



Present Parent

Evidence summary for school governors and senior leadership

This document summarises the peer-reviewed and institutional research underpinning Present Parent's case for schools. It covers four areas: language and communication, behaviour and emotional regulation, attachment and wellbeing, and safeguarding.

1. Language and communication

The finding: Parental phone use during parent-child interaction reduces children's language development. A single 30-second phone interruption is enough to reduce a toddler's ability to learn a new word.

Harvard's Center on the Developing Child identifies "serve and return" - the back-and-forth interaction between a child and a responsive adult - as foundational to brain architecture and language development. Phones interrupt these exchanges at the exact moment they matter most.

In a controlled experiment, mothers were asked to teach 24-month-olds two novel words. A 30-second phone call interrupted teaching for one word but not the other. Children learned significantly fewer words in the interrupted condition, despite hearing the word the same number of times.

Reed, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2017). Learning on hold: Cell phones sidetrack parent-child interactions. Developmental Psychology, 53(8), 1428–1436. doi.org/10.1037/dev0000292

Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Serve and Return. developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/

2. Behaviour and emotional regulation

The finding: Higher levels of parental phone distraction are consistently associated with greater child behaviour difficulties, including poor self-regulation, externalising behaviour, and conflict with peers.

A 2023 scoping review of 64 studies found consistent evidence that parental technoferece - disruptions to parent-child interaction caused by phones - is associated with observed changes in children's behaviour. A widely-cited 2018 study in Child Development specifically linked higher technoferece to greater child behaviour problems, including externalising behaviour (aggression, non-compliance) and internalising behaviour (withdrawal, low mood).

Komanchuk, J., et al. (2023). Impacts of parental technoferece on parent-child relationships and child health and developmental outcomes: A scoping review. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 26(8), 579–603.

McDaniel, B. T., & Radesky, J. S. (2018). Technoferece: Parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems. Child Development, 89(1), 100–109.



3. Attachment and wellbeing

The finding: Infants respond to a phone-distracted parent in the same way they respond to a completely unresponsive one. Children who repeatedly fail to get a parent's attention eventually stop trying, with later implications for wellbeing.

Tronick's Still-Face Experiment (1978) demonstrated that infants show distress, withdrawal, and self-soothing when a parent becomes unresponsive. In 2018, Myruski et al. modified the paradigm: instead of a still face, mothers looked at a mobile phone. Infants reacted identically - distress during the phone phase and reduced recovery during the reunion phase.

Research has further found that children who perceive high levels of technoference from their parents rate the parent-child relationship more negatively and report lower levels of emotional support.

Myruski, S., et al. (2018). Digital disruption? Maternal mobile device use is related to infant social-emotional functioning. Developmental Science, 21(4), e12610.

Tronick, E., et al. (1978). The infant's response to entrapment between contradictory messages in face-to-face interaction. Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 17(1), 1-13.

4. Safeguarding and supervision

The finding: Parental mobile device use in playground settings directly reduces the quality of supervision and increases children's injury risk in proportion to how long a parent scrolls.

A 2020 naturalistic study observed 85 parents of children aged 0-5 at four metropolitan playgrounds. The most common mobile device activity was scrolling (75.5%). Longer device use was directly correlated with reduced supervision, reduced parent-child interaction, and increased child injury potential.

Hnatiuk, J., et al. (2020). Parent mobile phone use in playgrounds: A paradox of convenience. Children, 7(12), 284. doi.org/10.3390/children7120284

About Present Parent

Present Parent is a mobile app that helps parents reduce phone use during family time. Parents set their own schedule and choose which apps to block. During locked sessions, the phone displays: "Look up." Available on iOS and Android. Free 3-day trial. No data about children is collected.
www.presentparentapp.com
