

*"In winter, the stars seem to have rekindled their fires, the moon achieves a fuller triumph, and the heavens wear a look of a more exalted simplicity."* ~ John Burroughs

## School Calendar

### This Week

#### Tuesday, December 4

7th Grade to Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Grades 1, 2, 3 Parent Evening 6:30-8:30 pm

#### Friday, December 7

Early Dismissal – Winter Fair Set-up 1:00 pm

#### Saturday, December 8

River Valley Open House 9:45-11:00 am  
Winter Fair 11:00 am-3:00 pm

### Looking Ahead

#### Friday, December 14

Holiday Candlelight Concert 6:30 pm

#### Thursday, December 20

Shepherds Play 7:30 pm

#### Friday, December 21

Shepherds Play 11:30 am  
Early Dismissal 1:00 pm

#### Monday-Friday, December 24-January 4

Holiday Break – No School

#### Monday, January 7

School Resumes

#### How to Contact Us

info@rivervalleyschool.org  
lc@rivervalleyschool.org  
bot@rivervalleyschool.org  
pc@rivervalleyschool.org

### School Pictures are Now Available!

Hopefully by now you've had a chance to see the portraits hanging in the school lobby. You can purchase your child's portrait and class picture by visiting: <https://hsmphotography.smugmug.com/Other/RVWS-School-Portraits-Class-Pictures-2018/>. The password for this protected gallery is: rvws2018

Please order by December 15th!

Hilary will be donating a portion of the order proceeds to the school's Annual Fund and will include a digital image of your child's individual portrait for sharing online with your friends and family when you order by December 15th.

Don't miss **Learning Virtue, Living Virtue**, this month's column from Paul Ritchie at the end of this week's Current.

### Winter Fair Sign up Board in the Lobby

If you haven't signed up for a volunteer shift for Winter Fair, please do!

There are several classrooms that still need help.

Also, gingerbread cookies from Early Childhood through Grade 3 families are needed by Friday and Secret Garden items go in the box in the lobby. Thank you all for your help with this amazing festival.



Celebrate the whimsy of the holiday season at River Valley Waldorf School's most magical festival of the year.

Featuring activities & crafts for all ages, food & desserts, live music, an artisan market and King Winter, himself!

And before Winter Fair, join us for our

**OPEN HOUSE | 9:45AM - 11AM**

(Nursery, pre-k, kindergarten & grades 1-8)

Learn about our programs, meet teachers, alumni and parents past & present.  
RSVP to 610-982-5606 or [info@rivervalleyschool.org](mailto:info@rivervalleyschool.org)



1395 Bridgeton Hill Road • Upper Black Eddy, PA • [rivervalleyschool.org](http://rivervalleyschool.org)

### Holiday Candlelight Concert

Friday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 6:30 pm

Grades 4-8 will present a concert of Holiday music on December 14<sup>th</sup> for all to enjoy. Families of younger grades and early childhood children are invited to come share in the festivities.

Students in grades 4 and up are asked to arrive at 6 pm dressed in Concert Attire (see the Parent Handbook for details).

## From Administration

### Schedule for Friday, September 21<sup>st</sup>

On Friday, September 21<sup>st</sup>, the last day of school before our Holiday Break, the Shepherds Play will begin at 11:30 am and there will be an early dismissal at 1 pm. There will be no buses taking children home that day and no Aftercare. Buses will operate only in the morning to bring children to school.

### RVWS is hiring

Kindergarten/Nursery assistant position open for the 2018/2019 school year. We are taking applications now, to start as soon as we find the right candidate. Hours are from 11:30 am until 3:30 pm, Monday through Friday. No teaching experience is necessary, however a love for children, interest in and appreciation for Waldorf education and willingness to learn and take direction from the lead teachers are absolute requirements! Experience working with young children is a plus. Please send a letter of interest and resume to: [lc@rivervalleysschool.org](mailto:lc@rivervalleysschool.org).

