Absorbing SpongeBob: Does Childhood Have Space for Technology?

Technology in childhood is an often-debated subject with the pro-Pac-man crowd facing off against those who suggest shutting down the iPad and turning off the television. Even the American Medical Association has weighed in, advocating for a balance between screen time and physical activity, middle ground between rest and Rescue Bots.

But is ditching technology a must? Does growing up mean leaving Mario to park his kart outside in the schoolyard? Or is there wiggle room between Winnie-the-Pooh and old-fashioned play?

As we think about this, it's important to remember some important points, including:

Technology isn't going away: Technology is here to stay and, what's more, the world will only become increasingly automated. We might never reach the potential of the Jetsons, but our reliance on machines will certainly increase. This makes it impossible to keep technology entirely away from a child. Doing so may even have a negative impact. Kids need to know how to use computers: they are a way of life.

Children see adults using technology and so they use it too: In Synergetic Play Therapy, we often point out that children notice incongruency – they notice it because the brain is on alert for things that don't make sense. Technology is an area where this incongruency is very present: parents, teachers, or other authority figures tell children not to watch their iPads only to turn around and use their smartphones at the dinner table. Children copy what they see around them: telling a child to stop but then doing it too leaves

a mixed message in the child's brain. Does this mean everyone could take a step back and unplug every now and then? Probably.

Technology and regulation can go hand in hand: One of the dangers of a child getting lost in electronics is the disconnection from their bodies. Kids may zone out for hours at a time, ultimately disconnecting from themselves and others. But there are ways to regulate while playing a videogame or surfing the internet. Playing Minecraft while bouncing on a yoga ball or taking a break from Peppa Pig to do some jumping jacks can infuse regulation into any activity.

Kids can also regulate in other ways – they may color or draw while watching their favorite cartoon, they may make a list of goals before sitting down to enter their fictional battleground (creating a plan for how they are going to approach their videogame time), or they may write a story about a YouTube series they like. Finding ways to merge regulation with technology is necessary. It's also something that doesn't change with age; whether an adult is texting, talking, surfing, or typing, they need it too.

Like nearly everything else in life, technology comes packaged with both the good and bad. Yet eliminating it from a child's life is impossible. Rather, when used creatively, technology is a tool – it can teach, help regulate, and be a valuable asset for the future.