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Smartphone Apps Great for Marketing, Bad for Social Skills

[Are We Dumbing Down a Generation of
Children With Technology?](#)

by [Lenore Skenazy](#)

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Is it just my kid, or is every child over the age of 8 carrying around a smartphone that's making him dumb?

That's what I've been wondering ever since my 12-year-old saved up his money for the do-it-yourself lobotomy known as the iPod Touch. (Yes, I *know* it's not actually a phone. Same point.) This is a boy who used to pick up whatever book I was reading and read it faster. "Now what do you like to do?" I asked.

"Well," he smiled. "I like to listen to funny sounds."

"Funny?"

"You know -- farts."

Actually, I'm a grown-up. I did not know.

"And I like to play games," he went on. There's the one with bouncing cows. And another one called "iShoot."

Sigh.

And when he's not shooting, bovine-bouncing or pretending to pass gas (like he doesn't have enough of his own?), he's sending his friends pictures of cats with captions like, "You eated my cookie?" Somehow, these make me laugh too. But "The Iliad," they're not. Archie and Veronica, they're even not.

My boy's transformation from bookworm to browser has been so swift and so complete, I just had to ask some of the folks who study kid marketing: Is he an isolated case?

Turns out he's as demographically pure as a 1969 hippie.

"The iPhone/smartphone is the new tween-teen killer app," says Rodney Mason, CMO of the digital-branding agency Moosylvania. "It's the remote control for the next generation, because in one single device they play games and text, do Facebook and MySpace, tweet on Twitter, surf the web, watch movies and TV shows like 'The Office,' and, oh yeah, occasionally listen to music and actually talk on it, which is now at the bottom of their list."

Mason had to threaten his own 14-year-old with turning off her iPhone if she didn't turn on her voicemail (which, reluctantly, she did. Doesn't mean she uses it.)

The smartphone is the perfect activity/toy/drug for tweens and teens who are, as they have always been, so painfully self-conscious it's hard for them to just hang out. Send someone a captioned cat or funny noise and you've got a way to connect without the awkwardness of actually coming up with something to say -- or even having to say it (or even having to make the noise). And when two or more tweens somehow *do* find themselves in the same room, they can whip out their phones and look down -- no need to chat.

We think of phones as a communication tool, but the truth is they may be just the opposite. "A year ago, 40% of 9- to 11-year-olds had their own cells," says George Carey, president of the consulting company Just Kid Inc. "It's got to be 50% by now. They roll out of bed and you can't talk to them, or get them to focus when they come home. The kids are bleary."

And naturally, it's starting ever earlier, says Allison Ellis, owner of the kids and teen marketing agency, Hopscotch Consulting. "Parents are handing over their iPhone in the grocery line or car and letting their toddler play with these things." Just like their older siblings, tykes find certain games, noises and ringtones addicting.

Er, engaging.

If you're a marketer, this means the way to reach pretty much anyone younger than you is to come up with irresistible apps, or fun new ways for kids to swap, spread or customize them.

But if you're a parent wondering what happened to your child who was just about to burst into the world, but got sucked into a smartphone instead, this may be the time to invent a killer app of your own: the unpaid phone bill.

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