



St. Gregory the Great Academy

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Dear Parents,

Peace be with you! I am writing today to share some observations and considerations which have occurred to me from my vantage point. When I was in high school, summer reading selections were not always enthralling. As I sit here, I cannot tell you much about [A Midsummer's Night Dream](#) or [Jane Eyre](#). There are some books that remain indelibly etched in my mind to this day, however. I have been thinking about one in particular lately, namely [Brave New World](#) by Aldous Huxley. In the dystopian future presented in [Brave New World](#), religion, creativity, and self-determination have all been replaced with a material world order. The inhabitants of this world essentially live in predestined social classes under the yoke of a dictatorship, yet they do not even realize the scope of their situation because they are provided with a plentiful supply of a matter known as "soma." Soma is used to maintain order by detaching the residents from reality, and it assists them in creating their own artificial existence with the assistance of the technology available to them. Soma enabled desensitization. In fact, the residents are terrified of a world without soma, and believe it impossible to live without it. Interesting stuff, this soma. Good thing it is an imaginary concept born in the 1930s, and that such a reality never came into being.

In this decade, we have a problem too. It is not a "school" problem, or a "home" problem; in fact I really do not know how to label this problem. It certainly is not imaginary. What I do know is that this problem is affecting the students that I love. Not to sound overly dramatic, but I believe that many of our children and teens have developed addictive tendencies centered on social media and technology. Now, I am not a doctor and I have absolutely no qualifications to diagnose anyone with anything. A quick internet search reveals that The American Society of Addiction Medicine lists the following as symptoms of addiction: **an inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response.** I suppose there are other definitions, and someone who knows much more about psychology could easily provide a more precise definition. What I do know, from where I sit, is that I see each of these symptoms with increasing frequency.

Have you noticed an **inability to consistently abstain from social media and electronic contact or a craving for tech** affecting anyone you care about? Let me ask this question another way; what happens when texting, social media, or gaming is taken away? I can tell you that the reaction of both students and adults when I tightened up our internet filter was unprecedented. I am no stranger to making unpopular decisions, and



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pushback against unpopular decisions is an expected occupational hazard. Still, the sense of befuddlement and indignation was something that I had never before witnessed. People never “like” when an activity that they enjoy is curtailed, and this is to be expected. The concerning parts were the apparent inability to move on and engage in other ways to occupy time, the sense of loss, and the continuing craving for backlit devices. What happens when a long journey begins or a long wait is expected at the doctor’s office, and the phone is dead? Ever turn off the router on a weekend? Even as adults, could we abstain from devices for 24 hours? Sure, we can rationalize our need to be connected by pointing to the idea that we must constantly be available in case some person we know has an emergency. Even if we could successfully accomplish this, could we do so consistently? Could our children? Is electronic contact and social media in such plentiful supply that we can no longer imagine how we would function without it? Do we use it to help maintain order?

Do you think that there is a **diminished recognition of significant problems with behaviors and interpersonal relationships**? It is rather commonly accepted that email has enabled people to communicate things that they would never say directly to a person who is physically present. In the “old days,” back when we would make up creative and somewhat anonymous AOL or Hotmail identities for ourselves, “e-muscles” were born. E-muscles are what we have when we sit behind a keyboard and spew words that we would have a very hard time looking at a person’s face and saying directly. E-muscles are flexed far beyond email now; people e-muscle up in text messages, group chats, and social media. Now, apply this concept to children and teens, who are still learning the nuances of proper behavior and relationships to being with. Online conduct is a very difficult animal to tame. Many of our students in Grades 4-8 have social media accounts, and engage with apps which permit contact with others. We know the names Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook (though, Facebook is apparently for “old people” now), but there are countless other apps which allow for electronic contact. In fact, such contact can simply be accomplished using iMessages and group text messages. These portals allow our children and teens to share information and photographs freely. Now, having been in education for almost 20 years, I can tell you that good kids sometimes make bad decisions, and that the probability of this occurring increases when the number of children involved increases. I do not have empirical evidence to go along with this assertion (which as a quantitative data person, is hard for me to swallow), but I do have two eyes and a building full of children and teens. If a group of 5 or 10 children were left physically unattended in a classroom for a class period, I would consider the person who had supervisory responsibility grossly negligent. So then, why is leaving a group of 5 or 10 children electronically unattended not considered negligent? The answer is surely not that children can only get hurt or make poor decisions when physically together. So then, what is the answer? The electronic world is often an “anything goes” zone for children and teens; social media has the power to virtually destroy interpersonal relationships using nothing more than thumbs. After seeing how the electronic playground has weakened the ability of students in our own school to recognize significant problems, might it be safer to leave 10 kids in a classroom alone with no supervision for an hour or so? Consider the fact that this week, 25 students were in a group message where a statement was typed that, had it been spoken in school in any context, would have put the building on lockdown and probably triggered a SWAT team. A statement that was serious enough to bring three police officers to my kitchen a 9:00 at night in order to gather more information. Yet, in its written form in the electronic compartment of an iMessage, some of the students did not even think it was worth telling their parents. Seems like textbook desensitization to me. I am not a philosopher, but it seems to me that the lines of reality are becoming blurred.

