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Study finds parents' phone use in front of their kids can harm emotional intelligence

When it comes to raising children in the digital age, one of the worst things a parent can do is give their kid a smartphone and hope for the best. Turns out, same goes for the grownups.

That shouldn't come as a big surprise, according to Robin Nabi, a UC Santa Barbara professor of communication who headed up a study of parents to look at how various forms of media use might impact their children's emotional intelligence.

Her research suggested that the emotional intelligence of kids can be adversely impacted by their parents' smartphone use — that all-too-common scene of a caregiver engaging with a screen with their child nearby seeking attention.

Emotional intelligence is a set of mental abilities that allows a person to recognize, understand and manage their emotional states. According to the research, people are born with some level of capacity for emotional intelligence. But it's also a skill-set that can be learned, practiced and developed, and it varies from person to person, Nabi said.

"Some people are very good at detecting emotional nuance in themselves and others while other people are not," she added. "At a more advanced level, some

people are very good at regulating their emotions — such as anxiety or anger — and others are not."

Those skills come in handy because people with more highly developed emotional intelligence tend to have more satisfying personal relationships, greater success in their work lives and generally experience a higher sense of well-being.

"We know that how parents express, reflect and talk about emotions with children influences their EI (emotional intelligence) development," she said. "And we know how easy it is for parents to be absorbed in their own phones, which could limit the interaction and feedback they give to their children. So we thought it would be important to see what role parents' screen time and phone use around their child might play in their child's EI development."

The study surveyed 400 parents of children ages 5–12. Among a variety of assessments, parents gauged their children's level of emotional awareness and control and concern for others. Parents also reported media use, including television, computers, game consoles, tablets and smartphones, and recorded how often their kids engaged in other activities, such as reading, listening to music and outdoor and indoor play.

At the same time, the parents reported their own time spent on digital devices in the presence of their children and how often they initiated conversations with their children during media and non-media activities. Of all the measures included, the only one that was associated with lower child emotional intelligence was parental use of cell phones in the presence of their children.

"Kids respond to their parents," Nabi said. "And no matter what type of content a parent may be viewing on their phone, the outward appearance to the child is a lack of responsiveness."

As explained in the paper, parental phone use is associated with "still face," an expressionless appearance that's often interpreted as depression, which can further impact a child's development of emotional skills.

"The takeaway is for parents to be more mindful of how often they are using their phones around their children," she said. "Where their eyes are sends a message to their children about what's important."

On a positive note, the study also reinforced that age-old advice for parents — stay engaged with your children. In the digital age, that means monitoring and mediating social media content, for example. It also means discussing emotions — those of the parents, the children and even the emotions displayed by the various characters — fictional or otherwise — that children cross paths with during their explorations of media landscapes.

Nabi's research cites a study from 1991 — well before smartphones, or even email, became commonplace — suggesting that "media has the potential to become a vehicle by which parents can encourage the talk that has been documented to enhance childrens' emotional skills, empathy in particular."

On a personal note, Nabi said she tends to take a holistic approach to media use at home with her family, recognizing how it can be both productive and problematic. There are no phones — or books — allowed during dinnertime. She also engages with her daughter about what she's watching or reading, as a way to monitor content and to allow space for sharing and discussion.

"These phones are tools that we don't really have great rules for yet," Nabi added. "They can do wonderful things, such as help us decompress, connect to family, learn and see interesting things about the world. But they can also be problematic depending on how we use them. Finding that balance is the key."

For kids and grownups.

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