

Can You Turn Your Cell Phone Off? Give it a Try

While walking on the bike trails of The Woodlands, I have recently been struck by the number of parents who are pushing strollers and engaged in conversation on their cell phones. I have almost become immune to it until several days ago, I actually saw a Mom pushing a stroller and engaging in conversation with her toddler. I wanted to run up and give her a hug. Why are we all so busy that we seem to think that our conversation on the cell phone is more important than engaging in conversation with our children and teaching them about their surroundings? Why do we choose cell phone conversation over eye contact with our children?

All parents want to provide their child the best possible education. Many people think of early childhood education as the function of preschool. Yes, a school setting can introduce and encourage social skills, but going for a walk with your child can be another kind of learning experience. You might just be trying to get exercise or fresh air, but your child is taking in the environment with all of her senses. She is seeing stimulating sights, which may include people, houses, animals, trees, weeds growing out to the sidewalk, ducks in the lake, planes overhead, flowers, sunshine or rain. Your child is seeing, hearing, feeling and feeling all of these things and much more. They are aware. She needs someone whom she can share these new sensations with and give them names. She needs someone to validate and appreciate her newly discovered world. She needs to learn joy and gratitude, emotions that will make her strong and stay with her for life.

It may be tempting to use the walk with your child as a time to catch up on phone calls and take care of some business, but next time, try turning off your phone and focusing on your child. Point out the sights, sounds and smells around and, in a simple way, explain what they mean. Add the sense of touch by slowing down enough to allow him to touch a flower or leaf, or if he can walk, let him out of the stroller so he can discover those "touchables" by himself. You might be rewarded by a look of wonder, a puzzled stare, or a burst of exuberance as your child experiences the newness of wonder of her world. To a young child, the world is a magical and fascinating place, even the most mundane elements are exciting to her!

Paying attention certainly applies to your time in the car as well. Safety issues aside, there is a wealth of learning to be done in the car. Car seats place the young child high enough to see out of the window. Imagine what your child thinks when a tractor-trailer glides by the window carrying a load of new cars or a garbage truck rolls by. There are traffic lights to see, fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars with blaring sirens and flashing lights, motorcycles roaring and bikes whizzing past. Time in the car is also a good time to sing songs together or turn some classical music on the radio or CD player and sing along. Consider this a bonus of time that you can spend with your child.

What is the benefit of turning off your cell phone and focusing on your child? The result of positive, sharing, parent-child communication is the strengthening of the relationship. Your child will know that he comes first with you. He will know that he is important. This provides him security and self-reliance. You are also performing the act of teaching. You are the window to his world. As you introduce, describe and explain his world, you are enriching his life and enhancing the natural learning process. You are your child's first and most important teacher. The memories you create with your child are worth far more than the phone call you might miss! Enjoy your child and make wonderful memories!