

COMMENTARY

The smartphone as a third actor in the parent–child relationship

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Abstract

The problematic use of electronic devices among minors is increasing, and specific withdrawal symptoms mark the addictive nature of this use. This Commentary offers a different perspective on the problem, proposing the smartphone as a third actor in the parent–child relationship: the issue involves not only minors but also their parents—how parents use smartphones, and how they mediate the relationship between children and smartphones. Specific constructs have been theorized to explain how this use interferes with the parent–child relationship. Technoference refers to the continuous, daily interruptions of parent–child interactions caused by smartphone use. The type of parent–child attachment is also important to consider, as children have been found to seek satisfaction of certain needs online when parents do not adequately respond to their requests. Active parental mediation is recommended to regulate children’s smartphone use, favoring shared rules and dialogue over restrictive control. Future research should focus on the role of fathers in the intergenerational transmission of problematic smartphone use.

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1. Introduction

Children’s use of electronic devices is substantial and growing. Problematic smartphone use is defined not by quantity alone but by psychological features of dependence—compulsive craving, loss of control, and withdrawal-like symptoms, encompassing disturbances of mood and sleep.¹

Smartphone use, however, does not only concern children, but also their parents: it can compromise mutual attention and shift the responsiveness of a parent or child away from the relationship itself.²

Adolescents remain more exposed to problematic use because the device readily satisfies developmentally salient needs, especially social support, so ordinary need satisfaction can shade into dependence.³

The relevant question is which variables make children use healthy rather than harmful. This Commentary argues the decisive variable is relational, not technological:

the smartphone acts as a third actor in the parent–child relationship, making parental behavior—not the device—the proper target of concern.

2. Beyond the child: A two-sided phenomenon

The parental relationship is a foundational variable. This centrality is consistent with family systems theory, which conceptualizes the family as an interconnected system in which one member's behavior affects all others: parental smartphone use generates a spillover effect that can damage the parent–child relationship and, in turn, favor problematic use in children.²

Technoference denotes technology's intrusion into interpersonal interaction—as when a parent picks up the phone during shared time, interrupting the exchange.² Such interruptions shape unhealthy use through two mechanisms: according to observational learning theory, children imitate parental device use, so parental dependence can be reproduced in the child; and an absorbed parent's failure to meet a child's bid for attention may push the child to seek it online instead.²

Attachment security offers a further explanatory mechanism: children with secure parent–child attachment show greater emotional regulation and self-control than those with insecure attachment, whereas insecure attachment is associated with greater social difficulty, increasing vulnerability to seeking gratification and connection online. Parents' failure to meet children's psychological needs shapes behavioral problems, including dependence: according to compensatory internet use theory, when children do not perceive their psychological and relational needs as met, they seek the support they need elsewhere, even online, which can lead to smartphone addiction.¹

Problematic use is not the child's problem alone: parents are often the first involved. A mother absorbed in a screen during her child's play exemplifies parental technoference, disturbing shared time and lowering responsiveness, with possible emotional and behavioral consequences.²

Together, these strands suggest the relationship is not one factor among many but the channel through which others operate: the device amplifies whatever the relationship already is.

3. The device as a third actor: Technoference, phubbing, and the emotional regulator

Real phenomena regarding parents' smartphone use have been conceptualized, analyzing how this use interferes with parent–child relationships.

Technoference refers to the daily interruptions in

interpersonal interactions or time spent together that occur due to digital and mobile technological devices.³ It interrupts conversations, play, and shared meals;^{2,3} and can generate negative consequences not only on the relationship, but also on children's individual functioning. Data attest to its association with externalizing behaviors in the mother–child relationship;³ and with internalizing behaviors of children such as sadness and social withdrawal.²

Technoference functions as an invisible barrier that alters a parent's capacity to respond to a child's needs. Naturalistic observation shows phone use increases fivefold the likelihood that a parent will ignore a child's bid for attention, and when parents do respond while using a device, their responses are slower, weaker, and less emotionally warm.⁴

The construct thus describes an ambiguous situation in which the physically present parent is actually absent mentally, making the parent–child interaction unpredictable.³

A related construct, parental phubbing, refers to parents' use of phones in their children's presence in a way that sidelines interaction with them, posing a threat to socio-emotional development and self-esteem formation, and fostering feelings of neglect and weakened emotional attachment. It shows a positive association with both internalizing problems (anxiety, depression) and externalizing behaviors (aggression, hyperactivity), and is inversely linked to children's self-concept and socio-emotional competence.⁴

A related practice is the use of the smartphone as an emotional regulator: parents often hand the device to a child to calm or occupy them when distressed, functioning as a coping strategy for the parent. While effective in the moment, habitual reliance on this practice, especially in early childhood, may compromise the child's own development of self-regulation over time.²

Though studied separately, technoference, phubbing, and emotional-regulator use are better read as facets of one fact: the device occupies a position within the dyad, and these mutually reinforcing mechanisms explain why interventions targeting only the child's behavior tend to underperform.

