

# Parents' excessive smartphone use could harm children's mental health

August 16 2024, by Ernie Mundell

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A child at the dinner table talks about trouble at school or an argument with a friend, but parents aren't listening: They're checking their smartphones instead.

It's a scenario that plays out millions of times per day across America, and it could be harming the mental health of children, a new study suggests.

Kids ages 9 to 11 who said their parents spent way too much on their smartphones were more prone to anxiety, attention issues and hyperactivity later on compared to the youngsters of parents who weren't phone-obsessed, Canadian researchers report.

"When children's emotional and physical needs are consistently ignored or inappropriately responded to, they are at risk of developing mental health difficulties," explained a team led by Sheri Madigan, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Calgary in Alberta.

Her team published their findings Aug. 16 in the journal [JAMA Network Open](#).

According to background data from the study, one [recent study](#) found that parents of infants now spend an average of more than five hours on their smartphones daily, including looking at a [smartphone](#) 27% of the time they are engaging with their baby.

[Another study](#) found 68% of parents admitting they are often distracted by their smartphones as they interact with their kids.

Research has shown that this kind of "technoference" while parenting means less attention paid to children, less parent-child conversation and play and even a higher risk for child injuries.

During adolescence, technoference is linked to "higher levels of parent-child conflict and lower levels of parental emotional support and warmth," Madigan's team noted.

Investigating the issue further, the Calgary group looked at data from more than a thousand Canadian children ages 9 to 11, provided at multiple points between 2020 and early 2022. Kids were asked how much they agreed with statements such as "I wish my parent would spend less time on their phone and other devices" or "I get frustrated with my parent for being on their phone or other devices when we're spending time together."

The children were also assessed for various mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and inattention that developed over time.

According to Madigan's team, "higher levels of [child] anxiety symptoms were associated with higher levels of perceived parental technofence later in development."

Too much parental [time](#) spent on smartphones was also associated with "higher levels of inattention and hyperactivity symptoms later in development," the study authors said.

The magnitude of these effects on kids didn't seem to change whether the child was a girl or a boy.

The team noted that they focused on children ages 9 to 11 because "this age range represents a sensitive period of brain development and is associated with an increased risk for [mental health difficulties](#)."

Still, it's tough to tease out the direction of the effect: Are kids anxious and acting out more because their parents are glued to their smartphones, or are parents of children with behavioral issues turning to their smartphones as an escape?

According to the new data, it appears that having more anxious kids can

push harried parents to use their smartphones more, but that excessive parental smartphone use could encourage inattention and hyperactivity in developing adolescents.

Overall, the study "highlights the complex relations between parental technoferece and emerging adolescents' mental health," Madigan's team said.

**More information:** Audrey-Ann Deneault et al. Perceived Parental Distraction by Technology and Mental Health Among Emerging Adolescents, *JAMA Network Open*, [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.28261](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.28261)  
[jamanetwork.com/journals/jaman.../fullarticle/2822421](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jaman.../fullarticle/2822421)

There's more on the role of technology in parenting today at the [Pew Research Center](#).

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