 years of research and concluded that it is the most effective way to maximize gifted children's learning.⁴⁵ Acceleration is usually thought of as skipping one or more grades, and for some students, this can be exactly the right step. However, many players must be involved in the discussion to make an acceleration successful, including the child, the parents, the receiving teacher, and the principal.

There are more ways to accelerate than we can list here, but some of the most popular include early admission to kindergarten, compacting the curriculum, whole-grade acceleration (grade skipping), single-subject acceleration (or subject skipping, in which, for example, a child moves from the second-grade classroom to the fourth-grade one for math), and early admission to junior or senior high school, or to college. Some children, especially the highly gifted, may use of several of these options during their school years.