### OPEN HOUSE ON SATURDAY – We need your help!

At 9:45 am this Saturday, December 8th, (before Winter Fair) RVWS is holding an Open House. Please invite your friends and family who might like to learn more about our school to attend. If you have a young child and would like to learn more about the grade school program – please plan to attend. The morning will segue perfectly into Winter Fair for ongoing family fun. Faculty and staff will continue to be present in the Open House/Model Classroom space during Winter Fair, so questions and conversations can happen throughout the day.

RSVP to [info@rivervalleysschool.org](mailto:info@rivervalleysschool.org).

- Share the event on social media
- Distribute flyers and postcards in your community
- Take a set of yard signs to display
- Invite family and friends

Thank you and see you there!

## From The Faculty

### What the Children are Learning:

First Grade – Language Arts  
Second Grade – Math  
Third Grade – Arithmetic  
Fourth Grade – Norse Myths

Fifth Grade – Math  
Sixth Grade – Astronomy  
Seventh Grade – History/Age of Discovery  
Eighth Grade – Physics

## From The Board

### November 26 Board Meeting Report and Community Survey Parent Council Forum on Wednesday, December 19

On November 26 the administration, board, and faculty met in a semi-annual collaborative session. The main topic was a discussion of the strategic plan centered on enrollment, led by the strategic planning committee. Thank you to the community members who also attended to participate.

An in-depth discussion of the community survey results led to a much clearer understanding of why parents initially choose RVWS for education and why parents re-enroll, the strengths of the school and where we need to focus to improve. The group also reviewed extensive analysis of area demographics.

**Please join us for another forum to be held with Parent Council on Wednesday December 19 in the evening.** More details to follow.

A summary of the survey results and the next steps for the strategic plan will be published in January, following the Parent Council session.

Thank you to the community for the wonderful survey response rate and the rich, thoughtful comments.

Also, thank you to our strategic plan committee chair David Willey for providing a thorough summary of survey results, and for facilitating the discussion; and to Jackson Harvi, an RVWS alum, who conducted the demographic analysis and created many insightful heat maps and charts.



**Have you heard the buzz?  
Winter Fair Flash Sale!!**

Auction and Gala Tickets will be discounted to last year's ticket price of \$75 during the Winter Fair on Saturday, December 8<sup>th</sup> between 11 am and 2 pm only! This is a onetime offer!

We want to be sure as many families as possible can join in our celebration!

The 100 days leading up to the auction, we will be celebrating 100 Days of Waldorf in honor of the Waldorf Centennial Celebration – highlighting all the reasons we love Waldorf Education and RVWS.

Our messaging will be posted on Facebook, Instagram and on the front desk in the lobby.

Please help us build the excitement about Waldorf Education and our River Valley School Community by sharing our daily messages.

For each "share" you will be entered in our auction raffle basket.

Inspired to share your love for RVWS?

Drop us a note at [auction@rivervalleyschool.org](mailto:auction@rivervalleyschool.org)

Tickets available online at: <https://rvws.ejoinme.org/auction>

## Class Fundraisers

### 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Class Fundraising

The 8th grade students will have a table in the lobby on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons where you can sign up for these services to help raise money for their 8th grade trip.

- Baked goods for sale on Fridays or pre-order holiday breads and pies and cookies.
- Hire an 8th grader for babysitting!
- Hire an 8th grader - or two - for odd jobs - leaf raking, cleaning a closet, assisting with a party!

Thank you,  
RVWS 8th grade class

## From the Community

### Code Blue Shelter

If you're lacking inside shelter in Upper Bucks County during periods of extreme, life-threatening weather (temperature or wind chill of 26°F or below) between November 15 and April 15, your neighbors and friends are ready with an Upper Bucks Code Blue Shelter at the Quakertown Masonic Lodge (501 W Broad St, Quakertown, PA 18951) from 8:15 PM to 7:00 AM the following morning. We'll have a hot meal and breakfast for you as well as shelter.

