

We're Now Realizing What Screen Use By Parents Is Doing to Kids, And It's Troubling

By Arianna Huffington, Thrive Global Founder & CEO

"I can't stay off my phone," [wrote](#) CNET's Ian Sherr last year. "And I'm afraid it's hurting my 2-year-old son." Sherr was giving voice to an important new development in the conversation around family screen time. For most of the last several years, as we've become more aware of the unintended consequences of allowing technology into every aspect of our lives, the family screen time discussion has mostly centered around screen use by children and teens. And that's not unimportant. We now know screen use can have negative effects on children's [mental health](#). We know it's connected to [attention problems](#), [social interaction difficulties](#) and even [higher risk of suicide](#).

But now we're finding out what screen use by *parents* is doing to children. And as Sherr suspects, it's not good. At every developmental stage for a child, the presence of screens — the term is "technoference" — is having profound consequences. Hunter College and The Graduate Center at The City University of New York ran a [study](#) creating a digital disruption version of the Still Face Paradigm. The latter is a phenomenon dating back to 1975, when developmental psychologist Edward Tronick [showed](#) that after a few minutes of interaction with an expressionless mother, an infant "rapidly sobers... grows wary... and orients his face and body away from his mother with a withdrawn, hopeless facial expression." It's not that the mother is absent. It's that she's there, but not there. It's an almost perfect description of what screens do to human interaction. And as the researchers found in the updated digital version, the results were largely the same. While mothers were on their devices, the infants were more distressed, explored their environment less and experienced lower emotional recovery when mothers put the screens down. "Results suggest that, like other forms of maternal withdrawal and unresponsiveness, mobile device use can have a negative impact on infant social-emotional functioning and parent-child interactions," [said](#) study co-author Tracy Dennis-Tiway.

Another [study](#) shows how screen use affects that relationship on the parenting side. Researchers at the Department of Pediatrics at the Boston Medical Center observed caregivers and children at 15 fast-food restaurants in the Boston neighborhood, with an eye toward how device use by the caregiver changed the interactions with the child. The results? "Caregivers absorbed in devices frequently ignored the child's behavior for a while and then reacted with a scolding tone of voice, gave repeated instructions in a somewhat robotic manner... seemed insensitive to the child's expressed needs... or used physical responses (one female adult kicked a child's foot under the table; another female caregiver pushed a young boy's hands away when he was trying to repeatedly lift her face up from looking at a tablet screen). In general, "highly absorbed caregivers often responded harshly to child misbehavior." It's as though they could not tolerate having any interruption to their screen addiction.

So we know that screen use by parents affects their interactions with their children, but how does that manifest in child behavior? That's what Illinois State and the University of Michigan set out to [explore](#). While it was observational and based on self-reporting by the parents, their

study did indeed find troubling connections. “We were able to demonstrate that even low and seemingly normative amounts of technoference were associated with greater child behavior problems, which may have great public health relevance,” the study authors [wrote](#). The study also noted that 48 percent of the parents acknowledged daily device-related interruptions in their engagement with their children, with only 11 percent saying they were technoference-free.

Of course bad behavior by children is stressful. And where do we now turn when we're stressed? To our devices, which creates a kind of technoference spiral. “Our results suggest that mobile devices and other digital technology are potentially serving stress-relieving purposes for parents,” the authors [write](#), “but at the same time potentially displacing opportunities for parent-child connection important to child health and development.”

Children may not know they're the first generation that has to compete with technoference, but they know they don't like it. Last year, a second-grade teacher in Louisiana gave her students an assignment to write about inventions they wish had never happened. Four of the 21 chose smartphones. “I don't like the phone because my [parents] are on their phone every day,” one [wrote](#). “I hate my mom's phone and I wish she never had one.”

