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THE ENTERTAINMENT POLL

They Do It All While Studying

At homework time, many students also are playing games, e-mailing friends and watching TV. Scientists say that is bad for learning.

By Chris Gaither, Times Staff Writer August 11, 2006

If you think peace, quiet and uninterrupted focus are the keys to good study habits, 16-year-old Ryan Arnold may prove you wrong.

While doing his homework, the North Carolina high school junior typically does at least four other tasks as well — among them listening to music, playing a PlayStation 2 game, sending e-mail and surfing the Web.

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"It drives me crazy," his mother, Cindy Hensley, said of her son's many activities. "I can't do it. I say, 'If I can't do it, then how can you do it?'" But he's a straight-A student, so I guess he does."

Time was, homework meant hunkering down in the library or a quiet study carrel. Today, instead of seeking to minimize distractions while studying, a majority of children are embracing them, according to a Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll.

Among respondents who had homework, 53% of children ages 12 to 17 said they did at least one

other thing while studying, compared with 25% of adults ages 18 to 24, the poll found.

The youngest poll respondents did the most juggling. Twenty-one percent of the 839 respondents ages 12 to 17 who were polled said they generally kept busy with at least three tasks in addition to their assignments.

Girls ages 15 to 17 were the busiest: 59% said they liked to do at least one thing in addition to homework, and 27% said they liked to do at least three other things.

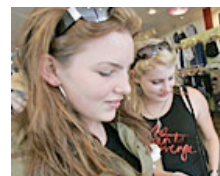
"I'll focus on my schoolwork, then if an e-mail pops up I'll change focus for a second, answer it, then go back to what I was working on," said Brittany Graham, 16, who also likes to surf the Web and listen to Christian rock while she studies in her family's home in Altamonte Springs, Fla.

Kids' fondness for multi-tasking is raising concerns among psychologists and educators. They worry that students are taking longer to complete their assignments while absorbing less information than they would if they were focusing solely on schoolwork.

Some scientists fear that multi-tasking could even stunt the development of adolescent brains. The ability to give up instant gratification in favor of long-term goals, for example, is largely controlled by the prefrontal cortex, the brain's "executive center." That's the same area of the brain that, among other things, determines correct social behavior and steers attention from one task to another.

"In kids, the prefrontal cortex is still developing," said Jordan Grafman, chief of the cognitive neuroscience section at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, part of the National Institutes of Health. "Developing strength in one's ability to stall immediate gratification is part of growing up."

But repeatedly choosing video games or instant messages from friends over homework could hinder that, Grafman said. Additionally, multi-tasking can prevent students from learning subjects in great depth, which is a process that stimulates reasoning, analysis



Sisters (Anne Cusack / LAT) click to enlarge

GRAPHIC August 11, 2006

Bored or multi-tasking?

Most kids don't give homework their undivided attention.

Q: When you are doing homework, do you usually prefer to focus on just your homework, or do you like to do other things at the same time?

Ages 12-17

Focus on the homework 41%
Do other things at the same time 53%
Doesn't apply to me 6%



Asked of those who do other things at the same time while doing homework

Q: Which of the following do you usually like to do while doing your homework? (Multiple answers allowed.)

Ages 12-17

- Instant message 15%
- Go on the Internet 21%
- Send or read e-mail 13%
- Text message 13%
- Listen to music 84%
- Talk on the phone 32%
- Play a video game 6%
- Watch a TV show 47%
- Watch a movie 22%
- It depends on the homework I have 6%
- Other 2%

Note: More information on this poll can be found at latimes.com/entertainmentpoll

How the poll was conducted: The Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll was conducted from June 23 to July 3 using the Knowledge Networks Web-enabled panel, which provides a representative nationwide sample of U.S. households. Of the 4,466 minors and young adults invited to participate in the survey, 1,904 (43%) responded to the survey, with 1,650 qualifying. The 1,650 qualified respondents included 839 minors (ages 12 to 17) and 811 young adults (ages 18 to 24). The margin of sampling error for both groups is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In order to provide as representative a sample as possible, the survey results were weighted to U.S. census figures for 12- to 24-year-olds in the United States in terms of age, race or ethnicity, gender and region, and for urban or rural residence and Internet access.

