THE APP GENERATION: HOW TODAY'S YOUTH NAVIGATE IDENTITY, INTIMACY, AND IMAGINATION IN A DIGITAL WORLD BY HOWARD GARDNER, KATIE DAVIS

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From the famed Harvard psychologist and an expert on the impact of digital media technologies, a riveting exploration of the power of apps to shape our young people—for better or for worse

No one has failed to notice that the current generation of youth is deeply—some would say totally—involved with digital media. Professors Howard Gardner and Katie Davis name today's young people The App Generation, and in this spellbinding book they explore what it means to be "app-dependent" versus "app-enabled" and how life for this generation differs from life before the digital era. Gardner and Davis are concerned with three vital areas of adolescent life: identity, intimacy, and imagination. Through innovative research, including interviews of young people, focus groups of those who work with them, and a unique comparison of youthful artistic productions before and after the digital revolution, the authors uncover the drawbacks of apps: they may foreclose a sense of identity, encourage superficial relations with others, and stunt creative imagination. On the other hand, the benefits of apps are equally striking: they can promote a strong sense of identity, allow deep relationships, and stimulate creativity. The challenge is to venture beyond the ways that apps are designed to be used, Gardner and Davis conclude, and they suggest how the power of apps can be a springboard to greater creativity and higher aspirations.

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Insightful and informative
By M. L Lamendola
In a bygone era, parents and teachers provided the lessons and kids responded. With today's app generation, parents and teachers must take an entirely different approach. They are the ones who must respond, because electronic media have completely changed the locus and flow of information.

Does this book provide a recipe for what that response should be? No, but it does provide valuable insight into dealing with the app generation.

Typically, a book addressing social issues has an agenda. The drawback there, of course, is the book is intended to be a proof of a thesis rather than an open-minded exploration of the issue. The former can easily be a blind leading the blind situation, and that's why an agenda-less book like this one is so valuable.

However, the drawback of the agenda-less book is the reader isn't likely to walk away with a "correct answer" sort of conclusion. But if you need such a conclusion, you probably aren't ready to examine social issues because seldom do such simple conclusions reflect the complex reality. Things are more nuanced and

layered than such conclusions permit.

This book didn't hit us with dire warnings that apps are turning kids into zombies. Nor did it herald a new age, in which app-enabled kids will run circles around their app-avoiding parents.

What the authors did was look at how different generations view the mobile app technology. They looked closely at the changes between the generations. It's a complex mosaic, and in that mosaic we find both good and bad effects. They provided some analysis of this also, without going very far down the opinion road.

If a reader can sense any personal opinion in this book, it's basically along the lines of "We want to look at both sides." It seems the authors are saying that technology can serve you or you can serve it; user discretion and judgment are the key. I agree with that.

Technology itself is actually neutral; it's how we use it that determines good or evil (can you say "atomic energy"?). Apps, like other technology, aren't always used wisely. But some uses are very beneficial.

The book seems to bear this out. If the authors were to belatedly slap an agenda onto their finished work, I think they would caution parents to actively engage with their children so that the devices don't become a de facto substitute for parents who are emotionally absent due to their own preoccupations.

Another reader might draw a different conclusion, such as the authors might warn parents that a dependency on apps is a real danger. Still another reader might conclude that the authors would say parents should encourage kids to expand their world with the many apps available today.

It's not that the book is confusing or its writing unclear; neither is the case. On the contrary, the book is informative and the writing is clear. It's that the subject includes positive and negative aspects, and their relative weights are still in flux.

We aren't finding kids drooling in mindless depravity while their IQs plummet to zero, nor are we finding them going to the other extreme, for example suddenly composing great literary masterpieces with their smart phone apps. What we are finding, according the the authors' research, is a change in skills, thinking styles, and other mental attributes.

This isn't new to apps. It has happened many times. For example, when calculators became ubiquitous, native math skills decreased but the ability to do more mathematical work rose. Or consider dressage. How many people today know how to properly saddle a horse? This doesn't stop anyone from traveling 500 miles between cities, does it? This mix of effects is pretty much what we are seeing with apps. This book brings us rich detail to help us understand the change, why it is occurring, and what its implications seem to be.

