



## **The Brilliant Baby Mind: No Apps or Upgrades Needed**

Presented by Catherine Steiner- Adair, Ed.D.

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### **Background**

Dr. Steiner-Adair is an internationally recognized clinical psychologist and author. In addition to her private practice, she is a Research Associate in the Harvard Medical School Department of Psychiatry. She has consulted to over 350 schools and businesses on work-family-life integration in the age of technology. Dr. Steiner- Adair is a resource to the media, having appeared on The Today Show, Good Morning America, NBC Morning Joe, The Huffington Post Live, WSJ Live, The Discovery Channel, CNN and PBS.

Dr. Steiner-Adair is author of The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age and the education curriculum *Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health, And Leadership*. She interviewed thousands of kids, parents, educators and health professionals in writing these resources.

### **Presentation** (focused on ages 0-6)

Dr. Steiner-Adair started her love-hate relationship with technology when her son was 13 in 1998. He won Windows '98 software from MIT, and it felt like the computer took over his life; he was hooked. He would get an energetic "hit" from it; something was going on in his brain. Dr. Steiner-Adair was a consultant to Phillips Andover Academy at the time and was getting calls from nursery school to high school teachers about the impact of technology on their students. Kids writing aggressive emails/social media posts, acting out on porn images seen on home screens, etc. More and more of these stories were surfacing.

Today texting has completely changed how we communicate with our partners; it has changed how we relate to one another. What once were full conversations have now been reduced to "p u at 4:30?" "idk" "ok" "c u l8r xoxo" etc. You cannot hear the tone in the voice – how is your partner feeling? Does 4:30 *really* work? An actual conversation uses a different part of our brain; psychologically it makes us connect to and think about the person we love. It increases our emotional thermometer and strengthens our relationship. We work out the hard stuff and connect through actual conversation.

Our smart phones have become like a security blanket. We take them everywhere and feel lost without them. The average adult smart phone user checks his/her phone 60 times a day. Parents of young children who do this are putting their children "on hold," asking them to "freeze in time." This is "checking out" and leads to ignoring small kids. When asked about this in interviews, kids will say things like, "My dad's smart phone is a stupid phone!" I have heard of kids flushing their parents' phones down the toilet, pulling the phone out of their parents' hands and throwing it. Children feel they are in competition with their parents' phones, and the dynamic is not unlike sibling rivalry. Even with a "no tech at the table" rule, parents are often the ones

breaking it (“I just have to check my email...”). When they are buried in their phones their tone of voice becomes disconnected, eyes are on the phone, and they have checked out.

I had a client in Maine. Her first child was born before smart phones were big. She would drive an hour to play dates, singing and talking to her child, listening to music or just being quiet. When the second child was born she had a smart phone and she would alter her route to drive on roads where she had cell service so she could talk on her phone. The then 6-year old was busy with a tablet in the car, and the baby was started saying “my pone! My pone!” It broke her heart. She had a very different child rearing experience with her second baby.

I love technology; it is useful. I don’t stand here as a saint. In my interactions with parents of newborns, I keep hearing the question “How do you change a diaper without a smart phone? I have to give my fussy child a smart phone, a stimulus, to calm them down, help them keep still long enough so I can change their diaper. It makes life so much easier.” The problem is that this leads to a baby’s brain developing in a very different way. And what about the parent who gets up in the middle of the night for the midnight feeding? Looking at their phones, playing a game, texting? It makes my heart sink. When we have our babies snuggled against our chest and they fall asleep we get that mushy gushy, lovey feeling. It is like no other. It changes us neurologically. With a newborn, we are learning how to be patient more than we were before, how to care more. We stop worrying about the small stuff, and our babies are rewiring us. This is part of the human parenting experience.

We are finding that kids in preschool who have been exposed to technology are less able to soothe themselves, play by themselves, or be soothed by others. Learning to calm a crying baby is a critical part of parenting. We need to teach babies strategies for self-soothing, and technology does not serve us in this department. Many toddlers these days can’t tie their shoes but can play tablet games. This is a neurological negative.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends **no screen time for babies 0-2 years**. It is too much for them. They can’t take the images, the tone, the light, the violence; they can’t process it. 85% of parents ignore this because devices make life easier. 3-5yrs of age can get up to 0.5-1 hr of screen time, with the occasional longer movie. But you *must* watch for content and gender stereotypes. Some kids media educational and really good/interactive. You need to figure out your child’s needs at that time. Do they need to calm down or be stimulated with an educational game?

It is critical that children up to 5 years old be talked to, sung to, played with, read to. In nursery school you will teach them how to be part of a group, a community. It is critical that they be held, talked to, engaged with. The language center of the brain in a 3 year old has 40% of it vocabulary developed already. They need to hear lots and lots of words. If a child is missing out on these things, there is a serious drop in development. They need to hear parents, teacher, grandparents, sing, talk, and read. A child will learn the language best by the human voice. Learning language is an embodied experience. Proust and the Squid is a brilliant book by Maryanne Wolf PhD, a professor of child development at Tufts. She talks of the “surround sound of coziness.”

