
Attention to Attention!

A growing need for educators and parents in the digital age
Part 1 of a study on human attentive faculties

— Holly Koteen-Soulé

Watching a small child pursue a beetle as it crawls through a thicket of grass, or follow the course of silvery raindrop down a windowpane, or all-consumingly lick an ice cream cone, is a study in devoted attention. As parents and teachers, we are tickled by the full-bodied ability of the young child to focus on an object or experience.

These delightful images stand in sharp contrast to the all-too-common sight of a plugged-in park walker oblivious to his surroundings, or two people at a restaurant both looking at their phones, rather than into each other's eyes!

What has happened in the intervening years? How might these contrasting phenomena be related? How has technology, the smartphone in particular, changed our lives, our children's lives, and our parenting?

We know that electronic technology can be both useful and challenging. We also know that research strongly suggests that excessive media use is deleterious, especially to the health and development of children and teens. While televisions and computers can be sequestered away or turned off, the smartphone has become ubiquitous in everyday life. Like other electronic technology, but to an even greater extent, the smartphone has tethered our attention, mostly without our being aware of it.

Warning messages from the tech industry

A recent feature in *The Guardian* highlighted several designers and product developers who have begun speaking out about the dangers and unintended consequences of technological innovations, particularly the smartphone. One recent study, according to Justin Rosenstein, found that the mere presence of the smartphone, even when it is turned off, damages cognitive capacity. "Everyone is distracted. All of the time." A former Google employee, Tristan Harris, gave a TED talk in Vancouver in which he said, "All of us are jacked into the system. All of our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free

as we think they are. I don't know a more urgent problem than this. It's changing our democracy, and it's changing our conversations and the relationships we want to have with each other." Harris was the author of a 2013 memo to fellow Google employees titled, "A Call to Minimize Distraction and Respect User's Attention," and has subsequently made his concerns public. Loren Brichter, who designed the pull-to-refresh feature used in many apps, admits that, "Smartphones are useful tools, but they're addictive." As Paul Lewis laments in the *Guardian* article, "I have two kids and regret every moment that I am not paying attention to them because my smart phone has sucked me in."

What is attention?

Attention is a primary factor in both parenting and education. We talk about "paying attention," "attention-getting behavior," and "attention deficit disorder," for example. Generally speaking, attention can be understood as a basic constituent and function of human consciousness. From this point of view, what does it mean, for us and our children, that technology has "grabbed our attention"?

The American philosopher William James explored consciousness and attention, along with many other topics, in his seminal work, *The Principles of Psychology*. He describes attention as naturally selective. He explains that at any moment, outward life presents itself to us in myriad sensory possibilities. What interests us and what we attend to is what forms our experience of life (James, *Principles*, Vol. 1, Chap. 40). Voluntary attention, requiring an effort of will, is quite different from the experience of involuntary attention (James, *Principles*, Vol. 2, Chap. 26).

When we are online, our ability to freely direct our attention may be more illusory than real, in part because the interests of others are often leading and shaping us, as much as or more than our own interests.

The Attention Economy

The Attention Economy, a 2001 book by Thomas Davenport and John C. Beck, attributes the original concept of an “attention economy” to Herbert Simon, an economist and computer scientist, who wrote in 1971:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else; a scarcity of whatever that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently.

(Simon, “Designing Organizations”)

In the decades since then, the consumer’s finite attention has been recognized as an increasingly valuable resource, especially for online businesses. We have all experienced how tantalizing ads and headlines can interrupt our online sessions. We could even say that our attention has been commodified, not unlike the way labor became commodified during the Industrial Revolution.

Matthew Crawford, author of *The World Beyond Your Head*, wrote in 2015:

Attention is a resource; a person has only so much of it. And yet we’ve auctioned off more and more of our public space to private commercial interests, with their constant demands on us to look at the products on display or simply absorb some bit of corporate messaging. Lately, our self-appointed disrupters have opened up a new frontier of capitalism, complete with its own frontier ethic: to boldly dig up and monetize every bit of private head space by appropriating our collective attention. In the process, we’ve sacrificed silence—the condition of not being addressed. And just as clean air makes it possible to breathe, silence makes it possible to think. What if we saw attention in the same way that we saw air or water, as a valuable resource that

we hold in common? Perhaps, if we could envision an “attentional commons,” then we could figure out how to protect it.

(Crawford, “The Cost of Paying Attention”)

Davenport and Beck refer to attention as “the new currency of business,” but their focus is primarily on the psychological and organizational consequences of employees’ feeling overwhelmed by an imbalance of information to available attention and the importance of attention management.

