

**Screen Time for Parents and Caregivers: Parental Screen Distraction and Parenting**

**Perceptions and Beliefs**

**by**

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PREVIEW

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the  
Department of Psychology**

**Pace University, New York City**

**2015**

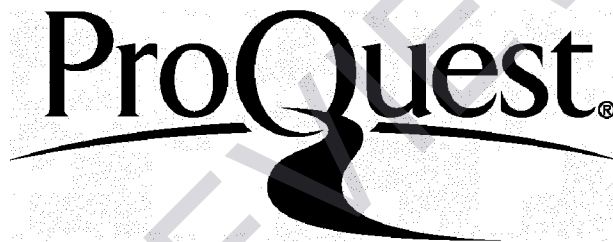
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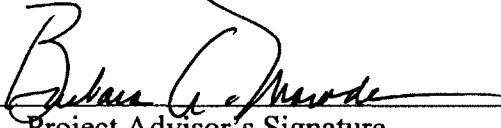
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many individuals I must thank for their involvement in this process.

First and foremost, my family to whom I am eternally indebted for their amazing support, love, and encouragement. Mom, Dad, and Josh, you have served as exemplary models of hard work and determination. Thank you for instilling these values in me. To my boyfriend, Lawrence, you have been such an incredible source of strength and encouragement. You continue to be my sunshine, even on the cloudiest of days!

To Dr. Barbara Mowder, my advisor and mentor, thank you for instilling in me a newfound respect, appreciation, and admiration for research. Over the past five years while working alongside you, I have learned a great deal about the power of psychology and the many ways it can touch people's lives. Thank you for your amazing encouragement and steadfast guidance as I embarked on this journey. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from you! Thank you to Dr. Renee Krochek, my consultant, for your continuous support and valuable feedback throughout this process. I am truly appreciative for all of your help and kindness. A very special thank you to Mr. Stephen Salbod, my statistics guru, to whom I am beyond grateful. Steve, your guidance and assistance allowed me to achieve my goals. Your immense patience and wonderful kindness supported me in more ways that you can imagine!

To Linda Olszewski, who sparked my interest in screen time and joined me on this journey, you are an amazing colleague, and a wonderful friend. To the rest of my Pace family, I wouldn't have come this far without all of you! Finally, to all of my family and friends, thank you for keeping me grounded, for loving me, believing in me, and cheering me on. I couldn't have done this without you!

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PREVIEW

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the concept of screen time has become an increasingly salient topic in the media. The national conversation about screen time has raised public concerns regarding implications for children's academic, emotional, and physical functioning. Less concern has been expressed over parents' and caregivers' screen time usage. As ownership of screened electronic devices, such as computers, smartphones, and tablets, increases due to accessibility and affordability, so does time associated with screens and the likelihood that individuals are distracted by these devices. As a result, caregivers and parents seem drawn to screened devices, which, in turn, may influence interactions with children. These phenomena support the need for research to investigate parents' and caregivers' levels of distraction while spending time with their charges, due to screened devices.

This study examined aspects of parental screen time, child screen time, and parental screen distraction with regard to the importance that parents and caregivers place on parenting behaviors. The parent development theory (PDT) was used as the theoretical context for this study. *Parental screen distraction* (PSD) refers to the moments in which parents or caregivers are distracted from performing behaviors associated with the parent role due to engagement with a screened device. While the overarching focus of this study is on parents and parenting with regard to screen time, the study also includes caregivers who spend greater than 20 hours per week caring for children. Within the context of this study, both parent and non-parent caregivers are categorized as individuals who are responsible for performing behaviors associated with the parent role while caring for children. Therefore, parental screen time (PST) and PSD refers to the screen time use of both parents and caregivers. Specifically, this study examines the relationship among

PST, child screen time, PSD, the importance parents and caregivers place on parenting behaviors, and demographic variables.