Skyping with family and friends can be great. When we Skype, we see a face and hear a familiar voice, and it reinforces language. It is highly relational. Reading the same book over and over is great. Kids love it. They learn vocabulary from repetition. Don’t be fooled by the “learn to read with this app” scams. (Caveat: if English is not a child’s first language, then these apps and online tutorials can be helpful.)

Babies need to hear 10,000 words a day. One of the best TV programs they can watch is *Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood*. Mr. Rogers talks in the way one should talk to a child. His pace of speaking is the pace a child learns a language. Sesame Street is really good. Other recommendations can be found at **commonsensemedia.org**. There you can find evaluations of what is educational. Original *Dora the Explorer*

shows were great, but look at current Dora apps and find that she has lost her magnifying glass and is now getting pedicures. (One mom I spoke with found a \$99.00 charge from one of the apps that sells “cheats.” Think about the language – “buying a *cheat* to help you win”!) A great resource is the website [www.commercialfreechildhood.org](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org).

Children are missing out on play. When asked what her favorite game was, one child told me “dress-up.” She said she plays by clicking on the outfit she wants. She swipes through the dress-up box and picks out a theme. Click, click, click... the app is thinking for her, and she is not developing an essential tool: creativity. With actual dress up, the “next level” is kids’ own imagination. Playing *real* games reminds them what they enjoy inside themselves. With screen games, there is no physical movement involved. Kinesthetic development and neurological pathways need to be developed through movement. Many of the K-12 referrals I get are for kids who are not using their hands fully. Dress-up takes balance and great coordination (i.e. when you’re trying on Mom’s heels). Things don’t always go right building forts with pillows – things fall down. Kids learn from this: how to deal with frustration, collaboration, imagination, co-creating. With app games, children don’t learn to deal with frustration, how to share, how to be bossy with, how to be assertive, how to think critically. Their social skills are not getting developed.

At age 5, girls are starting to be exposed to “the mean girl.” The first mean girl was Lucy from *Peanuts*. She was a bully. Angelica from *Rug Rats* was bossy; she lorded over the babies, was bratty, blonde and spoiled. She teased the other babies and had a mother who was characterized as the removed working mom. The mom who air-kissed her daughter while on her cell phone, always holding a brief case. She was self-absorbed and narcissistic. For 11 years this was one of the most popular shows for small kids. Today there is *Gossip Girl*, which is most popular with 10 year old girls and up. This show furthers the idea that girls are bitches, they text gossip to each other to further themselves. It’s very political and promotes the anti-feminist idea that girls are bitches. *Gossip Girl* lends itself to our tech-crazed world. It is based on educated and talented girls who go to an elite all-girls private school in Manhattan. They are wealthy and beautiful. The most powerful aspect of the show is that an anonymous person texts gossip to the others. They focus on who is sleeping with whom, where they shop, and the best-friend-as-the-enemy concept (“frenemy”). This is teaching girls to hate and compete with each other.

As early as 5 years old, girls are taught to “be nice.” When a 5 year old boy says, “I hate Billy,” he is asked, “What did Billy do to you?” When a girl says, “I hate Cathy!” she is told, “No you don’t. Hate is bad word.” Girls are not taught how to deal with their emotions. We are not equipping girls to handle conflict, how to be assertive or self-possessed.

We live in a culture of images. We have shifted how we make meaning of events. Today at a school play, kids on stage are looking out and seeing hundreds of devices. Instead of the smiling faces of their parents it is a sea of screens beaming at them. Parents are not fully present; they are focusing on capturing the images, not their emotions, not their child’s emotions. To a child, the action of taking the picture means more to you than they do. There is a disconnect; parents are not present. “Stop. Look pretty. Smile.” Then comes the posting and messaging, not interacting, being present in the moment.

Suggestions:

- 1) Hire a school videographer to take video and send it to all of the parents.
- 2) Turn your phone to just camera mode, take a picture put the phone away, carry on, look at pictures later. Stay in the moment.

Parents must be aware of which images we post of our children online, or send to friends and family. Ask your child, “Is it ok if I send this picture to your grandparents?” In doing so you are training them about responsible

use of images online. Do not post embarrassing pictures of your child's first use of the potty, dancing naked; these photos are out there for all to see forever. This is similar to how you would not force your child to hug and kiss someone they don't want to.

Little kids are sensitive to parents being on the phone all the time. They feel ignored and unimportant. "I wish my dad wouldn't come to my game because he just texts the whole time." They hate when they get picked up and you are on the phone. They want us to mean it when we say, "I can't wait to hear all about your day." That is a lie when we are on our phone and not engaged with them.

