Parents and Children in an Online World
Parents and Parenting in a Developing Digital Reality: The Challenge of Significant Parenting in the Internet Age

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The paper will focus on the new challenges posed by digital reality for adults in their role as parents. The Internet is playing a growing role in the life of children, offering them many opportunities but also exposing them to quite a few dangers. Many parents are not familiar with the subtleties of their children’s experiences as Internet consumers and leave them to deal with their joys and frustrations on their own. Parents themselves may experience helplessness and anxiety in the face of this reality or alternately complacency. It is therefore vital that parents adopt relevant engagement modes. The main modes are presented here.

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Introduction

Developing digital media is currently an integral part of the reality of children, youngsters and adults, and to a large extent influences and shapes everyone’s life, separately and together. This digital reality is present everywhere – in social education systems, work organizations, cultural and leisure systems and family systems in homes, with many implications for the behavior of individuals, the relationships between them and society as a whole.

This digital reality is reflected in media consumption: watching television, using computers and smartphones, listening to radio and reading newspapers or consuming news on the Internet. About half of media consumption time - 49% - is devoted to surfing the Internet. A Google survey about media consumption habits shows that the average Israeli surfs the Internet 4.5 hours a day (The Marker, January 2012). Among children and adolescents the findings were similar: children ages 6-12 surf the Internet about 4.2 hours a day, while among those ages 13-17 exposure to the Internet jumps to 5.4 hours a day. This is in line with data in the 2012 annual statistical abstract published by the National Council for the Child in Israel. The chapter on children and leisure states that: ‘The main channel for information of youngsters 15-18 years of age in 2010 was: the Internet – 82.8%, television – 7.2% and newspapers in print 3.6%. In 2009, among children 3-12 years of age, 52% used the Internet. Most did so to play online games (73%), surf to children’s websites (51%), search for information for study purposes (45%) and to search for general information and listen to music (36%). Among youngsters 15-18 years of age, 69.8% reported that they use Facebook. The parents of most 15-17 year old adolescents do not limit the amount of time they watch television or surf the Internet. More than two-thirds do
this with their parents’ knowledge. Children watch television with their parents in more than half the cases (58%), however this is not the case regarding Internet surfing. Only 6% surf the Internet with their parents.

This paper will focus on the new challenges posed by digital reality for adults in their parenting role, in other words for parents. Among the many facets of the digital reality, we will underscore the big parental challenge as we understand it - dealing with the effect of the Internet on the life of children, of their parents and on relations between them.

This topic is increasingly present on the agenda of parents, the education system and entities responsible for maintaining and protecting law and order. It is becoming evident that the Internet plays a growing role in children’s life, presenting them with many possibilities but exposing them to quite a few risks. The question is: where are the parents – the responsible adults – in this reality? What role should they play in their children’s Internet environment, what are the questions that parents ask themselves and what helps them function beneficially as parents in the face of this new and changing reality?

Our approach to this issue is based on the apprehension that parents carry the primary responsibility for raising and educating their children (Report of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2011) and on our awareness of the inter-generational digital gap between parents and children. This gap is reflected in differences in the ability of parents and children to navigate and use the Internet.

**Children and the Internet – Web 2.0 Generation**

Web 2.0 is the second generation of the Internet revolution. It appeared in 2005 when it became apparent that there is a common denominator to various technological phenomena and their use. The common element is
the shared intelligence and knowledge of the ‘smart mob’, that creates Wikipedia and blogs, participates on YouTube, exchanges ideas and experiences on social networks and more (Idan, 2008). In the reality of Web 2.0 users are the main content producers and the Internet affords the opportunity for discussions with many participants and exposure to various contents, some dangerous and harmful.

The Internet offers new types of activity arenas in everyday life, in other words, the social group is no longer comprised only of individuals from the user’s geographic area. Meeting face to face is no longer the exclusive prerequisite for an intimate conversation; time and place take on varied meanings.

Activity in social networks involves creating profiles through which participants brand themselves, their characteristics and preferences, upload statuses where they publish ongoing updates about events and experiences in their life, select the friends to whom they give access to this information and receive responses that supply ongoing and accessible attention.

