# KIM JOHN PAYNE

The second part of a two-part interview about simplicity, parenting and social inclusion

What about technology, which many people, not just in the Waldorf movement, see as a threat to childhood and the emergent individual?

Just five years ago, the average child in the US had 4.7 hours per day of screen time. This year it's 7.5 hours, and that doesn't include the time in school in front of a screen of some sort. While the figure of 7.5 hours per day in front of a screen is disturbing to most folk, the other worrying realization from this report is how rapidly the hours have grown since 2005.

If you do the math on this trajectory it is a rallying call for action. Chief amongst the many concerns I carry for the digital overwhelm so many of our children are suffering is the strong tendency for this activity to lead our children into addiction.

My dear friend Felicitas Vogt once defined addiction as "An increasing and compulsive tendency to replace inner development and avoid pain, silence and boredom, by creating outer stimulation". Just as a drug user needs more and more of the substance to gain the same "hit", our children are craving an ever-increasing screen exposure, both in time spent and the power of the images they watch. It's not only a question of what they are exposed to when in front of a screen it is equally about the doorway to addiction that they are opening wide. This is a doorway into which many other very troubling dynamics can enter.
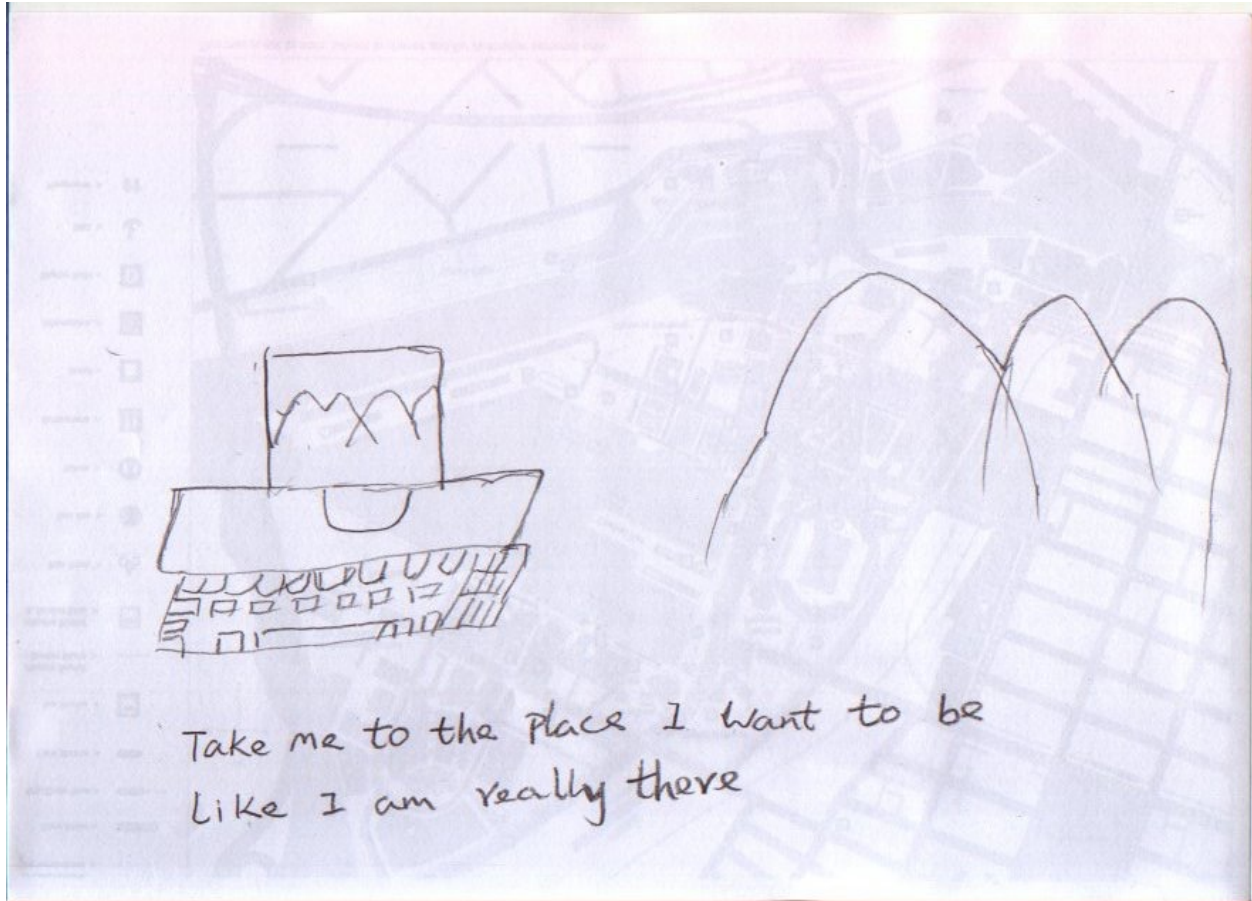
"Take me to the place I want to be like I am really there"
-Natalie, age 10 - her drawing of a keyboard and monitor.