The sample consisted of 93 parents and caregivers, and data was analyzed based on two questionnaires, the Screen Time Questionnaire (STQ), and the Parent Behavior Importance Questionnaire-Revised (PBIQ-R). Major findings of this study indicate: (1) a positive significant relationship between PST and child screen time, (2) a positive significant relationship between PST and PSD, (3) a negative relationship between PSD and responsiveness, and (4) parent/caregiver education level and income significantly moderate the relationship between PST and PSD. The findings of this study highlight the presence of PSD and the relationship of PSD to lower levels of parental responsiveness. As ownership of and dependence on screened devices continues to increase, further investigation is warranted to understand the role of screen time within the parent-child and caregiver-child relationship as well as the role that PSD may play on children's development.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Parents and caregivers in the U.S. currently live within a sociocultural context that regards screened devices positively, generally perceiving them as helpful tools (Heasun, Hyunjoon, & Daejoong, 2012). Individuals' readily use screened devices as forms of communication, entertainment, education, and even as parenting tools to pacify and soothe children (Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2013). Although there has been research and an ongoing national conversation regarding screen time (ST), the majority of concern does not focus on adult ST, but rather, children's ST usage. Current research suggests that overuse causes adverse cognitive, mental, and physical health risks (Boone, Gordon-Larsen, Adair, Popkin, 2007; Mark & Janssen, 2008; Page et al., 2010; Singh, Kogan, VanDyck, & Siahpush, 2008; Vandewater, Shim, & Caplovitz, 2004). While many experts in the U.S. agree that parents should take precautions and monitor their children's ST use (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011), there has been a lack of attention directed toward the ST use of parents and caregivers and the potential consequences that ST might have on the parent role in American society.

Media consumers over the age of 18 spend the majority of their ST, over 34 hours monthly, using browser/apps on a smartphone (Nielson, 2013). Each month, the average person logs over 14 hours on social media sites, watches over 13 hours of TV, and plays seven hours of video games (Nielson, 2013). The current extensive use of ST suggests that time which may have been previously available for parent-child and caregiver-child interactions may be compromised.

Parenting, defined as "a continuous set of child-rearing behaviors performed by a parent in the context of a parent-child relationship," is a social role steeped in a socio-

cultural context (Mowder, 2005, p. 52). Mowder's (2005) parent development theory (PDT) states that six behaviors compose the parent role, and a parent's level of engagement with these behaviors shifts over time as their children develop. These behaviors include: bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsiveness and sensitivity. The parent role is important for a multitude of reasons. Parents who are able to provide their children with the necessary levels of education, nurturance, protection, responsiveness, sensitivity, and warmth can positively affect their children's development and help them reach their fullest potential (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Baumrind & Thompson; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Kochanska, 1995; Minnard, 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2003).

The parent role is tremendously important, not just for children as individuals, but also for society as a whole. Society has many reasons to be invested in the occurrence of appropriate parenting (Pagliocca, Melton, Weisz, & Lyons, 1995). It is essential for parents to provide not only basic needs such as clothing and shelter, but also to instill moral and ethical values, so that children may one day positively contribute to society (e.g., hold a job, instill ethical values in their future children) (Baumrind & Thompson, 2002). For example, parents may be financially prepared to assume general welfare responsibilities for children, but should also be prepared to meet their emotional needs (Mowder, 2005).

According to the PDT (Mowder, 2005), parenthood is a role that is continuous in nature. In other words, parenthood continues throughout the individual parent's life, and ends only through means such as adoption, emancipation, or death of a parent or child. The PDT views parents as individuals who acknowledge, accept, and perform the parent

role (Mowder, 1997, 2005). Individuals' continuous acknowledgement and acceptance of their role as a parent, however, does not necessarily indicate that they continuously perform behaviors associated with the parent role. Because parenting is a role that involves the ongoing process of performing behaviors associated with the social role, when parents acknowledge and accept the parent role, but do not engage fully in performing behaviors consistent with that role, they are not necessarily fulfilling all aspects of the parent role.

Currently, a contemporary trend that may pose unknown consequences to parents' ability or decision to continuously or fully perform the parent role is ST. ST can be described as one's engagement with screened devices, such as computers, e-readers, movies, smartphones, tablets, television (TV), and/or video games (Mayo Clinic, 2011). Screened devices have taken American society by storm; their use has been integrated into even the most mundane aspects of daily living (e.g., checking the weather, paying bills). Americans engage in ST for over 60 hours per week (Pew Research Center, 2014), and many describe their relationship with ST as addictive (Moeller et al., 2011; SodaHead, 2012). While using screened devices, individuals are increasingly distracted from others and the world around them, often spending longer amounts of time than they intend engaging with their screened world (Morrongiello, 2008). This has added an element of complexity to parenting that parents in past generations did not encounter (Blackman & Olszewski, 2014).

