

# Raising a Child in the Era of Smartphones: Exploring the implications of parent smartphone use for the parent-child relationship

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## INTRODUCTION

AS technological devices become increasingly integrated in our day-to-day lives, academic and public domains have started to examine their effects on the most impressionable members of our society – children [Radesky et al., 2016]. These discussions typically surround the child’s own device use and specifically the impacts on their brain development, behaviour, and language learning. In this context, there has been an increase in the production of parenting manuals and tools to guide parents who may be worried about their child’s wellbeing and keen to protect them from the dangers of developing unhealthy technology habits. Parents, however, are somewhat less inclined to question their *own* technology use. This is especially true regarding smartphone use, which is increasingly part of everyday life. Parents are often oblivious to the distraction and dependence produced by their relationship with these devices. While studying the impacts of technology use on child brain development is extremely important, it is also essential to focus on the social implications of parents’ technology use; especially in terms of the parent-child relationship.

The study of parent-child relationships is rooted in attachment theory, which was formulated by British psychologist John Bowlby in 1973

and “emphasizes the importance of caring relationships for normal development of the child” ([Popov and Ilesanmi, 2015], 253). These caring relationships are characterised by affectionate, warm, uninterrupted and responsive parenting, in which “both parent and child find satisfaction and enjoyment” ([Stafford et al., 2016], 326; [Bowlby, 1973], 9). Fostering a strong attachment between parent and child is especially important during the first few years of a child’s life, as “relationships and patterns of interactions formed during the early stages of life serve as a prototype for many interactions later in life and might have life-long effects” for both the parent and child ([Hong and Park, 2012], 450). Parents also need to be attentive to their children during this time because children do not yet have the language ability to express what they need, so they will often communicate through their behaviour (450). Unfortunately, because young children are not seeking out and actively using technological devices themselves, this age range is underrepresented in the current research on the impacts of technology.

In this paper I will address some of the gaps in mainstream discussion of technology use in parent-child relationships by focusing specifically on the ways in which a parent’s attachment to their baby/young child may be impacted by their mobile device use. I will examine the question: how might

the phone use habits of parents during their child's first few years of life interfere with their ability to develop a strong and healthy relationship with the child? To do so, I will consider the two main roles that smartphones are playing in parents' lives – as distractions, through a phenomenon dubbed 'technoference', and as support for parenting duties of care. I will analyze how dependence on phones interferes with a parent's ability to engage with their child and attune themselves to their child's needs and emotions. I will also touch on some of the implications of this in terms of new notions of 'care' produced by common technology use. In doing so, I argue that parents are less likely to form a secure and healthy attachment relationship to their child when mobile device distraction and dependence are frequent.

## SMARTPHONE DISTRACTIONS

In an article for *The Atlantic*, American specialist in early childhood education, Erika Christakis, wrote that despite the dramatic increase in the percentage of women in the workforce and the proliferation of hired help and babysitters, parents actually spend more time with their children now than in the 1960s [Christakis, 2018]. However, she argues, "the engagement between parent and child is increasingly low-quality" and perhaps even "ersatz," meaning 'artificial' – which Christakis attributes to parents' continuous partial attention [Christakis, 2018]. The recent infiltration of smartphones into family life has been strongly correlated with this trend. While 92% of all Americans say they own a cellphone or smartphone, mobile devices are especially common amongst parents: "households with children are more likely to own and use technology and have multiple mobile devices compared to households without children" ([Kildare and Middlemiss, 2017], 581). This is often due to the unique safety, entertainment, and connectivity needs that come with parenting a child – needs that childless households are unlikely to experience.

