

Article offered by Tri-Town Council

Are You a Distracted Parent?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/growing-friendships/201412/are-you-distracted-parent>

In Highlights Magazine's annual State of the Kid Survey, a nationally representative sample of 6- to 12-year olds were asked, "Are your parents ever distracted when you are trying to talk to them?" 62 percent of children said yes, and, when asked, "What distracts them?" - the most frequently mentioned distractor was cell phones (28%) followed by siblings (25%) and work (16%).

We live in a technology-saturated time. In my practice, I often hear kids complain about parents spending too much time on their mobile devices, although sometimes the kids are complaining because they want to use the device! Our smart phones and tablets are useful and very compelling, but there's no question that they can pull us away from being present to our children.

Distracted parenting can be harsh parenting

A study by Jenny Radesky and her colleagues involved secretly observing caregivers and children in fast food restaurants. 40 out of 55 caregivers used their mobile device during the meal, and 16 used the device almost continuously during the meal. Some kids accepted the lack of attention, but others showed escalating misbehavior. The parents who were highly absorbed in their devices, keeping their gaze primarily on their device, even when answering questions, tended to respond harshly to their children's misbehavior.

What does it mean to be a NON-distracted parent?

Most parents care deeply about their relationships with their children, and routinely ignoring our children for long periods of time certainly doesn't contribute to a close relationship with our kids. But I don't think it's reasonable to expect that parents will "never" be distracted. In fact, I find the flip side of the Highlights statistic truly astonishing—that 38% of children answer, "No" when asked, "Are your parents ever distracted when you are trying to talk to them?" I doubt these parents never felt a moment of distraction, but it's lovely that so many children feel confident in their ability to get their parents' attention.

Talking with parents can help kids learn to manage their emotions, understand other people's perspectives, solve problems, and build a sense of closeness. But not all conversations between children and parents are precious bonding moments. Comments such as "He always gets the yellow cup!" or "This is a yucky dinner. Why do you always make yucky food?" aren't exactly heart-warming.

More is not necessarily better when it comes to giving children attention. A certain amount of benign neglect is good for kids, because it gives them room to discover their own interests and learn to solve manageable problems. Constantly staring at our kids in rapture is neither realistic nor desirable.

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Aiming for responsiveness

What's important is responsiveness: when our kids are trying to get our attention, how do we react? Do we notice when they're being kind, helpful, or creative or only when they're misbehaving? Do we have enough relaxed down time with our kids so they can talk with us when they need us?

As parents, one of the most important things we teach our children is how to be in a relationship. Our devices are part of our lives, and they're not going to disappear, but we can make decisions about how we use them that communicate our values to our children. We can create "device-free times."

Mealtimes, bedtime are important times to be present with our kids. Observational research also shows that reunion times—when we see our children for the first time after being apart for awhile—are great opportunities for connecting, because kids are often eager to share about their day, especially if we give them our full attention.

No parent is ever going to be 100% responsive, but we can try to be more aware of when our children are looking for our attention. We can try to turn toward our kids in kind ways more often than away.