Even when parents are not directly performing the role of parent, they have the ability to ensure, to some extent, that someone else is performing the parent role. Mowder (1993; 2002; 2005) differentiates these aspects of the parent role as direct and indirect parenting. Direct parenting represents the times when parents are directly interacting with

their children in the performance of their parent role (e.g., disciplining their children by setting appropriate limits). Indirect parenting takes place when parents try to ensure that their parent role activities are being performed by someone else (e.g., babysitter, daycare). The combination of direct and indirect parenting is relevant in conceptualizing and understanding how the parent role is performed continuously, even when a parent is unavailable to fulfill the parent role. The role of indirect parenting implies that when a parent places their child in the care of a caregiver, they are trying to ensure that a caregiver is meeting the behaviors and some of the responsibilities associated with performing the parent role (Mowder, 1993; 2005).

According to the PDT (Mowder, 2005), parents are individuals who acknowledge, accept, and perform the parent role. Caregivers are similar to parents in that generally, they acknowledge and perform parenting/caregiving duties toward their charges; however, they do not accept the parent role as their own. This distinction between parents and caregivers includes differences that may impact the degree of investment that caregivers have in performing behaviors associated with the parent role. Such differences include, for example, the absence of responsibility to provide basic needs such as shelter and clothing for charges, the potentially lower level of emotional investment that non-parent caregiver's may have in caring for charges, as well as the financial gain of caregivers performing the caregiver role. Variables such as the exchange of money for caretaking services or the length of time spent caring for children (e.g., one week, 5 years), may either positively or negatively impact a caregiver's level of investment to perform caregiving duties. For example, if a caregiver does not believe they are being adequately compensated for their services, this factor may negatively impact their behavior associated with performing the caregiver role and reduce their willingness to do



so. In other words, caregivers are “like parents” but they are not parents, and when in the caregiver role, they are responsible for performing similar behaviors.

Regardless of the distinctions between parents and caregivers, behaviors that are performed by parent and non-parent caregivers are similar and entail attending to children’s needs (e.g., bonding, general welfare and protection). For example, behaviors associated with the parent role that may be similarly performed by both parents and caregivers include: giving directions to a child, keeping a child safe, listening to what a child really says, providing activities for a child, reading to a child, responding to a child in a positive way, sharing interests with a child, or teaching new ideas to a child.

Given that the behaviors required by parents and non-parent caregivers are similar while caring for their charges, the distinction between the two social roles may be less important for the purposes of this study, which is to evaluate caregiver behaviors (e.g., screen time, screen distraction), as well as perceptions of parenting beliefs. In addition, the responses from parent and non-parent caregivers on measures of parent behaviors (e.g., screen time) and perceptions of parenting beliefs within the current sample do not differ significantly (see Chapter IV), and thus they are treated as a single sample, referred to as the Parent Group. Inclusion criteria for participants in the Parent Group are parents and caregivers who look after their charges for at least 20 hours per week. This criterion (i.e., >20 hours) was selected because the level of investment and frequency of parenting behaviors performed by caregivers who spend a large portion of their time (i.e., >20 hours/week) with children is likely to be more consistent with that of a parent, than a caregiver who only spends a few hours per week with children (Olszewski, Asar, Bogatch, & Blackman, 2014).

Society's increasing rates of ST coupled with the potentially addictive nature of ST (Moeller et al., 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014; SodaHead, 2012) may lead to moments in which the ST use of parents and caregivers distracts them from performing behaviors associated with the parent role (e.g., checking email, playing a videogame). The idea that parents and caregivers may be distracted from performing behaviors associated with the parent role due to ST engagement lends itself to the concept of parental screen distraction (PSD). PSD is a construct that emerged from this research and is defined as pertains to the current research.