While phones provide parents with many important parenting resources and support, they are also an integral part of a culture of constant connectivity that has ingrained a sense of urgency among many parents to constantly be in touch with everyone in their work and social circles. One study reports that parents described "feeling that they are expected by work and educational entities to be available always, both day and night, pulling them away from their families and children" ([Johnson, 2017], 1430). This expectation comes with a change of social norms that allow the invasion of portable devices into personal spaces – a change that has taken place within the lifetime of today's parents. As one parent said, "when I was growing up we didn't have cellphones and you just left a message on a machine and people got back to you when they could... now I feel like I've got to be available 24/7 and I've got to text back right away or I'm ignoring someone and being rude" (1430). This sense of urgency has reinforced a new "checking behaviour" where some parents find themselves opening their phones even when not prompted by a notification (1431). Therefore, although parents may be spending more time with their children than in the pre-smartphone era, increasing dependency on devices has produced certain habits that distract from a parent's actual engagement with the child.

Distraction amongst parents is, obviously, nothing new. Parents have always had stimuli in the world around them to distract their attention from their child. But the phenomenon is different today – it is more of a chronic distraction than an occasional inattention [Christakis, 2018]. Phones provide the possibility of constant multitasking in a capitalist society where productivity and efficiency are maximized. As leading US psychologist Sherry Turkle says in her book *Alone Together*, "our networked devices encourage a new notion of time because they promise that one can layer more activities onto it. Because you can text while doing something else, texting does not seem to take time but to give you time. This

is more than welcome, it is magical” ([Turkle, 2017], 164). Rather than being seen as capturing one’s time and attention, texting is positioned as an opportunity to accomplish multiple things at once – especially when it comes to balancing work and family life. The ways in which parents justify their phone use during family time is revealing: “They complain that their employers require them to be continually online but then admit that their devotion to their communications devices exceeds all professional expectations” ([Turkle, 2017], 164). The culture of smartphone use is therefore unique because of how emotionally connected parents are to the device, more so than to other types of technology of the past. Sparked by a pressure to respond to messages, and also a fear of missing out, many individuals experience anxiety over being without their phone ([McDaniel, 2019], 73). Therefore, although smartphones have facilitated greater connections with others, parent smartphone use may be creating a source of distraction that is disconnecting them from the people in their immediate social environment – especially from the individuals that need their attention most. As Turkle points out, “we have found ways of spending more time with friends and family in which we hardly give them any attention at all” (164). We are thus experiencing a normative shift in what it means to be present in a space with others.

### ‘TECHNOFERENCE’

As a result of the pervasiveness of smartphones, interruptions in parent-child communication have increased dramatically. A new concept dubbed “technoference” has recently been introduced to represent the “everyday interruptions in interpersonal interactions or time spent together that occur due to digital and mobile technology devices” ([McDaniel and Radesky, 2018], 101). This theory has been commonly applied to the parent-child relationship and interruptions that occur during “face-

to-face conversations, routines such as mealtimes or play, or the perception of an intrusion felt by an individual when another person interacts with digital technology during time together” (101). A 2018 study by Brandon McDaniel, a family relationship Research Scientist, and Jenny Radesky, a Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician, links problematic parental phone use to higher levels of technoference. Examples of problematic habits included the constant checking of notifications, thinking about calls/texts, and overall overuse of the phone. McDaniel and Radesky found that almost half of the parents studied had three or more instances of technoference in one day (105). Technoference is similar to what Sherry Turkle describes as people ‘marking themselves as absent’ by putting their phone to their ear, or more subtly glancing down at the screen during dinner ([Turkle, 2017], 155). In *Alone Together*, Turkle focuses on the human relationship with robots and the online networks that create the “relationships with less” that robots provide. She calls them the “unsettling isolations of the tethered self”:

“I have said that tethered to the network through our mobile devices, we approach a new state of the self, itself. For a start, it presumes certain entitlements: It can absent itself from its physical surround—including the people in it. It can experience the physical and virtual in near simultaneity.” ([Turkle, 2017], 155).

Turkle discusses how these new norms of isolation due to digital connectivity are changing people’s physical presence in public spaces. “What is a place,” she asks, “if those who are physically present have their attention on the absent?” (155). As McDaniel and Radesky found, being mentally disengaged points to the potential for “relationship dysfunction” and altered interpersonal interactions in one’s physical space (108). In terms of the parent-child relationship, the most immediate victim of this disengagement is

the child, who experiences a diminished sense of personal importance when their parent’s attention is so often captured elsewhere.

