

# Put down your phone and look at me

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

**A** long time ago in a faraway land, there lived a three-year-old boy who made the mistake of stubbornly choosing to watch television when his mother wanted to take him to the park. The boy was given a warning that he would “lose” the TV if he chose not to turn it off after the show ended, and thus began a new chapter in parenting.

The little boy saw the TV put away in the closet. Once his addictive symptoms subsided and the tantrums diminished, he became the most creative little boy around. Between his Lego, Playmobile, erector sets, crayons and paper, he also seemed to be much happier. His parents were happier as all the fights about television ended. Months later, but with new rules, this creative little boy got rewarded with a few hours each week of television time and everyone remained happy. In addition, the adults never missed the TV, the Internet, a smartphone or anything else, because after all, the '80s was a different time and place. While complaining about never having enough hours in the day, the family always ate dinner together, played, read nightly bedtime stories, and had lots of wonderful uninterrupted parent-child time.

Fast-forward 30 years to the present. Times have changed dramatically and not for the better. Within one week, I evaluated two children under the age of three with similar technology-related problems. One had serious temper tantrums when her iPad needed charging and the restaurant table was not near a source of power; the other child “lost it” when his iPad was taken away before bed. Most nights he needed it to fall asleep and it frequently remained in his bed until morning.

WHILE THE nature of the problems today may be similar to those of 30 years ago, their scope has become far more serious, in part because technology has evolved to be portable. A problem once confined to the living room now pervades every aspect of our lives. Technology – be it smartphone or tablet – follows us into the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom, the restaurant, the park, a wedding, the cemetery and just about any place imaginable that a three-year-old or parent or grandparent can be. While technology has added greatly to our lives, we have also allowed it to replace face-to-face communication. Our children and society as a whole are suffering. Children of all ages and their families need more than ever to sit together and just talk.

I am writing a lot about the problem with technology, but society is built on relationships, and relation-

ships are built on communication. Technology is interfering with this, rather than helping.

I thank all who responded to the questions posed in my recent column, (“Technology troubles,” June 10). Your responses were very interesting and I am happy to report that readers agree that in spite of their many advantages, smartphones pose many serious problems. There are a few people who don't own a smartphone and others turn their portable devices off when they are with their partners, out at a restaurant, at work, and occasionally for an entire day, making a real decision as to when they choose to receive or access information. Those who do this seem oddly in control, and seem the happiest. Those who turn off their phones for Shabbat speak of having more

often abbreviated written word of text messages, are frequently misinterpreted, especially by children who may be quite concrete in their thinking. (Now emojis are even replacing the words). The parental unit, the very foundation of the family, has deteriorated, as couples experience less closeness and greater distance, with the cell phone acting as the “third person” in their love triangle. In other words, while the “affair” may be with a smartphone and not another individual, the resultant anxiety, trust and potential addiction issues may feel the same, leaving the partner feeling left out and lonely.

SEVERAL READERS expressed concern over the changing face of the mother-infant dyad. One thing that

really stood out was the familiar scene of a mom walking her baby, talking on the phone instead of conversing with her baby.

Additionally, it's not uncommon for babies and phones to be propped up side-by-side when feeding, so in true multitasking fashion, Mom can read and feed simultaneously. This results in baby losing extremely valuable eye contact, physical touch, and loving baby-directed communication and empathy, all essential to the formation of future social relatedness.

Having spent years focusing professionally on early childhood, I am extremely concerned about the fragmentation of the caregiver-infant and parent-child relationships. If the resultant attachment between baby and parent is precarious, the long-term impact on other relationships such as that with siblings, friends and ultimately a marriage partner, may be devastating. As a society, we must be proactive and see the scope and seriousness of the smartphone issue to-

day as having a potential detrimental effect on a couple, the family, school, the army and the greater society.

We are important role models, and setting limits and guiding our precious children in forming appropriate interpersonal relationships with their family, friends, colleagues and ultimately their partners is crucial but often lacking. This will be the focus of the next column. ■

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*The second part of Batya Ludman's article 'Put down your phone and look at me' will appear August 5.*

*The second part of Mike Gropper's article 'Jewish Singles' will appear on August 18.*



time to sit and really be “present” with their loved ones and state that they appreciate just how much of a gift those 25 hours really are.

Sadly, we've all been privy to someone's “too loud conversation” and have seen too many families “together” – with each family member doing their own thing on their phone. We don't know what long-term impact technology will have on interpersonal communication. While everyone seems plugged in these days and brags about how many Facebook friends they have, it seems that fewer people are talking to each other, engaged in face-to-face conversation. It feels like the Tower of Babel – with everyone talking but not speaking the same language.

Face-to-face contact, where a child learns to interpret social cues and gestures and respond to the emotional content of a conversation that goes far beyond words, is virtually (no pun intended) nonexistent. Emoticons, designed to bring emotion to the terse and