

Hold the Phone!

Cell phone policies prevent harm to children

by Holly Elissa Bruno



Although the use of any kind of tool can influence our thoughts and perspective, the plow changed the outlook of the farmer, the microscope opened new worlds of mental exploration for the scientist. It is our intellectual technologies that have the greatest and most lasting power on how we think. They are our most intimate tools, the ones we use for self-expression, for shaping personal and public identity, and for cultivating relationships with others.

Nicholas Carr (2010, p. 45).

This article does not serve as legal advice. Please consult with your attorney.

Technology never falls backward. It touches our lives more intimately each day. Internet technology especially grows more and more personalized and alluring. At this moment, you are a few clicks away from rediscovering a favorite elementary school friend, watching YouTube videos that make your sides ache from laughing, redesigning your living room via Pinterest, purchasing a stunning outfit at a jaw-dropping discount, and/or enjoying face time with your distant relative.

Our relationship with the Internet has become so intimate that 36 percent of us wake up in the morning to check our texts, emails, tweets, and social networking messages before we do anything else (Acxiom Digital Impact “Consumer Digital Study,” 2013). Our smartphones hold treasure troves of our most personal information from secret passwords to



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recordings of loved ones who are no longer with us. Have you ever misplaced or lost your phone? OMG. Talk about separation anxiety! To some of us, our smartphone feels like a part of our anatomy.

As technology bounds into the future, we early childhood folk work in a different space. That space is the moment: The moment a child overcomes her fear of jumping into the water or marvels at the snowflake on her mitten, or makes her first best friend. We could say our work is timeless: by being present to a child in the moment, we witness and support her lifetime of wonder and awe. Our physical and emotional presence to the child, evidenced by a hug and smiling eyes, electrifies and preserves the moment in the child's heart. Her implicit memory system stores away these loving moments. She can call upon those warm memories of security when she faces her next chilling fear.

The net seizes our attention only to scatter it.

(Carr, p. 118)

So, when these two worlds meet — laser fast technology and timeless shared learning moments — can we create harmony over jagged cacophony? Can we have personal cell phones in the classroom and be present to each child? Let's figure this out together.

Could This Happen at Your Program?

Newly engaged toddler teacher, Lyra, feels her cell phone vibrate. A quick glance tells her it's Sam, her fiancée. Sam promised to text as soon as soon as a response came from their dream honeymoon hotel. Lyra glances up. The children are busily exploring the playground. Lyra can't wait. She has to know the answer! Reading through Sam's lengthy text, Lyra can't believe it! That resort will double its rates unless Sam and Lyra make an immediate down payment. “Who has that kind of money!” Lyra steams. Outraged, she texts Sam. “What are they thinking? We don't make that kind of money.”

Teacher's aide, Tulsi's scream jolts Lyra back to the playground. Ezekiel yells: “Lonnie! Bad Lonnie!” Toddler Lonnie has pushed Ezekiel onto Lev, who lies crumpled, pale and bleeding from his right ear. Director Rose bursts onto the playground. Lyra drops her phone and runs to help, shuddering “How could this happen? I was just texting for a moment.”

How Technology Affects the Brain

Imagine you are following that familiar voice of your GPS, as she guides you to your destination in a city unknown to you. You may have emptied your car of all maps, even your once-favorite laminated map that didn't tatter from use. Stopping at a crowded intersection, you wait for instruction on where to turn. Your GPS says nothing; the screen is jammed. Cars are honking at you. You tell yourself to "Think!" but nothing comes to mind.

Use it or lose it. Use your brain cells or lose your brain cells. Nicholas Carr explains,

"The chemically triggered synapses that link our neurons program us, in effect, to want to keep exercising the circuits they have formed. . . . Plastic does not mean elastic, in other words" (p. 34).

It's a simple axiom: As we depend upon our GPS, we lose our skill at figuring out directions.

As we depend on texting or email, our conversational skills can atrophy. As we connect with our smartphone, we disconnect from our environment and the people around us. Carr explains further,

"Experiments show that just as the brain can build new or stronger circuits through physical and mental practice, those circuits can weaken or dissolve with neglect" (p. 35).

Consider this vignette:

"Why don't you just call Janie?" urges the perplexed mother whose daughter, Pippa, has been slumped over her iPhone texting her BFF, Janie, all afternoon.

When Pippa finally realizes her mother is asking her a question, she looks up, and says: "I wouldn't know what to say to her."

Tipping into Addiction?

Any technology, including a cell phone, can both liberate and enslave us. "Enslave," a loathsome word, is defined as: "To control and keep somebody forcefully in a bad situation." How could a mere cell phone enslave us?

Consider this: addictions enslave us, robbing us of common sense. Dr. Larry Rosen, expert on the psychology of technology, warns that smartphones can be addictive (*iDisorder*, 2012). Addictions blur our perspective. The compulsion to respond to a text message can overtake us. Our autonomic system, home of the primitive amygdala gland, pushes us to react without thinking (Bruno, 2012). For example, in our opening scenario, Lyra has a compulsion to check her screen: That text that just pinged strikes a compelling chord in her brain.