Car rides will be provided from the following stops—call 267.450.5191 to request a ride:

- Turkey Hill @ Ottsville/Harrow 7:45 PM
- Perkasio Square Shopping Center 7.45 PM

To find out if the shelter is open, contact the Code Blue Status Line: 267.450.5191 after 1:00 PM

The Upper Bucks Code Blue Shelter is a ministry of Advocates for the Homeless of Upper Bucks (AHUB)

### **Holiday Shopping at A Toy Garden**

A Toy Garden, the RVWS family-owned online Waldorf store, is your source for toys, books, woolens, art supplies, stocking stuffers, and all other holiday needs!

River Valley families take 10% off everything in the store with coupon code "RVWS," and shipping charges will be refunded for all local orders picked up at the school!

Visit us today at [atoygarden.com](http://atoygarden.com)!

### **Deck the halls with holiday carolers! Fa la la la la...**

Having a Christmas or holiday party, or know someone who is? Spread the holiday spirit with THE COUNTRY CAROLERS, accapella vocal trio, available now for bookings in your area! Allow these three lovely ladies, Eve Sheldon, Kira Willey and Gina Ricci to spread some holiday cheer and fill your event, restaurant, store or meeting with the harmonious musical sounds of the season. Contact Gina at [ginaricci@live.com](mailto:ginaricci@live.com) for bookings and more info!



### **STUDENT POTTERY SALE PRESENTED BY KISSIMMEE RIVER POTTERY**

Don't miss a chance to shop for unique and beautiful hand-made pottery just in time for Christmas. Friday Dec. 7<sup>th</sup> - Reception 6-9 pm, Saturday Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> & Sunday Dec. 9<sup>th</sup> 10am - 5pm.

### **Come join the fun at OTAC this Fall at Ottsville Traditional Arts Center 250 Durham Road Ottsville**

Join us for holiday cheer and an open mic featuring Richard Finch's Rat Reunion and Kira Wiley & the Pop-Up Choir. Sign up at the door! Young performers will have early sign-ups if needed.

**Saturday December 15<sup>th</sup> 7-10pm • \$5.00 per person, Under 12 free!**

Please bring a little something for the food pantry

Double the fun that afternoon with caroling in Frenchtown and Ottsville!!! Check out the Pop-Up Choir 4-6pm in Frenchtown Art Yard. For more info and tickets contact [artyard.org](http://artyard.org)

#### **OPEN MIC NIGHTS**

Warm, fuzzy and friendly space to step out, reach up and share what you've got or what you're working on! Open Mic sign up list plus a featured performer/musician set . Coffee House will feature 2 or more performer/musician sets plus Open Mic sign up. Sea Shanties and sing along with Grace! \*\*\*Early sign up for kids!!! OTAC is a Great Space and has the most appreciative audience

**OTAC Wednesday Jam and Songs 6:00-8:00 and Open Mic Nights - \$5 per person**

For updates & further details check out [ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com](http://ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com) Facebook page

Questions, interest in a fundraiser, event, performance, workshop, etc. contact Grace Morgan [gracefulm@aol.com](mailto:gracefulm@aol.com)

Ottsville Traditional Arts Center is a multi generational and varied community that provides service through what we all have to share

### **Artyard**

#### **Pop-up Choir Holiday Paper Lantern Caroling in Frenchtown**

**Saturday, December 15, 4-6 pm**

Starting at 4 PM at ArtYard, Kira Wiley, Eve Sheldon and Noah Jarrett will teach simple, fun arrangements of familiar holiday classics as well as festive pop tunes. After rehearsing, the group will walk on the towpath—carrying beautiful paper lanterns—to lovely Bridge Street in Frenchtown, and go a-caroling! Shops will be open late, for holiday shopping and dining after we wrap up at 6 PM. There's no admission fee for this event. We hope you'll join us!