These activities create an additional culture that is integrated into the existing culture. In this new culture, familiar concepts such as closeness, intimacy, public arena, friendship and influence take on additional meaning.

Naturally, dangerous situations exist in daily life, and as in the physical space, there are risks alongside proper behavior in the virtual arena too. However, owing to the unique characteristics of Internet communication, for example greater physical distance and higher levels of ambiguity and exposure compared to regular communication, risky phenomena may often turn out to be confusing and confounding. In interpersonal interactions on the Internet, due to lack of eye contact and visual feedback provided by body language, there is often a feeling that things are illusory, in other words there is a false impression that
what is transpiring is not really happening. Children involved in abusive behavior on the Internet are not always aware of the implications of their actions. Internet victims on the other hand experience these behaviors as genuinely painful. Feelings of confusion and loneliness may be exacerbated. A new question arises with respect to parents: how can they help their children identify and maintain boundaries in an environment in which these boundaries are invisible?

Children’s activity arena and attitudes have undoubtedly changed and continue to vary. Life situations created in this arena differ from those we encountered several years ago. Optimal engagement in this reality demands increased awareness and unique tools adapted to children’s developmental stage. Intra-personal and inter-personal dynamics with which we are familiar in the physical space differ in the Internet arena. These new dynamics create new needs that are not the exclusive domain of the Internet arena and color all areas of life – including physical reality. These needs are growing and expanding in the face of the digital divide between adults and children and pose a big challenge for parents responsible for their children’s healthy growth and development and for preparing them to lead a satisfying and propitious life.

Parents face a new familial, educational and social reality requiring them to reexamine parenting in general and parenting in contemporary reality in particular. Furthermore, this reality calls for formulating ways to deal with the challenges created in the practice of everyday parenting. Parenting challenges are compounded since a great many parents are not familiar with the Internet or with the new worlds in which their children engage.

In order to identify parenting challenges in the digital reality we will review parenting in general as the basis for characterizing contemporary parental reality and the effects of the digital world on this reality.
Parenting Forever - A Role for Life

Parents and children, as it is known, came to the world bound together and perform what can be seen as a ‘joint performance’. With every child that is born, an active mother and father are also born. Parents and children develop and change together through a shared learning journey in which they serve as growth and development agents for each other. The role of parent in all places and at all times is to raise and educate their children and prepare them to function in adult life – as authentic, autonomous, independent and responsible human beings. One of the known definitions of the parental role is: ‘The role of parents is to reduce risks and increase possibilities’. Professor Jonas Salk, the known pediatrician, defined the role of parents somewhat poetically: ‘Good parents give their children roots and wings. Roots to know where home is and what it is, wings to fly as high and as far away as they can’. Another definition (Cohen, 2006) states that: ‘the role of parents is to reveal the secret to their children’. The secret has three parts: to reveal to children who they are – their identity and belonging; to reveal to them what the world is – the society and environment in which they live; and to help them discover the relations and connections between them and the world. In professional terms we can say that parents’ role includes driving individuation, socialization and culturization processes, in other words: to raise a child who is a discrete, individual and unique person, to develop this child’s life skills and to instill values and culture. This means connecting the child with respect to three relationships – to himself, to society, and to the generational chain. To this end parents and children set out on a shared journey of growth that begins at the station of the newborn’s full dependence on the parent raising him and proceedstowards the final destination which is the station of independence in which the child that grew and matured can stand on his own and lead himself and even others.
The joint journey of parents and children is based on building attachment, the special relationship between the newborn – and later the child – and the parent raising him. Since the 1950’s when Bowlby (1988) spoke of the existence of the nurturing relationship, it has been shown that such a relationship is the prerequisite and vital condition for children’s healthy development (Winnicott, 1972; Siegel and Hartzell, 2005).

In order to realize their role in practice, to shape and strengthen attachment, parents act on the basis of two main themes: leadership and responsibility, which are the essence of parenting.

