

## Your Smartphone or Your Life

By P. Donohue Shortridge, MA

On a crisp Saturday morning at a Denver farmers' market, the smell of roasted chilies hangs in the air. A wiggly 10-year-old girl waits in line at the burrito vendor's cart, arm linked with her dad's. All skinny jeans, sweatshirt, and braces, she sways to the nearby music of a guitar and mandolin duo.

Food in hand, daughter and dad sit across from each other at a small café table. She looks adoringly at him as she's about to take her first bite. In that golden moment, dad slips his phone out of his pocket. Her eyes pivot instantly to that thing, that mortal enemy that will once again rob her of her dad. Engrossed in his phone, he does not notice as his daughter draws back from the table, her eyes glaze over, and she looks distractedly at the moving crowd, accepting her not-unfamiliar plight: At any moment, her dad may abandon her for his phone, exiting this intimate father-daughter space and going elsewhere.

This true story is one of many: Anecdotally, parents use mobile devices in front of their children all the time. Children have become used to their precious parent time being interrupted, without apology or permission, by their parents' exiting at will to attend to their electronic life. The device's ubiquitous presence at the dinner table, on the nature walk, and during drive time and downtime signals to sons and daughters that they must compete with these inanimate objects for their parents' attention or simply resign themselves to the shared attention. Some children act out, thinking negative attention is better than no attention. Others adapt and

imitate their parents' behavior, begging for a mobile device of their own. New research from Common Sense Media found that "almost twice as many children have used mobile media compared to two years ago and the average time children spent using mobile devices has tripled" (2013, p. 9).

Distracted parents model that it is acceptable not to be present when you spend time with your loved ones. Children quickly learn that attending to a mobile device is an approved value.

But how do children really feel about their parents' use of mobile devices in their presence? In her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle recounts one boy's lament that he could understand it better when his dad worked at his desk computer than when he sat next to him with his mobile device in hand, physically there but not fully present. Says Turkle, "Children have always competed for their parents' attention . . . with parents being off with work, friends, or each other. Today, children contend with parents who are physically close, tantalizingly so, but mentally elsewhere." (2011, p. 267).

Our children need and deserve our full attention when we are with them. So what's a parent to do?

- Keep your smartphone out of sight when you're with your children. Better yet, turn it off and put it in another room. If you do need to use it, excuse yourself and take the call elsewhere. Make it short, come back quickly, and apologize for the interruption—because that's what it is, an interruption of your in-the-moment life with your child. The same goes for checking

or sending voice mail, email, or text messages.

- If you're going to look something up on your device when with your children, ask their permission before doing so. This is a good habit to get into whenever you are with another person.

- Vow to break the habit of fooling yourself that your electronic gadget use when with your children is not a distraction. It is. And it cuts deep.

### References

- Common Sense Media. (2013). *Zero to eight: Children's media use in america*. [www.commonsense.org/research](http://www.commonsense.org/research).
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.

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