#### **The Art of the Fold: The Making of a Book by Hedi Kyle and Ulla Warchol**

**Final Week – on view until December 9, 2018**

In their new book, The Art of the Fold, Hedi Kyle and her daughter, artist, and architect Ulla Warchol, gathered together in one volume 38 of Hedi's most popular structures. Presented at ArtYard are a number of Hedi's "thinking models" and drawings that contributed to the making of the book, as well as some of her more finished structures.

### **The Unlikely Whole – September 15-December 30 – Curated by Lucinda Warchol**

ArtYard is pleased to present The Unlikely Whole, an exhibition featuring the works of Mariel Capanna, Amie Cunat, Osamu Kobayashi, Amy Pleasant, Kenny Rivero, and Rudy Shepherd. The selected works explore the landscape, the body, memory, and identity as sites of disassembly and reconstruction. Through methods of fragmentation, translation, and repetition, these artists both challenge and reimagine our conception of the whole.

### **Poetry Confessionals – on view until December 30<sup>th</sup>**

Currently on view in our project gallery are ArtYard's Poetry Confessionals which – besides playfully inverting the term confessional poetry – are spaces where a person can sit down and tell a story to a live poet who is listening on the other side, and who will make of your struggles, sorrows, and memories a little poem. Stop by our gallery to test the Confessionals out yourself or to enter our drawing for a free live session with a poet! Confessionals are open for use during our normal gallery hours.

### **The Creative Commons: Progressive Studio Practice - January 12 – April 15**

#### **Opening on Saturday, January 12, 2019, 6:00 - 8:00 PM**

ArtYard is pleased to announce our upcoming exhibition, The Creative Commons: Progressive Studio Practice from the Creative Growth Art Center, LAND Gallery, and the Center for Creative Works. This exhibition will feature the works from three non-profit studios influenced by the work of Creative Growth founders Florence and Elias Katz, whose radical approach to art making and inclusion for adults with developmental disabilities launched acclaimed careers and occasioned a sea change in conceptions of contemporary art.

#### **Friday, January 25, 7:00 PM**

Come to ArtYard to learn how to **make your own crankie device** from cardboard, wood, or reclaimed junk with Mike Tyksinski and Eric Fiorito.

#### **January 31- February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

#### **Poetryyard's Intensive Residential Workshop with Ross Gay**

A rare opportunity for a small group of only five participants to work closely with a nationally known poet in a workshop-style format.

Gallery Hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 11:00 AM - 5:00 PM.

To learn more about these events, please visit our website [www.artyard.org](http://www.artyard.org)

ArtYard, 62A Trenton Avenue, Frenchtown, NJ 08825

## **Learning Virtue, Living Virtue**

### **Learning Virtue. Living Virtue by Paul Ritchie December – Soul**

"While everyone has a different experience of what is soulful, these experiences do share similar beginnings. We start by giving ourselves permission to be soulful, to take seriously this aspect of ourselves, our soul and our soul needs."

--Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry University of California

Whenever we experience something beautiful, we are with soul. A deep inward breath of fresh, crisp air, followed by a pause and awareness of "how beautiful this is" is itself a prayer of appreciation that we are, in this time and place and awareness, living gratitude that can come from not only beholding beauty, but being one with it.

What is the first thing we can do to be more at one with soul?

First, become observant of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates. We can't care for the soul unless we are familiar with its ways. Soul is about being vulnerable.

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So how do we “manage” the soul to help us resolve the issues we face day to day?

We must understand that care of the soul is not primarily a method of problem solving. Our goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth and value that come with soulfulness.

If soul is not so much a “thing,” then what is it?

Soul is a quality or dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance.

Thomas Moore, psychotherapist and author of "Care of the Soul," wrote:

“The act of entering into the mysteries of the soul, without sentimentality or pessimism, encourages life to blossom forth according to its own designs and with its own unpredictable beauty. Care of the soul is not solving the puzzle of life; quite the opposite, it is an appreciation of the paradoxical mysteries that blend light and darkness into the grandeur of what human life and culture can be.