Source: Times/Bloomberg poll

HOME Site Map

- Business
- Advertising
- Money & Investing
- Technology
- Video Games
- Work & Career
- Business Tools
- Investor Tips & Tools
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- Money Library
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Ulla Foehr, who surveyed teens on media consumption for a Kaiser Family Foundation study released last year while she was a Stanford University doctoral student, notes that multi-tasking is not a new phenomenon. For decades, some kids have studied to music or while watching TV.

But the computer's role as both an educational tool and a means for diversion, all wrapped in the same package, increases the allure of doing several things at once. AOL, for example, on Thursday released StudyBuddy.com, a search engine to help with homework, but it also offers plenty of time wasters, including instant messaging and video clips.

"The computer really fosters it. It makes it hard not to multi-task," Foehr said. "It's the availability, combined with the innate desire to take a break. For teens, it's really driven by the social needs, the need to connect with their peers."

Distraction isn't everyone's cup of tea, the poll found. More than 2 in 5 respondents ages 12 to 17 said they preferred to focus completely on their homework and didn't multi-task at all.

Among those in that same age group who did other things while studying, many reported relatively passive diversions. Eighty-four percent said they listened to music as a side activity, 47% watched TV and 22% watched a movie.

But teenage respondents also enjoyed multi-tasking with things that required active participation, the poll found, including talking on the phone (32%), going on the Internet (21%), instant messaging (15%), sending or reading e-mail (13%), text messaging (13%) and playing a video game (6%).

Many teenagers and their parents believe that this generation is simply better at performing simultaneous tasks, because they do it so often. To watch a child study biology while cruising MySpace.com, chatting with five buddies on AOL Instant Messenger and listening to the TV drone in the background is to begin to suspect that today's youngsters must have sharper focus than previous generations.

But David Walsh, a psychologist and president of the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family, said, "That's more wishful thinking than reality."

To single out kids who are pulling down good grades despite multiple diversions misses the point, he said.

"The question is not whether they're doing fine. Some kids are very bright. The question is could they be doing better if they weren't constantly shifting back and forth," said Walsh, whose book "No: Why Kids — of All Ages — Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It" will be published by Free Press in January.

Research has shown that, with practice, people can improve how often and when to shift focus to other tasks most efficiently, and they can sharpen their ability to visually scan between windows open on a computer screen.

But decades of experiments on adults have proved that performance suffers when people try to multi-task.

A recent experiment at UCLA suggests that being distracted also changes how we remember information. Researchers there asked subjects, who were in their 20s, to divide cards into two categories based on the shapes displayed. They then had to do it again, this time while keeping count of the high-pitched beeps played through headphones.

When asked questions about the task learned while counting beeps, the subjects had a much harder time recalling the details of their work or extrapolating based on what they learned. That's because the distracted learning relied on a different part of the brain than the focused learning, UCLA scientists said.

"What it might suggest is that if you learn these things while you're distracted, then your ability to generalize that knowledge might not be as good," said Russell Poldrack, an associate professor of psychology. "Even if you can learn under multi-tasking, it can change how you learn."

Many scientists say there's little evidence to suggest that today's children are any different from yesterday's, though it's not a settled question.

"Are kids going to have brains that are fundamentally different in the ways they multi-task?" Poldrack asked. "It's certainly a possibility. There's going to be some interesting science to be done on that down the road."

One thing is certain: Not all kids respond the same way to distraction. The Shamoun

LESLIE CARLSON *Los Angeles Times*



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brothers in Sterling Heights, Mich., are a case in point.

Matthew, 13, needs silence when he's doing homework: no TV, no music. But Brandon, 14, chats with friends on MySpace and AOL Instant Messenger, talks on the phone, listens to the radio and checks e-mail while he works. He describes multi-tasking as "easy."

"Each kid is different," said his mother, Amira Shamoun. "As long as he's doing his homework and going to bed on time, I'm OK with it."

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