

Parents who use cellphones on playgrounds feel guilty, study finds

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Though not all parents steal glances at their cellphones while watching children at the playground, many of those who do feel guilty about being glued to a screen rather than the monkey bars.

That's according to a new study by researchers at the University of Washington, who spent days watching hundreds of parents and caretakers interact with children - and their cellphones - at North Seattle playgrounds last spring and summer. The study was the first of its kind, researchers said, because it measured not just how [adults](#) use their cellphones while kids play, but also gauged how they feel about it.

Using a [cellphone](#) is a powerful distraction, researchers found. More often than not, adults using cellphones while their kids played did not respond - or even look up - when a child tried to get their attention. Parents were much more responsive to their kids' requests when doing almost anything else - chatting with a friend, helping another child, or even staring off into space, the study found.

About half the parents, nannies and other baby sitters surveyed separately by UW researchers said they should restrict cellphone use while at [playground](#), but felt guilty about not being able to do so.

Boredom was the single biggest reason why adults said they dig their cellphones from a pocket or purse. Researchers saw adults using cellphones to make telephone calls much less than they saw them using a touchscreen.

Not everyone is texting while baby-sitting, though. A little more than 40 percent of the caretakers did not touch their phone once while researchers watched. Of the 60 percent who did, most spent less than 5 percent of their stay at the playground on the phone.

"Concerns on this topic are very prevalent, and a lot of people report feeling guilty about their own behaviors," lead author Alexis Hiniker said in a university release about the study. "But there's also a group who resents the idea that they should have to put their phones away when their child is safe and happily engaged in something else."

Researchers found no significant difference between how women and men used their cellphones at the playground. And the study, conducted by the UW's Human Centered Design and Engineering department, made some interesting suggestions about how technology companies might design applications to have "parenting" modes with limited functionality, or a password screen that every so often prompts users to "check in" with the outside world.

But another question is how all this time on cellphones affects a child's development. Play and face-to-face interactions are the bedrock of children's learning in the earliest years, researchers said, and adults' phone-use habits could potentially disrupt kids' learning when it comes to language and social skills.

Just how disruptive? It's too soon to tell. Aside from a few early investigations, researchers said, work in that area is in its infancy.

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