Bernie Siegel, Founder of Exceptional Cancer Patients declared, “Every day is my best day; this is my life; I’m not going to have this moment again.”

A powerful place to find soul is in the presence of other people we meet at the soul level. This happens when two or more people are truly present in a dialogue that depends on letting go of ego and defenses. Conversations happen in timeless time. This connection nourishes the soul, always.

Conversely, negligence of soul creates a void, an emptiness that creates a slide into all-too-familiar default behaviors, self-rejection and detriment of the soul.

There is no magic spell, no “x steps” to regenerate soul. We must explore the positives and negatives. Only then are we deeply nourished at the center of our being. Poet Wallace Stevens wrote, “Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around the lake. The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn is among the leading voices in stress reduction and mind/body connections for healing. “Zen has an expression, “nothing special.” When you understand “nothing special,” you realize that everything is special.

Everything's special and nothing's special. It's how you see, it's what eyes you're looking through, that matters. Are you looking through eyes of wholeness, or are you looking through eyes of fragmentation? Are you looking through eyes of compassion and self-compassion or are you looking through eyes of greed?”

Rituals can play a role, too. If, say, our meditations impart truth and integrity and they are deep in meaning, then they are rich in soul and so are we. Consider four examples:

Creativity: When we create ideas, we multiply opportunities to experience life, thus nourishing many souls at once;  
Enjoying beauty: Songs, snowflakes, acts of courage, a job well done, the smell of fresh-baked bread. Beauty nourishes the soul;

Humor: Too much seriousness violates the laws of nature. Living a humorless life or never taking time to laugh at ourselves shrinks the soul; and

Work: We honor life when we work. The type of work is not important. All work feeds the soul if it is honest and done to the best of our ability and if it brings joy to others.

There are no set rules. Move as your soul does.

We close this reflection – but not our journey – with the words of Father Alfred D'Sousa:

“For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin – real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be got through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.”

From The Atlantic Magazine via Waldorftoday.com

## The Dangers of Distracted Parenting

When it comes to children's development, parents should worry less about kids' screen time—and more about their own.

By Erika Christakis

Smartphones have by now been implicated in so many crummy outcomes—car fatalities, sleep disturbances, empathy loss, relationship problems, failure to notice a clown on a unicycle—that it almost seems easier to list the things they don't mess up than the things they do. Our society may be reaching peak criticism of digital devices.

Even so, emerging research suggests that a key problem remains underappreciated. It involves kids' development, but it's probably not what you think. More than screen-obsessed young children, we should be concerned about tuned-out parents.

Yes, parents now have more face time with their children than did almost any parents in history. Despite a dramatic increase in the percentage of women in the workforce, mothers today astoundingly spend more time caring for their children than mothers did in the 1960s. But the engagement between parent and child is increasingly low-quality, even ersatz. Parents are constantly present in their children's lives physically, but they are less emotionally attuned. To be clear, I'm not unsympathetic to parents in this predicament. My own adult children like to joke that they wouldn't have survived infancy if I'd had a smartphone in my clutches 25 years ago.

To argue that parents' use of screens is an underappreciated problem isn't to discount the direct risks screens pose to children: Substantial evidence suggests that many types of screen time (especially those involving fast-paced or violent imagery) are damaging to young brains. Today's preschoolers spend more than four hours a day facing a screen. And, since 1970, the average age of onset of "regular" screen use has gone from 4 years to just four months.

Some of the newer interactive games kids play on phones or tablets may be more benign than watching TV (or YouTube), in that they better mimic children's natural play behaviors. And, of course, many well-functioning adults survived a mind-numbing childhood spent watching a lot of cognitive garbage. (My mother—unusually for her time—prohibited *Speed Racer* and *Gilligan's Island* on the grounds of insipidness. That I somehow managed to watch every single episode of each show scores of times has never been explained.) Still, no one really disputes the tremendous opportunity costs to young children who are plugged in to a screen: Time spent on devices is time not spent actively exploring the world and relating to other human beings.