How does this very high use of screens today compare to the amount of screen time we were exposed to as kids?

Some parents, usually fathers, comment to me that we watched a lot of TV when were growing up and we are OK (maybe on a good day). My reply is based around the hard neuro-science that it takes the average 12-year-old just under 4.0 seconds to see an image and make full meaning of it. Now, consider an episode of Mr. Rogers or the like from the 1960s. The camera pans, zooms or switches very rarely. Long sequences can go by before something as "dramatic" as a camera change happens. It gave time, time for the information and image to be absorbed. Watching television or playing a video game now involves very rapid change of images and even split-screen-flashing, and strobe-like images.

Recently I had a day to fill in a hotel as my plane was cancelled. I decided to take advantage of the television, video game and high speed internet facilities to do some rough comparisons of the difference between Mr. Rogers and contemporary TV and video games.

I gave myself six hours of watching and playing. As I settled in front of a monster sized flat screen I secretly thought that this could be fun. Firstly, I watched three episodes on

my computer of Mr. Rogers and one of Father Knows Best. On average, the camera image shifted once every 50-70 seconds. OK, this was not going to be too bad.

I then watched a series of television programming and played video games that, according to the information I found, were made for 4 to 9-year-olds. The only comparison to the 1960s is that drug users back then used to pay a lot of money to have that kind of out of body experience. The average image shift happened about 90 times per minute.

So the bottom line is, that to be exposed to the same amount of image flashes and shifts we would have to watch 900 hours of Mr. Rogers to be in the same ballpark as modern screen demands of our children in just one hour! So the argument that "We are OK so our kids should also be OK watching TV" is a little shaky.

As I was watching "modern kids stuff", I was rapidly marking down in one column on a pad of paper the number of times the images flashed, and in another column when the images were aggressive, which involved doing someone bodily harm. Including the video games which I selected at random from the hotels menu and television, around 36% were violent. If I put together the national average of 7.5 hours a day of using screens with my numbers this means that the average American child is seeing over 7000 violent images each day. I realize that this is not exactly empirical data but kind of interesting to say the least.
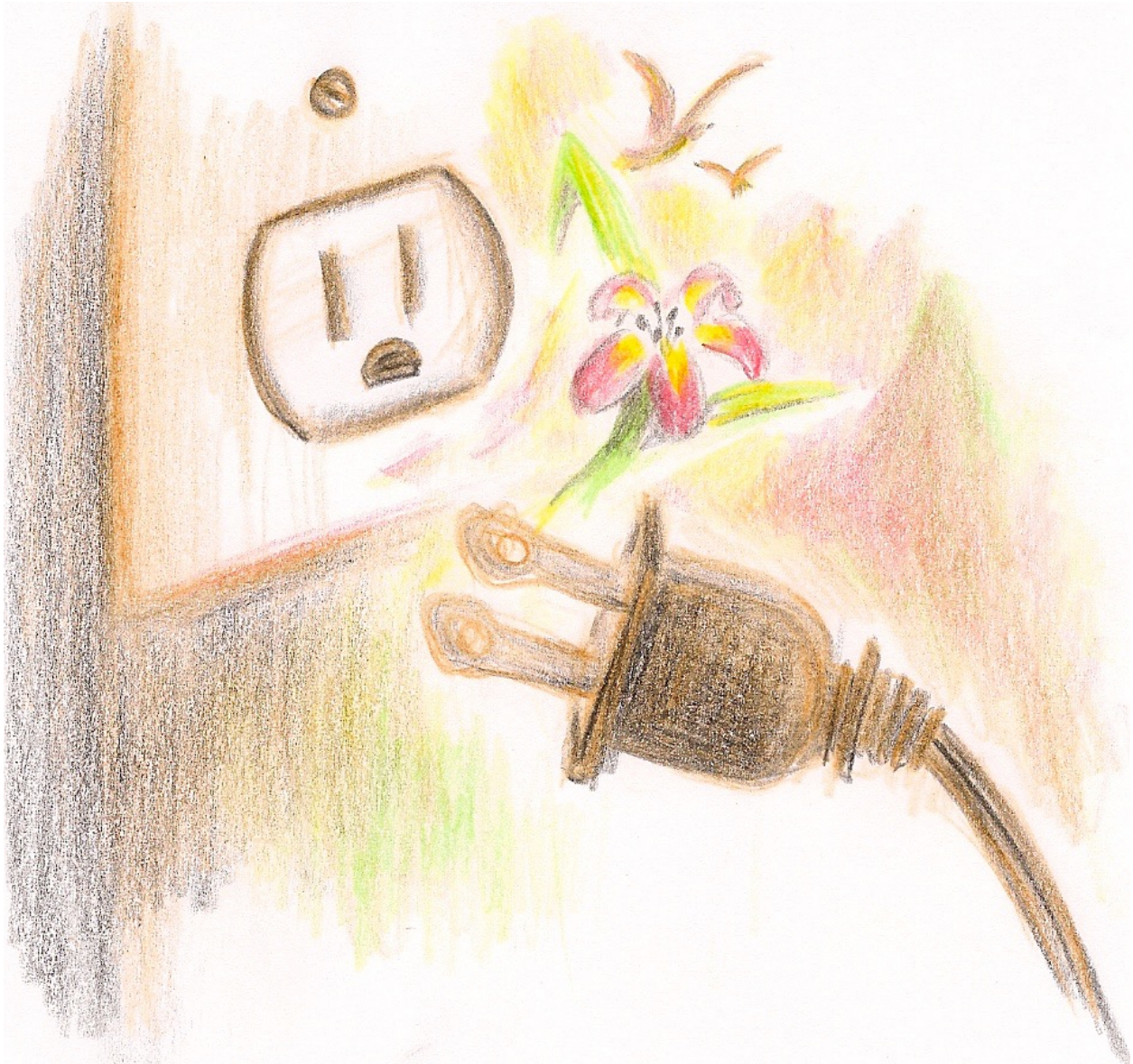
In your book Simplicity Parenting you talk about four levels of simplicity. Do these have any relationship to the social issues you work with?

