



ONE HANDED PARENTING

By Wilson McCaskill

There is endless commentary in all forms of media, social included, on the pervasive and addictive influence of mobile phones and social media on every area of human interaction.

“We are creating tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works,” said Chamath Palihapitiya, the former Facebook executive to an audience at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

How many of those listening to Chamath were parents with babies yet to complete their first one thousand days of life I have no idea. But I imagine those parents were aware that the human brain is not really ready to be born until it is three years old. And, as they would all have been well educated, they would also know that the brain is only 15% connected when born and the remaining 85% of connections happen outside the womb.

Sadly, I am sure that a percentage of those parents with babies whose brains are busily gathering data to determine what will be needed to survive for the rest of their lives, will have fallen in to the costly trap of **one-handed parenting**.

You see it everywhere: in parks, cafes, restaurants, on trains, planes, buses, beaches, boardwalks and anywhere a parent/s might be with a baby. It has become accepted and acceptable behaviour...a baby nestled in the crook of a parent's arm while the hand on the other arm nurses a mobile phone that is communicating constantly with the world beyond baby. Parent is connected while baby is disconnected from the essential tactile, physical, vocal and emotional interaction its brain needs at this crucial time in its development.

While the brain may be only 15% percent connected when born it is never-the-less a very sophisticated sponge and thrives on volumes of multi-sensory input and I daresay baby hungers for parent to put down the phone and cradle its bottom in the cup of that very able phone hand. Those gentle and repetitive taps on the posterior that parents reflexively do, and that rubbing and squeezing of baby's legs convey messages and meaning we can't possibly quantify or fully understand...but they are essential, which is why they happen reflexively...unless of course interrupted by the addictive pull of a very smart phone.

I want somebody to measure the time today's parents spend staring into the eyes of their babies without being distracted. I want to believe nothing has changed since phones became smart. However, where once a smile and the facial gymnastics that followed was communication of the highest order; today a smile from baby is just as likely to be photographed by parent, shown to baby and then posted to trigger a mini avalanche of comments that distract said parent from the most important thing at hand...meaningful, undistracted, in the moment bonding with baby who doesn't give a



stuff about the photo of themselves smiling and would much prefer a deep exchange with parent minus the digital device constantly hanging between them.

Worryingly, prams now have mobile phone holders attached to the handlebar so parent can safely steer with two hands and not miss out on anything digitally streaming their way. From baby's perspective Mum or Dad are people with a rectangle blotting out most of their face.

Gone are conversations about the surrounding landscape, strange noises and interesting smells. Gone is the pleasure of just watching parent interact with the world and sharing that experience with words not yet understood but with tones and inflections that deepen connection and the pleasure of being alive.

Mum and Dad both think they are on the ball and fully present in the baby's life. Unfortunately, constantly glancing at their phone and responding to its pleas for attention have become a habit they are not aware of. Unlike real baby, *phone baby* has many more tricks up its phone cover to attract and monopolise the attention of not just Mum and Dad but nana, pop, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew and neighbour.

On several occasions, real baby has felt threatened by their digital sibling's superior connection seeking skills and has cried out in full voice hoping that meaningful and undivided attention would be the response; only to find it was quickly given Dad's old *phone baby* to play with so parents could enjoy a moment with Mum's very shiny, very attractive, brand new *phone baby*.

One handed parenting, no matter how sophisticated the phone in the other hand may be, supplies insufficient developmental fertiliser for wholesome growth of baby's brain.

The more babies see smiling faces the more they learn to smile in response. Seeing Mum and Dad smile at them and each other is especially important. Noticing they can trigger Mum and Dad to smile and then, in turn, share their smile with others is good for baby. All those smiles train baby's facial muscles to do likewise and each time baby smiles laughs, chuckles and chortles it is rewarded with the feel good of being loved, cared for, noticed, appreciated and wanted. Even if science didn't inform us that focused connection is good for baby, plain commonsense certainly does.

That is the trouble with addictions; they over ride commonsense. Having real babies compete with *phone babies* is nonsensical but increasingly they have to. A sign of the damage this competition causes is the increasing number of young children whose faces have disconnected from their feelings.

Teachers will be no strangers to children who say they had an awesome holiday with a facial expression and tone of voice that falls far short of the claimed experience. Young faces that fail to mirror the words they are using point to a possible lack of face-on-face communication. I speculate that too often they have attempted to communicate without the developmental advantages of being heard by an active listener: a listener whose eyes met theirs and resisted the temptation to be distracted.



These children can be helped by asking them to connect their face to their story. This simple instruction can bring worthwhile results and persistence will lead to children who are emotionally engaged in their own stories.

Smiling is in itself a soothing skill and those whose faces naturally hover in the always *ready to smile* position are invariably less stressed, more optimistic and happier to engage and interact with others. Our brains are easily duped into releasing feel good chemicals and the act of smiling, even when we have little reason to do so, tricks our brain into doing just that. Our brains will even make us feel good when we see someone else smiling. Hence, smiling at discontented babies while trying to soothe them often proves effective.

Cultivating the habit of being quick to smile is best done in the first one thousand days and made that much harder when real babies compete with *phone babies*. Children who come to school without this habit need the intensive therapy of being surrounded by those who do have it...especially the adults who guide them. It behooves primary schools to ensure that staff models a penchant to smile...that students see them as a smiling staff who are eager to engage and connect.

Phone babies are here to stay and no one can deny that they have brought much good into the world and will continue to do so. Parents however, will need to be careful that their *phone babies* do not directly or indirectly damage the development of real babies and the easiest way to ensure that, especially in the first one thousand days, is to never parent one handed and to put *phone baby* away when connecting with real baby.

A word of warning to parents: When *phone baby* sees you connecting with real baby it will get jealous and do everything it can to attract and hold your attention. Remember, it knows you well and won't give up while there is charge in its battery. To resist, focus on smiling at your real baby and look deep into its eyes. From this you will get something *phone baby* can't give you...**yet.**