Yet for all the talk about children's screen time, surprisingly little attention is paid to screen use by parents themselves, who now suffer from what the technology expert Linda Stone more than 20 years ago called "continuous partial attention." This condition is harming not just us, as Stone has argued; it is harming our children. The new parental-interaction style can interrupt an ancient emotional cueing system, whose hallmark is responsive communication, the basis of most human learning. We're in uncharted territory.

Child-development experts have different names for the dyadic signaling system between adult and child, which builds the basic architecture of the brain. Jack P. Shonkoff, a pediatrician and the director of Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, calls it the "serve and return" style of communication; the psychologists Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff describe a "conversational duet." The vocal patterns parents everywhere tend to adopt during exchanges with infants and toddlers are marked by a higher-pitched tone, simplified grammar, and engaged, exaggerated enthusiasm. Though this talk is cloying to adult observers, babies can't get enough of it. Not only that: One study showed that infants exposed to this interactive, emotionally responsive speech style at 11 months and 14 months knew twice as many words at age 2 as ones who weren't exposed to it.

Child development is relational, which is why, in one experiment, nine-month-old babies who received a few hours of Mandarin instruction from a live human could isolate specific phonetic elements in the language while another group of babies who received the exact same instruction via video could not. According to Hirsh-Pasek, a professor at Temple University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, more and more studies are confirming the importance of conversation. "Language is the single best predictor of school achievement," she told me, "and the key to strong language skills are those back-and-forth fluent conversations between young children and adults."

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A problem therefore arises when the emotionally resonant adult-child cueing system so essential to early learning is interrupted—by a text, for example, or a quick check-in on Instagram. Anyone who's been mowed down by a smartphone-impaired stroller operator can attest to the ubiquity of the phenomenon. One consequence of such scenarios has been noted by an economist who tracked a rise in children's injuries as smartphones became prevalent. (AT&T rolled out smartphone service at different times in different places, thereby creating an intriguing natural experiment. Area by area, as smartphone adoption rose, childhood ER visits increased.) These findings attracted a decent bit of media attention to the physical dangers posed by distracted parenting, but we have been slower to reckon with its impact on children's cognitive development. "Toddlers cannot learn when we break the flow of conversations by picking up our cellphones or looking at the text that whizzes by our screens," Hirsh-Pasek said.

In the early 2010s, researchers in Boston surreptitiously observed 55 caregivers eating with one or more children in fast-food restaurants. Forty of the adults were absorbed with their phones to varying degrees, some almost entirely ignoring the children (the researchers found that typing and swiping were bigger culprits in this regard than taking a call). Unsurprisingly, many of the children began to make bids for attention, which were frequently ignored. A follow-up study brought 225 mothers and their approximately 6-year-old children into a familiar setting and videotaped their interactions as each parent and child were given foods to try. During the observation period, a quarter of the mothers spontaneously used their phone, and those who did initiated substantially fewer verbal and nonverbal interactions with their child.

Yet another rigorously designed experiment, this one conducted in the Philadelphia area by Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Temple's Jessa Reed, tested the impact of parental cellphone use on children's language learning. Thirty-eight mothers and their 2-year-olds were brought into a room. The mothers were then told that they would need to teach their children two new words (blicking, which was to mean "bouncing," and frepping, which was to mean "shaking") and were given a phone so that investigators could contact them from another room. When the mothers were interrupted by a call, the children did not learn the word, but otherwise they did. In an ironic coda to this study, the researchers had to exclude seven mothers from the analysis, because they didn't answer the phone, "failing to follow protocol." Good for them!

