

What happens when mom unplugs teens for 6 months?

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AP Associated Press By BETH J. HARPAZ, Associated Press – Tue Jan 18

NEW YORK – Susan Maushart lived out every parent's fantasy: She unplugged her teenagers.

For six months, she took away the Internet, TV, iPods, cell phones and video games. The eerie glow of screens stopped lighting up the family room. Electronic devices no longer chirped through the night like "evil crickets." And she stopped carrying her iPhone into the bathroom.

The result of what she grandly calls "The Experiment" was more OMG than LOL — and nothing less than an immersion in RL (real life).

As Maushart explains in a book released in the U.S. this week called "The Winter of Our Disconnect" (Penguin, \$16.95), she and her kids rediscovered small pleasures — like board games, books, lazy Sundays, old photos, family meals and listening to music together instead of everyone plugging into their own iPods.

Her son Bill, a videogame and TV addict, filled his newfound spare time playing saxophone. "He swapped Grand Theft Auto for the Charlie Parker songbook," Maushart wrote. Bill says The Experiment was merely a "trigger" and he would have found his way back to music eventually. Either way, he got so serious playing sax that when the gadget ban ended, he sold his game console and is now studying music in college.

Maushart's eldest, Anni, was less wired and more bookish than the others, so her transition in and out of The Experiment was the least dramatic. Her friends thought the ban was "cool." If she needed computers for schoolwork, she went to the library. Even now, she swears off Facebook from time to time, just for the heck of it.

Maushart's youngest daughter, Sussy, had the hardest time going off the grid. Maushart had decided to allow use of the Internet, TV and other electronics outside the home, and Sussy immediately took that option, taking her laptop and moving in with her dad — Maushart's ex-husband — for six weeks. Even after she returned to Maushart's home, she spent hours on a landline phone as a substitute for texts and Facebook.

But the electronic deprivation had an impact anyway: Sussy's grades improved substantially. Maushart wrote that her kids "awoke slowly from the state of cognitus interruptus that had characterized many of their waking hours to become more focused logical thinkers."

Maushart decided to unplug the family because the kids — ages 14, 15 and 18 when she started The Experiment — didn't just "use media," as she put it. They "inhabited" media. "They don't remember a time before e-mail, or instant messaging, or Google," she wrote.

Like so many teens, they couldn't do their homework without simultaneously listening to music, updating Facebook and trading instant messages. If they were amused, instead of laughing, they actually said "LOL" aloud. Her girls had become mere "accessories of their own social-networking



AP – This undated photo courtesy of Frances Andrijich shows Susan Maushart, second from left, with her children. ...

profile, as if real life were simply a dress rehearsal (or more accurately, a photo op) for the next status update."

Maushart admits to being as addicted as the kids. A native New Yorker, she was living in Perth, Australia, near her ex-husband, while medicating her homesickness with podcasts from National Public Radio and The New York Times online. Her biggest challenge during The Experiment was "relinquishing the ostrichlike delusion that burying my head in information and entertainment from home was just as good as actually being there."

Maushart began The Experiment with a drastic measure: She turned off the electricity completely for a few weeks — candles instead of electric lights, no hot showers, food stored in a cooler of ice. When blackout boot camp ended, Maushart hoped the "electricity is awesome!" reaction would soften the kids' transition to life without Google and cell phones.

It was a strategy that would have made Maushart's muse, [Henry David Thoreau](#), proud. She is a lifelong devotee of Thoreau's classic book "Walden," which chronicled Thoreau's sojourn in solitude and self-sufficiency in a small cabin on a pond in the mid-1800s. "Simplify, simplify!" Thoreau admonished himself and his readers, a sentiment Maushart echoes throughout the book.

As a result of The Experiment, Maushart made a major change in her own life. In December, she moved from Australia to Long Island in New York, with Sussy. Of course, the move merely perpetuated Maushart's need to live in two places at once: She kept her job as a columnist for an Australian newspaper and is "living on Skype" because her older children stayed Down Under to attend university. Ironically, the Internet eased the transition to America for Sussy, who used Facebook to befriend kids in her new high school before arriving.

Another change for Maushart: She's no longer reluctant to impose blackouts on Sussy's screentime. "Instead of angsting, 'Don't you think you're spending too much time on the computer? Don't you think you should do something else like reading?' I now just take the computer away when I think she's had enough," Maushart said in a phone interview. "And now that she's been on the other side and remembers what it's like, it's less of an issue."

Maushart realizes that living off the grid for six months is unrealistic for most people. (She also admits getting her kids to go along with it partly by bribing them with a cut of proceeds from the book, which she planned to write all along.)

But she encourages families to unplug periodically. "One way to do it is just to have that one screen-free day a week. Not as a punishment — not by saying, 'I've had enough!' — but by instituting it as a special thing," she said. "There isn't a kid on the planet who wouldn't really rather be playing a board game than sitting at the computer."