



the trouble with TOO MUCH TECH

THERE ARE LITERALLY MORE WAYS TO
CONNECT THAN EVER. AND THAT'S A PROBLEM

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM ROUMIEU

After a fun day of apple picking near Brewster, NY, Amy Lamont* and her two sons, ages 3 and 5, headed to dinner. Though the restaurant was nearby, Lamont didn't want to get lost, so she punched the address into her cell phone's map function. She couldn't get the voice commands to

work; she figured she'd glance along the way. Somehow, the phone led her 10 miles off track, and as she struggled to figure out where she was, she missed a left turn and ended up facing three lanes of oncoming traffic. "The only thing that saved us was a red light, which allowed me to swerve and

pull over," Lamont recalls. "All because I kept looking at the stupid phone."

Plenty of today's parents are guilty of similar forms of screen addiction. In fact, many of us treat our cell phone like a newborn: We're constantly checking to make sure it's on, we'd never leave home without it, and we pray it never falls and breaks. We check Facebook while our kids play at the park, take calls during family dinner, and—worst of all—chat or text with precious cargo in the backseat.

It's not just our smartphones we're obsessed with—it's all tech. When researchers from Northwestern University's Center on Media and Human Development surveyed more than 2,300 parents about their use of technology, they found that 27 percent were logging a whopping 11 hours a day of total screen time (including two hours on their smartphone and nearly four on the computer).

"Every mom wants to protect her child," says Jenn Berman, Psy.D., a child and family therapist in Beverly Hills. "We buy the best crib and the safest car seat and read all the books. But when you can't take your eyes off your laptop, it tells your child she's not worthy of eye contact. And worse, when you text or talk while driving, you're endangering her life."

That is not an overstatement. Of course, phones and computers can be a helpful and—let's face it—integral part of our lives. The key is finding the balance. Fortunately, all it takes is a few easily implemented solutions to slash screen time in favor of face time. Address the bad tech habits on the following pages and you'll enjoy more meaningful interactions with your children; bolster their self-confidence, language, and social skills; reduce their chances of getting hurt; and even carve out more me time.

*Name has been changed.

The iFauxPas: Talking or texting while driving

The statistics boggle the mind: Parents are more likely than non-parents to read or text while driving (45 percent versus 33 percent), according to a recent study on driver safety commissioned by Liberty Mutual Insurance.

Worse, nearly 80 percent of parents say that they talk on the phone at least some of the time while they're driving, even though more than half of them consider it dangerous. (They're right: Using a cell phone—even hands-free—is just as risky as driving drunk; you're four times more likely to crash when doing either. Texting or e-mailing is twice as risky as drunk driving, increasing accident risk eightfold.)

"Most parents say they would never drink and drive with their child in the car, but they don't stop to consider that using their smartphone to talk or text can be equally, if not more, dangerous," says David Strayer, Ph.D., of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, a leading researcher on distracted driving. Same goes for that GPS app. Truth is, using your phone while driving can be deadly.

► **iFix it!** To avoid the siren call of her phone, Rachel Macy Stafford, author of *Hands Free Mama*, started stashing it in her purse, then placing her purse on the passenger-side floor or in her trunk. Besides keeping her daughters safe, the move opened up a new world of drive-time chats. "The atmosphere in the car immediately changed," she reports. "I was now available to the little girls in the backseat, talking with them, pointing to things as we drove, and asking them questions. Now, drive time is a safe haven from outside distractions—a place where my children open up to me."



Forcing your kids to jockey for your attention while you post a status update creates an emotional disconnect. When you've committed to a one-on-one activity, your child should be the star of the show.

The iFauxPas: You set the dinner table with plates, utensils...and gadgets.

Family meals are endangered enough, thanks to dueling after-school schedules; adding tech is a recipe for disaster. Besides inadvertently teaching and reinforcing rude behavior, dinner table media jeopardizes a

sacred time, says Dr. Berman. Research shows that having frequent family dinners can be protective against drug and alcohol use, obesity, and early sexual activity.

► **iFix it!** Treat gadgets like belches: not welcome at the dinner table. Set the rule that the first person who tries to get her device during a meal has to clean the dishes, says Carol Archambeault, author of *The Shared-Meal Revolution*. For this to work, parents must follow suit along with their younger diners. "You don't want to be a digital hypocrite," Dr. Berman warns. "Setting screen-time limits for your kids without adhering to them yourself is a double standard that could make kids take you less seriously."

The iFauxPas: You scan headlines while your son scales a crazy-high slide at the park.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Injury Center,

the number of ER-treated nonfatal injuries to children ages 5 to 9 was declining until the year 2007, when the rates suddenly began to climb. As it happens, Apple also introduced the iPhone that same year.

Though studies have yet to confirm a connection, ER docs like Wally Ghurabi, M.D., medical director of the Nethercutt Emergency Center at UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica, believe distracted parenting could be a cause. "Few parents will admit to it, but when a child comes in with a broken arm, it's often because the parent was utilizing a handheld device and not paying attention," he says.

Think you can successfully multitask? Not likely: In a 2010 study, 75 percent of cell phone users walking through a large plaza failed to notice a clown on a unicycle.



► **iFix it!** Implement a "5 to 9" rule, meaning no gadgets during prime park (and other after-school activities) hours. Tweak the time for your lifestyle; for Stafford, the hours between 3 p.m. and the kids' bedtime are off-limits for media, but even a "6 to 8" rule can help.

The iFauxPas: You're working a side game of Candy Crush during a tea party.

Forcing your kid to jockey for your attention while you pin a lasagna recipe creates an emotional disconnect, Dr. Berman says. "It sends the message that you care more about your device than your child, which makes her feel rejected." It might also delay language development: One *Pediatrics* study found that the more two-sided exchanges a youngster has with an

adult, the more advanced his language. "That kind of conversational give-and-take just doesn't happen when a parent is on her smartphone." (Periodic "Uh-huhs" or "Good jobs!" don't count.)

► **iFix it!** Plan family outings to places that aren't conducive to electronic disturbances—libraries, museums, sporting events, theaters—and leave the devices at home (or locked in the trunk in case of emergency). "At restaurants, I used to automatically take my phone out before the food came," says Stafford. "Now I don't even bring it with me. 'Waiting time' is now 'connection time.'"

You needn't cut yourself off completely: It's fine to occasionally check e-mails

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- Fluoride-free cleansers
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