

## Less Face, more Books – the importance of reading for adolescents’ mental health

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Michel Desmurget is a French neuroscientist known for his contributions to understanding the effects of digital technology on cognitive development, especially in children and adolescents. He is the author of several books, including the best-seller *The factory of digital cretins*, in which he claims that, for the first time in history, children have lower IQs than their parents<sup>1</sup>. The book was described by Radio France Inter as a “public health book”. His recurring themes are the impact of technology on society, with an emphasis on reading, and the challenges that parents and educators face when dealing with cultural and technological changes in raising children.

His latest book, *Make them read!* discusses the importance of reading for the development of the human brain, especially in childhood, and features research that confirms that teenagers are reading less and less. In France, for example, official figures show that 21 % of young people (aged 16 to 25) have difficulty reading, of which 10% are almost illiterate. This figure rises to 44% among secondary school pupils, who left school after completing compulsory education in the country (16 years). Another 80 % (compared to 21%), however, the study details, show deficiencies (43%, very low ability, and 28 % serious difficulties) when it comes to “poor automation of basic reading mechanisms”, such as decoding, word identification and text interpretation.

Throughout the 12 chapters, spread over five parts totalling 381 pages, Desmurget explores the crucial relationship between reading and human brain development in the contemporary context, linked to the excessive use of smartphones - which he calls “digital elephants” - which explains the continuity of the title: “So as not to create digital cretins”.

It seems that the author likes the word “cretin”, used in the title of two of his works, which, in the definition of the Caldas Aulete Dictionary, refers to an individual “who suffers from cretinism or who has this condition; who is unintelligent or very foolish, or who has very unreasonable thoughts or behaviour (cretinous idea); stupid, imbecile; It is said of someone who has inconvenient behaviour, or a cheeky, insolent attitude”<sup>2</sup>.

In his presentation, the author emphasises the importance of “Reading for pleasure”, highlighting how this habit can impact cognitive, emotional and social development, drawing a vital connection between the practice of reading in adolescence and mental health. To defend his thesis, Desmurget draws on research and studies on the relationship between the formation of critical and imaginative minds and the habit of reading.

One of the main concerns raised is the visible decline in reading among young people, a phenomenon that the author attributes to the use of mobile devices that inevitably lead to social networks. Those of us who are parents of teenagers can identify with the first paragraph, because we realise that they are, in fact, increasingly immersed in digital environments, consuming fragmented and superficial information, to the detriment of a deeper immersion in literature. The books adopted in schools, out of obligation, still “save” them, but they don’t guarantee the continuity of the habit.

This decline is alarming, as reading provides key benefits such as the development of critical thinking, empathy and the ability to concentrate for long periods. Constant exposure to quick and ephemeral content on social media can lead to a decline in attention span and a superficial understanding of complex topics. In addition, reading books offers a healthy form of escapism, allowing young people to explore new worlds and perspectives in a way that digital media rarely can. Therefore, replacing the time spent on social media with reading not only enriches vocabulary and writing, but also strengthens adolescents’ mental and emotional health<sup>3</sup>.

It’s essential not to confuse reading with books: “But I read on my mobile phone,” is often the response of many young people. However, reading on the screen, with the exception of apps linked to books such as Kindle or Scribd, doesn’t exactly mean that the teenager is getting involved with literature or delving deeper into a subject, Desmurget argues



in the second chapter. “It could simply mean that they’re browsing blogs in search of ‘hair styling tips’ or that they like flicking through celebrity gossip magazines. Hence the question: ‘What exactly are our children reading?’”

Desmurget also discusses how interaction with screens affects not only the ability to concentrate, but also the ability to understand and analyse critically, and warns of the future negative effects of this phenomenon on the formation of an informed and reflective society. For the author, no other reading format has greater power to activate certain areas of the brain than a book, especially a paper book, so that it can be leafed through, analysed and researched. In chapter<sup>9</sup> (“The unique potential of the book”), studies are cited that show that the linguistic complexity of written media significantly exceeds that of oral worlds – and on this shelf fit videos and films on all kinds of screens, or even audiobooks and podcasts. “Writing offers various forms of segmentation that can inform the reader about the structure of the text, the linking of ideas and the passages that are to be found (headings, subheadings, paragraphs, bolded words etc.). Speech seems much less structured” (p. 235), says the author.