Research in this growing field of technofence is lacking and, as mentioned before, has focused mainly on the effects on children’s developmental processes. Studies on how digital distractions impact parents’ own experiences with their child are much more scarce ([Kushlev and Dunn, 2019], 1622). The lack of relevant pre-existing research likely affects this paper’s accuracy regarding parent experiences with technofence. However, a few recent qualitative studies have revealed how parents’ ubiquitous engagement with the digital world through their smartphones is affecting the benefits they reap from concurrent nondigital activities with their children (1620). In 2018, Canadian psychologists Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn conducted a field experiment in a science museum and a weeklong diary study of parents’ daily lives. In the science museum study, parents were assigned to either maximize or minimize their phone use during the visit, and in the diary study, 300 parents’ regular phone use at home was tracked over the course of a week (1623, 1630). In both cases, higher levels of smartphone use were associated with greater feelings of distraction among parents, which was in turn linked to lower feelings of social connection to the child (1635). Other studies – done in restaurants, playgrounds, doctor offices, and more – have suggested very similar conclusions: “parent phone use is associated with less verbal interaction, lower parental responsiveness, and at times harsher parental responses” ([McDaniel, 2019], 74). By hindering social connection, technofence is taking away from the parent’s ability to meaningfully bond with their child or make the most of time spent with them. In the context of Bowlby’s attachment theory, mobile technology interferes with the much needed ‘uninterrupted and responsive parenting’, therefore detracting from the satisfaction and enjoyment that parents can derive from interactions

with their child. These relationship issues become more evident when focusing on the impacts of technofence on child behaviour.

In their study on technofence, McDaniel and Radesky found that “even low and seemingly normative amounts of technofence were associated with greater child behavior problems” – both internalizing behaviours (whining, sulking, hurt feelings) and externalizing behaviours (restlessness, hyperactivity, being quick to frustration, temper tantrums) ([McDaniel and Radesky, 2018], 109). These child behaviour patterns, as a study by Radesky et al. observed, influence how parents themselves perceive their child and their relationship with the child. The authors of this report specifically examined maternal mental representations of the child in relation to phone use during parent-child eating encounters, both in the home and in the laboratory. Maternal mental representations are important because a parent’s – in this case, a mother’s – opinions regarding “the child’s thoughts, motivations, and causes for their behavior are important predictors of how the parent responds to the child” ([Radesky et al., 2018], 311). As supported by Bowlby’s theorizing as well, these mental representations include the parent’s cognitive and affective (or, mental and emotional) perspectives regarding their relationship with the child and the child’s personality (311). The research team measured these mental representations via an interview method known as Working Model of the Child Interview (WMCI), and rated the representations along multiple dimensions such as Richness of Perception (how they efficiently and effectively convey “who” their child is) and Caregiving Sensitivity (how they describe recognizing and responding to the child’s needs) (312). They found that a mother’s active phone use during both family meals and laboratory-based eating tasks was positively correlated with perception of the child as difficult, and “negatively associated with the mother’s richness of perceptions of the child and caregiving sensitivity”

(316). “Taken together,” the authors concluded, “these findings suggest that parent mobile device use during daily routines with children may be a reflection of underlying relationship difficulties” (316). As attachment theory suggests, these patterns of interaction formed in the early stages of the parent-child relationship, in which children increasingly act out in response to their parents’ distracted engagement, can have long-lasting implications.