There was a small observational research study of caregivers of toddlers at fast food restaurants. 80% of the caregivers had their heads in their screens, and when they talked to the children there was no eye contact. At 5 and 6 years old, the caregivers gave the children tablets in order to "behave." Even though they like playing on electronic devices, in interviews it is clear that children don't like this. They feel as if they don't matter to adults. The other issue is that a child's capacity to sit through a boring meal with adults and interact is not being learned when a tablet is introduced. This is a social skill that is being lost. Today top business schools are looking for social-emotional skills. Can a student push an idea? Collaborate? GPA and board scores matter less than a student's ability to interact with others. Technology distracts from this.

Who matters more, your partner or the outside world? Couples I counsel talk of their partner's screen as "the mistress." Affection is lacking. Do not use your phone as an alarm clock. We are so dependent on our phones that whenever we hear an alert, we pick it up we scroll through ("just checking"). In the morning we need to scroll through our own minds and check in with ourselves. A phone is a connection to the outside world, to others. We need to wake up slowly and connect with ourselves. Check in with ourselves, check in with our partners. Do something sweet for your partner 5x a day so they know you're thinking about them.

First thing in the morning, which way do you roll? Do you roll to the center of the bed to snuggle, or do you roll to the outer edge to reach for your phone and check for messages? This choice is critical because it defines how you start your day, how you create your priorities. As a marriage and family therapist, I highly recommend rolling inward!

Get up 30 minutes early to check your emails in the morning, then be present for your kids when they get up. Think about your voice when you are using your screen (are you buried in your phone?). The tone you use with your children is important. Kids need undivided attention.

Children need to deal with their anxiety; they need to process it. After 9 minutes playing on a tablet, they will respond less to pro-social interactions. Empathy and ambient awareness are gone. They will forget their thoughts and feelings and become consumed by technology.

Children benefit greatly from playing outside after school to refresh and reboot. And when you come in the door from work, do not come in mid-call ("Shhhh, one sec!"). This makes kids feel sad and unimportant to you. Also saying "I'm just going to check my emails" often turns into 2 hours of screen time that you are spending away from your family. Do it later! When your children come home from school, have snack and talk, hang out, play outside, play inside – but don't punctuate coming home with screen time. Children need to play in the three dimensional world, to interact with people and "manipulatives," e.g. Legos, puzzles, arts or crafts, or cooking. They need to pace themselves, relax and not get sucked into mesmerizing, stimulating screen games or TV. Make social media and screen time a part of life but not the backdrop for it. Create your own Family Responsible Use Agreement (template available at [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org)) and post it on the fridge or by the computer with understandings about what, when, and how long it's okay to be engaged in these activities.

Bed and bath time have seen a 25% spike in preventable accidents with caregivers multitasking with a device. Be present; do not have your phone in there with you. Your brain switches off from the tools it needs in order to be aware when you're using your phone. Let bath and bedtime be quiet, cozy, unplugged times. At the end of their day, and our day with them, our children need to know they are precious to us and matter more than anything to us. Nothing spoils the magic of a bedtime book or chat more than a parent checking a text. The same tech-free breather goes for parents, too. No screens in the bedroom! 6yr olds to 26yr olds alike hate it when parents take a call or text mid-conversation. (Who doesn't?!)

Children need to develop a capacity for solitude. Children need to not feel lost or separated when they're alone (i.e. not being stimulated by other people or electronic devices). They need to learn to be ok in the crib in the morning, they need to learn to be creative and play with pots and pans, figure out what to do, then what to do next. Encourage this time.

At regular times unplug, and unplug completely. Have tech-free weekends, tech-free vacations, tech-free mornings, etc.

China leads the world in tech addiction. They have 300 tech rehab centers, and children as young as 5 years old are being treated here. There are instances of tech-addicted children not being calmed by human interaction; the only way for them to be soothed is by handing them a smart phone. They are losing their ability to self-soothe or to be soothed by human contact. This is frightening!

We need to reboot how we feel about global technology. We need to be educated; there is a lot of research we need to listen to. Do not for a minute feel your kid needs a tablet 24/7 at school in order to succeed.

Reminder: speaker phone, FaceTime and Skype with loved ones is great. It's a great way to stay in touch with grandparents.

Audience member question: "I have a toddler and am trying to [keep him away from screens]. What do you do when you are with other parents who allow their children screen time?"

Dr. Steiner-Adair: "You can say before you even get together: 'I have respect for your parenting style, but we have come a decision as a family that we do not want our baby exposed to screens. I will have a hard time saying no when we are all together.' Email your family and friends before vacations together and come up with group expectations surrounding screen time. Do not succumb to peer pressure. You cannot get back the magic of these early years, and your kids will thank you later. Kids will always be exposed to other things at others' houses. It takes a village. Have the hard conversations and lay the groundwork now."