

## **So Close and Yet So Faraway, So Connected and Yet So Disconnected**

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I believe the year was 2003, perhaps 2004. I was invited to give a presentation about raising resilient children. The sponsoring group asked if I would like to join them for a light dinner prior to the talk. I was pleased to do so. Little did I know that during that meal I was to be introduced to an electronic instrument that I had never seen before but one that was to assume a dominant world-wide presence during the upcoming years, a presence that was to grow exponentially.

I enjoyed the dinner conversation. At one point a member of the group took out what appeared to be a funny-shaped cell phone and asked, “Have any of you heard about the BlackBerry?” No one had. She said that it was quite an amazing instrument, that in addition to its use as a phone, you could also use it to receive and answer e-mail messages. As a technological device it sounded rather impressive. However, I will never forget my response. “But if you can check your e-mail messages from any location with the BlackBerry, it might distract you from other things. For some people it would take a lot of willpower not to keep looking at or sending messages.” All agreed, but none of us vowed to refrain from buying one—perhaps silently subscribing to the belief that we possessed the self-discipline to use this instrument wisely.

### **The Appearance of Smart Phones**

How prophetic my comment was about will power, which I should note pre-dated the 2007 appearance of what some would say were the true “smart phones,” namely, the iPhones and Androids. Ironically, nowadays checking e-mails on one’s phone seems passé for a number of people, replaced by the immediacy of receiving and sending text messages. And let’s not forget about the emergence of “apps” that accompanied the arrival of the smart phone. The term apps may have originated as an abbreviation for the word application, but it can now be found in dictionaries as a word in its own right. It is defined as “an application, typically a small, specialized program downloaded onto mobile devices.”

There seem to be apps for anything and everything. Games, maps, exercise routines, calorie counts, sports scores, recipes—the list is endless. I wondered how many

apps exist, and to answer the question I turned to the source for anything and everything: Google. I “googled” (how quickly a noun can become a verb) the words “how many apps exist in the world?” and discovered the following statistic: As of July, 2014, “Android users were able to choose between 1.3 million apps. Apple’s App Store remained the second-largest app store with 1.2 million available apps.” I knew there were many apps but would have never guessed these many. And most likely in a year or two, these numbers will seem very small given the endless stream of new apps that appear.

As we know, apps, texts, and e-mails are also accessible on tablets. You can buy almost any size device with choices of colors, including for the protective covers. It is more the rule than the exception that each family member has his or her own tablet or phone.

Lest I seem to convey a negative attitude about the proliferation of smart phones, tablets, and similar instruments, I will admit that I am typing this article on my iMac and I also own a MacBook Pro, especially useful when I am on the road, an iPad (also very handy on the road and to download books), an iPhone, and even an iPod purchased several years ago that now seems unnecessary since music can be downloaded on the iPhone and iPad. When I finish a presentation or land after a flight the first thing I do is check my iPhone for any e-mails and texts.

I offer all of this information in the hope that the views I express in the remainder of this article are not interpreted as a one-sided, negative image about technology. If anything, technology has led me to be a more productive person; it certainly has facilitated the writing I have done. However, we must appreciate that while there are many benefits associated with the digital age, there are also negative forces that must be understood and addressed.

### **The Possible Loss of Connections**

A main concern that I have is that technology may compromise positive relationships and connections between parents and children, between spouses, between friends, and between colleagues at our workplace. Several months ago I had the opportunity and pleasure to do a joint presentation with my son Rich titled “Raising Resilient Children and Teens in the Digital World” (the presentation is posted on my

website). Rich is founder and president of flyte new media, a web design and marketing company in Portland, Maine. He has helped establish a social media club in a high school, and as the father of two daughters ages 10 and 12 has a special interest and expertise in the impact of technology on children and adolescents. In our presentation we examined the ways in which technology can be used to reinforce skills in children that will help them to become more resilient and confident.

But we must not ignore the ways in which technology can become an obstacle to establishing healthy emotional and cognitive development and secure family relationships. As an example, at a recent presentation I recounted the story of a young boy who scored a goal in a soccer game. He was very excited and immediately glanced towards his father on the sidelines. A noticeable expression of sadness appeared on his face when he saw that his father was busy texting and had missed his goal. Is it too great a sacrifice to turn off our smart phones when we attend our children's events and instead actually watch the game? Precious moments lost to a smart phone are often lost forever.

It was interesting, however, when I recommended at this talk that parents consider turning off their smart phones when attending their child's activities that a father replied, "But that's how I feel when I try to talk with my kids and they're busy with their smart phones or tablets."

I inquired how he felt when this occurred and without hesitation he responded, "I feel sad and rejected."

In hearing this poignant comment, I offered several observations. The first was that we should use our feelings as guidelines to become more empathic with our children. If we feel rejected when our kids are tuned into their phones and tablets instead of to us, then we should remember that probably our children feel the same way when we are the ones using electronic devices while they are attempting to get our attention. Second, we serve as models for our children. If we place texting ahead of interacting with them, we should reflect upon how they might interpret our behavior. And third, we should consider appropriate guidelines for the use of smart phones, tablets, and other devices both for ourselves and our children so that technology does not interfere with the establishment of positive family relationships.

**Ignoring One's Children**

The seemingly negative impact of technology on parenting behaviors was highlighted in a study conducted by Dr. Jenny Radesky, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician at Boston Medical Center. The research was reported by several media outlets, including in an article written by Patti Neighmond for npr.org titled “For the Children’s Sake, Put Down that Smartphone.”

