

# Technology sometimes detrimental to our families, social lives

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The next time you are in a public place where families gather, such as a playground, a children's soccer game or a museum, see how many parents are focused on their mobile phones instead of watching their kids.

The compulsive attention people pay to their [mobile devices](#) is becoming a trend that should concern us, according to MIT professor Sherry Turkle. In her new book, *Alone Together*, published this month by *Basic Books*, Turkle suggests that the time is ripe for widespread rethinking of the way we use cutting-edge technology.

“There is a real state of confusion about whether or not we have each

other's attention in our always-on connectivity culture," says Turkle, the Abby Rockefeller Mauze Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, in MIT's Program in Science, Technology and Society. "Families fight over this issue. It's time for a correction, because we still have a chance to change things."

Alone Together documents extensive field surveys made by Turkle, a psychologist who interviewed 450 subjects to understand how people adopt technology in everyday life. One of the book's most striking findings is that many families play out a kind of role reversal over technology: Young people, while admittedly heavy users of mobile devices themselves, are nonetheless unhappy at the frequent use of mobile devices by their parents. Many high-school-age kids complained to Turkle of parents who enter the "BlackBerry zone" and ignore them even during family meals. "My parents text while we eat. I'm used to it," one teen told Turkle.

"I was stunned," says Turkle, noting that the more common trope involves parents fretting over teens who send as many as 6,000 texts per month. "Yes, we know teens text all the time, but that doesn't mean they don't want their parents' undivided attention when they are picked up from school or sitting at dinner. Not getting attention is a critical problem among adolescents, who are also terrible at asking for attention, because they're playing it cool. So you have kids really struggling to forge relationships with their [parents](#)."

## **A technology in its toddler phase?**

Turkle is at pains to make clear that her view about the impact of technology on contemporary life is not all negative. "Of course I found many positive things about the always-on culture," she says. "People have opportunities to create friendships and stay in contact with other people from all over the world. None of what I found negates that." And

as for her own outlook, Turkle quips, “I’m not a Luddite — I’m sitting here deciding which of 15 new gadgets I’m going to buy next.”

Still, Turkle is concerned that the use of technology is shaping social norms, rather than the other way around. The Internet is still evolving rapidly, she points out, meaning that we do not have to sacrifice traditional sociality for currently popular applications. As Turkle likes to say: “Just because we’ve seen the Internet grow up, we think the Internet is all grown up.” Instead, she offers, it is in “its toddler or maybe mid-childhood phase,” and our relationship with it can evolve.

That dictum also applies to areas such as Internet privacy, which Turkle sees as a major civic concern. “We know how easily information can be politically abused,” she writes in the book. *Alone Together* also extensively analyzes the effects of social robots as a substitute for human interaction, of which Turkle is wary. “Humans need to be surrounded by human touch, faces, and voices,” she writes.

Other scholars regard the book as a timely contribution the study of technology’s impact. “I agree that one important story of technology today is about human vulnerability to the promise of sociality without the hard work that sociability involves,” states Nancy Rosenblum, the Senator Joseph Clark Professor of Ethics in Politics and Government in the Department of Government at Harvard, who has read the work, in an e-mail response to questions. *Alone Together*, as Rosenblum sees it, should “spark a conversation that will get people to wrestle with the implications of the technology that increasingly shapes our lives.”

## Can we change our habits?

But can we actually change the ways we use technology? Rosenblum suggests further research is needed to see how people can push back against technology. “We need to better understand under what conditions

people are willing and able to engage in meaningful action,” notes Rosenblum. Regarding increased online privacy, for instance, she adds, “What kind of social and political mobilization is needed to facilitate this, and is the political will here?”

*Alone Together* does not prescribe a programmatic list of steps for creating a privacy movement or opting out of the always-connected lifestyle. But it does conclude with thoughts about restoring the human touch to family and social life. “We will begin with very simple things,” writes Turkle in the book. “Some will just seem like good manners. Talk to colleagues down the hall, no cell phones at dinner, on the playground, in the car, or in company.” Such deeds are not necessarily easy, she adds: “As we try to reclaim our concentration, we are literally at war with ourselves.”

Still, concluding an interview, Turkle emphasizes that people have the ability to make sure technology is not controlling their lives. “This is not the book of a schoolmarm,” says Turkle. “But if you take your kids on an activity and find you can’t fully participate because you’re texting, get a grip.”

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