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Op/Ed

TLK ABT A GEN GAP

Learn to Bridge the Communications Chasm

Emily, age 17, and her twin, Jackson, communicate by txt. That's the best way to reach them, dude. It is their lifeline, their command-central, their 24/7 unlimited access to their posse, and as essential to the Gen Y/Millennial generation (ages 7-25) as red wine is to today's boomers.



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Facebook and My Space are the other critical links. These no-parent zones are online platforms for creating one's very own persona, real or imagined, and the entry points to one's inner circle, outer circle, and anyone else in orbit. Thus, a massive chorus of *al fresco* voices

provides constant real-time, feel-good feedback and advice — plus directions to the party, which starts in five minutes.

How alluring. How compelling. How fun and engaging. But it's enough to drive an aging boomer parent insane. We've lost control! We can't override the commands! How can we have full and unfettered parental access to our kids and their toys when we don't even know how to operate the remote?

Bear witness to the inevitable separation of generations — we once called it the generation gap. Do we face the same chasm now with our own children, those Echo Boomers? Or can we figure out how to get along? It might make sense: Some observers are amused that boomers, some 78 million strong, are outnumbered by another market segment: 80 million Gen Y's — street-smart, techno-savvy, and fearless.

DEMOGRAPHERS tell us that the defining events during one's adolescence, from about age 10 through 20 or so, profoundly impact the shared values and behaviors of the group. For boomers, the birth of television connected us like nothing else and confirmed what it meant to be American in the late 1950s and the 1960s. The Kennedy years, the space race, the growth of suburbia and prosperity, created an optimistic, can-do generation that would have the confidence —

VIVA THE VITAL!

A series on boomer-related issues.

and numbers — to make staggering changes in the social world order in the 70's — with far-reaching implications.

In the workplace, we turned out to be driven, dues-paying workaholics. To this day, we like face-to-face meetings, processing (read "controlling") things, and teamwork. We look to our company for recognition, personal gratification, and the chance to make a difference. In the later years of our career life, we are more interested in "being someone" than "becoming someone."

Contrast that with our Gen Y children: This is the first generation to get a laugh from saying, "www dot mommy" at age 2, and is far more interested in playing on the computer than watching boring Bert and Ernie. They live in neighborhoods that look like the United Colors of Benet-

ton, and watch MTV and its spin-offs twice as much as CBS.

In between trips to swim team practice, choir rehearsal, and the math tutor, thousands of scary images of Osama, Saddam — and who among us can forget Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber" — invaded their cul-du-sac lives. They suffered through the horrors of Columbine, 9/11, Virginia Tech. It was enough to make a kid go reinvent himself in an online chat room, the modern version of an EST session. Perhaps they need their technology to give them control over their lives. The good news is they still need us, too.

WHILE BOOMERS have reached a stage of life when they look inwardly to drive behavior, Gen Y still seeks constant reinforcement from their peers or an older "parent" or authority figure. Their life experiences have made them cautious, not optimistic. Many barely make a move without consulting parents, teachers, older adults, or anyone who will listen (again, back to My Space, blogs, IMs).

As Gen Y enters the workplace, older boomers need to quickly close this generation gap. For the next 10 to 15 years boomers will be running the show and can shape how Gen Y develops as a work force.

Ideal scenarios are where boomers become vital mentors to young workers and teach them about teamwork, impart industry knowledge, and provide the instant feedback Gen Y craves. In turn, Gen Y becomes the "technology coaches," reversing the mentoring order and providing training, insights, and real value to themselves and the workplace. It could prove to be a win-win.

Some advice, in the meantime, for coping with all the young dudes in your life: Start by getting a cool cell phone. Be sure it's better than your kid's. This is essential. Go for strong color, sleek design. Next, figure out how to txt. It's not hard. You will attain instant "rad" status and be assured of return txt mss. Send photos, too. Mad props all around. B4 u no it, u wil hve X'd the gap.

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