

Op-Ed

Written by Matthew Gutschick, Artistic Director of The Rose Theater

Matthew Hansen's haunting October 15 article "We're All Just Slaves To Our Smartphones" got me thinking about possible antidotes to technology addiction and its impact on our children. As the artistic director for Omaha's local children's theater, I actually see one helpful solution on a daily basis. Parents and children often walk into The Rose Theater with screens in front of their faces. One cannot blame a 6 year old 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. Yet once the 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. Usually, families leave the theater 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.

The social and cognitive benefits of participating in live theater are more than anecdotal. Nobel Prize winners are 22 times more likely to be performers than scientists. American CEOs are nearly unanimous in naming creativity as the number one 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. Particularly crucial for healing our broken political dialogue at the moment, 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. 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. We need more of this skill in our world. What better way to develop it than in a fun environment -- like that found at The Rose -- where adult and child can rediscover themselves and each other?