



Digital devices during family time could exacerbate bad behaviour

By Michael Hawton, Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

Parents who spend a lot of time on their phones or watching television during family activities such as meals, playtime, and bedtime could influence their long-term relationships with their children. This is according to researchers (Brandon T. McDaniel of Illinois State University and Jenny S. Radesky of the University of Michigan Medical School) who say so-called ‘technoference’ can lead children to show more frustration, hyperactivity, whining, sulking or tantrums. (McDaniel, B.T., Radesky, J.S. Technoference: longitudinal associations between parent technology use, parenting stress, and child behavior problems. *Pediatr Res* **84**, 210–218 (2018).

The same research shows that we are letting technology interfere with primal things, like ‘looking’ after our offspring. From a biological point of view, children and teenagers are ‘pack animals’ who need the connection with their pack if they are to survive and flourish. Having worked in the children’s court for many years, I have seen parents distracted from their primary task of caregiving by drug addiction or by their own mental health needs. This is not that different. What is going on here is that parents are allowing this bright and shiny distraction – called their device – to determine what they do.

Observably, the overuse of devices by parents leads to greater tension in the household both with kids’ behavioural issues and parents getting angry when they’re disturbed by their children.

The pattern which gets repeated is that the child seeks their parent’s attention (which is their basic need), the parent fobs them off, the child ups the ante and then the parent feels annoyed and may lash out. This is a cycle that can only be broken by one party though – the parent.

Some tips for parents to help them turn off their devices (tv, phone, computer) and interact more freely with their children

1. Your phone is a resource – and *just* that. We have a saying in our teenage parenting course; the internet is an invited guest - not an assumed resident! This basically means that you should control your technology, having it in or out of your life, at your discretion.
2. It is about priorities and all those tiny day-to-day interactions that go into forming a healthy relationship with your teenager. If we’re letting our need for devices have ascendancy over relationships, this is not in their best interest.
3. How do you want your teenager to remember you? Is it as a rude, cranky person who was always on their phone? Or as a warm and available person and one of life’s first teachers?

On the flip side, parents also need to use devices when their kids are home, mainly for work, but also for play and relaxation. How can parents set some boundaries for their children to also respect this need and still know they are loved?

I think parents have the right to not be interrupted. An example may they're working or doing something important, a way to get the kids into the habit of not interrupting you, you may tell them that unless it's some kind of emergency they should not interrupt you for a few hours. At a practical level, it's about preparation and it's about set-up.

The same goes with spending time with your teenagers. You could timetable periods to be with your kids, when they're NOT to be on their devices. Remember, the phone is a resource you can *choose* to use or not use. With calmer, happier children as a result of *that* choice, it makes sense to choose wisely.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

References:

Daniel, B.T., Radesky, J.S. Technoference: longitudinal associations between parent technology use, parenting stress, and child behavior problems. *Pediatr Res* **84**, 210–218 (2018).