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The iParents: Adults face modern struggle to balance staying connected and hands-free parenting

By Sarah Boesveld

As critics fret about the distraction digital technology has wrought, moms and dads beg to be cut a little slack - life as a multitasking modern...

Adam O. Thomas is "guilty," and he'd be the first to tell you so.

He's the guy pushing his daughter, Sylvie, on the swing at their local park in Vancouver with one hand and texting his buddies with the other. The "ping!" of a new message will almost always halt a very "serious dance party," much to the four-and-a-half year-old's chagrin.



Sometimes, Mr. Thomas will be admonished by that sweet little girl voice: "Daddy, you come home and you're always on your phone!"

"She's frustrated, because she's watched her shows, she's done her drawings and she wants to show me those drawings," says Mr. Thomas, the co-creator of the forthcoming web TV series *Parked*, about a group of 30-something guy friends. "I sort of had to take a position where it's like 'I need to take some time when I get home to participate in that moment with her because that moment, for her, does not exist a half an hour later.'"

As families scramble to keep up with the rapid advancements of technology (both Apple and BlackBerry released new touch-screen smartphones this week), children are not the only ones whose screen time has come under scrutiny. British schools this month distributed brochures scolding parents for ignoring their children in favour of their smartphones, and advised them to switch off the phones before bedtime and chat with their kids or read a story instead. Public health researchers have attributed a rise in playground injuries to parents checking their Facebook instead of standing at the bottom of the slide. The Internet is sprinkled with complaints about parents who hoist their iPads aloft to document an entire school pageant rather than just sit and watch.

Digital distraction appears to have thrown a wrench in the hands-on aspiration that defines modern parenting - being at the soccer game but immersed in a Twitter debate when your son scores a goal is the 21st century version of not showing up at all. But as critics fret about the distraction and constant documentation digital technology has wrought, moms and dads beg to be cut a little slack - life as a multitasking modern parent is hard. What's the harm in sneaking a peek at your Instagram feed?

A study on parenting in the digital age released in June by the U.S. Center on Media and Human Development at Northwestern University found that only 3% of parents strongly agreed that smartphones have made parenting easier. Thirty-six percent somewhat disagreed that it has, and 33% strongly. Parents, it found, spend an hour and 48 minutes a day on their smartphones - and that doesn't include talking or texting, just emailing, browsing the web and spending time on social media.

"What kids talk about and what's so poignant to me is that they say their parents are such hypocrites," said Dr. Catherine Steiner-Adair, an American clinical psychologist whose book *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age* was published last month. "Everybody's so connected to each other, we're posting 50 pictures of our kids but we're not on the floor playing with our kids, giving them our full attention."

Parenting *is* hard, Dr. Steiner-Adair acknowledges, and perhaps even more-so today with workplace expectations ramping up and pressure from all sides to be a "good mother" or a "good father."



But children are "hungry" for uninterrupted parent time, she said, especially in a culture that has come to place children at the centre of parents' lives. Dr. Steiner-Adair recalled one woman she interviewed for her book referring to Harry Chapin's song *Cat's in the Hat*, for the way her digital distraction may be impacting her home.

"She said 'Our house is now eerily silent at night - we always used to hang out together and talk and laugh ... I worry that what I'm role modeling for my child - which is being on my phone 24/7, my laptop, my desktop- my kids are going to do the same,'" Dr. Steiner-Adair said. "And that's important to think about."

There was a time when Rachel Macy Stafford couldn't walk past her phone without checking it for new emails or Facebook updates. The mother of two daughters, 7 and 10, lost sight of the small moments, and now encourages others via her blog, *Hands Free Mama*, and forthcoming book of the same title, to take little increments of time to really focus in on interactions with her kids, to steer focus away from the device's demands.

"My motivation is having a relationship with my daughters in 20 years," she said, making the strong suggestion that her distractedness now might imperil their bond.

'It's not up to me to continually entertain them. And if they're happy, I can check Facebook'

But what's often forgotten is the fact that parents today spend a lot more one-on-one time with their children than their parents did with them and there's an expectation to do so, says Aimée Morrison, an English professor at the University of Waterloo who researches the way we document our lives online.

"We are expected to spend a lot more time with our kids. But you know what? All of that time is not super exciting," she said. "I spend a lot of time with my daughter while she's doing stuff like cleaning the books off her floor and trying to put them back on the bookshelf. She's not paying attention to me, she just wants me in the room, so I'm reading my phone."

And she's often reading the digital editions of newspapers - the tablet or smartphone equivalent of the papers fathers have long read in those quiet moments when any pestering from kiddies was verboten.



Somehow, Prof. Morrison said, it's considered "morally objectionable" when dad or mom reads something on their phones.

So morally objectionable, that the parent staring into a smartphone has become an Internet joke, that kind of clever social commentary that elicits a knowing, if not slightly embarrassed, chuckle.

On the tumblr page Parents on Phones, a mom in a pink sundress stands wanly in a toy store behind her over-the-moon son. Another stealth snapshot shows a woman at a cafe table, immersed in her phone as her daughter stares longingly out the window.

Michael Cohen, a Massachusetts marketing consultant and father of three, says he started collecting these photos as a joke, and has only been busted once, by a woman on the subway in Tribeca who looked up angrily from her smartphone the minute his camera clicked.

"Every person that you meet, when they see you with your beautiful perfect young children, they're like 'Enjoy the moment, it goes by so fast,'" he said. "And at the same time it's like your monkey mind takes over. You're watching your kids and then all of a sudden you're in your phone checking your fantasy football stats or watching the news" because what the kids are doing in that moment in time isn't exactly stimulating, he said.

That's not to say Mr. Cohen doesn't get criticized for his social commentary: 'What if that woman was a single mom and is working on her phone?' people will say.

"I am harshly passing judgment on these people and I am one of these people too," he said.

The worst thing that's ever happened while Emily Kroeker of Estevan, Sask., was staring down at her iPhone was looking up to find her toddler covered in blue marker. Her five-year-old daughter had asked if she could colour, but didn't specify to her otherwise engaged mom that she wanted to pull a Picasso on her sister.

"At least I can still hear them if I'm on my phone," Ms. Kroeker wrote to the *Post* via Twitter while she made her daughters a snack. "Just yesterday, I gave the little one a cheese string so I could watch a video in peace."

'We're posting 50 pictures of our kids but we're not on the floor playing with our kids'

And yet, she will always put down the phone if her attention is needed - if her daughter asks her to read her a story. And if it's not, then what's the problem?

"I can't do everything for my kids," she says. "It's not up to me to continually entertain them. And if they're happy, I can check FB [Facebook]."

Mr. Thomas says time on his phone at home not only keeps him connected to work, but to his identity as a person. He remembers having anxious pre-baby conversations with his wife about how much their life would change when they have a child, almost imagining themselves being forced to become different people. The phone allows him to remain connected with friends, to look at websites that interest him, to stay up on current events, to keep being Adam.

"Do I stop being an artist so I can be this version of a parent that I've imagined because I've watched too many television reruns? I ultimately think that's a really healthy struggle and in some ways it's a terrible thing to model, this idea of giving everything up [when you become a parent]."

"It's never going to be the 1950s again."

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