**Are we raising a generation of nincompoops?**

NEW YORK—Second-graders who can't tie shoes or zip jackets. Four-year-olds in Pull-Ups diapers. Five-year-olds in strollers. Teens and preteens befuddled by can openers and ice-cube trays. College kids who've never done laundry, taken a bus alone or addressed an envelope.

Are we raising a generation of nincompoops? And do we have only ourselves to blame? Or are some of these things simply the result of kids growing up with push-button technology in an era when mechanical devices are gradually being replaced by electronics?

Susan Maushart, a mother of three, says her teenage daughter "literally does not know how to use a can opener. Most cans come with pull-tops these days. I see her reaching for a can that requires a can opener, and her shoulders slump and she goes for something else."

Teenagers are so accustomed to either throwing their clothes on the floor or hanging them on hooks that Maushart says her "kids actually struggle with the mechanics of a clothes hanger."

Many kids never learn to do ordinary household tasks. They have no chores. Take-out and drive-through meals have replaced home cooking. And busy families who can afford it often outsource house-cleaning and lawn care.

"It's so all laid out for them," said Maushart, author of the forthcoming book "The Winter of Our Disconnect," about her efforts to wean her family from its dependence on technology. "Having so much comfort and ease is what has led to this situation -- the Velcro sneakers, the Pull-Ups generation. You can pee in your pants and we'll take care of it for you!"

The issue hit home for me when a visiting 12-year-old took an ice-cube tray out of my freezer, then stared at it helplessly. Raised in a world where refrigerators have push-button ice-makers, he'd never had to get cubes out of a tray -- in the same way that kids growing up with pull-tab cans don't understand can openers.

But his passivity was what bothered me most. Come on, kid! If your life depended on it, couldn't you wrestle that ice-cube tray to the ground? It's not that complicated!

Mark Bauerlein, author of the best-selling book "The Dumbest Generation," which contends that cyberculture is turning young people into know-nothings, says "the absence of technology" confuses kids faced with simple mechanical tasks.

But Bauerlein says there's a second factor: "a loss of independence and a loss of initiative." He says that growing up with cell phones and Google means kids don't have to figure things out or solve problems any more. They can look up what they need online or call mom or dad for step-by-step instructions. And today's helicopter parents are more than happy to oblige, whether their kids are 12 or 22.

"It's the dependence factor, the unimaginability of life without the new technology, that is making kids less entrepreneurial, less initiative-oriented, less independent," Bauerlein said.

Teachers in kindergarten have always had to show patience with children learning to tie shoes and zip jackets, but thanks to Velcro closures, today's kids often don't develop those skills until they are older. Sure, harried parents are grateful for Velcro when they're trying to get a kid dressed and out the door, and children learn to tie shoes eventually unless they have a real disability. But if they're capable of learning to tie their shoes before they learn to read, shouldn't we encourage them?

Some skills, of course, are no longer useful. Kids don't need to know how to add Roman numerals, write cursive or look things up in a paper-bound thesaurus. But is snail-mail already so outmoded that teenagers don't need to know how to address an envelope or put the stamp in the right spot? Ask a 15-year-old to prepare an envelope some time; you might be shocked at the result.

Lenore Skenazy, who writes a popular blog called Free-Range Kids, based on her book by the same name, has a different take. Skenazy, whose approach to parenting is decidedly anti-helicopter, agrees that we are partly to blame for our children's apparent incompetence, starting when they are infants.

"There is an onslaught of stuff being sold to us from the second they come out of the womb trying to convince us that they are nincompoops," she said. "They need to go to Gymboree or they will never hum and clap! To teach them how to walk, you're supposed to turn your child into a marionette by strapping this thing on them that holds them up because it helps them balance more naturally than 30,000 years of evolution!"

Despite all this, Skenazy thinks today's kids are way smarter than we give them credit for: "They know how to change a photo caption on a digital photo and send it to a friend. They can add the smiley face without the colon and parentheses! They never took typing but they can type faster than I can!"

Had I not been there to help that 12-year-old with the ice-cube tray, she added, the kid surely would have "whipped out his iPhone and clicked on his ice cube app to get a little video animated by a 6-year-old that explained how you get ice cubes out of a tray."

Friends playing devil's advocate say I'm wrong to indict a whole generation for the decline of skills they don't need. After all, we no longer have to grow crops, shoot deer, prime a pump or milk a cow to make dinner, but it was just a couple of generations ago that you couldn't survive in many places without that knowledge.

Others say this is simply the last gasp of the analog era as we move once and for all to the digital age. In 10 years, there won't be any ice cube trays; every fridge will have push-button ice.

But Bauerlein, a professor at Emory University who has studied culture and American life, defends my right to rail against the ignorance of youth.

"That's our job as we get old," he said. "A healthy society is healthy only if it has some degree of tension between older and younger generations. It's up to us old folks to remind teenagers: 'The world didn't begin on your 13th birthday!' And it's good for kids to resent that and to argue back. We want to criticize and provoke them. It's not healthy for the older generation to say, 'Kids are kids, they'll grow up.'

"They won't grow up," he added, "unless you do your job by knocking down their hubris."