

How Cell Phone Use Is Destroying Your Kids' Short-Term Memory

By Rebecca Jackson

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I'm mid-conversation with my 15-year-old, and he's filling me in on the happenings of his day. They chose pseudonyms in French class. His "French" name? Bruno. I remind him that Bruno is Italian, not French, but he could care less. "It's hilarious," he assures me.

Then, I hear it; the faint but ubiquitous ding of an iPhone coming from his pocket, and he's transported someplace else. As we continue our chat, there is visible tension in his jawline and his stare is more vacant. He's suppressing the urge to glance at his phone, but he can't stop himself from thinking about it. He's looking at me, he's responding to what I'm saying, but it's not him. I've already lost him.

I tell him that I'll be picking him up from swim practice tonight, I tell him about his cousin's birthday party next weekend. He walks away and makes it about five paces before he pulls the phone out of his pocket.

I find out later that he has no memory of my telling him either of these things.

Concern about kids' use of technology is nothing new; concern over my own child's use of technology is.

As a parenting expert and author, I'm fortunate enough to work with some of the premiere universities and hospitals currently conducting research on this very subject. So shouldn't I be inoculated against this type of unwelcome infiltration in my own home? Um, hell no. No parent is.

So, what actually happened to my child's memory during the last two minutes of our conversation -- the part after the "ding" when I told him about a birthday party and confirmed his pickup at practice?

In an article published this week in *Wellness*, Erik Fransén, a researcher out of Stockholm's KTH Royal Institute of Technology, explains that the problem with technology use has to do with our working memory, or what we often refer to as our "short-term" memory: "Working memory enables us to filter out information and find what we need in the communication... it's also a limited resource."

According to Fransén's research, working memory can only carry up to three or four items. When we add a new message to that (DING, check your cell phone! DING, Check your cell phone!) we lose our ability to process information.

Parenting a Generation M2 child means that our kids' brains have carte blanche to forget anything we say after hearing the DING.

"The effect of media multitasking on memory is still relatively unknown. Many parents think it's simply use of more than one media device at a time; like watching *The Voice* while texting. It's not that

simple," explains Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman, Clinical Director for the New England Center for Pediatric Psychology.

Donaldson-Pressman, along with a research team out of Brown University School of Medicine and Children's National Medical Center, are currently conducting one of the most comprehensive research projects ever to examine the complex influences and behaviors which affect Generation M2.

It's called "The Learning Habit study," and the 7-minute online survey gives parents instant feedback on key habits and routines.

Research on this subject is something parents are now demanding.

Donaldson-Pressman and her colleagues are already outlining precautions for parents to take which include:

1. Have a cell phone "spot" in your home: place cell phones there upon entering your house. It will become a habit, just like hanging up your keys.
2. Whenever possible, power-down before conversations.
3. Stop the conversation. If you find yourself in a conversation with your child and hear their phone ding or vibrate, stop the conversation. Let them know you want them to take a moment and power-down; they can turn their cell phones back on when you are finished.

"When you ask a child to power-down, it gives them permission to let go of whatever and whoever is virtually intruding on your conversation. It's a clear sign that you are both fully present for the conversation," explains Donaldson-Pressman, best-selling author of *The Narcissistic Family*.

My son's response to something that seemed like nothing more than background noise caught me off-guard. Never again will I underestimate the power of a cell phone, even when it remains unanswered. Swim practice and a birthday party, that's just small stuff. There are many crucial conversations we're going to have over the next two years. Before we can begin, I need to know he's really listening.