

Turned off by PC-Turnoff Week

By *srlinuxx*

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PC-Turnoff Week, which begins Monday with the goal of persuading parents to drag their children off the computer for seven days, is the wrong answer to a serious problem.

What's more, the organizers of PC-Turnoff Week have a potential conflict of interest: They also sell software that limits computer use by children, and they haven't done enough to draw a clear line between their business and their non-profit efforts.

The problem, at least, is clear.

Home computers are tremendously beneficial for children, providing everything from almost infinite resources for school reports to an anonymous way to gather health information on topics too sensitive to discuss with Mom and Dad.

But computers can also be a liability, sucking children into addictive and time-wasting fascination with instant messaging or violent games.

Meanwhile, we're deluged with confusing and sometimes contradictory statistics.

A study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project released Wednesday said a remarkable 87 percent of teens from ages 12 to 17 are online, and 75 percent of them use instant messaging. Some 31 percent of online teens get health information from the Web.

A joint study by Stanford and Johns Hopkins published earlier this month found elementary-school students with televisions in their bedrooms scored 8 to 10 percent lower on achievement tests. Yet students who used a home computer scored higher.

I talked with several experts this week and got consistent advice: Parents need to understand and monitor how their children use computers.

Easier said than done. The online world is full of dark places only a few mouse clicks away from child-appropriate sites. Instant messaging in moderation helps children develop social skills, but can interfere with homework and family time if overdone.

Simply getting rid of the computer is not a reasonable option; it would be like stopping your children from ever going outside just because they could fall down and skin their knees.

Which brings me back to PC-Turnoff Week.

The organizers say the goal is ``to encourage parents to turn off their children's computer for one whole week during the summer. We also encourage parents to limit excessive use by their children throughout the year as well."

While no one could argue against limiting excessive computer use, turning the computer off for a week does nothing to genuinely help parents.

``This is not a realistic approach, because what happens when the week is over?" said Dina Borzekowski, an assistant professor of public health at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and co-author of the study that found children benefit academically from home computers.

PC-Turnoff Week (www.pcturnoff.org) was created in April by business partners Joe Acunzo and Mark Sicignano of Branford, Conn. The pair also run SoftwareTime, a company that sells a \$39.95 piece of software called ComputerTime, launched last year, for setting time limits on computer use by children. Yet ComputerTime offers fewer features than more established products at about the same price, such as Cybersitter, CyberPatrol and Net Nanny.

The home page of PC-Turnoff Week includes a prominent box on the left side saying ``PC-Turnoff Recommends . . ." with a big point-and-click icon for ComputerTime. But you have to click on the ``About Us" link and then on a small ``full disclosure" link to discover PC-Turnoff Week was created by the company that makes ComputerTime.

I spoke to Acunzo on Wednesday and he said, ``We want to make sure people are aware of the connection." I'd be more convinced if that connection was revealed on the PC-Turnoff home page.

There's also a ``Donate" link on the home page soliciting contributions up to \$100 for a ``Gold Membership."

Yet Acunzo told me PC-Turnoff has not registered as a non-profit corporation. ``We're scrambling around to get the time," he said.

That means donations aren't tax deductible, and the founders aren't legally obligated to account for how they're spending donated funds.

``There are certainly skeptics out there, but our intentions are sincere," Acunzo said at the end of our conversation.

I'm among those skeptics. Parents have enough trouble already figuring out how to cope with children and technology; PC-Turnoff Week isn't advocating a helpful approach or conducting itself in a way I'd regard as trustworthy.

By Mike Langberg
Mercury News

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