PSD refers to the moments in which parents or caregivers are distracted from performing behaviors associated with the parent role due to engagement with a screened device. PSD does not include moments in which parents or caregivers and children are engaged in joint-screened activity or when a screen is simply turned on as background noise. Rather, PSD focuses on moments in which parents or caregivers are disengaged from performing behaviors associated with the parent or caregiver role and are absorbed in ST during moments they, perhaps, would otherwise interact with children. Although parent and caregiver screen use does not necessarily equate to time detracted from interactions with children, increased ST use may lessen the frequency with which parents and caregivers engage in behaviors associated with the parent or caregiver role, and may potentially impact relationships with their charges.

The ease with which screened devices afford individuals the ability to shift among social roles (e.g., customer, employee, parent) may contribute to parents' and caregivers' increased PSD and ST use. In fact, parents and caregivers may not even notice the fluidity with which they shift between social roles while using their screened devices. Indeed, even though parents and caregivers may be in physical proximity to children, ST

may limit the attention that they direct toward children. For example, a parent in the midst of playing with Legos with their child may have the sudden impulse to check their work email. If the parent gets out a phone and engages in checking and responding to work emails for 20 minutes, the parent's attention has been directed toward fulfilling the employee role while at the same time, somewhat diverted from performing the behaviors associated with the parent role. This exchange highlights a phenomenon in which the potentially addictive and distractive nature of screened devices may contribute to missed opportunities for parents and caregivers to interact with children, that are perhaps unintentional in nature.

Individuals conceptualize what being a parent means based, in part, on their own prior experiences within a parent-child relationship. According to the PDT, parenting is primarily learned and reflects parents' education, experience, and knowledge of parenting (Mowder, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2005). Early in life, young children begin to appreciate social roles and are able to recognize and describe the characteristics associated with the parent role, indicating that children are keen observers of parent behaviors (Lessuck-Namer, 1998; Mowder, 1997). Accordingly, parenting is not limited to the acceptance, acknowledgement, and performance of the parent role, but also includes the responsibility to model appropriate behavior for children. Correspondingly, caregivers who spend a great deal of time caring for children, share a similar responsibility to model appropriate behavior for children.

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), children observe the people around them behaving in various ways and imitate observed behaviors. With social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) in mind, ST and PSD are behaviors that children may observe and imitate if they witness their parents or caregivers commonly engaging in

them. Not surprisingly, research has identified that parental screen viewing results in increased ST for children (Jago et al., 2012). ST for children has been associated with a host of negative outcomes (e.g., cognitive, mental, physical) (Boone, Gordon-Larsen, Adair, Popkin, 2007; Mark & Janssen, 2008; Page et al., 2010; Singh, Kogan, VanDyck, & Siahpush, 2008; Vandewater, Shim, & Caplovitz, 2004), which suggests that parents' ST has the potential to not only influence the parent-child relationship, but also to influence children's development.

As the uses for ST within daily life (e.g., banking, entertainment, socializing) continue to evolve, the presence of ST within the parent-child and the caregiver-child dynamic will potentially increase as well. Concern in the U.S. regarding the high rates of child ST usage has led to the issuance of public policy statements that recommend limit-setting as a way to curb children's ST use (AAP, 2011). However, seemingly those who interact closely with children (e.g., caregivers, parents) should also be encouraged to limit their own screen use while spending time with children in order to model appropriate ST use and reduce the amount of ST children engage in (Jago et al., 2012).

As children grow and develop perceptions of the parent role, exposure to their parent's and caregiver's ST use will likely impact their views on what constitutes appropriate ST usage within the parent-child/caregiver-child relationship. As children develop into future generations of parents, their early experiences of their parents' and caregivers' ST use will likely influence the way in which they use ST with their own children. Currently, there is little to no precedent for parents or caregivers to draw upon with regard to appropriate ST usage within the parent-child and caregiver-child relationship. Today's parents and caregivers are the pioneers in this respect, potentially

setting examples for generations to come regarding what constitutes appropriate device usage within the parent-child and caregiver-child relationship.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The present study focuses on a contemporary phenomenon regarding ST and the frequency with which parents and caregivers are distracted by screened devices within the context of their performance of behaviors associated with the parent role. The variable of interest in the current study is the relationship between parent and caregiver screen time, parent and caregiver screen distraction, and perceptions of parenting behaviors. Additionally, the relationship between PST and children's ST is examined, along with potential moderating demographic variables (e.g., age, education, gender). Prior data (Radesky, et al., 2014) indicates that parental screen distraction during mealtimes may lead to an increase in children's externalizing behaviors and bids for attention; however, there is no study to date that compares parent and caregiver screen behaviors with beliefs about the importance of parenting behaviors.

