

# Can parents' tech obsessions contribute to a child's bad behavior?

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Fatigue. Hunger. Boredom. Those are often on the list of reasons parents mention if their child whines, has tantrums or acts out.

Researchers are now asking if such negative behaviors could be related to something else: [parents](#) spending too much time on their smartphones or tablets.

A small study from University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and Illinois State University found that heavy [digital technology](#) use by parents could be associated with child behavior issues. The findings were published in the May 2017 online issue of *Child Development*.

Researchers analyzed surveys completed separately by both mothers and fathers from 170 two-parent households. Mothers and fathers were asked about their use of smartphones, tablets, laptops and other technology—and how the devices disrupted family time (a disturbance that lead author Brandon T. McDaniel coins 'technoference.') Interruptions could be as simple as checking phone messages during mealtime, playtime and routine activities or conversations with their children.

Might a few stolen moments used to check a couple text messages have a deeper effect?

While more research is needed, the study suggests it might: Even low or seemingly normal amounts of tech-related interruption were associated with greater child behavior problems, such as oversensitivity, hot tempers, hyperactivity and whining.

"This was a cross-sectional study, so we can't assume a direct connection between parents' technology use and child behavior but these findings help us better understand the relationship," says senior author Jenny Radesky, M.D., a child behavior expert and pediatrician at Mott. "It's also possible that parents of children with behavioral difficulties are more likely to withdraw or de-stress with technology during times with

their child."

But she adds "We know that parents' responsiveness to their kids changes when they are using mobile technology and that their device use may be associated with less-than-ideal interactions with their children. It's really difficult to toggle attention between all of the important and attention-grabbing information contained in these devices, with social and emotional information from our children, and process them both effectively at the same time."

McDaniel, who designed and carried out the study, says researchers hope to learn more about the impact of increasing digital technology use on families and children.

"Research on the potential impact of this exposure lags far behind," says McDaniel, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Illinois State University.

"It's too early to draw implications that could be used in clinical practice but our findings contribute to growing literature showing an association between greater digital technology use and potential relationship dysfunction between parents and their children."

Parents in the study were asked to rate how problematic their personal device use was based on how difficult it was for them to resist checking new messages, how frequently they worried about calls and texts and if they thought they used their phones too much.

Participants also were asked how often phones, tablets, computers and other devices diverted their attention when otherwise engaged with their children.

On average, mothers and fathers both perceived about two devices

interfering in their interactions with their child at least once or more on a typical day. Mothers, however, seemed to perceive their phone use as more problematic than fathers did.

About half (48 percent) of parents reported technology interruptions three or more times on a typical day while 17 percent said it occurred once and 24 percent said it happened twice a day. Only 11 percent said no interruptions occurred.

Parents then rated child behavior issues within the past two months by answering questions about how often their children whined, sulked, easily got frustrated, had tantrums or showed signs of hyperactivity or restlessness.

The researchers controlled for multiple factors, such as parenting stress, depressive symptoms, income, parent education as well as co-parenting quality (how supportive partners were of each other in parenting their child), which has been shown to predict child behavior.

The study joins other research and advocacy groups contributing to a larger debate about technology and its effect on [child development](#).

Some professional societies, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and Zero to Three, recommend "unplugged" family time. But they haven't tested whether lessening or changing digital technology use during parent-[child](#) activities is associated with improved [child behavior](#).

McDaniel and Radesky advise parents to try to carve out designated times to put away the devices and focus all attention on their kids.

Reserving certain times of the day or locations as being technology-free—such as mealtime or playtime right after work—may help ease

family tensions caused by the modern blurring of outside worlds with home life, they say.

"Parents may find great benefits from being connected to the outside world through mobile technology, whether that's work, social lives or keeping up with the news. It may not be realistic, nor is it necessary, to ban [technology](#) use all together at home," Radesky says. "But setting boundaries can help parents keep smartphones and other [mobile technology](#) from interrupting quality time with their kids."

Provided by University of Michigan

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