

Study indicates teens are not as good at multitasking as adults

25 November 2015, by Bob Yirka



Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

(Medical Xpress)—A small team of researchers with University College London has conducted a study using volunteers that yielded results that indicated that teen girls are not as good at multitasking as adult women. In their paper published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, the team describes their study and results and why they believe that what they found might apply to parents, children and educators.

Multitasking has become an everyday part of life, people talk on the phone while watching television, or type text messages while they walk down the street—and most seem to believe they are pretty good at it. The researchers with this new effort sought to learn if that is indeed the case, and if there are differences between how well [teen girls](#) multitask versus women that have grown to adulthood.

The study consisted of enlisting the assistance of two groups of female volunteers, [girls](#) between the ages of 11 and 17, and women between the ages of 22 and 30. Both groups were asked to perform two different types of tasks (one social, one non-

social) to determine how well they multitasked. The social task consisted of asking the volunteers to use social cues to guide decision-making as they attempted to move objects between slots in a set of shelves. The non-social task consisted of asking the volunteers to memorize either a two or three-digit number before they started the non-social part of the experiment.

The researchers then monitored the volunteers to see what sort of an impact having to memorize the numbers had on their ability to move the objects. They found that having to do so resulted in performance deficits when engaging in the social task for all of the [volunteers](#), though more so for those that had to memorize the three digit numbers. The researchers also found that the girls in the younger group displayed larger deficits than the older women—accuracy fell by approximately 10 percent for the adults and 15 percent for the girls, which they suggest, means the younger girls were less adept at multitasking.

The researchers suggest their findings indicate that parents and educators might need to take such difference into account when setting up tasks for their children or students.

More information: Multitasking during social interactions in adolescence and early adulthood, *Royal Society Open Science*, Published 25 November 2015. [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.150117](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150117)

Abstract

Multitasking is part of the everyday lives of both adolescents and adults. We often multitask during social interactions by simultaneously keeping track of other non-social information. Here, we examined how keeping track of non-social information impacts the ability to navigate social interactions in adolescents and adults. Participants aged 11–17 and 22–30 years old were instructed to carry out two tasks, one social and one non-social, within each trial. The social task involved referential

communication, requiring participants to use social cues to guide their decisions, which sometimes required taking a different perspective. The non-social task manipulated cognitive load by requiring participants to remember non-social information in the form of one two-digit number (low load) or three two-digit numbers (high load) presented before each social task stimulus. Participants showed performance deficits when under high cognitive load and when the social task involved taking a different perspective, and individual differences in both trait perspective taking and working memory capacity predicted performance. Overall, adolescents were less adept at multitasking than adults when under high cognitive load. These results suggest that multitasking during social interactions incurs performance deficits, and that adolescents are more sensitive than adults to the effects of cognitive load while multitasking.

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