Yes, these are successful methods of simplifying that we noticed parents implementing rather than ourselves "constructing" and teaching. They sure seem to reduce stress on children and their parents. However, the effect of balancing a child's life goes deep. When a parent brings a child to me to help them with social issues like being teased or bullied at school or home, the place we begin is to look at what is making the child a target. The answer in a vast majority of situations is clear. They are reacting and giving the children who are bullying "mean fun". They react because their lives are often too fast, unfiltered and unpredictable.

It has been very moving over the years to see how many children are dramatically helped

to end the cycle of teasing, become more socially resilient and make good friends when their parents have the courage to bring greater balance and simplicity into the family's life. This change happens quickly and kids can "get their shape back" within weeks. They are amazed at how the teasing eases as their resiliency grows and the children bullying them lose interest.

These four realms for simplifying are:

Environment:
De-cluttering too much stuff at home. The average child in North America has over 150 toys, countless books and clothes all crammed into their bedrooms. Many parents comment that after creating toy, book and clothes "libraries" and creating a simple and spacious feeling in their bedrooms and playrooms there is a surprisingly dramatically positive effect on their children's behavior.

Rhythm:
Increasing predictability by introducing rhythmic moments for connection and calm. I have noticed how rhythm creates a sense of external governance and support for young children that is only neurologically available to them as they approach their tweens and particularly their teens. A young child who has the feeling of predictability in home life, a sense of "we do" in this way, later is much more likely to develop the strong ego forces of "I am". Also, a simple formula has helped countless parents. Wherever there is behavioral difficulty (for example, bed time or meal times), increase rhythm. I know that sounds so basic, but boy does it come as welcome news to beleaguered parents.

Scheduling:
Soothing violent schedules brings moments for Being into all the Doing. Backing of "parenting as a competitive sport" and rediscovering that boredom is the precursor to creativity.

Filtering Out the Adult World:
This involves reducing the influence of adult concerns and inappropriate conversations that take place in front of children. When we pause before we speak in front of children and ask ourselves three simple questions *Is it true? *Is it necessary? *Is it kind?, then the whole mood we create in our homes changes.

In terms of screens and media our message is simple. There are screens (TV computers, smart phones etc) in so very many places in the world. Just as the body needs balance between waking and sleeping, eating and exercising, our souls need balance between screen exposure and quiet time. Therefore by giving our children no access to screens in the home, we are not denying them "the real world" (it has always struck me as a little ironic when I hear TV and computers referred to in this way), we are simply creating one of the few places in their lives where they can achieve inner balance.

By establishing home as a screen free oasis when they are very young, by the time they are older and becoming increasingly exposed to screens, the parent has far fewer disagreements about screens as this has become a "family way".

Kim, thank you so much for the interview!
Thank you!

To learn more about Kim John Payne's work, [visit the Simplicity Parenting site](#) or [The Center for Social Sustainability](#)