

BRIEF REPORT

Is it fair to simply tell parents to use their phones less? A qualitative analysis of parent phone use

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For American parents, smartphone ownership is nearly universal. The majority of parents report spending too much time on their phones and feeling distracted by them daily.¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines encourage parents to be mindful of technology use around children, due to associations between parental phone use and less responsive parent-child interactions² and more child externalising behaviours.³ However, there are potential positive uses of technology by parents (e.g. social support), which need to be considered when planning interventions. This study's aim was to examine parents' in-the-moment motivations for smartphone use during stressful moments and associations with parent characteristics.

Parents ($n = 296$) of children ages 3–6 years were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online survey tool commonly used in psychology research. After providing informed consent, parents completed a demographic survey (average age 33.33 years [$SD = 7.02$], 62.5% female, average income \$66,673 [$SD = \$44,038$], 60.2% held Bachelor's degree or higher, and 75.3% Caucasian, 11% Black, 3.2% Latinx, 8.8% Asian American and 1.2% Other). Parents also completed a 3-item parenting stress measure ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.52$),⁴ Brief Co-parenting Relationship Scale ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.05$)⁵ and 4-item measure of phone distraction around children (DISRUPT; $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.23$).

Parents provided free-text responses to: "Thinking about the last time you got on your phone or mobile device because you were feeling stressed by parenting, please describe what was going on. What was stressful? What were you doing? What was your child doing? What happened? Be as detailed as possible". Parents then rated their feelings of guilt and shame for the parenting experience previously

described on a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much or a lot), with average guilt score ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.72$).

Open-ended parent responses were read by three investigators using grounded theory methods to identify novel themes arising from the data (i.e. rather than superimposing a predetermined structure). A codebook was developed describing novel motivations of mobile use during stressful parenting moments. Responses were coded into their most prominent theme to reliability ($\kappa > 0.70$). We excluded 45 responses that were blank, uninterpretable, merely descriptive (e.g. "I was angry and my child cry") or contained a theme already described in prior literature (e.g. "about my work"). *t*-tests were performed to examine mean differences by presence/absence of each theme for parent age, family income, parenting stress, co-parenting quality, phone distraction and feelings of guilt about use. We utilised Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and report adjusted *t*-values and degrees of freedom when variances between groups could not be assumed to be equal.

Open-ended response analysis yielded five themes (see Table 1). Parents who expressed "Virtual Escape" reported significantly higher parenting stress [$t(249) = -2.62$, $p = 0.009$], phone distraction [$t(249) = -3.51$, $p = 0.001$], guilt during phone use [$t(249) = -2.54$, $p = 0.012$] and worse co-parenting quality [$t(230) = 2.13$, $p = 0.034$]. Parents with the "Real-Time Social Support" theme had higher income [$t(28.46) = -2.18$, $p = 0.043$], better co-parenting quality [$t(35.07) = -3.03$, $p = 0.005$], and less guilt during phone use [$t(39.32) = 2.47$, $p = 0.018$]. No significant differences were observed for any parent characteristics of those who expressed "In the Moment Parenting Tips", "I'm Checking Myself" or "Parallel Media Use".

TABLE 1 Novel themes of parent smartphone use motivations during stressful parenting moments, with illustrative responses, frequency and coder reliability

Virtual Escape $\kappa = 0.79$ $n = 79$ (31.5%)	Parent describes using their phone to mentally and emotionally get away from their current situation with their child, as well as expressing stress, negative emotions or boredom relieved by phone use "My child wanted to go to McDonald's and didn't want to eat what I was cooking. He was crying and yelling and so I went to my room and shut the door and got on my phone to distract myself from the situation I was in" "I was having a hard time because I had work to do and my son was bored so I yelled at him to watch TV instead of bothering me. I felt bad but I was in the middle of something and he kept whining and nagging me. I felt like I just needed a few minutes on my phone and I would feel better" "I got on my phone when my kids were acting up and being very whiny. They would not get along with each other and it was getting on my nerves. I was over the whining so I put them down in front of the tv and decided to mentally check out and look at my phone for a little while"
Real-time social support $\kappa = 1.0$ $n = 27$ (10.8%)	Parent describes connecting with another person for support or help with their child "I couldn't stop my child from crying so I had to call someone" "I wanted to ask support group how they handle their children in case of such behaviours" "The child would not stop asking questions. So I sent a text to another parent friend and asked if their child does the same thing"
In the moment parenting tips $\kappa = 0.925$ $n = 28$ (11.2%)	Parent describes electronically searching for information to help them with their child or parenting, such as activities to do with their child "My daughter was not being clear in her communication, I googled tips for communicating with a toddler" "My child started crying excessively and i did not know how to calm them down. I looked up parenting strategies to help my child calm down" "Child was exhibiting some weird behaviour at school and I didn't know how to go about asking her if she wanted to talk about it. Googled parenting tips"
I'm checking myself $\kappa = 1.0$ $n = 5$ (1.9%)	Parent describes intentionally using their phone to calm down so they did not harm their child verbally or physically. "My child was refusing to go to school and I feel so much stressed, I felt like beating my child to death but I got on to my phone and I feel a little bit relieved" "My child was tired from not taking a nap that day so he was grumpy to begin with. He has trouble with his speech and he was getting frustrated that I was not understanding what he was attempting to communicate with me and he started having a meltdown, despite using a speech board to assist him. He started crying and hitting and I got upset and wanted to yell at him to just tell us what he wanted, so I got on my phone to calm down and take a few minutes away from him" "My child was throwing a god awful fit and I was trying to calm down so I wouldn't scream at him"
Parallel media use $\kappa = 1.0$ $n = 6$ (2.4%)	Parent describes using their phone while their child was using their own device "my child is occupied and I want them to feel comfortable and when they see me comfortable on my phone then it makes them feel better" "It's winter and my son's class was cancelled so we were stuck at home. My son had the TV on and he kept rewinding the same scene. I told him to stop numerous times until I took the remote control out of his hands. So he decided to jump on the couch over and over. I told him to stop and he starts colouring, singing the same tune (Baby Shark) over and over. It was annoying and we can't get out of the house so I gave him the iPad and had him play games while I played my own game on my phone" "They were feeling sick and were crying a lot because they were bored but too sick to do anything. I decided to give them an allowed and allow them to watch some YouTube and then I checked some emails"

These findings indicate that parents have motivations for using smartphones around children that may not occur to clinicians; parents' momentary mental states around smartphone use have not been described in prior research, which has focused on parents' global perceptions of phone use and parenting.

Parents who endorsed "Virtual Escape" had more parenting stress and guilt compared with parents who did not. Such parents may need alternative strategies for responding to difficult child behaviour or awareness of how digital spaces with persuasive rewards (e.g. social media or mobile games) might draw them in during times of stress. Although a "Virtual Escape" may help parents feel less negative effect in the moment, research suggests that such interruptions lead to more long-term negative child behaviours. Conversely, smartphone use for social support or parenting information may be an adaptive behaviour;

future research should examine whether such behaviours are less disruptive to parent-child interaction than escape-motivated behaviours. In addition, smartphone design and interventions could promote seeking of social support or information when stressed, and then encourage parental disengagement from media once done. Limitations of our study include non-coding non-novel responses and use of an online sample, which restricts generalisability of results.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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