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Screen Test: The Danger of Digital Fixation

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When it comes to the dangers of the digital age, most parents worry about what is on the screen of the computer. Recent research indicates that the screen itself just might be a very real danger.

Writing in *The New York Times*, physician Perri Klass warns that many parents are unaware of the risks posed by the digital screen. She tells of parents who tell the pediatrician that their child cannot have attention problems because he can watch a digital screen for hours on end. The child may have attention issues elsewhere, but not in front of a screen.



Dr. Klass writes:

In fact, a child's ability to stay focused on a screen, though not anywhere else, is actually characteristic of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. There are complex behavioral and neurological connections linking screens and attention, and many experts believe that these children do spend more time playing video games and watching television than their peers.

Dr. Christopher Lucas of the New York University School of Medicine explains that the kind of attention demanded by the digital screen is very different from that required, for example, by a classroom or a book. The child in the classroom has to pay attention without immediate reward and learn to maintain that attention. When reading, a child has to supply the reward by means of imagination.

But, when focused on a digital screen, the child's attention is rewarded by "frequent intermittent rewards" in the form of hormones released into the brain. The child may grow dependent on these rewards and lose the ability to maintain attentiveness without the pleasurable charges to the brain.

Dr. Klass admits that the research is not yet able to answer the question of which comes first — the dependence on the screen or the lack of attentiveness. Either way, the close association of the digital screen and the attention crisis is well documented.

This does not mean that parents should throw the computer (and other digital devices) out of the house, but it is a wake-up call that Christian parents should note with particular concern. For Christians the issue cannot be merely academic success in the classroom. We must be concerned with the means of grace that make for godliness in the life of the believer. The Christian should be a student of the Scriptures, and this requires the discipline of attentive reading. Attentive worship is another necessary discipline of the Christian life.

Are we creating a generation that cannot worship or read without the need for a dopamine release?

This research is important for us all. The digital revolution has brought wonders and opened new worlds. There is so much to celebrate and appreciate. At the same time, there are real dangers in these new technologies, especially for

children. Parents must set and maintain boundaries for their children . . . and for themselves.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Perri Klass, M.D., “Fixated by Screens, But Seemingly Nothing Else,” *The New York Times*, Monday, May 9, 2011.

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