

Stopping smartphone zombie children

A Denver father says smartphones turned his two youngest sons into zombies.

So he turned himself into a crusader.

Timothy Farnum, an anesthesiologist, wants Colorado to be the first state to ban smartphone sales to children younger than 13, and he already has plenty of parents on board. The behavior of his boys, ages 10 and 11, underwent striking changes when they got phones.

They became withdrawn, distracted, disinterested in playing outdoors. When he tried to take the phones away, Farnum told CNN, one of his previously easygoing sons showed symptoms that looked alarmingly like drug withdrawal: "He was very addicted to this little machine. It kind of scared me."

Parents face an everyday challenge in trying to sort out the rapid-fire changes mobile technology is making in American life. How much is too much? Does early mastery of technology give kids a competitive edge later on? If electronic content is labeled "educational," does it help or hinder?

All valid questions, all slowly being sorted out by pediatric experts. Their short answer: Media are inescapable for children growing up today, and it's up to parents to be careful and vigilant regulators.

Farnum's initiative, which would require retailers to ask pointed questions of shoppers about who will use new phones and maintain exhaustive records, is a long shot, and he admits as much.

He hopes, he says, to at least get parents to examine current scientific studies on the effects of screen time on young children and teens to better enable them to set guidelines for their own families.

Such studies abound with cautionary messages: Excessive media exposure, especially for younger children, can interfere with sleep, hinder social development and discourage physical activity.

A study presented at the 2017 Pediatric Academic Societies Meeting found a direct correlation between handheld electronic media exposure and delayed speech in very young children.

And that's already a problem: According to the recent study, a survey conducted at children's 18-month checkups found 1 parent in 5 said their child was already exposed to at least a half-hour of screen time daily.

A columnist for *Psychology Today* explains it this way: A child hearing a story read by a parent visualizes the action taking place, interacts with the reader, and begins to link printed words with language. A child watching a video is passive, yet comes to expect constant stimulation: "The device does the thinking for them. ... Their own cognitive muscles remain weak."

Being a parent is no easy business; runaway technology often rockets beyond the research.

But the research in this area is emerging with a consistent message: Too much mobile media exposure is a problem for our kids. Farnum reports that once he pried the smartphones away from his boys, they reconnected with such basic childhood pleasures as playing outdoors and reading.

Those are experiences all children need. It's up to us to make sure they get them.

YOUR VIEWS

Are parents doing enough to limit their children's smartphone use?

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