Neighmond observed at the beginning of her article, “It’s not just kids who are overdoing screen time. Parents are often just as guilty of spending too much time checking smart phones and e-mail—and the consequences for their children can be troubling.” Neighmond wrote that Radesky became aware of that many parents in different situations were more focused on their smart phones than on their children. In one instance, Radesky saw a mother placing her phone in the stroller between herself and the baby. “The baby was making faces and smiling at the mom and the mom wasn’t picking up any of it; she was just watching a YouTube video.”

Radesky and her colleagues decided to study this behavior, and they selected an interesting setting. They observed 55 different groups of parents and young children eating at fast food establishments. Radesky acknowledged that her research did not represent a scientific study but was similar to an “anthropological observation with field notes.” What did she find? “Many of the caregivers pulled out a mobile device right away. They looked at it, scrolled on it and typed for most of the meal, only putting it down intermittently.” Forty of the 55 parents used a mobile device during the meal, and many were more attentive to the device than to their kids.

Radesky voiced concern about this kind of behavior, contending that face-to-face interactions are the major way in which children learn. “They learn language, they learn about their own emotions, they learn how to regulate them. They learn by watching us how to have a conversation, how to read other people’s facial expressions. And if that’s not happening, children are missing out on important developmental milestones.”

I would add that parents—similar to the father who failed to see his son score a goal in soccer—were also missing out on important experiences if their eyes, hands, and mind were glued to a smart phone.

Dr. Perri Klass, a pediatrician, in her blog “Parents, Wired to Distraction” written for *The New York Times* quotes an important question raised by Radesky, “Are these devices just a marker for different parenting strategies and/or different satisfactions, different styles—or is the device itself impacting those interactions?” Klass believes that the answer probably involves all of the above.

A related question is how much does a parent’s attention to a mobile device impact on the child’s overall emotional and cognitive development. Klass warns that increased screen time is associated with a decrease in the amount of time that adults speak with children.

Dr. Claire McCarthy in an article that appeared on boston.com titled “Put Down Your Phone and Talk to Your Kid” noted that in Radesky’s study parents who used mobile devices talked 20 percent less and interacted 39 percent less compared with parents who were not using similar devices. On a personal note, McCarthy, a pediatrician, admits that she has to work hard at not using her smart phone when she is with her children, that “it’s so tempting—and with everybody doing it, it’s become so normal that it doesn’t seem a big deal at all.” However, McCarthy emphasizes the possible consequences of not spending as much time communicating with your child. “Through talking, we learn about each other’s lives. We support each other. We strategize about problems together. We laugh, we guide, we vent, we explore feelings, we build trust.”

### **From the Child’s Point of View**

The long-term effects of the disconnection between parent and child is still to be determined, but there is evidence to indicate that negative emotions are stirred up in children when their parents use smart phones in their presence. Dr. Catherine Steiner-Adair, a well-known clinical psychologist in the Boston area and author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*, interviewed 1,000 children and many parents, teachers, and young adults about the role of screens in the lives of children.

In an interview for the Klass article, Steiner-Adair observed that “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. They were

complaining that their parents were focused on screens. . . . 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."

Neighmond also referred to the research undertaken by Steiner-Adair, noting that one four-year-old labeled his father's smartphone a "stupid phone." One girl asserted, "I feel like I'm just boring. I'm boring my dad because he will take any text, any call, anytime—even on the ski lift!"

This last comment reminded me of a young girl who reported a very different experience to me. She said that she knew her parents loved her. When I inquired how she knew, she provided a very insightful answer.

"They let the answering machine answer a call when they were playing with me."

The wisdom expressed by a child!

Neighmond advises that similar to other mental health professionals, Steiner-Adair is not certain "how much these mini-moments of disconnect between a parent and child affect the child in the long-term. But based on the stories she hears, she suggests that parents think twice before picking up a mobile device when they're with their kids." I would expand this advice to include other important relationships as well, such as husband and wife.

### **The Digital World Is Here to Stay**

Digital devices are not going away. Almost all of us use them on a regular basis. We have become dependent on them. The issue is how to use them in ways that improve our lives and do not weaken family relationships. As I advocated earlier, I think that parents are responsible for setting limits on their use and their children's use of these devices. Unless one is expecting an emergency call or text, there is no reason to have the smartphone on while attending a child's events or during meals. I even suggest not placing the phone on vibrate since if the phone does vibrate, many people let curiosity get the better of them and check to see who sent a message.

I also believe that when families go to a restaurant, all smart phones and similar devices should be turned off when the meal is served. Might I dare to suggest that they be turned off when first entering the restaurant or when the meal is ordered? However, in this day and age many parents may argue that this suggestion is going too far, believing it is difficult enough to turn off electronic devices when the food actually arrives.

I appreciate we are all very busy. However, as I frequently say to parents at my presentations, years from now when you look back at your lives I doubt you will regret having waited an hour or even longer to answer a text or e-mail that didn't require an immediate response anyway. In contrast, I would guess that you will regret missing out on many precious moments with your children, whether those moments involve watching them score a goal in soccer or having them tell you about an event that occurred in school or simply having your undivided attention for even a brief time. As Harry Chapin so eloquently describes in his song "Cat's in the Cradle," if you don't have time for your children when they are growing up, they may not have time for you later in life. In the song, when the father wants to spend time with his grown son, the son responds on the phone how busy he is, adding, "But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad, it's been sure nice talking to you," followed by the haunting lines, "And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me, he'd grown up just like me, my boy was just like me."

The song was written in 1974, well before the arrival of smartphones and tablets. It was a struggle then to have time for our kids, and it continues to be a struggle. Even more striking nowadays than in past years given the ubiquitous presence of digital devices, the actual physical distance between a child and parent may be but a few feet, but the psychological distance may be vast. I believe we can initiate realistic steps to close that distance and in the process promote greater family closeness, respect, and harmony. We will all be the beneficiaries of such an action.

My best wishes for a peaceful and satisfying holiday season and 2015.

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