Leadership in general, and parental leadership within it, is defined as the psychological phenomenon of influencing beliefs, opinions, feelings and behavior. Regarding parental leadership the question is: by what means and how do parents apply parental leadership? How do parents exert influence in practice? What is parental abundance – the nurturing material that develops children, and what is the incline – the way, the path – through which this abundance can pass from parent to child?

Parents exercise leadership through two components that create parenthood: potency - the ‘paternal’ component – the strength, power, guidance and authority parents have by virtue of their role and status; and compassion [in Hebrew: Rachamim], originating from the word Rechem (in Hebrew: womb) – containing, nurturing, strengthening, encouraging and supporting – the ‘maternal’ component. In reality, the two components are found simultaneously in both parents, father and mother. The combination of potency and compassion enables the growth of the child and at the same time the development of parenting and parent leadership. Different proportions of potency and compassion produce parental behaviors that travel between two poles: from resoluteness and
assertion to containment, compassion, encouragement and sometimes even complete concession. Parental leadership can be illustrated graphically.

The parenting leadership graph outlines the leadership path through four leadership styles that in effect reflect parenting: (1) *Asserting style* – parents determine the way of life at home, its culture, laws and rules. It is their right, and in fact their duty, by virtue of their role and status; (2) *Persuading style* – parents use their leadership to interpret laws and rules and develop children’s understanding and acceptance of the desired way of life and their responsibility to maintain and abide by the rules. Parents act on the basis of their parental authority; (3) *Advising style* – this parental style is intriguing and is expressed mainly through discussions and by presenting various options before deciding on a course of action. In this style parents try to appeal to the child-adolescent and transfer responsibility to them; 4. *Releasing style* – in this style the parent and
child-adolescent are close to their journey destination: independence. A large share of the responsibility is on the young person, and this is the measure of independence. Differences between the styles are found in the relationship between parental authority – the potency component - and parental softness in the compassion component. The art of parenting lies in the ability to show flexibility in using all styles and in matching leadership style to the child – his development level and abilities.

Parental responsibility, which is an integral part of parental leadership, is also found in parenting components. “The concept of parenting can be studied phenomenologically by observing the phenomenon of motherhood and the birthing process, because observing motherhood affords a description of relations with the other, from the inside. [This is] a relationship that goes further, beyond love, in the direction of responsibility for another person as it is a part of you, even though it is not a part of you... The phenomenon of pregnancy is the extreme phenomenon of responsibility towards another and towards the otherness of the other. The question of responsibility is raised from within, not as looking to what is outside that may endanger me in the encounter with it, but rather precisely the Other that is inside, that which the space given to him enables its growth, and at the same time creates the necessary tension that only within it can it grow (Levinas, 1979, in Ben Pazi, 2008). As part of the discourse of rights taking place in modern culture, parental responsibility appears as ‘the right of the parent to realize his responsibility towards a child’ (Rotlevi, 1997).

All researchers repeatedly emphasize the functional aspect of parenting: ‘the idea of ownership helps the individual perceive parenting. I am not the owner of my child’ (Levinas, 1979, in Ben Pazi, 2008). The Hebrew language also underscores this aspect of parenthood: it is created through entrustment (‘and God entrusted Sarah...’) [the Bible uses the Hebrew word ‘pakad’ = entrusted], and therefore the newborn is...
an entrustment [in Hebrew – *pikadon’*] to the person to whom he was entrusted [in Hebrew – *hufkad alav*] and emanating from this has received a role, the parental role.

In order to fulfill their responsible parental leadership role parents are equipped with two parental resources: **love and wisdom**.