It has never been easy to balance adults' and children's needs, much less their desires, and it's naive to imagine that children could ever be the unwavering center of parental attention. Parents have always left kids to entertain themselves at times—"messaging about in boats," in a memorable phrase from *The Wind in the Willows*, or just lounging aimlessly in playpens. In some respects, 21st-century children's screen time is not very different from the mother's helpers every generation of adults has relied on to keep children occupied. When parents lack playpens, real or proverbial, mayhem is rarely far behind. Caroline Fraser's recent biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of *Little House on the Prairie*, describes the exceptionally ad hoc parenting style of 19th-century frontier parents, who stashed babies on the open doors of ovens for warmth and otherwise left them vulnerable to "all manner of accidents as their mothers tried to cope with competing responsibilities." Wilder herself recounted a variety of near-calamities with her young daughter, Rose; at one point she looked up from her chores to see a pair of riding ponies leaping over the toddler's head.

Occasional parental inattention is not catastrophic (and may even build resilience), but chronic distraction is another story. Smartphone use has been associated with a familiar sign of addiction: Distracted adults grow irritable when their phone use is interrupted; they not only miss emotional cues but actually misread them. A tuned-out parent may be quicker to anger than an engaged one, assuming that a child is trying to be manipulative when, in reality, she just wants attention. Short, deliberate separations can of course be harmless, even healthy, for parent and child alike (especially as children get older and require more independence). But that sort of separation is different from the inattention that occurs when a parent is with a child but communicating through his or her nonengagement that the child is less valuable than an email. A mother telling kids to go out and play, a father saying he needs to concentrate on a chore for the next half hour—these are entirely reasonable responses to the competing demands of adult life. What's going on today, however, is the rise of unpredictable care, governed by the beeps and enticements of smartphones. We seem to have stumbled into the worst model of parenting imaginable—always present physically, thereby blocking children's autonomy, yet only fitfully present emotionally.

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Fixing the problem won't be easy, especially given that it is compounded by dramatic changes in education. More young children than ever (about two-thirds of 4-year-olds) are in some form of institutional care, and recent trends in early-childhood education have filled many of their classrooms with highly scripted lessons and dull, one-sided "teacher talk." In such environments, children have few opportunities for spontaneous conversation.

One piece of good news is that young children are prewired to get what they need from adults, as most of us discover the first time our diverted gaze is jerked back by a pair of pudgy, reproaching hands. Young children will do a lot to get a distracted adult's attention, and if we don't change our behavior, they will attempt to do it for us; we can expect to see a lot more tantrums as today's toddlers age into school. But eventually, children may give up. It takes two to tango, and studies from Romanian orphanages showed the world that there are limits to what a baby brain can do without a willing dance partner. The truth is, we don't really know how much our kids will suffer when we fail to engage.

Of course, adults are also suffering from the current arrangement. Many have built their daily life around the miserable premise that they can always be on—always working, always parenting, always available to their spouse and their own parents and anyone else who might need them, while also staying on top of the news, while also remembering, on the walk to the car, to order more toilet paper from Amazon. They are stuck in the digital equivalent of the spin cycle.

Under the circumstances, it's easier to focus our anxieties on our children's screen time than to pack up our own devices. I understand this tendency all too well. In addition to my roles as a mother and a foster parent, I am the maternal guardian of a middle-aged, overweight dachshund. Being middle-aged and overweight myself, I'd much rather obsess over my dog's caloric intake, restricting him to a grim diet of fibrous kibble, than address my own food regimen and relinquish (heaven forbid) my morning cinnamon bun. Psychologically speaking, this is a classic case of projection—the defensive displacement of one's failings onto relatively blameless others. Where screen time is concerned, most of us need to do a lot less projecting.

If we can get a grip on our "technoference," as some psychologists have called it, we are likely to find that we can do much more for our children simply by doing less—regardless of the quality of their schooling and quite apart from the number of hours we devote to them. Parents should give themselves permission to back off from the suffocating pressure to be all things to all people. Put your kid in a playpen, already! Ditch that soccer-game appearance if you feel like it. Your kid will be fine. But when you are with your child, put down your damned phone.