#### DECREASED PARENT-CHILD INTIMACY AND SMARTPHONE ‘ESCAPISM’

The study by Radesky et al. supports McDaniel’s discussion of a vicious cycle of increased phone use and decreased parent-child intimacy: “experiencing greater parenting stress may increase parental phone use in the presence of the child which then exacerbates stressful child behavior, and the process likely continues over time” ([McDaniel, 2019], 74). A prominent example of this cycle is how parents respond to a child’s bids for attention, which can be seen as a form of ‘stressful child behaviour.’ Studies have found that technologically distracted parents are slower to respond to their children’s re-engagement attempts – often not even looking up from their device in order to pretend not to notice the child ([Kildare and Middlemiss, 2017], 589). When they do respond, some parents were reported to respond with scolding, or in a physical manner like “kicking the child’s foot under the table” or “pushing the child away” (589). This greater over-reactivity in distracted parents is, as Erika Christakis argues, a result of misreading the child’s emotional cues ([Christakis, 2018]). A tuned-out parent may be quicker to anger than an engaged one, as they are more likely to assume that a child is trying to be manipulative or difficult, when in reality they just want their parent’s attention ([Christakis, 2018]). With technoference displacing parent-child interactions in this way, “parents may

be experiencing less positive parenting experiences” ([Kildare and Middlemiss, 2017], 589).

These results point to the possibility of parents using their phones deliberately, prompted by certain aspects of their relationship with their child. Parents have reported turning to their mobile devices to “escape” the boredom of parenting, to self-regulate when stressed, and to seek social support when feeling isolated ([Radesky et al., 2018], 311). As McDaniel writes, “many tasks throughout the day such as feeding and play can become monotonous over time – leading many parents to express they pick up their phones during these times” ([McDaniel, 2019], 73). One parent reported, “I usually use it as a distraction method, away from something I don’t what to do,” and another referred to their phone usage as a “coping mechanism” ([Johnson, 2017], 1429). As such, parents use phones to escape not only boredom but also some of the common stressors of parenting, such as feelings of isolation. One mom said, “If I’ve had a . . . long day with the kids and it feels so insular . . . [the phone provides] the reward of . . . a life beyond this” ([McDaniel, 2019], 74). From such parent testimonials of phone use, a link is emerging between negative emotional experiences like loneliness and depression, and increased device use, especially for social media. To connect with family, friends, and others, “mothers of young children, especially first-time mothers of infants, have been shown to turn to social media and blogging” (74). Generally, connecting to the virtual world begins to seem more desirable than connecting to humans – especially during the stressful and emotionally taxing times that often come with being a new parent. This connects to Sherry Turkle’s analysis of the increasing will to turn to online virtual worlds and robots to replace or enhance human interactions. Just as many people turn to various forms of escapism, such as the worlds of their digital avatars, when faced with personal challenges, so too are parents seeking online outlets to take a break from the trials of parenting. However, mobile phone

usage has often been shown to have the opposite effect than what is desired, and recent survey results have linked maternal depressive symptoms specifically to increased problematic phone use among mothers (74). Phone use often leaves parents, specifically mothers, feeling worse because of social comparison and the perception that they are wasting time – something becoming increasingly common due to the proliferation of idealistic “motherhood” social media pages (74). Therefore, while parents may be intentionally seeking out digital escapism so that they can be in a better mindset for dealing with their children, the reality is that this often has detrimental impacts on their mental wellbeing.

Given the findings of the maternal mental representations study and how phone use detracted from parents’ ability to accurately report on who the child is and how they are feeling, the fact that parents are actively seeking an outlet to escape from time with their young child is concerning. Although mothers have always needed breaks from the constant care that is involved in raising a baby, this has usually come in the form of support from family members, neighbours and friends, and not in the ever-present glare of a 5-inch screen that can connect to anyone in the world. The culture of parental phone use perpetuates a narrative of children as burdens and emphasizes the need for external validation and support. As reinforced by the research, this can exacerbate the very issues in the parent-child relationship that parents are seeking to escape, and, as Bowlby might add, create long-lasting attachment gaps. If parents increasingly have less capacity to give their undivided attention to their young child, they are investing less in the relationship and implying – intentionally or not – that there are other connections or tasks that matter more than being responsive and attentive to their child. A young child in particular needs human attachment, and all the nurturing, playtime, and constant cooing that comes with it. Infant feeding, for example, is a time of “intense mother-infant bond-

ing,” and an important time for parents to cultivate a close connection with their child, unencumbered by digital distractions, that will last for the rest of their lives ([Kildare and Middlemiss, 2017], 589). Of course, parents must keep up with other responsibilities. But if the time they do get to spend with their child is marked by disengagement and irritability and viewed as mundane and insular, they lose some of the ‘satisfaction and enjoyment’ that Bowlby described as integral to a healthy relationship. If parents do not learn to pay attention and respond sensitively to their child’s emotional cues, and continually seek out their phones for a “life beyond this,” their attachment to their child – and consequently to their family unit as a whole – weakens.

