

## All On-Call in the Family: Use of Electronics Hooks Teens, Parents, Even Babies! The Result: More Anxiety for Everyone



Much has been reported about the pervasive use of electronics by teenagers and the need for parents to have a screening policy against the overuse of screens. Well, it turns out that parents are often part of the problem, not the solution, as many moms and dads have become overly attached to their smartphones, iPads, laptops, and social media. In fact, today's preoccupation with screens extends *throughout* the family, with Generation X and Y parents, boomer grandparents, and even babies involved: Fisher Price is marketing a baby bouncy seat with an iPad holder, and now there is a potty seat that comes with an iPad holder.

What is the effect of this "all in the family" technology? These new techie toys are coming to market so quickly, and our society has an insatiable appetite for them. Caught in the vortex, research hasn't had a chance to catch up, and we won't have definitive data about the effects of this lifestyle revolution for years to come.

We do, however, now know some things that are troubling. Let's start with babies. Developmentally, babies from the time they are born, seek contact with human faces. They learn language through human interaction. The value of connecting with others comes from the early, loving connection to significant others. Social, non-verbal language development depends on the experience of relating with others. Further, research suggests that TV watching before the age of 2 leads to a higher incidence of Attention Deficit Disorder. As far as the impact of babies playing with iPads, my instinct says it can't be good.

### **Face-to-Face**

As a child psychologist, my biggest concern about the explosion of screen use among all of us, including babies, is that it interferes with sustained face-to-face, intimate contact with family members. Again, how this will affect social and emotional development is an unknown, but it's clear that screens divert our focus from humans into gadgets, in a way that is highly individualized and not social. And it's not only the impact of screens on our children and babies that is problematic; it is also the impact of parents who may be physically with their kids but actually not connected to them because today's moms and dads are often distracted by screens as well.

While we typically feel compelled to respond to the constant barrage of emails, texts, calls, etc., we are not connecting in a meaningful way. And ironically, if we try to extricate ourselves from our gadgets, we often feel anxious that we are missing something important.

When I became an intern years ago, I was given a beeper to be used when I was “on call,” and I remember how anxiety-producing it was when it would go off. When wearing it, I was always aware that I was working on some level, and I wasn’t free to relax when playing with my kids, making dinner, or even taking a rest. In the last few years, like many doctors, I have given back my beeper and use my cell phone instead, since they both serve the same function. However, now, everyone has a cell phone, and we are often expected to be on call, on-demand, 24/7.

How many of us, especially parents, would not feel anxious if we left home without our phone? How many would feel compelled to go back home to get it? The first thought is, “What if something bad happens and I don’t have my phone?” “What if my child gets sick at school, and they can’t immediately reach me?”

### **Anxious Stories**

A mother of a preschooler was at a doctor’s appointment, and her phone was turned off. As she was leaving, she quickly looked at her phone and said, “My stomach dropped—my son’s teacher texted me 20 minutes ago that he was complaining of a belly ache, and I didn’t instantly respond!” In fact, not responding instantly to teachers or to your children now feels like Bad Parenting 101. And, what if work sends an email that you don’t immediately respond to? This doesn’t make a good impression on your boss or a client. And how many of us can say we never received a work-related call, text, or email in the evening, weekends, and/or on vacation that demanded our immediate attention? Even when looking for a vacation spot, consider how important it is to have Internet access.

As a child psychologist, I hear vexing tales about technology and anxiety every day. I recently saw a mom who was telling me how her 12-year-old daughter had been rude to her that morning, so she took her phone away. But then she told me she had to give it back to her. When I asked why, she said, “Well we had a long drive to get to this appointment, and then she would have to sit in the waiting room, and I couldn’t expect her to do all that without her phone!” Then she paused, and we both burst out laughing, realizing how silly that sounded! It made it so clear how much our family life and expectations have changed in this techie age.

In another example, a parent of a 7-year-old boy was talking to me about the incredible peer pressure his son feels to have the latest electronics. He said, “As parents, I think we are going to look back at all this and say, ‘What were we thinking?’”

Again, it’s a family affair. While parents are complaining about their kids’ use of screens, kids are now complaining about their parents being on screens. “My mom is always on her phone.” “My dad is always on his computer.” In short, potentially valuable family time is routinely being interrupted by the buzzing of screens. In fact, texting while driving has been determined to be as dangerous as drunk driving. Have we reached the point where parenting on devices should be compared to drunk parenting because of the level of distraction?

In some of my family therapy sessions, we have had to establish rules limiting screens, not just for the kids, but for the parents as well. One father I work with agreed to turn off his phone on evenings and weekends until after his young children were in bed. However, he admitted he had to hide it away because it would be too tempting to use it. Like so many other parents, he felt anxious. Unfortunately, too many of us feel incredible pressure to be constantly available to others—but this often the wrong kind of attention, and it comes at the expense of offering genuine, sustained attention to our loved ones. Today's family is typically a matrix of everyone, at every age, at home together. But we're not talking, we're not *really* connecting; rather, we're fixated on our screens. And if this is the new normal, why shouldn't we add to the picture a baby in a bouncy seat with an iPad? No one in this family is looking at her anyway.

### **The Techie Takeaway**

So how can parents deal with this dilemma?

First of all, it's vital that families carve out private time to talk with each other without distractions. For instance, at certain times of the day, all screens should be shut off. Examples include meal times and short car trips, times when conversation should be encouraged.

Family interaction such as playing games, going on outings, etc. should also be encouraged and made part of your routine, as long as electronics is off limits!

Overall, we need to reevaluate our time on screens vs. quality time with our kids.

Indeed, this problem is all in the family, and it is all-important to address.