

The Psychological & Behavioural Sciences Prize Questions: 2018-19

Digital devices now play a prominent role in social life. Discuss how screen use may affect relationships either within or outside the family.

With the exponential rise in variety and sheer number of digital devices, as they play an increasingly central role in our day-to-day lives and interactions, the question of how they affect our interpersonal relationships and whether this impact is positive or detrimental has been brought into sharp focus. In this essay, the role of the mobile devices in family life will be explored. First, the severity and reach of device addiction will be examined, before exploring its impact on mental health in regard to its implications for family relationships. Finally, the essay will look at how mobile devices tilt the scales of the family-work balance for working parents and how this affects parent-child relationships.

To understand the impact of devices on family life, we must begin by examining the role of digital devices in the upbringing of the current generation. This role cannot be underestimated, since in many developed countries, such as the US and UK, the majority of teenagers and young adults own smartphones; for example, Pew Research Centre's 2015 survey of 1060 American teenagers aged 13-17 found that 73% of those surveyed owned smartphones (Lenhart, 2015). Digital device usage by teens is increasingly a cause for conflict at home between parents and children: a University of Southern California study of Japanese and American families found that 36% of American parents and 32% of American teens felt that they argued about device use on a daily basis. However, 23% of Japanese parents felt their teens' use of mobile devices hurt their relationship, while only 6% of teens felt the same way (Robb et al, 2017). This shows a discrepancy in perception between teens and their parents, as in all cases, more parents than teens felt that devices were causing a disturbance in family life; however, what remains consistent across the board is a significant acknowledgement that devices are a source of disagreement at home, leading to conflict between parents and children. Largely, this conflict arises from parental perception that their children are spending excessive amounts of time on their mobile devices, with the USC study finding that 61% of parents considered their teens to be addicted.

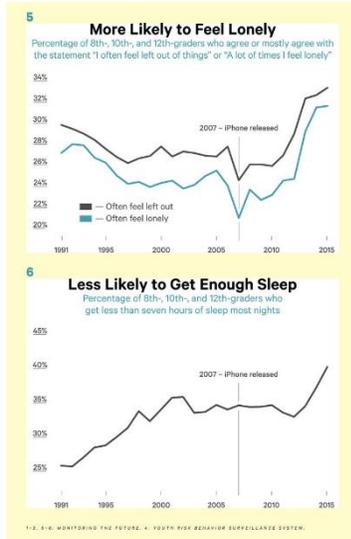
On the other hand, this is seemingly not the full extent of the problem: the same USC study also signaled that a number of parents may likewise be addicted to their devices. 27% of surveyed teens felt that their parents were addicted and 38% of parents themselves were inclined to agree with this view. Furthermore, 20% of Japanese teens even indicated that they sometimes felt that their parents thought that their mobile devices were more important than their children. What this shows is that although the epidemic of mobile device overuse may be more severe among teens and younger device users, it is by no means restricted to any one age group and the older generation is similarly impacted. It therefore follows that parents ought to shoulder more of the blame for setting a poor example for their children and setting the stage for the deterioration of relationships within the family unit.

So given this proof that modern families do overwhelmingly appear to be hooked on mobile devices, what exactly are the consequences of this for families? The USC study found that while 94% of the Japanese teens felt that digital devices do not hurt family relationships, nearly a quarter of parents disagreed. This harm to the family can be caused by a number of factors, and this paper will first focus on the damage done to the family unit which is brought about by the effect of mobile devices on the mental health of their users.

The first way in which mobile device usage can negatively impact mental health through its disruption of sleep patterns. Mobile devices, including mobile phones, tablets, laptops and e-readers, emit blue light, which sparks the production of cortisol, suppressing melatonin to throw the circadian rhythm out of whack (Harvard Health Letter, 2012). In the long term, this screen use before bed can lead to health problems including insomnia and chronic sleep deficiency. Disrupted sleep patterns affect mental health as well – researchers at the Murdoch University in Perth have linked poor-quality sleep associated with late-night mobile phone usage in students between 13 and 16 years old to “increases in depressed mood” and “decreased self-esteem” (Vernon et al, 2017).

However, their effect on sleep cycles is not the only aspect of mobile device usage that can be detrimental to mental health: with the recent proliferation of smartphones and tablets comes the rise of social media, and owning a device almost guarantees more time spent on apps and websites such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, particularly for millennials and teenagers today, who are the first generation to grow up in the digital age and are also the largest demographic among social media users. As such, they are the first generation whose upbringing has been heavily shaped by digital devices, and the first to face the trials and tribulations posed by social media. This being the case, neither they nor their parents are entirely equipped to navigate the potential dangers of social media – and studies show that mobile device usage is affecting our most important relationship: the one we have with ourselves.

