

It is no surprise that technology has taken over the world. Nearly every person on the street holds a powerful computer in their pocket in the form of a smartphone. Over 1.8 billion people own smartphones and use them on a daily basis. Some studies estimate that an average person checks a digital screen more than 150 times each day, spending approximately five hours on their phone.

Perhaps those most affected are young people. According to the Sesame Workshop, more than 93 percent of 6 to 9-year-olds have access to a cell phone and more than 30 percent own their own phone, and experts expect these numbers to increase.

While screen time isn't always a bad thing – educational apps are a great way for children to learn to read and practice math skills – a number of studies show that children's brains can be permanently damaged if they spend too much time in front of a screen. They lose the ability to focus, to concentrate, to lend attention, to sense other people's attitudes, to communicate with those around them, to build their vocabulary and more.

What can parents do to turn the tide and get children to put their phones down? What is the solution to this apparent "technology addiction"?

It is a problem that Matthew Gutschick, artistic director of The Rose Theater, sees every day.

"Parents and children often walk into the Rose Theater with screens in front of their faces. One cannot blame 6-year-olds for drawing their parents with iPhones instead of eyes and smiles if this is the image they see of their parents on a daily basis," he says.

The solution, however, can be found in the simple act of engaging in a screen-free environment as a family.

"Once this same family enters the auditorium and the live performance begins, attention gently shifts. Sure, the show usually has some responsibility for engaging imaginations of the young and the old. More importantly, though, parents and children start actually looking at one another -- parents checking their child's responses to a gentle joke in the play, children confirming the dramatic tension they feel is shared by their adult companions."

Dr. Liraz Margalit notes in *Psychology Today* notes that because smartphones spoon-feeds images, words and pictures to children (effectively thinking for the child), the brains of kids who follow stories on their smartphones get lazy. They aren't developing their cognitive abilities by processing a voice into words, visualizing complete pictures and exerting the mental effort to follow a story line in the same way they do when listening to a story read aloud by a parent or watching a live performance.

Margalit also explains that when a child spends too much time on an iPad or smartphone instead of chatting and playing with others, their empathetic abilities – the way they read situations and get a feel for people – can be dulled, possibly permanently. Engaging in live performances can help mitigate this, according to Gutschick.

“Usually, when families leave the theater, they are talking with one another, phones and their attendant distractions securely stored in purses and pockets while themes from the show or favorite moments are shared between parents and children. Whereas many families enter the theater with habitual distractions, they usually leave with a renewed sense of focus on the people they love most,” he says.

The social and cognitive benefits of participating in live theater are more than anecdotal. The benefits of arts participation positively impact STEM disciplines. Nobel Prize winners in science are 22 times more likely than their peers to be performers. American CEOs are nearly unanimous in naming creativity as the No. 1 trait sought in graduates. Arts participation among children leads to higher test scores and graduation rates and, consequently, to a higher rate of college attendance. Arts participants are also more likely to engage in volunteerism and political activity. Most encouraging of all, these findings cut across all socioeconomic groups.

“If the opposite of distraction is connection, live theater and theater education have a crucial role in developing the minds and hearts of our young people,” says Gutschick. “The education researcher Vivian Paley found that fantasy play is a child’s work. It is the activity that allows them to ‘make up a new scene’ that practices the art of problem-solving.”

“In other words, creativity is the practice of finding connections where none existed before,” he concludes.

By taking children to the theater, the ballet, concerts and more, parents can help reduce the impact of hours of screen time and help children develop the important cognitive skills they need to understand the world around them. Perhaps best of all, the experience involves enjoyable quality time spent as a family where adult and child can rediscover themselves and each other.