Immediate safety issues arise with this diminishing engagement. McDaniel wrote that mothers who are distracted during infant feeding may overfeed their infants, perhaps leading to infants who do not learn to listen to their satiety cues (76). Further, he pointed out that children of parents who were distracted during developmental screening visits had higher rates of developmental delays (76). There are also problems that arise when young children have to vie for their parent’s attention, given that it is more difficult to break attention from a mobile device than from other sorts of distractions (76). To re-engage a distracted parent, “unsupervised children will engage in risky, sometimes life-threatening behaviors” ([Kildare and Middlemiss, 2017], 588). For instance, a study in a fast food restaurant reported children making bids for their parent’s attention by misbehaving, “e.g., crawling under tables or standing on chairs” (588). Unsurprisingly, as children engage in these risky and unsafe behaviours to fight the increasing hold of their parent’s mobile devices, the number of child injuries has increased: “Child accident rates have risen 40% in the past five years, linked to parental neglect from technology obsession” [Rowan, 2013].

## PARENTING THROUGH SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES

Paradoxically, increasing child accidents comes at the same time as a spike in demand for surveillance systems, as well as other apps and tracking devices, to protect the child from external safety threats. As a result, parents' technological dependence has produced new norms of care, with parents increasingly relying on child monitoring devices as a proxy for their own presence, time and attention. Although there is a secondary emphasis on parental convenience and freedom, surveillance is predominately offered as a necessary tool of responsible and loving parenting. Through these technologies, "parents can 'care' for the child without their anachronistic physical presence" – in other words, care is being performed in modern and not 'outdated' ways ([Marx and Steeves, 2010], 199). This relates to the concept of the "surveillant consumer" that technology and ethics researchers Luke Stark and Karen Levy take up in their article –specifically their discussions about the *consumer-as-observer*. They describe the *consumer-as-observer* as a form of surveillant consumer that "is enabled through the market for surveillance products and systems to supervise intimate relations (children and, increasingly, the elderly) as components of a normalized, familial duty of care" ([Stark and Levy, 2018], 1206). Surveillance has therefore become "normatively essential to duties of care," especially in the form of parental supervision of children (1207). Stark and Levy go on to describe a number of new gadgets for parents of small children – from the Baby Milestones apps, to "smart diapers," to the Dropcam monitor – that track the baby's needs, emotions, and progress (1207-1208). In each of these cases the proponents of these products encourage consumers to act, and understand themselves, as surveillors, "responsible for both the management and the care of others" (1203). This assumes, as they quote Fisk to say, that adults are the

"final arbiters of risk and appropriateness" (1210). As fears of insecurity and threats to the baby have been produced and marketed, what gets ignored are the ways in which parents' state of disengagement due to technofence are placing children at more frequent dangers than the threats surveillance technologies are designed to prevent.

It is interesting to read Stark and Levy's work on the *consumer-as-observer* in the context of parental mobile phone distraction and technofence. The obligations of parental roles appear to be shifting from needing to be emotionally and physically present with the child, to being able to supervise and track the child through the mediation of new technologies. With fears of extensive external threats, parenting becomes leveraged as a "space of anxious care," and failure to follow the sociotechnical duty of child surveillance might be construed as a failure to parent appropriately (1209-1210). In the article, Stark and Levy go on to discuss how consumers also internalize a discipline of surveillance; in other words, the reality of being watched themselves. This is potentially produced by the constant mobile connectivity that parents find themselves in today – their actions are often being broadcast through their social media use. Perhaps this prompts their desire to keep up with the latest surveillance technologies to protect their child, without questioning their own complicity in a child's (in)security through their everyday cell-phone usage.