The number of girls aged 13-18 reporting symptoms of severe depression increased by 58% between 2010-15, while suicide rates within the same demographic increased by 65% (Twenge et al, 2017). While economic struggles were previously thought to be linked to depression and suicide, SDSU psychology professor Jean Twenge noted that since the American economy improved between these years, it was unlikely to be the driver behind these increases. Instead, many researchers have attributed the rise in self-harm and suicide among teenagers born after 1995 to the rise of the smartphone. An Education Policy Institute report disclosed that just over one in three 15-year-olds in the UK have “experienced cyber-bullying, accessed harmful content such as a website promoting self-harm or had some other type of negative experience when using social media” (Frith, 2017); similarly, a National Institute on Drug Abuse survey reported that “adolescents who spent more time on new media (including social media and electronic devices such as smartphones) were more likely to report mental health issues”, with eighth-graders who were “heavy users of social media” having a 27% higher risk of depression



than those devoting more time to non-device-related activities. Even more worryingly, teens who spent three hours or more per day on devices were 35 percent more likely to have a risk factor for suicide, such as making a suicide plan. These figures all point to a correlation between excessive device usage and increased suicidal or other negative emotions and behaviours, as illustrated by the graphs on the left linking the rise of new technology with increases in worrying behaviour patterns in teens.

The effect social media or device usage otherwise has on mental health also spills over into our relationships with family members. Numerous studies have backed up the intuitive assumption that depression and self-harming or suicidal behaviours are likely to strain relationships within the family. For example, a BMJ study

found that “many parents characterised their initial reaction as ‘shock and horror’” upon discovering their children self-harmed, while “some siblings became extremely upset or angry”, beginning to resent their self-harming sibling, and that “in some cases, family relations became so strained that some siblings removed themselves from the family altogether”. Furthermore, it was found that the marriage of parents of a self-harming child was sometimes put under strain (Ferrey et al, 2015). Thus, it can be concluded that the detrimental effects caused by the excessive usage of mobile devices are not limited to the individual themselves, but also have a significant impact on those around them as well as their relationships with the individual.

It is important to note that it is not only the use of devices by children which affects family relationships: multiple studies also show that the blurring of work and family boundaries brought about by the introduction of mobile devices to the home have a negative impact on the relationships of working adults with their family. It has been indicated that mobile phone use over time is associated with increases in negative “spillover” and is correlated with “increased distress and lower family satisfaction” (Chesley, 2005), as overworking is promoted (Galinsky et al., 1998) and family life is continuously disrupted as working adults are now constantly available; “the cellular phone... becoming more and more common among the urban and suburban middle class... mean(s) that one can be contacted anywhere, at anytime” (Ventura, 1995) and “have normalised the expectation of constant availability and interruption” (Daly, 1996), connected to the workplace by their phones and emails; a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development of over 2000 UK employees found that 40% checked their work email at least 5 times a day outside working hours.

This constant blurring of lines between family and work is affecting children. In an international study of 6000 8- to 13-year-old children, 32% reported feeling “unimportant” when their parents were distracted by or checked their devices “too much” when spending family time with them, something which just over half (54%) of the children felt their parents did too much (AVG, 2015). Meanwhile, clinical psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair notes that “while parents

and children are enjoying swift and constant access to everything and everyone on the Internet, they are simultaneously struggling to maintain a meaningful personal connection with each other in their own homes”, finding that many of 1000 children aged 4-18 she surveyed described themselves as “sad, mad, angry, and lonely” when their parents were using devices (Steiner-Adair, 2013). As such, it is clear that parents dividing their attention between their devices and their children is detrimental to the child-parent relationship and leads to lasting feelings of unhappiness and even resentment from the children towards their parents, as they feel that mobile devices are drawing the focus of their parents away from them.

However, even with all this in mind, it would be far too simplistic to suggest the entire removal of mobile devices from the home as a solution to all the ills they cause – despite the possible negative consequences of unmanaged mobile device usage in the home, they still are a modern necessity and closely connect the world and family unit alike, making everyday life more convenient for us all. Thus, the solution to the epidemic of mobile device addiction is more nuanced. The negative impact of mobile devices on relationships within the family is not only on the hands of today’s children and teenagers; rather, we must remember that parents must equally share the blame, as their children engage in antisocial behaviour and gradually become addicted to their screens as they mimic what they see their parents doing when they come home from work. Moreover, it is crucial for parents to ensure that their children are aware of and to a certain extent protected from the harms brought about by excessive mobile device usage, such as by limiting screen hours and removing devices an hour or more before bed and keeping screens out of the bedroom to mitigate the disruptive effect blue light has on sleep (Georgetown, 2017). Finally, the Education Policy Institute recommends that rather than restricting children’s access to digital devices, parents would be better off equipping their children with digital skills, teaching them how to stay safe online and building their resilience in order to teach them how to respond to any possible harmful content they may encounter online.

Overall, by recognising and carefully curbing the worst excesses of mobile device usage at home, we can learn to strike a balance between family and device time, whether it may be spent on work or simply Internet browsing and the use of social media, and improve relationships within the family unit while incorporating the inevitable use of mobile devices into the equation.

(1988 words)

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