

Smart Phones

As discussed in Previous Trending with Teens articles, smart phones trigger the same Dopamine response in the brain as occurs with gaming. Given their ever-present nature, the excitement of a “ding” from the phone when using apps like Instagram intrudes upon our focused attention at any given time. As a result, having a phone next to you when trying to do homework means that you are in a state of constant partial attention when the ding keeps going off. For the developing teen brain (which is wiring up in relation to the environment it lives in), researchers worry that an entire generation of teens is wiring their brains to need this stimulation and will only be able to focus for brief periods of time. Given the time it takes for the brain to switch from one task to another, any efficient block of time dedicated for homework becomes compromised.

In addition to the constant Dopamine surges, smart phones add a hyper-sensitive emotional component. When not having the phone on, teens can experience FOMO (a fear of missing out on what the other teens are saying and doing). When it's on, there's also the anxiety related to how others might respond to a teen's sent message. What if others don't like it? What if no one is responding to my message? Beyond the anxiety are the increased sadness, social embarrassment and humiliation when one receives a disapproving response or a hateful reply. What young teen cannot be consumed with negative emotions when receiving something like a body-shaming message?

In addition to the obvious physical health implications from too much screen time that have been discussed in previous articles, *too much time in the virtual world impedes the development of your child's mirror neuron system* – the part of the brain that processes our perceptions of other's thoughts and emotions. Studies have found that infants, for instance, need

authentic three-dimensional faces to develop their mirroring skills.ⁱ Without a functional mirror neuron system that is mirroring actual people to guide them, children struggle to develop empathy. In a review of research between 1979 and 2009, Stanford University found a sharp decline in empathy traits among college students over the last ten years. The culprit, researchers concluded, was the students' increased dependence on technology.ⁱⁱ On a neurological level, neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf explains in her book *Proust and the Squid*, the speed and superficiality of the tech experience thin the neural experiences that develop empathy.ⁱⁱⁱ Think about it: can you really understand how someone feels without gazing into their eyes? Do emotions really trigger our deeper emotional and mirror abilities? They should. Amazingly, one study found that children who spent time reading fiction books were more empathic.^{iv} The act of placing yourself in the characters' lives and experiencing their emotions develops your mirroring abilities.

According to former President Jimmy Carter, you have two loves in your life: God and the person who happens to be in front of you at any time.^v Is it really possible to show that level of love and respect if your time together is spent checking the cell phone, looking at Snapchat, or texting under the table? IRL (in real life) is where social and empathetic development will take place.

Finally, having a smart phone means that your teen never gets a break from the drama of the school day. No longer can a teen find sanctuary at home from the typical drama inherent in middle school. This social stress can become 24/7. Constant access to electronic devices also means that your teen isn't spending downtime dreaming about the future, or putting their developmental issues into things such as art, music and poetry. As stated by Dr. Michael Rich, from the Center on Media and Child Health at Harvard Medical School: "Boredom is where creativity and imagination take place."

Tips for Managing Smart Phones

1. Consider joining the Wait until 8th parenting movement (www.waituntil8th.org).
2. Be good role models with your smart phone usage.
3. Start with a flip phone and have a “no-delete” rule for texting. Only parents should delete.
4. Phones must be handed over when requested by parents.
5. Create smart phone “free zones” and times in the house. No phones at the dinner table.
No phones in the bedroom at night.
6. Talk to and do research with your kids about various apps. Help them be aware of various dangers (i.e., bullying, predators, challenge games, pornography, and sexting) and the potential social dramas inherent in social media usage.
7. Don’t fall for the “but I need my phone to do my homework with my friend” trick. If that’s truly the case, you can block out a specific amount of time for the so-called group project.
8. For older teens, teach and role model turning the apps to “no notifications” during family time and during homework.
9. Discuss consequences ahead of time for misuse and how responsible usage equals increased freedoms.
10. Encourage free play and family board game nights.
11. If other students are coming over, consider a basket in the kitchen and collect the smart phones. This will encourage real interaction and help cut down on group online antics.

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ⁱ Jacoboni, *Mirroring People*, 161-162.

ⁱⁱ Catherine Steiner-Adair, *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York, NY: Harper, 2007).

^{iv} Keith Oatley, "In the Minds of Others," *Scientific American Mind*, 22, no. 5, (2011): 62-67, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/chwe/austen/oatley2011.pdf>.

^v Krista Tippet, "The Private Faith of Jimmy Carter," *On Being*, April 26, 2007, accessed September 19, 2017, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/private-faith-jimmy-carter/transcript/1321>.