4. Implications: From restriction to relationship

Because children take parents as behavioral templates, parents should limit their own use in the child's presence. Parental mediation should be understood not as surveillance but as part of the educational process through which children develop critical judgment and self-

regulation. Mediation takes two broad forms. Restrictive mediation sets limits on time, context, and content; it is more effective with younger children prior to early adolescence (10–12 years), but its efficacy falls thereafter, and covert monitoring tends to generate conflict and erode trust, making transparency essential.⁵ Active mediation, by contrast, involves discussing use and agreeing on shared rules, explaining both risks and the device's value; it is the more educational form, fostering digital skills, critical sense, and self-regulation while protecting against cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and dependence.⁵ Clinical assessment should therefore begin with attachment security and everyday technofence, not screen-time thresholds alone, shifting guidance from restrictive scaffolding in early childhood toward negotiated, active mediation in adolescence.

5. Open questions and future directions

The main gap is the issue of fathers. The evidence base is thin: bond quality with fathers appears to be a stronger predictor of risk than paternal dependence itself, yet data on paternal smartphone use remain scarce and its

mechanisms of transmission largely uncharted.¹ This gap carries practical consequences, as clinical guidelines cannot currently account for father-specific parenting dynamics.¹

6. Conclusion

Excessive smartphone use is a problem of families, not minors alone, affecting both child development and the parent–child relationship. Demonizing the device is not viable, given its genuine benefits. The alternative is educational and relational: helping children use technology critically, within a relationship built on communication and shared rules. The smartphone is a third actor, as summarized in Figure 1: the same device can either interfere with the parent–child relationship—through technofence, phubbing, modeling, and use as an emotional regulator—or be safely absorbed into it when buffered by secure attachment, active mediation, shared family rules, and transparency. Parents remain the protagonists, and cannot credibly teach what they do not practice—making the adult's example, not the child's screen, the most promising point of leverage.

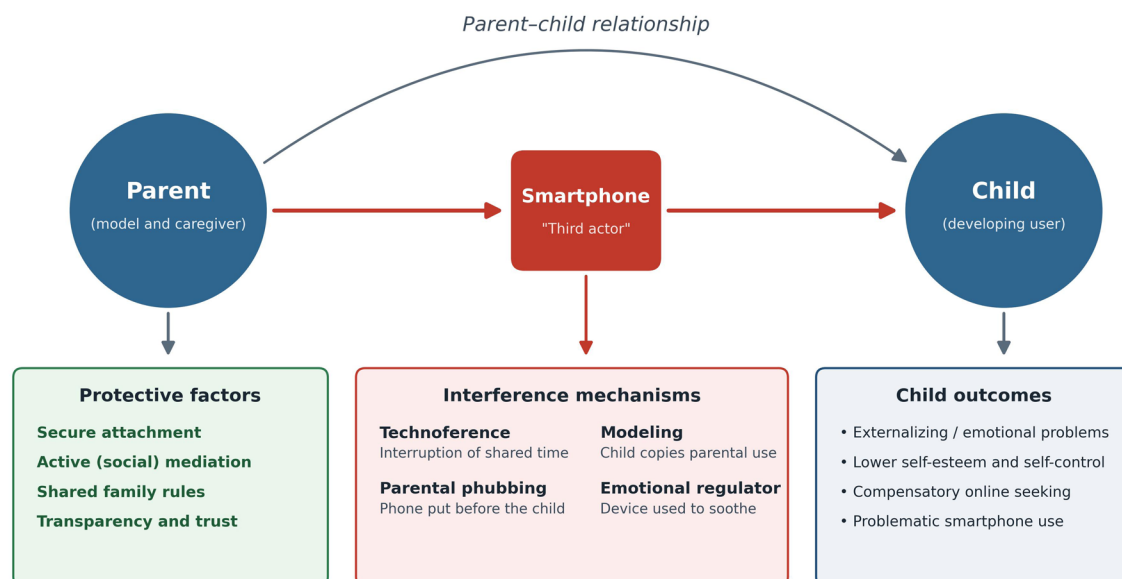


Figure 1. The smartphone as a third actor in the parent–child relationship. The parent–child relationship encompasses attachment, communication, and responsiveness. Red arrows indicate pathways through which the smartphone enters the dyad and may degrade interaction quality, whereas green elements indicate parental factors that may protect the child against problematic smartphone use. The smartphone may instead serve as a shared resource when its use is mediated, modeled, and discussed rather than used as a refuge or substitute caregiver.

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