

# How Your Teen's Phone Is Ruining Her Concentration

Multitasking leads to shallower thinking and more time spent working, especially for kids who struggle with attention

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We know texting while driving has consequences, but what about texting when doing homework?

It's something almost all kids do, and most parents have also been known to check their text messages at their desk. If we're being honest, most of us have our cell phone within arm's reach when we're at work, and we will glance at it from time to time. When we're defending the practice we call it "multitasking." How bad could it really be?

Pretty bad, according to a [recent study](#) that found the mere presence of a smartphone reduces a person's ability to focus. In the study, undergraduates asked to leave their phones in another room did better on cognitive tests than those who were asked to silence their phones and leave them face down on their desk or in a bag.

In the experiment, even students who said they weren't thinking consciously about their cell phones still experienced a loss in ability, which means some of this distraction is happening on an unconscious level. This is bad news for those of us who think we're pretty good at not being distracted by the phone when we're working.

"I hear about these issues about technology all the time," says Matt Cruger, director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute. He says that with the kids he works with, he isn't concerned about their capacity to be able to do homework, but with "the capacity to really get in the mindset of thinking about homework-related activities." In other words, they could do their work if they were able to focus on it. And while trouble focusing on homework is hardly something new for children, captivating new technologies aren't making it any easier.

## Distraction devices

Why are tech devices so distracting? For starters, most apps and web content are engineered to be as user-friendly and addictive as possible. They ping us with notifications when we get a new message or when someone has posted something we might be interested in. They are reliable sources of validation that tell us when someone likes something we've posted.

And we know there is always something new to look at. Even if we haven't heard the buzz alerting us to something new, we might find ourselves restlessly reaching for the phone to scroll through the constantly updating feeds full of pictures and headlines and jokes curated just for us. We might also feel some pressure to keep up.

But there are also some less-obvious reasons why kids may be particularly hooked. Phones are where young people [do a lot of their socializing now](#), especially as they reach the [pre-teen](#) and teenage years, when their major developmental goals are to start crafting an identity separate from their parents and to prioritize forming friendships with their peers — goals that are made for spending hours on social media.

Compared to adults, kids also have a less developed ability to control their impulses. If it's sometimes hard for their parents to unplug, imagine how hard it is for a child who struggles with impulsivity or a teen with a new BFF to resist checking her phone. Prioritizing getting started on a book report or even studying for tomorrow's test won't be nearly as compelling.

## Multitasking

Many adults and kids share the idea that when we are texting or monitoring feeds while we work we are still being productive — we are able to juggle everything at once. But neuropsychologists aren't optimistic about how productive multitasking really is. “Having multiple sources of technology at your fingertips and available at all times probably is almost a guarantee of a reduction in performance and productivity,” says Dr. Cruger.

For one thing, there's what experts call “resumption lag.” That's the period of time between when you were interrupted from a task and when you resume it. Transitioning between tasks isn't seamless, and the time spent collecting your thoughts prior to resuming a task add up.

A [study out of Stanford in 2009](#) examined how well multitaskers are able to process information. People considered heavy media multitaskers were found to have more difficulty ignoring irrelevant but distracting things in their environment. As a result they actually performed worse on a test of task switching ability when compared to people who were lighter multitaskers.

Multitasking means working less efficiently even when you think you're applying yourself. That's because people dividing their attention aren't able to engage in their work with the fluency they might otherwise have. “They're not free to think about what's the best way to do something,” Dr. Cruger explains. “Kids will start a task, try to get the task done, but not take the time to travel along and figure out how to do the task best.”

While the work might still get finished, multitasking adds up to shallower thinking and more time spent actually working. But it's hard for kids to see it that way. “If you haven't

really established a disciplined routine for learning and thinking, it's hard to have a sense of what to compare your current performance against," notes Dr. Cruger.

## Kids who struggle with attention

There's a kind of myth that kids who have ADHD are uniquely suited to multitasking.

At a Child Mind Institute [event](#) about how children are affected by technology, Ali Wentworth, actress, comedian and host of the event, described how she found her teenage daughter the evening before: She was doing her homework on one screen, texting on another, with *Gilmore Girls* playing on a third. When Wentworth protested, her daughter told her, "I have ADHD. This is how I do my homework."

In reality, multitasking during homework can be particularly difficult for kids who have ADHD.

"There's pretty compelling literature that suggests that nobody is actually good at multitasking, but I think kids who have ADHD also have a set of cognitive distortions about their skills and capacities," says Dr. Cruger. "They're probably worse at multitasking than people without ADHD, but they often think they're better at it."

That might be because the constant stimulation offered by tech devices is [very appealing to kids with ADHD](#). Short bursts of attention, with immediate rewards, are easier for them than paying sustained attention. But trying to do both at the same time — juggling homework and Snapchat — would be particularly difficult for them.

That's because people with ADHD struggle with [executive functions](#), which are the self-regulating skills we use to do things like shift between situations, control our emotions and impulsivity, and organize and make plans. These are all skills that are integral to doing homework and they are weakened further when we are dividing our attention across multiple platforms.

"One of the psychological impacts for people with ADHD is they have to make smart decisions about how to use their resources wisely because they have limited attentional resources and they have limited capacity to do the hard work of learning naturally," explains Dr. Cruger. "It just takes more effort for them."

Given that kids with ADHD are particularly susceptible to the stimulation that tech devices provide, and that focusing on homework is already harder for them, successfully doing both would be incredibly difficult.

## A distraction-free mind

Setting up a [homework routine](#) that minimizes distractions is important, especially if your child struggles with attention, or seems to be finding that her homework is taking much longer than it should.

Let her know that the goal is to make doing homework easier and less stressful. Removing those distractions should improve her homework experience and leave her with more actual free time.

If it's difficult to get your child's buy-in, establishing regular homework breaks where she gets to walk away from her homework and check social media or check her texts can make this an easier sell. But to be effective, the breaks should be planned and discrete — they shouldn't bleed into homework time and ideally they should happen away from her study space, which should be a place for focusing.

This sort of discipline might not come naturally to kids or adults, but learning to unplug from distractions is a life skill that will become increasingly important as technology becomes more absorbing, and the need to learn and stay focused doesn't go away.