What is thus becoming increasingly normalized is a state of disengagement where attention is being taken by the phone but made acceptable due to surveillance technologies that supplement the parent's 'absence'. This is concerning because of its potential to displace the special and intimate relationship between parent and child, as childcare begins to resemble a relationship solely based in control. Parents, as Stark and Levy might suggest, are encouraged to understand themselves as surveillors, with less of a focus on the unique and intimate co-

dependent relationship between parent and child. As duties of care are being performed by technology, with devices that keep track of baby's movements, linguistic inputs, and developmental status, the inherent nurturing aspects of parenting become somewhat diminished. When traditional caretaking roles are supplemented by technologies, parents are not only given more control, but more freedom. But this narrative of freedom is ambiguous – freedom from *what*? Freedom from having to be physically present with their child and attentive to their child's needs? This rhetoric, implied in the parents' testimonials about their phone use referenced earlier in this paper, discourages parents from understanding their relationship with the child itself as liberating. Young children become positioned as a chore; a burden. As Sherry Turkle says about how we handle communication between friends, "It is sad to hear ourselves refer to letters from friends as 'to be handled' or 'gotten rid of,' the language we use when talking about garbage" (168). Similarly, while communicating through their nonengagement that the child is less valuable than whatever is on their phone and alleviating their guilt through technologies of surveillance and control, a parent's care becomes understood as something that can be supplemented or replaced by technologies. This mitigates the need for parents to develop strong human-to-human contact with their child and is a far cry from the "old world wisdom" that Cris Rowan describes – "that parent/child co-regulation leads to self-regulation," for both the parent and the child [Rowan, 2013].

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the seductive lure of technology with which children must compete to capture their parent's attention is threatening the very fabric of family life as we know it. With the pervasiveness of cellphone use putting parents in what Rowan calls the "digital equivalent of the spin cycle," phones are increasingly intruding on time parents spend with their

young children. In the context of attachment theory, technofence is not only impeding parents' ability to be attentive to their child, but it is also detracting from the "satisfaction and enjoyment" that parents gain from interacting with their child. Further, the vicious cycle that parental phone use perpetuates – increased child disobedience that leads to increased parent frustration and desires to 'escape' – encourages a parent's perception of their child that is less accurate and sensitive. In turning to other devices to supplement their disengagement, norms of parental care begin to get redefined.

This is an especially interesting time to study this topic, as the current generation of parents are raising their children in a technologically-driven society, yet experienced very different levels of technology – notably complete absence of smartphone use – when they were children themselves. Of course, as the parents of the future are themselves being brought up in this society of pervasive cellphone use and dependence, it will become increasingly difficult and unrealistic for parents to completely disconnect during time with their child. It is also important to acknowledge the beneficial roles that mobile technology can play in parenting and childcare – for example, it can improve work-life balance by allowing parents to work remotely, and it presents opportunities to bond with children through shared enjoyment of photography, video games, and television programs. However, parents must be cognizant of the ways in which *continued* distraction and dependence on phones has the potential to interrupt developmentally important parent-child conversation and child play.

A parent's relationship with their child is one of the most important relationships they will form in their lifetime. Critically examining how their smartphones are affecting this relationship will equip parents with the capacity to recognize and encourage improved device habits for themselves, as well as for their growing children as they too start to turn to device use in an increasingly technological world.



## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rhea Murti graduated from McMaster's Arts & Science program in 2021 and will start law school at the University of Toronto in the fall. This paper was written as a capstone project for a Technology and Society class in her third year. Rhea was interested in, and concerned by, parents' increasing dependency on smartphones, and was keen to understand the impacts of this use on parents' relationship with their children. Rhea wanted to investigate how a device that parents often turn to as both a distraction and a support would interfere with their ability to develop a strong and healthy parent-child relationship. Rhea is grateful for the opportunity to publish this piece and hopes that it encourages readers to continue to question how society's smartphone-dependant habits may be impacting even one of the most important relationships we build in our lifetime.

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