Love is the big catalyst of parenthood. In the words of a popular song in Hebrew: ‘nothing compares to a mother’s love’. The root of love is in the complete trust the mother has in her newborn and in herself as the person that can and is able to fill the parental role of nurturer; she identifies the ‘good’ found in both of them and that can develop within them. To this end she continuously engages with herself, her child and her surroundings. Trust, recognition of good and engaging in communication create **love** (the first letter of each of these words in Hebrew spell the Hebrew word for love) which is a significant component of parental leadership – the substance and spirit that grows human beings. This love is the expression of the unique attachment that evolves between children and their caretakers – parents. Attachment creates the parent-child dyad as defined by Winnicott (1995), and from it, as modern psychology tells us, derive to a large extent the child’s future relationships and relations (Seligman, 1995; Seigel and Harzwell, 2005). Wisdom is a resource and a tool for applying purposeful parental leadership. This leadership is assisted by wisdom in order to reconnect to the parental dream and often even to build on its foundation a parental vision, to examine existing and required parental tools, strengths and abilities, set goals, detect obstacles, and finally – identify opportunities, determine success and accommodate concerns. This wisdom is the wisdom of life, parents’ accumulated knowledge and experience that helps them apply discernment and make decisions in the course of the parental act of raising a child.
So far we described the essence of parenting, its components and resources. It has been so from the beginning of time to the present. As we saw, the parenting role is always the same however parental practice is time and place dependent since the parental endeavors stems from the social-economic-cultural reality in which it takes place.

**On the Growing Need for Meaningful Parental Leadership**

Many professionals are in agreement regarding the need for parental leadership in dealing with the myriad challenges involved in growing up and developing in the new complex reality. Moreover, recognition is growing among professionals, slowly but consistently, that parental leadership is a unique and non-transient resource in the task of raising and educating children. Profession Yohanan Peres already wrote about this in the beginning of the 1990’s: *there is no substitute for the love, commitment and investment of parents in raising children*. After that, and after decades invested in prevention, professionals now concede that their extensive, varied and devoted activity addressed mainly the *symptoms* of the problems and troubles experienced by children and youngsters. Professionals are realizing that the factors which protect children and develop their resilience have to do first and foremost with a significant adult who is permanently and consistently in contact with them. In most cases the parent is this significant adult. The factors that cultivate resilience also provide meaningful experiences that create a sense of belonging and protection, feelings of self-worth that develop as a result of feeling needed, the ability to contribute and experience responsible interpersonal relationships. Parenting plays a decisive role with respect to these resilience factors. Their development – as well as their absence – depends to a large degree on the act of parenting.
It is becoming increasing apparent that parents applying parental leadership and maintaining parental responsibility create an environment for growth and development that is nurturing, containing, holding, protecting and secure, offers a vision, provides support and creates resilience. Such an environment creates conditions that enable children’s optimal development. In his special book *Home for the Soul*, Matari (2005) expresses this idea in a touching way: ‘Parents are the home of children’, and after all we all need a home in order to survive and of course in order to grow and develop. The breeding ground for children’s growth and development is found therefore in their parents.

**The Weakness of Parent Leadership**

The need and demand for parental leadership paradoxically underscores its current weakness.

It can be said that at this time parental leadership and responsibility – the substance from which children and parents grow and evolve – are often found to be weakened among many parents, preventing the formation of relevant and optimal parental functioning. Parenting oftendoes not succeed in expressing its voice and positioning itself in a way that will enable it to exert its influence and realize its significance. This reality is the backdrop and basis for the ‘great hunger’, the emotional hunger in society we know it (Israeli society and western society in general). The report on the state of poverty in Israel that was not written is the poverty report about the emotional hunger of children and youngsters. We observe this insymptomatic phenomena revealed in their behavior: increased violence, substance abuse, poor scholastic achievements, a growing sense of missed opportunities, alienation and loneliness in Israeli society in general and among children and adolescents in particular. In recent years
all of us, health, mental health, education and community professionals, as well as parents themselves, are searching and contemplating the sources and causes of parent and parenting weakness in order to gain insights that will help us identify and apply means and methods to empower and strengthen parents.