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously stated “I know it when I see it” once when he was trying to address an issue that he had difficulty quantifying. **Dysfunctional emotional responses** have technical definitions which are very complex, but I am going to channel Justice Stewart here and assert that “I know it when I see it.” I do know when I see children and teens whose self-esteem is obliterated because they compare the reality of their own lives to the sanitized version of other people’s lives displayed on social media. Social media provides the opportunity to share only what people want to share; it is not reality. Try explaining this to a teen who wonders why she or he cannot be as popular as someone else is. Go ahead and find the right words to assuage a child who is excluded from special events, as evidenced by photos posted all over the place. Read the ways that children and teens talk to each other with contempt and malice in group texts, and then try to pass it off that the other person was just kidding because “that is how we always talk.” Scroll through your Facebook feed, or flip through one of your child’s classmate’s Instagram account. Any chance that you will find a detachment from reality being delivered via the zeros and ones making their way to your screen?

As I stated at the beginning of my message, I do not know the answers. I am not an expert parent, and I make a whole boatload of parenting mistakes on a regular basis. What I do know is this, if I may be so bold: It is time to take a good hard look at our children’s relationship with electronic communication and social media. Consider keeping your child’s phone or device with you at night. They surely do not need to talk to anyone once bedtime comes, nor go online. The iPad or phone does not need to be the alarm clock; go to Target and get an actual clock for \$5.00. Keep electronics out of bedrooms. Remember, for hundreds of years children of all ages went to bed and woke up without phones and iPads in their bedrooms; our current generation will not crumble if forced to do the same. Sure there will be annoying whining and assertions that you are the actual worst parent in the world; you get used to it after a while, I assure you. A few more points to consider: 1) Good kids can do bad things. Do not ever fool yourself into thinking that this is not possible. 2) As I stated before, the chances of good kids doing something bad increases when kids are in a group. 3) Kids in Catholic schools do bad things sometimes. Catholic schools are populated by kids, and kids are kids. The difference in a Catholic school is that the faculty and staff are not constrained by the law to hold back Catholic morality and values when discussing issues such as this. Please do not think that because your children are in a Catholic school that they are immune from these types of behaviors or dangers. 4) Please do not email me back and demand to know how I dare allow such things to occur among my Catholic school student body, or how ashamed I should be that SGGAs students could be involved in such things. We are not a “Perfect People Club.” I refer back to #3 above: kids are kids, and will make poor decisions at times regardless of what school they attend. Where the Catholic school difference occurs is how we react to and work to prevent such behavior. 5) Tweens and teens are still children, and thus have no “right” to privacy. Remember that you are the rainmaker in your own home; you lay down the law. If your child does not like that you inspect his or her phone or take it at night, deleted Snapchat from his or her iPad, or called another parent to ask about some online “friend” who may be some 48 year old person in California, so be it. Children, even teenaged ones, have no right to privacy in these matters in your home. Period. No matter how “uncool” you are told that you are. No matter how mad he or she gets. No matter how loudly they scream that they cannot wait until they are 18 so that they can move out. (Just show them the mortgage or rent bill – that should calm such ranting a bit).

I do hope that my direct approach has not offended you; if so I do apologize for my delivery. (By now most of you are probably used to it, and know that it is rooted in concern.)

By the way, interesting how Huxley named his matter “soma.” Ninety years later, addictions to soma have not come to pass. We do have this thing called **Social Medi**A**, though, and I willing to bet that it is more dangerous than Huxley could have ever imagines.**

May God bless us all as we do the best that we can to protect His children.

Dr. Briggs