



Hands-Free Parenting

An art teacher asked first graders to draw pictures of their families. In many of the drawings the adults were holding rectangular objects that she thought were books, and were standing apart from the children. Recently my husband and I went out to dinner here in town and a mom with her two young children were seated next us. The children hardly spoke which, given their ages, I thought was unusual. Their faces seemed somber and detached. Throughout almost the entire meal, their mom was using her 'smart phone' surfing the web and texting, not talking to or sharing her presence with her children. We don't have to look far to see examples indicating that cell phones and similar devices are distracting parents from engaging with their young children. We also know from more than 20 years of early childhood research that loving, responsive early relationships are critical to school and life success, relationships that require the attentive presence of an important caregiver.

Check out a link on MECC's Facebook page to a blog by Rachel Stafford, who's made news for starting the *Hands-Free Revolution*. This particular post was called "How to Miss a Childhood," and it was heart-breaking to hear from children themselves how neglected and sad they feel, how unimportant and rejected, because of their parents' addiction to cell-phones and other devices. Reading her blog, www.handsfreemama.com, will make you laugh, cry, feel remorse and hope, and encourage you to join her *Hands-Free Revolution*. And, although it seems contradictory to suggest that you connect to the very technology that is distracting you from being with your children, I urge you to visit this site. It has the power to change your life and the lives of your children.

Babies, toddlers, preschoolers can't wait - they need your time, engagement, and guidance now if they are to grow into loving, successful people. And you need the feeling of joy you'll get by being fully present with them during a myriad of daily activities. When they're asked to draw their family in a few years' time, make sure they draw you holding books and reading to them, not holding cell phones and ignoring them, as was the case with the art lesson described above.

Being fully present with your children during the daily activities and routines you and they must do anyway (mealtimes, dressing and grooming, bath time, bedtime, etc.) simply means turning off your phone, laptop, and other devices. (If this is easier said than done, all the more reason for you to tackle it now before the addiction takes over your life.) Use language during these times to describe what's happening; what your children are doing; what you see, think and feel; share stories and laughs; tell them you love them. Using language in this way - making silly sounds, singing songs, reciting rhymes - builds foundations for school and life success, even with babies. Doing these seemingly boring activities as a mindful partner with your child will help you get to know your child better, and will impart priceless lessons to you both.

Another activity to do each day with your child, beginning in infancy, is "reading books." Yes, research proves it: babies need reading, too! Sure, they'll chew and slobber on the books (which is why you use cloth and board books with babies); but they are also looking at pictures, listening to your voice, sharing your attention, learning the sounds and rhythms of language, and many other things. For younger infants, use books with bright colors, simple pictures, photos of other babies, and items easily recognized by babies. You can make homemade books using photos of family members and things in your house. Toddlers and preschoolers like books that are more complex, have silly rhymes, and are about things they are familiar with. Be sure and ask

your child's early care provider, the children's librarian, or another parent about recommendations for good books. If you have favorite books from your childhood, they may still be available – your child will love sharing your memories and making new memories with you.

Disconnect from your devices to connect with your children – you won't regret it!

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