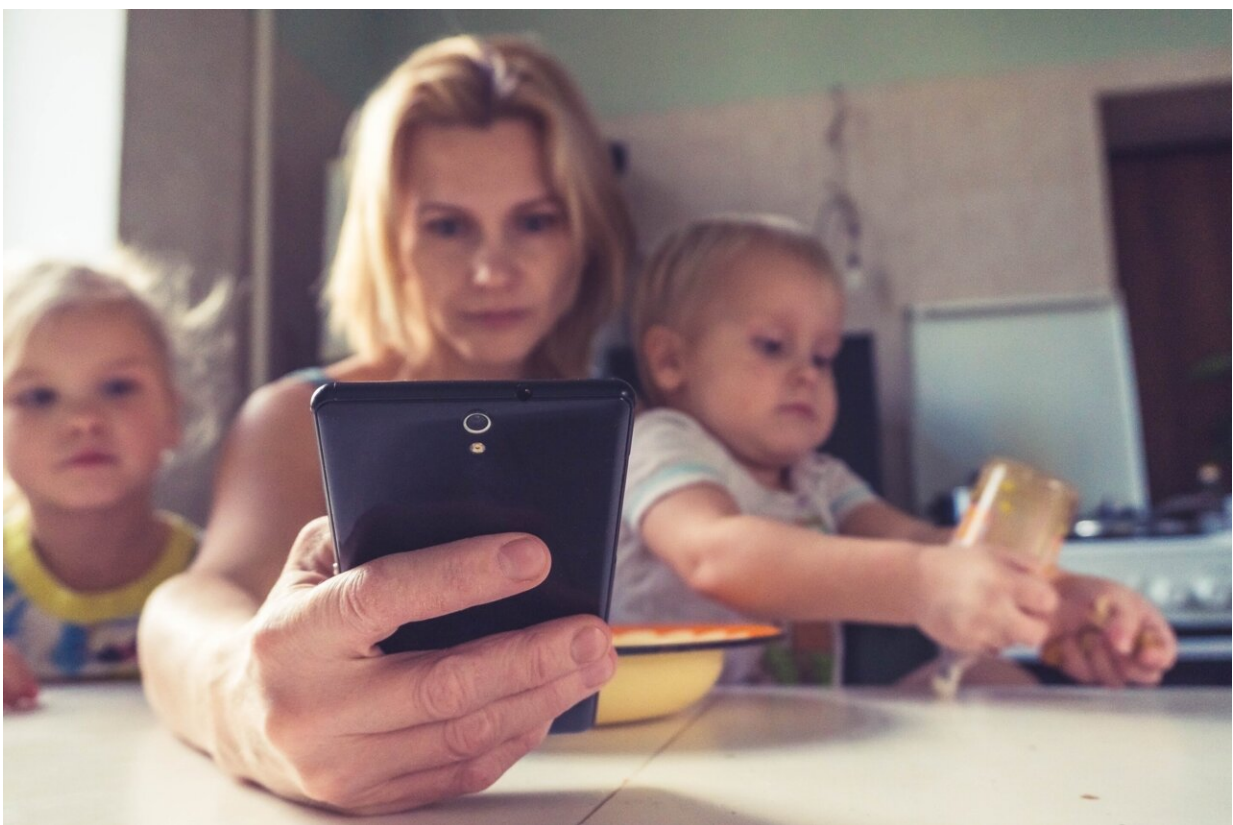


# Study finds 'technoference' no worse for parent-child interactions than non-digital distractions

May 21 2024

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Technology use is at an all-time high and understanding how this impacts daily life is crucial. When it comes to parent-child interactions, scientists

have coined the term "technoference," meaning technology interference. It occurs when parent-child interaction and communication are disrupted by the use of digital devices.

But is distraction caused by digital devices more detrimental to parent-child interaction than when parental distraction comes from different sources? Researchers in Switzerland have investigated.

"In this study, we show that when parents are distracted, the quality and quantity of parent-child interaction is impaired compared to when parents are not being distracted," said Prof Nevena Dimitrova, a researcher at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland and principal investigator of the study published in *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. "This was regardless of if that distraction came from a digital or a non-digital activity."

## **Screening distraction**

Although the negative impact of parents being distracted by their phones while around their children has been established, less is known about whether these negative effects come from the fact that the parent uses a screen or from the fact that the parent is distracted in general.

To fill this gap, the team around Dimitrova tasked 50 parent-child pairs, in which children were 22 months old on average, to play together for 10 minutes. Participant pairs were divided into three groups. In the first group, there was no disruption. In the second group, after five minutes of play, the parent was given a questionnaire to fill out on paper, whereas in the third group, also after five minutes, the parent was instructed to fill out the same questionnaire using a tablet. Parents that filled out the questionnaire were instructed to continue interacting with their children.

The researchers found that parents who filled out the questionnaire were

less sensitive to children's communication signals, and that children showed lower levels of social involvement towards their parents.

Technoference, however, did not affect parent-child interactions more negatively than non-digital distractions. Instead, all [distraction](#), regardless of whether it was caused by screens or pen and paper, had negative effects on parents, children, and pairs.

"We interpret this finding—that was equally surprising for us—as the possibility that screens are so ubiquitous nowadays that [young children](#) might be becoming used to the reality of seeing their parents use screens," said Dimitrova.

Regardless of their findings, the researchers stressed that parent-child interaction is at its best when parents are not distracted at all. This might be especially important for parents who find it difficult to bond with their children.

## Curbing a 'moral panic'

In the media, mostly alarmistic messages about the risks of screen use are discussed, said the researchers. However, research does not support the thesis that screen use by or in the presence of children is exclusively bad. For example, positive effects of screens on child [psychological development](#) have been shown in previous research.

"This study shows how important it is to rely on [scientific evidence](#) rather than [public opinion](#) about screen use. We see that it's not screens per se that are detrimental to the quality of parent-child interaction," concluded Dimitrova. "Instead, it seems to be the fact that the parent is not fully engaged in the interaction that negatively impacts parent-child communication."

The researchers, however, also pointed out that it is difficult to make definitive statements about parental screen use based on one study alone. This is partly because everyday parent-child interaction differs from the experimental setup. For example, the ways in which [parents](#) use screens while around their children cannot always be replicated fully. Studies in naturalistic context are needed and might lead to different results, the scientists noted.

**More information:** Effects of Digital and Non-digital Parental Distraction on Parent-Child Interaction and Communication, *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/frcha.2024.1330331](#)

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: Study finds 'technoference' no worse for parent-child interactions than non-digital distractions (2024, May 21) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-technoference-worse-parent-child-interactions.html>

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