Dr. Rosen, warns of "Phantom vibration syndrome." Have you ever thought your cell phone was vibrating, only to pick it up to find no one called or texted? Rosen notes some of us wake up and jump out of bed, tricked by our brains into imagining our cell phone is ringing. Rosen's underlying point is that the human brain is especially susceptible to dependency on our phones. When my iPhone was stolen in Ohio, I physically felt the loss of all the information I couldn't access, people with whom I would lose touch, messages I would miss, and my inability to call home.

Our cell phones can be more than our assistants; they can become our bosses without our knowing it. I am not saying Lyra or any of us is addicted or that technology is inherently evil. However, Rosen's research substantiates our unconscious human drive to get the latest message via phone. (See Resources for the link to my interview with Larry Rosen.)

Children's Need for Adult Care and Presence

As sophisticated and child-friendly as technology can be, it cannot love a child. Even a cell phone designed to engage a three year old cannot hug the child holding it. Children's social and emotional development requires direct interaction with caring people in the moment. Children thrive when adults actively engage with them and they languish when abandoned. "Failure to thrive" is the classically used melancholy phrase that describes what happens to children when adults who should pay attention do not pay attention over time.

What message does Lyra send Lonnie, Lev, and Ezekiel when she devotes herself to her cell phone and not to them? What happens to a child's self-esteem when an adult appears to prefer connecting with a handheld device rather than holding the child's hand? So many magical 'emergent curriculum' opportunities float by, unobserved, and lost forever.

Many programs request that family members put away their cell phones while picking up or visiting their children. When a parent walks through the front door, he is likely to see an image of a cell phone with the slash of a STOP sign superimposed on it. That sign tells anyone entering our programs that we support and model in-person, authentic interactions. How many parents heed the STOP sign?

Do licensing regulations address personal cell phone use?

I asked this question of experts in a recent radio interview on personal cell phone usage, now available as a podcast (see Resources for link). Ann Ditty, licensing expert and former President of the National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA), reminds us of two requirements held by many states:

1) Compliance with staff-child ratios.

2) Proper supervision of children.

Ratios ensure children are safe because their teachers can see, sense, and anticipate what each child is doing at all times. Ditty notes that when Lyra was texting, her 'absence' in that moment could mean she might not be counted in the teacher-child ratio. Being out of ratio is something every program dreads.

Along with the teacher-child ratio standard, the requirement to effectively supervise children is included in most state regulations. Supervising children includes keeping them safe and engaged in playful learning. The following Texas regulations for child care center personnel, for example, summarize the need for close supervision of and engagement with children:

Do caregivers who are counted in the child/caregiver ratio have any additional responsibilities?

In addition to the responsibilities for employees specified in this division, caregivers counted in the child/caregiver ratio must:

- know and comply with the minimum standards for child-care centers.
- know which children they are responsible for.
- know each child's name and have information showing each child's age.
- supervise children at all times.
- ensure the children are not out of control.
- be free from activities not directly involving the teaching, care, and supervision of children, such as:
 - administrative and clerical functions that take the caregiver's attention away from the children.
 - meal preparation, except when 12 or fewer children are in care.
 - janitorial duties, such as mopping, vacuuming, and cleaning restrooms; sweeping up after an activity or mopping up spills may be necessary for the children's safety and are not considered janitorial duties.
 - personal use of electronic devices, **such as cell phones, MP3 players, and video games.**
- interact routinely with children in a positive manner.

Unless you work in Texas, Rhode Island, or are a family provider in Delaware, your state licensing regulations likely do not directly mention personal use of cell phones. However, because use of personal cell phones with children possibly knocks a teacher out of ratio and demonstrates that she is not properly supervising children, that teacher in any state (and therefore the program) is likely to be out of compliance.

Had Lyra been actively engaged with the children, she may have prevented Lonnie's shoving Ezekiel. She would have understood the dynamics of the boys' relationship, foreseen potential conflicts, and made sure vulnerable Lev was safe. While Lyra is relating to her fiancée via cell phone, her absence gives the children tacit permission to roughhouse. In a heartbeat, children pick up and challenge our lack of watchfulness.

Shouldn't we trust teachers to have common sense and not blame the technology?

During my radio interview on "Sensible cell phone policies," another guest, Lee Kolbert, an advocate of technology in teaching, stopped the conversation by cautioning us not to blame technology. Technology, Lee says, is neutral. We should rely upon teachers to use common sense. Do you agree? If we all used our common sense, would we need laws that prohibit us from texting while driving?

When I have asked teachers offline: "What do you use your cell phone for in the classroom?" they tell me they check to see if their own children got home safely, to remind a partner to stop at the market to pick something up, to view the latest photo of the new grandbaby, or to check an

important news story or sports score. Although each of these reasons is understandable, none of these trumps the need to actively engage with children in our care. Early childhood teachers are called upon to use an abundance of common sense. Cell phones are just another recent technology teachers need to master and know when to use appropriately.

Why set teachers up for distraction? Instead, arrange for non-working times during the day when teachers can freely use their personal cell phones. Separating 'program' cell phone from personal cell phone use can protect teachers as well as children.

Don't we need cell phones in crisis situations like New Town, Connecticut?

