

## Distracted parenting

Parents of pre-schoolers can feel as if they are on a treadmill of activity – hunting for missing socks, wiping runny noses, surviving toddler tantrums, supervising teatime, bath time, story time, bedtime – all on diet of four hours' sleep. And many would agree that in this season of family life, technology can be a lifesaver! What mum or dad hasn't breathed a sigh of relief when putting a child in front of a screen during the 'happy hour' of 5 pm to 6 pm when blood sugar is at an all-time low, sibling rivalry is at its peak, and the fish fingers aren't on the table? As well as keeping children entertained, digital technology means that we can answer emails, keep up with the news, make bank transfers, check the weather, post on social media, and watch our favourite programme 24/7 at any time, any place.



But with all the advantages smartphones bring to families, there are also insidious dangers. We can be sitting round the kitchen table with our children, standing by the swings at the park, waiting at the supermarket check out – physically in the same place with them – however our time and attention is actually focussed not on them but on the little screen in our pocket.

At one of our Care for the Family parenting events, we show a DVD clip of children talking about how they feel when their parents are on their phone. One little boy said: "I feel like they don't care about me." And a little girl said: "I sometimes want to play a board game, but Mummy is too busy on her phone."

I recently spoke at a head teachers' conference where delegates shared their dismay at the number of parents who barely look up from their smartphone as their son or daughter comes racing out of school, desperate to show them their painting or junk model creation. One nursery teacher said that when she spoke to her two- and three-year-olds, many were looking down – "as if to find the screen the noise was coming from" – rather than looking up at her face.

It's hard to say what harm this 'distracted parenting' causes. Smartphones have only been available for a decade, so we are in unknown territory. But a number of studies paint a worrying picture. In some recent research, psychologists asked parents how often they thought their use of devices interrupted interactions with their child. Most agreed they were frequently distracted. Only 11 per cent claimed that they were unaffected.

In the same experiment, the parents were asked to rate their children's behaviour. Did they sulk, display easily-hurt feelings or whinge? Were they hyperactive or easily frustrated? Did they have frequent temper tantrums? The findings were interesting: the more often parents reported themselves as being frequently distracted from their children because they were on their iPad, laptop or phone, the more behavioural issues they noticed their children having.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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We know how important responsive behaviour is for children. When we smile at our child and they smile back, it releases chemicals in the body that make both them and us feel happy. Nurturing and responsive relationships with children can help both their emotional and intellectual development. One study showed that infants whose parents talked with them at 11 months and 14 months knew twice as many words at the age of two as those who did not.

One dad told me this story: “I was catching up on some work emails on my phone and my son came into the kitchen and asked if I would come outside and play football. I replied, ‘In a minute.’ One email led to the next and then my son came back and said, ‘Are you coming now, Daddy?’ Irritated, I looked up and said, ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’ Crestfallen, he picked up his football and began to walk away. It was what he said next that stopped me in my tracks: ‘You were a nicer daddy before you got your iPhone.’” Ouch!

That dad’s story is a reminder that children love to have our undivided attention and we need to give this regularly and consistently. But part of the problem is that technology is so easily accessible, prevalent and unpredictable. We are at the mercy of a beep from a text or notification – and we get a buzz out of it.

We can’t do it all. If we need to meet a deadline on our laptop while our child is playing or watching television, that’s fine. And if we need our child to be occupied while we make dinner or sort out the washing, that’s OK too. But when we are with our children, let’s really be with them – and put the phone away.



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