

DIGITAL LIFE

# Is Our Phone Use to Blame for Our Kids' Acting Out?

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We parents are just as obsessed with technology as our kids. Sure, we may not play games or text silly emoji to our friends. We do work, pay bills, keep up with teachers' requests, and read the news – at least most of the time.

So much of our lives take place on our phones that it's easy to get lost in our screens with our heads down. Unfortunately, the more time we spend on our phones, the more likely our kids will respond with bad behavior, according to a [new study](#).

Researchers at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and Illinois State University found that heavy digital technology use by parents may be associated with child behavior issues. The findings were published in the May 2017 online issue of "Child Development".



About 170 mothers and fathers from two-parent households filled out a survey about their use of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and other technology and how these devices disrupted family time.

Interruptions included checking phone messages during mealtime, playtime, and routine activities or conversations with their children. They rated how problematic they thought their personal device use was based on how difficult it was for them to resist checking new messages, how frequently they worried about calls and texts, and if they thought they used their phones too much. They were also asked how often phones, tablets, computers, and other devices diverted their attention away from their children.

On average, mothers and fathers both thought their devices interfered with their interactions with their children at least once or more on a typical day. Mothers, however, seemed to perceive their phone use as more problematic than fathers did. About half (48 percent) of parents reported technology interruptions three or more times per day, 17 percent said it occurred once, and 24 percent said it happened twice a day. Only 11 percent said there were no interruptions at all.

Parents were then asked to rate their child's behavior over the past two months. They answered questions about how often their child whined, sulked, easily got frustrated, had tantrums, or showed signs of hyperactivity or restlessness. The researchers controlled for other factors that are known to impact child behavior, such as parenting stress, depressive symptoms, income, parent education, and support of their spouse.

Overall, they found that, even in low amounts, interruptions to parent-child time caused by digital technology are associated with greater child behavior problems like oversensitivity, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, and whining. Children crave our attention, and just as they can get jealous when our attention is focused on a sibling, they will also react negatively when we are engaged with our phones.

The researchers admit that it's too early to draw a direct link between our phone use and our children acting out, but this study adds to growing literature showing an association between greater digital technology use and potential relationship dysfunction between parents and children. Numerous research and advocacy groups are working on finding definite answers to this dilemma so they can effectively advise parents in the future.

Just like we need to set boundaries for our kids, we also need to set boundaries for ourselves. It isn't easy. It can be just as challenging as cutting back on sugar, alcohol, or meat. But setting guidelines, like no phone use at red lights, at the dinner table, during the hours right after school when kids do their homework, etc. can help.

Remember that children just want our focused attention. Some professional societies, such as the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and [Zero to Three](#), recommend “unplugged” family time. Put your gadgets in a bucket and go take a family bike ride or hike outside.

You can also incorporate more unplugged time into your home through mindfulness. Try some fun [mindful meditations](#) together as a family.



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