We maintain that there are two main sources of parental weakness:

- **The parents themselves** – in meetings with many and different parents we found that most of them are unaware of the pronounced significance and importance of parenting in general and of their own parenting. We learned that many parents lack basic knowledge about the parental role and the parental processes they themselves experience, and some lack an understanding about children - their development, growth and education. Many parents lack effective and relevant parenting skills, and many experience considerable loneliness and do not know who can help them and how to receive assistance and support. Furthermore, when parents find themselves in an environment which for the most part is not supportive, and certainly does not exhibit empathy, it is there that weak and weakened parenting is formed. Such parenting often feels threatened by the children as well as by professionals and the community. It withdraws into itself and creates a contracted parenthood that has difficulty functioning and is incapable of applying parental leadership and responsibility.

- **The social environment** - an examination of the social environment in which parents function shows that parents and parenting lack status, rights and visibility. In Israeli society, across all its system, parents do not have a defined position and their rights are unclear. In fact, it can be said that parents are the transparent class in Israeli society. They are not seen, certainly not as subjects (rather than objects)
with needs, abilities and desires. Through them we see mainly the undesirable behavior of children and young people. In instances when they are visible, parents are mainly perceived as ‘vessels’ through which the educational and social goals we have for children and youngsters can be achieved. Undoubtedly, in order to exert parental influence and leadership the status of parents must be recognized, clear, appreciated and backed by their environment. The social reality of parents, as we understand it, in many cases undermines recognition of parents, their place and rights, and in doing so often excludes them from their parental role.

**Parenting in the Digital Age – At Risk Parenting**

The weakness of parenting on the backdrop of digital reality creates at risk parenting. This means parenting that does not succeed in realizing its purpose to raise and educate children and prepare them for life as healthy, independent and authentic adults with resilience to deal with its demands.

It is the way of the world that parents have always prepared their children for the world in which they themselves grew up and with which they were familiar, such that they had the knowledge and tools needed to fulfill their role. In our complex and rapidly changing reality, parents are perplexed as to how to function and therefore seek knowledge and tools as well as the support of the environment in order to fill their parental role and succeed in doing so as they perceive and understand.

Current digital reality is to a large extent a new and even surprising reality for many parents. Some see parents as tourists in a new country. Children and youngsters were born into and grow up in a world in which the physical and Internet arenas are intertwined. They engage in this world as a way of life. They feel comfortable in this world. Alongside them are the adults who find themselves somewhere on the continuum
between immigrants, those acclimating and those who are ‘aliens’ in the Internet arena.

Children of the Internet age, for whom the significant adults in their life are not familiar with the nuances of their experiences, may find themselves alone as they face the excitement, pain and frustration that are part and parcel of their life in the vast expanses of the Internet. At the same time, their parents, those of whom are not familiar with the customs and influences of this arena, may experience helplessness, frustration and anxiety, or alternately may be too calm and confident regarding their children’s command of the technology and how to use it.

However, it appears that the digital age, and mainly the Internet and social networks, pose real danger, particularly for parents and parenting. The danger is the undermining of the foundation of parenting – the attachment between children and parents. The Internet affects the direction of children’s attachment. They tend to be increasingly ‘peer oriented’, and to a lessening degree ‘parent oriented’ (Neufeld and Mate, 2006.) The decreasing attachment between children and parents significantly hinders parents’ ability to guide and give direction. When an entire and growing life arena is fully controlled by children and their peers, and when parents do not have a foothold in this arena, their ability to exert influence in this arena is very limited or virtually non-existent. Consequently, and in order not to feel that they are alone, children shift the direction of their attachment, at least in part, from their parents to those who are familiar with the arena in which they engage – their Internet peers.

**Parenting with Opportunity**

In this reality parents face a weighty question: how to be significant parents? In other words, how to be leading and influential parents? How
to maintain a relevant and effective dialog with children regarding their Internet activity as well? There are no simple answers however we will attempt to outline several avenues of thought and action:

According to Neufeld and Mate (2006), it is very important to raise parent awareness once again to six universal attachment modes which, in current culturally-diverse reality, have eluded them and which they supposedly lack. Neufeld and Mate indicate six attachment modes, from the simple to the complex. Peer-oriented children tend to use only the basic modes in their attachment to one another. Parents’ role in the peer-oriented Internet age is to master these attachment modes and apply them to protect their children and ensure their proper development. Command of these attachment modes is the way to return parenting to parents and children to their parents’ lap. According to this approach the six attachment modes are:

**Senses** – physical nearness is the first goal of attachment. Although it begins in infancy, the hunger for physical closeness never disappears. Children talk to each other in search of physical contact, but talk does not satisfy this need. Parents can offer physical closeness at home as part of the family’s practices and culture.