The authors do highlight the dangers of dependency, but they also highlight the opportunities of enablement. They provide evidence for both, and avoid hysteria in either direction. The changes are happening, and I think having an informed awareness of these changes is paramount for parents and teachers.

Readers of this book will gain that awareness, and not just at the summary level. Understanding specific changes and their implications makes for an actionable learning on the part of the reader. The authors sort the changes into three basic groups: identity, intimacy, and imagination. This seems like a logical grouping, and it certainly helped me stick with the subject matter as the authors went through it.

But how do they come up with their information? For example, how do they know how apps affect intimacy?

They conducted extensive research. You can find out about it in the book's 10-page methodological appendix. They also tapped many written sources; these sources are provided in the 22-page bibliography. I did a spot check on the sources for quality, and was quite impressed. I often find authors tapping disinformation sources as if they are reliable, and these authors didn't do that. They used really good sources.

Including the Introduction, the actual text of this book runs 197 pages. The authors managed to pack quite a bit of insight into those pages.

Disappointed.
By Loves the View
I looked forward to what Howard Gardner, who brought the concept of multiple intelligences to the public, had to say about the "app generation". I was disappointed that the first 30 pages of this 200 page book were devoted to defining "generation". Ensuing pages sprawled. The authors explore the "3 I's" (Identity, Intimacy and Imagination) making connections and a few conclusions through anecdotes and brief summaries of research.

The book read like a draft. I think the authors were not clear on whether they were presenting research to prove something about this topic or whether they were describing the navigation of the 3 I's as noted in the sub-title.

Injecting the studies makes it seem like something will be proven/disproven. The book would rest better on the anecdotes and if the studies are used, there should be more clearly explained as well as their connections to the result. Here are three examples of the kind of dangling studies in this book:

1. After a number of anecdotes and the citation from a study that undergraduates/recent graduates and their parents are in contact 13.5 times a week, the conclusion is that technology weakens the ability to develop an autonomous self and that the app generation needs to seek reassurance outside the self. (p. 85) Since the study is not explained, the conclusion seems to be a leap. For instance, does in include those living with parents? Family business? What is the nature of the almost twice daily contact?

2. The "Bermuda Study" is cited in the methodologies and mentioned (p. 11) as contributing to the book but unless the results are in the text unidentified or are buried in the footnotes (not indexed) we never get the results.

3. The authors allude to the identity/isolation issues of technology and connect it to neighborhood violence and binge drinking without attribution but site back up data for other contributing factors such as academic and financial pressures. (p. 78- 80)

Good concepts are introduced, such as this generation defining itself by technology while others define their cohort group by history ("WW2 generation", "Vietnam generation"), the concept of digital immigrants and digital natives, current methods used to "package the self" and the positive of being app-enabled and the negative of being app-dependent.

I think this book succeeds in defining apps and how they are used. While this generation may well be defined by apps, this book does not make the case. Even the "Conclusion" documents other powerful social trends.

In July, I read The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains and was hoping this book would give more perspective. Unfortunately The App Generation did not deliver.

A Book That Provides a Glimpse of the Future
By Dad of Divas
This is a book that will open your eyes to the changing world around you and the children and what they will bring to our society as they grow up. Being someone who has read about the different generations, along with worked with many of the Gen X, Gen Y, Millennials and others, this is a seemingly apt name for this generation and the book is a well written account and preview of what today's generation will bring to society in the future. The topic is important for all to understand, not only parents, but educators, law makers and so many more. While the authors take a somewhat academic approach, I appreciated the personal reflections that were also incorporated within the book as well. This is a book that all should read, as understanding today's youth will give us a glimpse into the world to come!

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About the Author
Howard Gardner is Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and senior director of Harvard Project Zero, an educational research group. He lives in Cambridge, MA. Katie Davis is assistant professor, University of Washington Information School, where she studies the role of digital media technologies in adolescents' lives. She lives in Seattle, WA.

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