As we scramble to ensure our programs are as safe from tragedies like the one that happened in New Town, Connecticut, we add cell phones to our disaster plans. Cell phones are the quickest way to connect classroom or playground to the main office and outside assistance. When Lev fell on the playground, teacher Tulsí's call to director Rose produced immediate help. You can also be assured that medical assistance was speeding its way to the program. Safety and evacuation plans require pre-planned ways to immediately connect program staff with each other and with outside authorities. Doesn't that justify teachers having cell phones?

This essential function can be met by using program, rather than personal, cell phones.

Will teachers in their 20s and 30s quit?

Millenials and Gen-Xers came of age with computer technology, just as Baby Boomers used innovations like

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Walkmen and eight track tapes. Are we discriminating against our younger teachers if we ban personal cell phones in the classroom and on the playground? I have no doubt that some younger teachers will be troubled by these policies. I have heard from them directly. If access to a personal cell phone at all times is essential to a teacher and that teacher is told, "No personal cell phone usage" while working, she may walk out, or look for another profession more open to continuous use of personal cell phones. At this point, however, in the teaching profession, no technology trumps the benefits of a child's personal interaction with a teacher. While a teacher is texting, an unsupervised child can suffer harm. Another child's unspoken need for reassurance can go unnoticed. When a teacher is preoccupied in her own world texting, children are abandoned.

Like you, I want children to be cared for and educated in each moment. So, here's a solution I propose—with gratitude

to director Debra Emery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for sharing potential changes she was considering for her own center's policies.

Policy on Personal Cell Phone Use

Here is a policy governing personal use of cell phones for teachers of young children. This policy makes an important distinction between 'personal' cell phones (owned by the teacher) and 'program' cell phones (owned by the program). Personal cell phones cannot be used while the teacher is working. Program cell phones will be readily available for each classroom and easily accessible by every teacher.

Only program cell phones can be used by staff during working hours. To avoid the temptation of having a personal cell phone nearby, this policy requires that personal cell phones be left at the front desk and accessed only during non-working breaks.

Take a look at this policy below. Would it work in your program? Or does it infringe too greatly on personal freedoms? As Dr. Sue Offutt recommends: "We have got to have a dialogue with teachers about this" (Ditty, et al.).

One Connecticut director, weary of the strain and distrust caused by policing classrooms for personal cell phone usage, takes this policy further. She includes sanctions if personal cell phones are in employees' possession during work. The first time an employee, against regulations, uses her personal cell phone at work, the employee is placed on unpaid leave for three days. If that employee again uses her personal cell phone at work, she is terminated.

The following look at who may be liable if a child is harmed while a teacher is texting serves as another wake-up call on the need for a personal cell phone policy.

Cell Phone Usage Policy

To ensure children's safety, well-being and engagement with staff, we uphold these standards on personal cell phone (owned by individuals) and program cell phone (owned by the program) use.

Personal cell phones:	Program cell phones:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ will be left at the front desk for safe-keeping while teachers are working. ■ may not be in the classroom, on the playground, on field trips, or any place where teachers are working. ■ can be picked up and used during work breaks, returned, and retrieved at the end of the work day. <p>Outside callers who wish to reach employees during working hours, should call this number: _____.</p> <p>We will notify you immediately if a call warrants your attention; otherwise, we will inform you of the call during your break or as appropriate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ will be provided to each classroom to be readily available to employees. ■ will be used solely for work purposes. ■ will comply with all requirements for safety and emergency situations. ■ will serve as a direct communication link to the front desk and administration. ■ may be taken on the playground and on field trips.

Are you liable if a child is hurt while a teacher is texting?

If I allow myself to be distracted by my cell phone, I am making a choice, whether I acknowledge this or not. What I choose to do in my personal life is one thing; what I choose to do in my professional life is another. "Do no harm" is at the heart of NAEYC's *Code of Ethical Conduct* (NAEYC, 2005). As early childhood professionals, we have a primary obligation to exercise due care and diligence. By texting instead of interacting with the children, Lyra failed to exercise due care. As such, Lyra was likely negligent.

Lyra's director, Rose, and the center are also likely to be found negligent for not preventing Lyra's use of her cell phone. Education law attorney and author, Suzanne Eckes reminds us, "We need to ask what would a 'reasonable teacher' do in the situation? What reasonable teacher would risk putting a child in harm's way?" (BAMradio podcast).

Can Lev's family sue Lyra and the program? Yes. Even parents with whom we have the most trusting relationships become fiercely protective when their child is harmed on our watch. Few programs can afford the financial strains of a lawsuit. What program do you know that can endure accusations of negligent care? When you last read of a young child left behind on a bus, how did you react? Negligence in the care of children is inexcusable.

Where do you stand?

Where do you stand on personal cell phone use at work? What do you think will ensure no child is harmed as a result of personal cell phone use in your program?

I know where I stand: Children deserve our total respect, presence, and engagement. It's 'no accident' that driving and texting are against the law in most states. Personal cell phones can call us away from the children. If just one child is harmed while a teacher is texting, that is one child too many.

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Resources

- Consumerdigitalstudy.com
www.textinganddrivingsafety.com/