While writing allows for careful revision and meticulous organisation of thoughts, speech often occurs in a spontaneous and linear manner, which can result in disorganisation and less cohesive ideas. Furthermore, in writing, the reader has the ability to pause, reflect and revisit previous points, which facilitates comprehension and the assimilation of complex information. In speech, these opportunities are limited, depending much more on the immediate memory and clarity of the speaker. Therefore, writing not only clarifies communication, but also enriches the reader’s experience by allowing a deeper and more structured engagement with the content<sup>4</sup>.

Not that watching this content is bad, but the way of learning in reading material is superior, due to the demand for concentration, the rare words that help enrich the vocabulary and the stimulus to imagine a scene that needs to be created in the child’s mind, quite different from the one that comes to be consumed. Desmurget also strongly criticises the idea that “everything is on Google”, that because of AI there’s no need to learn, you just have to type in the information or text and it comes ready or semi-ready.

This is what Desmurget calls “useless knowledge”, because it gives the illusion of understanding. Reading a book requires more in the way of exercising thought. With the irony that permeates

much of the book, the author warns of a future in which parents will go so far as to consider their children will be able to stop thinking and simply use the GPT chat or even an “electronic chip” in their heads. This view highlights a growing problem: excessive dependence on technology can lead to the atrophy of fundamental cognitive skills. Critical thinking skills, creativity and ability to solve complex problems are developed and refined through reading and active engagement with text. Reading therefore, is not just an academic exercise, but a vital necessity for the full and healthy development of the human mind<sup>5</sup>.

In the field of mental health, the author draws on further research to affirm that reading enriches socio-emotional development. Over the last 20 years, neuroscience studies have become interested in the impact of reading on empathy and have provided significant evidence that books lead to self-knowledge and important emotional questions. “The idea is quite simple: by observing the characters in books (or identifying with them), readers can more easily decipher their own behaviour, thoughts and emotions; armed with this understanding, they can more easily face and/or prevent the real difficulties of life” (p. 291).

Some of these studies mention that when you’re reading, specific neurons are activated, from words that generate triggers in the brain, even in the sensory field. The word “bell”, for example, activates brain regions related to sound processing.

In this way, Desmurget highlights how immersing oneself in literature can act as an escape valve, providing moments of reflection, empathy and understanding, which are fundamental for mental balance. The author also explores the importance of open dialogue between parents, educators and teenagers, highlighting how promoting the habit of shared reading can be an effective strategy for building the habit of reading and a healthy mind.

But how do we get them to read? The final chapters, and especially the Epilogue, propose practical solutions to encourage reading among children and young people, with three main factors in mind: the example of adults, the creation of environments conducive to reading and the integration of technologies in a conscious and balanced way. In other words, if parents spend all day in front of screens, how can they be moral enough to tell their children to put down their mobile phones and pick up a book? Valuing reading comes by example.

When creating spaces, the suggestion is to fill the house with books, invest in bookshelves and

leave them on display. Giving children books as presents is also important, but not without identifying the genre they enjoy. If they like one title, they may become interested in another similar one. Finally, there is an urgent need to reduce the amount of “white elephants” in the family environment. There’s no way to open up mental space for reading in a child or teenager who spends five or six hours in front of a screen. Putting a limit on this time is essential if “boredom” is to encourage them to pursue other activities, including why not reading a book?

It’s curious that each chapter ends with the subtitle “To summarise”, in which an extract of the

topics covered is presented, as if, at the same time as encouraging reading in long doses, the author is concerned with “chewing” the topic, to make it more palatable or easier to assimilate.

To summarise, the book transcends mere analysis, broadening the vision into the complex territory of mental health in adolescence. With his insightful and ironic approach, the neuroscientist presents us with a topic that not only warns of the challenges faced by young people in the digital age, but also offers a possible way to promote reading as an essential tool for preserving mental well-being during formative Years and for developing a critical and creative mind. “Make them read”. It’s worth it.

## References

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