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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The smartphone has become a metronome. This is how we change the beat

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Without thinking about it much, children mimic their parents. It was when my husband — a veteran journalist — and I found ourselves glued to our phones for work at home, and tweeting compulsively, that I began to worry about what it was teaching our kids.

What were we modelling? What was it doing to us? We were increasingly alone while together, particularly after our young teens retreated into their bedrooms to use their own smartphones, a development that quickened their inevitable withdrawal from us.

Cyberspace is more intense and exciting than the real world, a world of continuous competition and commerce. It's also easier to navigate. But what grabs our attention there isn't necessarily what's needed for us to grow well.

While we were working out boundaries for our children, I began to think about boundaries for us, looking for other ways to find joy and meaning in our own lives in the hope we could spark it in our kids, because it isn't children who are driving the digital revolution. It's us, adults.

Screens Everywhere

We have normalised the extraordinary take-up of personal screens. Schools have made them compulsory. Adults have become dependent, blurring the lines between public and private, home and work.

It's making everyone in the family more emotionally brittle, less present. It was just this week, when at a school assembly I noticed how many grown-ups — there, after all, to eye-ball and champion students — were scrolling and checking notifications habitually.

Smartphones have thinned relationships. If parents and carers are constantly checking their devices, their children feel less important. If your partner is on the phone all day and night, your relationship with your partner suffers. It makes it hard to be at ease. It is a recipe for anxiety.

We have always sought to be entertained. My parents' and my generation were mesmerised by the television, which replaced the hearth or the fire. The difference with modern media and families is that the television set was in the centre of a common space and the evening shows were usually watched together.

The smartphone is more than a tool, it has become a metronome; dictating a rhythm that deprives us of the ability to concentrate on just one thing. One of them is conversations; active-listening, 'ebb and flow' conversations that matter. Without face-to-face conversations we find it harder to

reflect. For children growing up, conversations are the bedrock of development. A way to fight back is "table-time talk" over dinner at least a few times a week.

Another casualty of our smartphone addiction is our patience with messiness; sensory tactile messiness.

How I quit my phone

A few years ago I became so concerned about where technology was taking us that I quit Facebook and more dramatically, quit my phone-dependent job. I went into rehab in the form of art school — getting messy with paint and clay and observing the world in a different way. There are screens and the performative elements of social media in the art world too, but they are not obligatory.

Even the most simple exercise of drawing with charcoal or ink is therapeutic, especially for young people for whom playdates often involve screens.

"I have a student who loves his computer games but drawing from observation has helped him see," a teacher told me. "Sadly, you have to teach play these days."

How can you learn to play without getting messy?

During the July school holidays an art gallery assistant told me how apologetic parents were about their children leaving marks on tables after an art workshop. "We don't make art at home. It's too messy," one told her. "That's why we give them the iPad."

The physicality of art materials can be a surprise for those of us who aren't used to squeezing tubes of paint, mixing plaster moulds and gluing collaged paper. Using our hands is part of developing and strengthening eye coordination and neural pathways.

I reclaimed making and doing things with real materials. It also proved a way of engaging practical science and my whole body. Making complex sculptures proved very rewarding.

I learnt the basics of welding and timber work with a mitre. It took some risk, which is what we want our young people to do too.

Developing any skill, given time, requires discipline, patience and fortitude, which has got to be good for emotional agility, whatever your age.

My family's challenges haven't disappeared but they have eased as we have talked about them and invested in alternatives to screens. Not everyone can change jobs or quit to go to art school but in lesser ways we can all renew our passions and support lives offscreens.

As we do, we will find our children do too. They pay more attention to what we do than what we say.