The overarching focus of this research regards the ST use of parents and caregivers. Since the expectation is that parents' and caregivers' behaviors are similar with regard to caring for children, and there is no difference between the responses of parents and caregivers within the current sample, for the purposes of this study, they are treated as one group, referred to as the Parent Group. Thus, for the purposes of this research, when considering PST and PSD, responses from parents and responses from caregivers who care for children for 20 or more hours per week (i.e., the Parent Group), are examined together. The present research aims to address four research questions related to PST and PSD. The following research questions are posed:

1. Is there a relationship between the time that parents and caregivers spend on electronic devices and the screen time use of children?
2. What is the frequency of PST and PSD, and are the two associated with each other?
3. Are PST and PSD associated with the importance that parents and caregivers place on parenting behaviors? That is, as PST and PSD increase/decrease, do parents' and caregivers' ratings of important parenting behaviors (e.g., bonding, responsiveness, sensitivity) change?
4. Do demographic variables (i.e., annual household income, respondent age, education level, employment status, gender) moderate the relationship between PST and child ST, PST and PSD, and PST, PSD, and the importance that parents and caregivers place on parenting behaviors?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Parenting is an essential role that has long-term implications for children, families, and society as a whole. Psychologists endorse the concept that children's growth and development are directly impacted by the role that parents play in their lives (Baumrind & Thompson, 2002). A contemporary issue facing parents today is the function that ST plays in their lives. Current nationwide trends of ST use highlight patterns of increasing use emerging among parents and children (AVG Technologies, 2015). The potentially addictive nature of ST has led many parents to become dependent on the technology, leaving them unprepared to cope with the challenges ST presents within the parent-child relationship (Brody, 2015).

This chapter presents a review of a broad range of parenting literature including theories, outcome-based research, and research regarding ST. This chapter is organized into three sections; the first section focuses on parenting, so that the importance of the parent-child relationship can be viewed through the use of relevant parenting theories and practice. The second section provides an examination of contemporary research on ST. The third section considers the bidirectional relationship between parenting and ST.

#### **Parenting Research**

The following section outlines a number of parenting theories and research pertaining to the present study. The theories and research discussed were selected based on their relevance in helping to frame the potential impacts of ST use on the parent-child relationship, utilizing the following research: (a) Baumrind (1971) and Maccoby and Martin's (1983) parenting styles; (b) attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1974; Bowlby, 1969); (c) Bandura's (1977) social learning theory; (d) Bronfenbrenner's (1979)

ecological systems theory; (e) Mowder's (2005) PDT; and (f), the development of emotional self-regulation in children.

**Theory of parenting styles.** Diana Baumrind is credited as a pioneer within the realm of parenting research. Her research has not only established a theoretical basis with regard to specific types of parenting styles, but Baumrind and many other researchers have also linked her parenting styles with measurable childhood outcomes (e.g., Baumrind, 1971, 1989, 1991; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). This research, focusing on Baumrind's parenting styles, provides a context to examine parents and parenting with regard to the function of ST within the current parent role. That is, Baumrind's parenting styles can be used as a framework to consider parent behaviors that may be impacted by the use of ST, and the importance this may exert over children's developmental trajectory.

Baumrind (1967, 1971, 1989, 1991) conducted extensive studies on parent-child interactions spanning four decades and developed a theory of parenting styles distinguishing three qualitatively different patterns of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive, generally based on the dimensions of warmth and control. Research indicated that each of these parenting styles impacts the way children function cognitively, emotionally, and socially (Dornbusch et al., 1987). Each of these parenting styles differs in the behaviors, standards, and values, which parents expect their children to adopt.

Baumrind (1971) suggests authoritarian parents tend to set rigid rules, demand obedience, and use strategies such as the withdrawal of love or approval to force a child to conform. Authoritarian parents emphasize conformity and respect for authority with little affection or support. These parents are more likely to use power and assertive