Present but Absent: Phubbing and Technoference in Family Life, and How to Reclaim Our Attention for Those We Love

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Abstract

This article examines phubbing, the practice of turning to a phone while someone else is trying to engage with us, and technoference, the wider interruption of family life by digital devices. It reviews evidence on couple satisfaction, conflict, coparenting and child behaviour, considers why phone distraction becomes ordinary, and discusses the limits of the evidence for Emirati and other Arab families. It closes with practical steps families can try.

Introduction

A child starts telling his father what happened at school. His father looks up from his phone, says, “Go on, I’m listening,” and returns to the screen. He may have heard every word. His son was waiting for someone to notice his tone and ask what had upset him. If that scene keeps repeating, the child may tell a shorter story next time or wait until someone seems ready to listen.

Public discussion of screens tends to focus on children and teenagers. What adults do around each other matters too. The way family members give and withdraw their attention shapes the conversations they have and what they feel comfortable sharing. Research over the past decade gives us a clearer picture of these patterns, although important questions remain.

What is phubbing?

The word blends phone and snubbing. It describes diverting attention to a phone during a social interaction (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). The term gained currency in 2012 through an Australian campaign associated with the Macquarie Dictionary. Roberts and David (2016) developed a nine-item measure of partner phubbing, with examples such as glancing at a phone mid-conversation.

Technoference covers a wider range of interruptions to shared activities and conversations caused by digital devices, whether intentional or incidental (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). A tablet or another screen can interrupt family life in much the same way. Many of these interruptions arise from everyday habits, such as checking messages at dinner.

How it looks at home

A girl holds up a drawing while her mother reads a work message. A teenager answers his father in a few words without looking up from a game. One partner tries to discuss something difficult while the other keeps answering texts. A grandfather stops telling a story after his grandchild’s attention shifts to a screen. Siblings trying to make a family decision may find themselves talking to people who are all looking elsewhere.

An urgent call is easier to understand when the person taking it explains why and picks up the conversation at the point where it stopped.

What the research says

Couples and coparenting

In an early US study of 143 married or cohabiting women, participants commonly reported interruptions during leisure, meals and conversations. Higher technoference was associated with greater conflict over technology, lower relationship and life satisfaction, and more depressive symptoms (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

Roberts and David (2016) surveyed 453 US adults across two studies. In their second sample, 46.3% reported being phubbed by their partner and 22.6% said it had caused conflict. The researchers linked partner phubbing with phone-related conflict, which in turn was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. The latter was associated with lower life satisfaction and depressive symptoms. People with more anxious attachment reported greater conflict over phone use.

A later study of two samples of 182 and 239 couples in the United States and Canada connected technology interruptions with conflict and, in turn, with lower relationship satisfaction and poorer perceived coparenting (McDaniel et al., 2018). A meta-analysis of 52 studies likewise found associations with poorer relationship outcomes, including lower responsiveness and intimacy (Ni et al., 2025).

Parents and children

In an observation of 55 caregivers and young children at fast-food restaurants, researchers recorded instances of absorbed phone use and harsh responses to children's bids for attention (Radesky et al., 2014). The design gives a view of everyday behaviour. It cannot establish what the devices caused.

Research with 170 US families with young children found associations between interruptions and child behaviour problems (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018a). In subsequent longitudinal work, child behaviour problems, parenting stress and technology interruptions showed signs of a feedback loop. Parents under stress may turn to devices, and frequent interruptions may accompany further difficulties (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018b).

A review of 83 studies found that being phubbed was associated with poorer interpersonal and well-being outcomes, with stronger associations for some outcomes in adolescent samples (Nuñez & Radtke, 2024). Reviews also link parental phubbing with depressive symptoms among adolescents and with children's social and emotional adjustment in studies from China (Lin et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

Enjoying time together

In a field experiment involving meals with friends or family, participants with access to their phones reported more distraction and less enjoyment. A follow-up study found similar associations in everyday interactions (Dwyer et al., 2018).

