

Your Cell Phone or Your Life

by P. Donohue Shortridge

True story, this:

On a crisp October Saturday morning in Denver, at the final day of the Farmer's Market for the year, the smell of roasted chilies mingles with the fragrant mulchy-earth now blanketed in floating golden Aspen leaves. A wiggly 10-year old girl, arm-linked with her dad waits in line at the burrito vendor's cart for her breakfast to be made. All skinny jeans, sweatshirt and braces, she sways to the nearby music of the 12-string guitar and mandolin duet while chatting with her dad.

Finally, dad and daughter sit across from each other at a small café table. Her eyes wide, she looks adoringly at him as she's about to take her first bite. In that golden moment, everything changes. Dad slips his phone out of his pocket and places it on the table next to him. Her eyes pivot instantly to that thing, that mortal enemy that will once again rob her of her dad. Dad does not notice his daughter's reaction to his choice. Her body draws back from the table, her eyes glaze over and she looks distractedly at the moving crowd as if resigning herself to her not-unfamiliar plight: At any moment, dad will abandon her. He will exit this intimate dad-daughter space and go somewhere else. And not by her leave. He will just do it. Anytime, anywhere. They scarcely say another word to each other during the rest of their breakfast not even as they get up to leave.

Admit it parents:

You use your mobile device in front of your children all the time.

As a consequence, your children have become used to you interrupting their precious time with you. And you do it without apology or permission; you simply exit at will to attend to your electronic life. Your device is always present, at the dinner table, during drive time and down time. Your children learn to either compete with your inanimate object for your attention or simply resign themselves to the reality that you are only half here. Some children act out, thinking negative attention is better than your partial presence. Others will adapt and imitate your behavior, begging for a mobile device of their own and thus be only half here with you.

But how do children really feel about their parents' use of mobile devices in their presence? Author Sherry Turkle did ask children. In her book, *Alone Together, Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, she reports that they feel:

hurt jealous abandoned

So what can you do parents?

Change your mind-set such that your use of your portable device in front of your child is no longer a given. Make the decision that when you are with your children, your business elsewhere is to be the exception, the emergency, and undertaken rarely.

Here are some specific suggestions:

- Keep your smart phone out of sight when with your children. If you need to make a call, excuse yourself and do it elsewhere. Make it short, come back quickly and apologize for the interruption. Because that's what it is, an interruption of your in-the-moment life with your child.

- If you want to look something up on your device when with your children, proceed only if it relates to the conversation at hand, ask their permission before doing so, then put it away as soon as you find the fact. This is a good habit to get into no matter whom you are with.

- Don't check messages in front of your children. Again, if you must check, do it out of their sight. Apologize for leaving this space and hurry back.

Vow to stop fooling yourself that the presence of your electronic gadget when with your children is not a distraction. It is.

And it cuts deep.

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