They describe four symptoms of “organizational ADD” (Attention Deficit Disorder):

- 1) Increased likelihood of missing key information when making decisions.
- 2) Diminished time for reflection on anything else but email, etc.
- 3) Difficulty of holding others’ attention without increased glitziness.
- 4) Decreased ability to focus when necessary (Davenport, *Attention Economy*, p. 7).

When I shared these symptoms with a group of educators, they agreed that all four also describe the learning problems they observe in grades and high-school students.

What happens to a child’s developing capacity to consciously direct his or her attention, when the attention of adults and older students is divided, distracted, or even deficient, as Davenport and Beck describe?

Attention and presence

We used to speak about the importance of “quality time” with our children. Now, in the midst of our ultra-busy, multitasking lifestyle, we need to be keenly aware of the quality of our attention. Are we fully present or are we only offering a shell of ourselves?

The potency of a conversation or interaction between two people depends a great deal on the

quality of the attention that they give to each other. Is there a genuine interest in connecting? How well are we listening to each other? We have all experienced going through the motions of being social, while preoccupied with thoughts, feelings or plans that have nothing to do with what is happening at the moment.

This is particularly poignant in a conversation between an adult and a child. A spouse who does not have the full attention of his or her partner may register an objection and get fuller participation. It is rare for a young child to be able to do the same. A tantrum may ensue, but if its cause is not recognized, is unlikely to achieve a satisfactory resolution for either child or parent.

I did witness a four-year-old child say, in a surprisingly wise and authoritative voice, to his father, as his father glanced at his phone to see who had just sent him a message, “Put down your phone, Dad!” The implication was clear: “I am talking to you.” The father complied, of course.

During my many years as an early childhood teacher, I observed many interactions between children and adults. A young child can readily sense if and when “someone is at home.” Typically, the child first relaxes and then becomes more animated. The image that best captures what can happen is of the sun coming out from behind a cloud! Children who sense the conscious, generous, fully present attention of adults around them can feel affirmed in their active devotion to life and supported to enter more firmly into their own beings.

Imitation in the formative early years and beyond

Our own attention is critical in a young child’s development, because in his first seven years, the child learns everything through imitation. We can recognize this fairly easily with regard to how children learn to walk and speak, but imitation in the young child goes much deeper than that. Rudolf Steiner characterizes the young child as wholly sense

organ, such that they take in everything in their surroundings, especially everything connected to the human beings with whom they have daily contact.

But it is what you are that matters; if you are good this will appear in your gestures; if you are bad-tempered this will also appear in your gestures—in short, everything that you do yourself passes over into the children and makes its way within them. This is the essential point. Children are wholly sense organ, and react to all the impressions of the people around them. Therefore the essential thing is not to imagine that children learn what is good or bad, that they learn this or that, but to know that everything that is done in their presence is transformed in the childish organisms into spirit, soul and body. The health of the children for their whole life depends on how you conduct yourself in their presence. The inclinations that children develop depend on how you behave in their presence.

(Steiner, *Kingdom of Childhood*, p. 18)

From this perspective, it seems clear to me that the quality of attention of the people with whom a child regularly interacts undoubtedly has an influence on the child, especially before the age of seven, when the capacity for imitation is strongest. The question that such a thought naturally brings up is how much of the rise of ADD and ADHD in our children today is due to their own constitutional situations and how much is the result of or aggravated by the quality of the attention they receive from the adults in their lives.

In a 2017 lecture in Seattle, Michaela Glöckler, a medical doctor and former Head of the Medical Section at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, spoke about the relationship between fundamental experiences in the first three years of a child’s life and three major health and educational challenges in older children and teens. She correlated attention deficiency problems with a lack of concentrated

or focused attention in the first year of life; problems of depression and aggression with the lack of a peaceful atmosphere for listening in the second year of life; problems of addictions and dependencies with a lack of feeling accepted, or of having an inner space to feel at home in the third year of life.

These thoughts, in addition to much recent research, certainly underscore the foundational importance of the early years. I believe that the degradation of the quality of our own attention and its effect on our children is an area that bears greater study, as it may well have a role in many of the current challenges described above that are facing the children in our society today.

My study has been focused primarily on the child under the age of seven. However, the effects of electronic devices on the capacity for attention of older children, while they may be less physiological in nature, are no less impactful to their development. Older children are still developing their capacity for attention and attention management and still need healthy role models in their parents and teachers, in relation to media use as well as in other areas of life. ♦

Resources:

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