And all the available evidence would suggest that this is increasingly the prevailing opinion of the too-young-to-drive set. Clinical psychologist Catherine Steiner is the author of [The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age](#). For her book, she interviewed 1,000 children, parents and teachers about how they felt about the role screens were playing in their lives. “Children of all ages — 2, 15, 18, 22 — used the same phrases to talk about how hard it is for them to get their parents' attention when they need it: sad, angry, mad, frustrated,” Steiner [said](#). They were complaining that their parents were focused on screens “like a child's chorus of all ages, talking about this new sibling rivalry, only it's not a new member of the family — it's a new screen, it's a device.”

And the phenomenon is global. In a large international survey of over 6,000 parents and children from countries in North America, South America, Asia and Europe, over half the children said their parents checked their devices too frequently and 32 percent of the children reported feeling “unimportant” as a result.

And some children are fighting back. To take a child-friendly paraphrase from *Network* — a film about the dangers of screens of another sort that seems almost comically quaint today — they're mad as heck and they're not going to take it anymore. Last year in Hamburg, Germany, 7-year-old Emil Rustige, with the encouragement of his parents, [organized](#) a protest in which 150 people joined him to rally around the slogan, “Play with ME, not with your cell phones!” The first rally was a success. “I don't like it that my dad is always playing around with his phone,” said 6-year-old protester Ylvi Schmitt to [Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeitung](#). Her father, also in attendance, acknowledged he needed to “take a good look at himself.”



Emil Rustige (R), age 7. Sign says “We are loud because you only look at your mobile phone.” Axel Heimken, Picture Alliance / Getty Images

We all do — and not just individually, but collectively. This isn't solely an individual behavior issue. It's a public health issue. That's why it was good news when Manchester [became](#) the first city in the U.K. to introduce a public health program aimed at technoference between parents and children. “You go around Manchester and Salford and see unbelievable attempts by children to communicate with the adult they are with but who is oblivious to them,” said Michelle Morris, a speech therapist and consultant at Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust. The initiative includes “nudge” texts (hey, you have to reach people where they are!) about times when device-free communication is particularly important and tips about how to do it, as well as training for health professionals to give to parents.

But we also need to widen the conversation about screens and families. And we have to do it in a way that acknowledges the serious consequences of what's going on, but without shaming parents. A whole generation didn't just wake up and decide to become distracted and disengaged parents. In fact, awareness about the value of parental engagement with babies and children, of [eye contact](#), of [talking to them](#), of [reading to them](#), of [playing with them](#), has never been higher. Yes, parenting can be exhausting, but this is the golden age of parenting. Or at least of parenting awareness and commitment. Because at the same time as we've discovered what truly makes children thrive, along came this other thing — in the form of these incredibly powerful and seductive devices — that makes it more challenging than ever before to give our children the attention we know they need. This technology has become another member of the family, and one that we habitually turn to for multiple reasons including to relieve the inevitable stress brought on by the challenges of raising the other members of the family.

The question is how to turn this awareness into action. Going cold turkey isn't an option. “You can't always say your child will come before your phone,” [says Judith Myers-Walls](#), professor emerita at Purdue University. But we can ask: “How can I model for my child a positive way to use this?” For Ian Sherr, whose worries about the effects his phone use was having on his son, Theodore, started us off, it's about balance. “If it looks like Theodore is playing on his own, then it's OK for me to grab my phone or take a breather,” he writes. “But I have to be smart about it. I can play on my phone and still take regular breaks to check in with him, tell him the train track he's built looks cool, hug him and then go back to what I was doing.”

I'm also heartened by signs that, no matter what we do, the next generation will be even more deliberate in course-correcting. Here's how Sherry Turkle, MIT professor and author of [Reclaiming Conversation](#), [described](#) what one 15-year-old boy told her. “Someday he wanted to

raise a family, not the way his parents are raising him (with phones out during meals and in the park and during his school sports events) but the way his parents think they are raising him — with no phones at meals and plentiful family conversation.”

As the late poet Mary Oliver [wrote](#), “attention is the beginning of devotion.” It’s also at the core of everything that makes us thrive. It’s the bridge between us and the rest of humanity. And it’s in our families where attention most needs to be safeguarded.

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