Why checking the phone becomes ordinary

Fear of missing out, difficulty regulating phone use and learned habits can help explain frequent checking. People who are repeatedly phubbed may come to see it as normal and do it themselves (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Sometimes the reason is practical. A parent may be on call, for example, and another family member may need to coordinate care. Children also learn what counts as listening by watching the adults around them.

Does a phone have an effect simply by being there?

Two early experiments suggested that a visible phone could reduce the quality of a conversation (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). A later replication failed to reproduce that effect (Linares & Sellier, 2021). Advice to families has a firmer basis when it addresses interruptions and distraction during actual use.

How interruptions may affect relationships

One possible mechanism is perceived exclusion. When a person looks at a phone mid-conversation, the speaker can feel pushed aside, regardless of what the phone user intended (Nuñez & Radtke, 2024). Another is reduced responsiveness. Much of listening happens in small exchanges, such as noticing a change in someone's voice and asking a follow-up question. Partner phubbing has been linked with lower responsiveness (Ni et al., 2025). Finally, repeated interruptions can become a source of conflict in their own right. Couples may end up arguing over the phone while the issue they originally wanted to discuss goes unresolved (Roberts & David, 2016; McDaniel et al., 2018).

Evidence from the Arab region

A cross-sectional survey of 741 married participants in Saudi Arabia associated problematic use of phones, the internet, social media and games with more partner phubbing. It also reported an unexpected association between higher phubbing and higher relationship satisfaction. The author suggested that people may view digital engagement as an ordinary and important part of life together (Aljasir, 2022).

That result comes from a single self-reported survey. A meta-analysis also reported variation across Western and Eastern samples (Ni et al., 2025). Emirati families need more direct study. Extended-family gatherings, weekly visits and conversations across generations in a majlis offer settings that research centred on nuclear households elsewhere may overlook.

Limits of the evidence

Most studies are cross-sectional, and many rely on what participants say about their own behaviour or their partner's. Tension at home may lead to more phone use, and some relationships may run in both directions. Much of the evidence comes from outside the Arab region. Purpose matters as well. A message can help partners stay close when apart, and looking at something together on a screen can be a shared activity. The issue examined here is what happens when a device repeatedly draws attention away from the person in the room.

What families can try

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a family media plan that includes screen-free places and times and involves children in the discussion. Some of the steps below are practical suggestions informed by the research and still need testing in controlled interventions.

Couples

Explain an interruption and return to the conversation. "I'm waiting for a reply from work. I'll answer it and then we can finish talking." After replying, pick up where you left off. Agree on one or two places or times when both of you can set your phones aside. When something bothers you, describe the particular conversation and what you needed from your partner. That gives you something concrete to agree on.

Parents

Start with one meal or the first ten minutes of an evening together. Agree with children on how to handle urgent calls and try the arrangement for a week. Adults can model the rule by setting their phones aside when someone starts talking. If a message has distracted you, say, "I missed the last part. I want to hear it."

Turn towards the speaker, let them finish and ask a question about what they said. If there is something worth seeing on the screen, share it. When family life feels strained, consider whether stress is leading anyone to withdraw into a device and whether practical support would help. Try

using the first five minutes after you come home to greet people and ask how their day went.

Family practitioners

Ask how family members use phones when they are together. Explore what sits behind the interruptions, including work demands, stress, loneliness or insecurity. Help families practise a specific way to pause, explain an interruption and resume a conversation.

Community institutions and researchers

Family guidance and marriage preparation programmes can include digital habits and assess the effect of that guidance. Schools and community centres can connect digital well-being with family communication. UAE and Gulf research institutions could use longitudinal designs and objective device-use measures alongside self-reports, with attention to extended families and intergenerational gatherings. Public education can focus on the effects of actual distraction and acknowledge where the evidence is uncertain.

Conclusion

Family attention is built in small exchanges. A phone check that seems trivial in isolation may become a recurring source of tension when it repeatedly interrupts conversation. Research links these patterns with couple satisfaction, coparenting and child behaviour, while leaving room for different family and cultural contexts.

At your next family gathering, try putting the phone down when someone begins to speak. Ask one question about what they said. That may be all they need to finish the story they were about to shorten.

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