**Sameness** – children seek to be like those they are attached to – their parents. Identification is a familiar way to create attachment. Identification with friends, singers or other performance artists decreases attachment to parents, and parents should consider ways to deal with this cultural-social phenomenon.

**Belonging and loyalty** - to be close to someone and feel belonging and attachment to them. Peer-oriented children are fervently possessive of each other and strive to claim each other as their own, not allowing anyone else to come between them. In the past by comparison, children’s attachment was usually to their parents and to significant adult figures with whom children and youngsters could feel safe and secure and
therefore feel free to engage in new experiences in a protected space that also provided guidance.

Significance—the fourth way to ensure closeness and connection is to find significance, to feel meaningful for someone. The problem with this form of attachment for peer-oriented children is that they become vulnerable. Seeking someone else’s approval may lead to being hurt when reaction towards them is unfavorable.

Feeling - emotion is always involved in attachment. Children that experience emotional intimacy with a parent can tolerate much more physical separation yet still manage to feel close. They also internalize a model of emotion-based relations. Peer-oriented children feel that by opening their heart they risk having it broken and experience difficulty creating intimate relationships as adults.

Being known - means to feel a sense of being seen and heard. The experience in this case is psychological rather than just physical as is the case with senses attachment.

All six attachment modes are in effect different expressions of the urge for connection on which they rest. The individual to which the child is attached will have a greater impact on his life. A parent absent from an arena which is significant to the child, the Internet arena, abandons the child to the influences of those who operate in this space – different types of friends. Children undoubtedly need friends, however peer-orientation competes with parent-orientation and excludes parents in a reality in which they are not sufficiently vigilant or present in their children’s life. Consequently, it is vital that parents adopt relevant ways of engaging in the digital reality by striving to:

1. Become familiar with and personally experience opportunities to share content which the Internet offers and experience first-hand what their children feel.
2. Acquaint themselves with their children’s perspective – speak to them, hear what attracts them, what they enjoy, what intrigues, tempts, scares and disappoints them in their activities on the Internet and be cognizant of the differences between their perception and that of their children.

3. Discuss with their children values that are acceptable at home and how they will maintain these values in the Internet arena. At times the customary judgment tools we apply as adults, and the discernment we employ in the physical arena, are insufficient in the Internet world, and perhaps there is a need to clarify troubling issues and to reformulate them to fit Internet norms and culture.

4. Remember not to paint everything black, even when encountering dangerous situations and behavior. It is important to recognize the advantages and benefits of this medium, while also addressing its dangers.

5. When considering the dangers, such as exposure to harmful information, it is important to remember that information on the Internet takes many and varied forms: not only written texts but also pictures, advertisements and text in Internet jargon that changes frequently. A great deal of information is not necessarily found on websites, but rather in blogs, chats and forums.

**Summary**

Since the beginning of time parents are parents are parents, and there is no substitute for them as those that raise children. Parents and children continue to need each other in the Internet age. Not being knowledgeable about the Internet arena should not exclude parents from their parental role. To the contrary: as we saw, in the Internet age children need their
parents more than ever to accompany them in the new expanses of life. Parental functions – commitment, investment and love – are necessary in order to raise children in a reality of accelerated change. Basic parental abilities continue to be relevant, yet they must take a new form suited to place, time and the newly emerging culture. For parents to fill their parental role in the face of this challenging digital reality we suggest that parents themselves learn and remain up to date, and even use new media to do so. New media can also be used to form parent communities and to alleviate parental loneliness. Parents and professionals can also take advantage of this media to develop relations based on discussion and engagement between them and to promote nurturing educational activity with partnering strategies, with each person contributing to this partnership.
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