

The Other Side of Screen Time

By Nancy Stewart www.SingWithOurKids.com

Much has been researched and written about young children and how much (if any) screen time they should be allowed to have at different ages. The information and recommendations change daily as we try to keep up with the pros and cons of the latest technology. But what's not being written about is the *other* screen time. That is; *adults* watching a screen while caring for young children. Last year I took my two young grand children to the park where there were a dozen or so other adults with their children. I suddenly realized I was the only adult who was actually *watching* the children and got thinking about the consequences of "the other side of screen time."

Don't get me wrong. I love my I-pad and my smart phone and my computer (all of which have allowed me to create and execute this project), but with this technology comes huge responsibility. So here are my thoughts on what's *not* happening with our children while we are on our phones, pads, televisions, and other screens...

1. **Brain connections-** Babies and young children learn new things constantly throughout their day. And when they discover something new the first thing they do is look to their adult for a reaction. It is in this split second, when the adult reacts, that connections are made. These connections build the wiring in the brain. What happens when a baby keeps looking to its parent or caregiver and no one is looking back, preventing those connections from being made?
2. **Face time-** We know children learn empathy by watching the expressions on our faces; concentrating on our eyes. At six months of age they watch our lips as they begin to try to figure out sounds and speech. The more they see and hear us, the more they learn about language and human emotion. How much are they not seeing and hearing from us?
3. **Talk time-** Babies and young children love the sound of your voice and the more they hear it the more they engage and learn. When you simply imitate the sounds babies make you stimulate brain activity. **The amount of talking (to babies) and conversations we have (with toddlers and preschoolers) may be the single biggest factor in reading success later on.** And here's another point about talk time. When our children *hear* our conversations with other adults, they are hearing different vocabulary, and gaining important information about our family history, values, and culture. Adult screen time is time spent *not* talking. How much time do we now spend *not* talking?
4. **What you are missing-** When you are in the same room with your baby, but focused on a screen, *you* are missing out on the best entertainment ever- the human being discovering its world for the first time! Nothing is more amazing, and miraculous things happen constantly. These miracles happen in the blink of an eye, and you don't want to miss them!
5. **Safety-** Last but certainly not least, there is the safety issue. As I sat in the park and looked around I realized how easy it would have been for a small child to suddenly disappear. It's hard enough to keep your eyes on your own child in a sea of motion, let alone if you look away for five or ten or twenty minutes...

Last year I was setting up for a concert in a classroom at a large daycare. Most of the kids were outside, but the youngest group was in the room. It took me twenty minutes to set up. The teacher was texting the entire time as the one and two-year-olds wandered around the room aimlessly. I purposely didn't engage with them as I was curious to see just how long the teacher would remain "absent." I was heart-broken at the missed opportunities that hung so heavily in the silence. In a positive and caring environment you would hear an adult say something like, "Oh! You have a blue block! Would you like to build something? Let's build a house!" Well, you get the idea. When there is such a lack of engagement it's stunning. I'm sure the teacher wasn't a bad person. She was no different than many of us caring for children both at home and in schools and daycares. We just haven't thought through the consequences of this new world we live in. We haven't thought about what *isn't happening* while we're busy with our technology.

It's not complicated, but it's vitally important- to raise happy, healthy, smart children, we have to be present, and not just physically present. And that brings me back to singing. Singing is so simple. It's free. It's available to every one of us, regardless of income or education. We are *meant* to sing, and when we sing with our children all of the things that should be happening can and do! So the next time you're caring for a baby or young child, try putting down your device and just sing. You'll be glad you did, and so will your child!