

Research team reports on effect of mobile phone use in parent-child interactions

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Object set A offered for free play during the first session of the parent–child interaction test. Credit: *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). DOI: 10.3389/frcha.2024.1330243

Preschoolers who use mobile devices more frequently have lower quality and quantity of parent-child interaction than their peers who do not use them. Researchers from the Alpha Generation Lab at the Department of Ethology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, hypothesized that mobile phone use takes time away from and interferes with social activities, thereby degrading the quality of time spent together, according to their [article](#) published in the journal *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

"A total of 72 parent-child pairs took part in our research. The parents reported on the family's device use habits and [time](#) spent together in a questionnaire, but their interaction with and behavior toward their children was also observed in a laboratory study," noted Dr. Krisztina Liszkai-Peres, the lab's researcher and first author of the study.

The researchers included 47 mobile-using preschoolers in the study. They considered a child as a mobile user if they had been using the device for at least 6 months and spent at least 2 hours per week using it actively, such as playing games. The non-user group included 25 children who—according to their parents—had actively used a mobile phone or tablet only up to 5 times in their lifetime (passive screen time, e.g., watching videos, was not an exclusion criterion).

"For the survey, we developed a 31-item parent questionnaire to assess parents and children's digital media use habits, children's problematic mobile use, and the family's shared digital and non-digital (real-life) [leisure activities](#)," the research stated.

"In the laboratory, we measured the quality of parent-child interaction in

two different situations: in a 5-minute long free play session, during which the child-parent pairs were free to play with any of the games provided, and a 5-minute long structured play session," explained Dr. Veronika Konok, a research fellow at the Department of Ethology and lead researcher of the Alpha Generation Lab.

In the structured game, the parent-child pair had to draw using the classic drawing board (Etch-a-Sketch), where one knob should be turned to draw vertically and the other to draw horizontally, and the two knobs should be turned simultaneously to draw a diagonal line.

The task for the parent and child was to work together to draw a pine tree or a house by one of them turning one knob and the other turning the other. The researchers then analyzed videos of the interactions, looking for indicators of the quality of the parent-child relationship.

They found five aspects by which the interactions could be generally characterized: interactivity (e.g., child initiates interaction to which parent responds), parental control (parent physically or verbally controls child), attention towards a partner (e.g., they look at each other), collaboration (they work on a task together), and shared fun (e.g., parent and child laugh together).

"We found that the interactions of mobile-using children and their parents during joint play were of poorer quality than those of non-mobile-using children and their parents. There was less interactivity, less attention to each other, and less parental control," summarizes Dr. Liszkai-Peres.

However, the results of the questionnaire study show that joint, real-life (non-digital) activities help to prevent the child's mobile use from becoming problematic: if the family spends more screen-free time together, it is less likely that the mobile-using child will become addicted

or that the child's mobile use will lead to regular family conflicts.

However, shared digital activities have not been shown to be this effective, probably because they do not provide the high-quality [social situations](#) that are essential for the development of secure attachment and the various skills (e.g., self-regulation) that a child needs.

"There could be several factors behind the association. On the one hand, a child's use of digital devices takes time away from [social activities](#), resulting in slower development of social skills, which may also manifest itself in parent-child interaction. In addition, we found that children who use mobile devices tend to have parents who also engage in higher levels of digital media use, leading to an overall decline in the family's joint real-life activities and, thus, a decline in the quality of interactions."

"However, there can also be an inverse causation: poorer parent-[child](#) relationships can lead to both parties paying more attention to digital devices," says Dr. Konok.

"It is important to note, however, that [mobile phone use](#) is not an evil thing itself. It is more important that even if children do use such a device, they have enough time for other non-digital activities such as exercise, sleep, and as the research shows, screen-free family time together. The latter can be seen as a protective factor against the development of problematic digital device use," said Dr. Liszkai-Peres.

The researchers, therefore, recommend parents engage with their children in as many screen-free activities as possible.

This will not only help their children develop personal relationships and social skills but also prevent problematic device use. Parents have an exemplary role to play in media literacy. By following the right strategies, they can ensure a healthy and supportive environment for

their children.

More information: Krisztina Liszkai-Peres et al, Association between the use of mobile touchscreen devices and the quality of parent-child interaction in preschoolers, *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/frcha.2024.1330243](https://doi.org/10.3389/frcha.2024.1330243)

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