



Parents of Young Children: Put Down Your Smartphones

Too much tech and too little talk could delay communication development.

Parents today are more pressed for time than any other generation of parents—and constantly connected. Largely thanks to the smartphone, parents often find it difficult to separate from their hand-held devices. Checking your phone has become both habit and necessity to manage work and family life (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/The-Importance-of-Family-Routines.aspx). But, all this multitasking could also hurt your young child's ability to learn.



Ways to Enhance Your Child's Communication Skills

You spend so much time making sure your child eats right, has all of their recommended vaccines (/English/safety-prevention/immunizations/Pages/Recommended-Immunization-Schedules.aspx), and gets enough rest. Yet, his or her communication and social development is just as important. Children gain communication and social skills through listening, talking, reading, singing, and playing with their parents—interactions lost while you are on a smartphone.

Here are three ways parents can enhance their child's communication skills.

1. **Play Non-Electronic Games:** Nursery rhymes (/English/ages-stages/preschool/nutrition-fitness/Pages/Motor-Activity-and-Self-Play.aspx) such as peekaboo, pat-a-cake, and Itsy Bitsy Spider actually serve an important purpose: they promote face-to-face interaction, teach turn-taking, and reinforce essential parts of bonding and conversation. Activities like blowing kisses, waving bye-bye, and clapping all help a child build social interaction and conversation skills. These games all require free hands—for both children and parents!
2. **Share a Common Focus:** Read a book together (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Developmental-Milestones-of-Early-Literacy.aspx), share a toy, look at the same dog in a park. When two people focus on the same thing at the same time, they are engaging in what is called "joint attention." Joint attention is a vital part of communication and language development (/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Language-Development-2-Year-Olds.aspx). It is also an important social skill, allowing a child to share an experience with another person and see someone else's point of view. Sharing focus lets a child know you are interested in what they say or do. When parents are on their cell phones, they are not fully focused on the same points of attention as their child and miss key opportunities to build this skill.
3. **Send and Receive Nonverbal Messages:** Speaking and understanding words are just part of the communication puzzle. Non-verbal signals such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and body language provide additional information. A child is able to recognize emotions and understand the intent of a message. When a parent is using a smartphone, these nonverbal cues are often reduced or eliminated completely. As a result, children miss out on receiving important nonverbal signals from their parents (part of learning to communicate). Parents may also miss information their kids are trying to send them through pointing, gesturing, staring, etc. These are subtle, but vital signals young children send—especially when they don't speak many words yet (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Language-Development-8-to-12-Months.aspx).

Tips for Parents Who Feel Tech-Overloaded

Smartphones can be a way to connect with others and make our lives easier, but their overuse can interfere with child interactions. While it may be difficult to keep your phone out of sight completely (especially since most parents also use their phones to take photos and videos of their kids), carving out some boundaries to promote technology use in a healthy way can help.

Here are some suggestions:

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- **Create regular tech-free times:** As part of the daily routine, make devices (e.g., televisions, phones, computers, games or other electronics) off limits at specific times. Dinnertime and before bedtime are important ones, but more extended breaks from technology each day are desirable, especially for families with very young children. You can also limit digital distractions by creating tech-free rooms/zones in the house, such as the kitchen table (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Mealtime-as-Family-Time.aspx>). If you're sitting around the table texting while eating, you are not connecting. Teach your child to connect by connecting.
- **Designate tech-free outings:** A trip to the farm or the zoo, a playdate in the park, a day at the pool. Most parents love taking pictures of their kids and sharing moments on Facebook, but an activity can go undocumented every once in a while. Putting the phone away allows everyone to enjoy a fun, uninterrupted moments to focus on talking and communicating with each other.
- **Use technology in an interactive way:** If you are using a phone or other device, use it with your kids—together. Talk about what you see, ask them questions, and otherwise engage them face-to-face.
- *See Kids & Tech: 10 Tips for Parents in the Digital Age* (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx>) for more ideas.

Why YOU Can't Be Replaced by Technology

The development of speech and language skills (<http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/>) is strongly linked to thinking ability, social relationships, reading and writing, and school success. In the first three years of life, 80% of a child's brain development occurs. This development is fed through consistent verbal and nonverbal interactions between parents and children, so it is important to keep the focus on quality time and not on technology whenever you can.

Does this mean that we need to put down our smartphones completely? Of course not; but nothing takes the place of face-to-face interaction when it comes to our children's learning and speech and language development—not even technology.

Additional Information & Resources:

- How to Raise Concerns about a Child's Speech and Language Development: Do's and Don'ts (</English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/How-to-Raise-Concerns-about-Childs-Speech-Language-Development.aspx>)
- 10 No-Cost, Screen-Free Activities to Play with Your Preschooler (</English/ages-stages/preschool/nutrition-fitness/Pages/Motor-Activity-and-Self-Play.aspx>)
- How to Make a Family Media Use Plan (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/How-to-Make-a-Family-Media-Use-Plan.aspx>)
- Learn the Signs. Act Early (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>) (CDC.gov) - Aims to improve early identification of children with autism and other developmental disabilities so children and families can get the services and support they need.
- IdentifyTheSigns.org (<http://identifythesigns.org/>) (ASHA) – The early stages of speech and language disorders are easier to spot when you know the signs.

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