Technology interference in the parenting of young children: Implications for mothers' perceptions of coparenting

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ABSTRACT

Technology devices and their characteristics have become more pervasive and enticing. The use of these new devices is common, and interruptions due to these devices are likely. This study examines the frequency of technology interference in (a) coparenting relationships—the relationship between parents as they parent their children together—during early infancy/childhood and in (b) various parenting domains (bedtime, mealtime, etc.), as well as (c) associations between technology interference and perceptions of coparenting quality as reported by 203 married/cohabiting mothers. Many mothers perceived that technology interrupted coparenting interactions on occasion, especially during unstructured parenting such as playtime. Mothers rating more interference reported worse coparenting, relationship satisfaction, and depressive symptoms. Technology interference predicted coparenting even after controlling for relationship satisfaction and depressive symptoms. Technology interference likely decreases coordination between parents, leaving some mothers feeling frustrated. Parents may be advised to critically examine and potentially regulate technology use during family interactions.

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1. Introduction

Family life is now permeated with technology devices, with the majority of U.S. adults owning cell phones, computers, tablets, and more (Anderson, 2015). With so many devices it is likely that interference due to this technology will occur in family relationships. Prior research has termed this "technoference" or "technology interference," which is defined as everyday intrusions or interruptions (that are often brief) in couple or family interactions or time spent together due to technology (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). The current paper relates an exploratory study that examines the frequency with which technology interference may

occur in coparenting relationships and in various parenting domains (e.g., bedtime, playtime, etc.) from mothers' perspectives. It also examines how these interruptions may relate to mothers' perceptions of coparenting quality.

1.1. The coparenting relationship

The coparenting relationship consists of the way partners work together as parents, supporting or undermining each other's parenting (Feinberg, 2003). It is a subsystem within the family, and although the couple and coparenting subsystems are related the coparenting subsystem deals primarily with parenting related issues (Feinberg, 2003). The quality of the coparenting relationship in two-parent families can be measured in terms of individual parents' perceptions of the coparenting relationship as well as observations of triadic interactions (i.e., mother, father,

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and child). Furthermore, greater coparenting cooperation and support and lower undermining (both parent reports and observations) in intact families with young infants and children predict greater marital satisfaction and parenting quality (e.g., Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004), as well as child outcomes such as fewer externalizing and internalizing behaviors (for a review, see Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). The influence of coparenting quality on child outcomes can be direct through compromising the emotional security that children feel in regards to their parents (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994) and indirect as coparenting quality spills over into individual parenting behaviors and quality (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995; Margolin et al., 2001). Therefore, examining influences on coparenting relationships contributes in important ways to efforts to enhance family and child well-being across the early developmental years.

1.2. Technology use

Technology has become *pervasive* and sometimes *invasive* in family life. It is important to study the influences of technology, especially mobile devices such as cell phones and smartphones, as many individuals keep them on themselves at all times. This creates a unique "always-on" environment (Middleton, 2007) or a state of "perpetual contact" with others (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) that has only recently emerged. For example, about 90% of U.S. adults report that they have their phone with them frequently and 76% state that they never or rarely turn their phone off (Rainie & Zickhur, 2015). This environment presents adults, children, and families with new opportunities for connection and growth (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007; Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012), but also unique struggles that were not faced in the past. Indeed, many adults respond that they *cannot live* without technology (such as cell phones, the internet, and Facebook) (Popkin, 2011; Rainie & Keeter, 2006), and qualitative interviews reveal that many individuals experience discomfort when they have to temporarily disconnect (i.e., turn their phone off for a period of time) (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005). In other words, individuals are developing strong attachments to their technology that did not necessarily exist in our society in the recent past. Carbonell, Oberst, and Beranuy (2013) state that individuals' relationships with their cell phones have become "much more intense" than users' relationships ever were with their fixed-line telephones (p. 901). Due to these new features of mobile technology and the potential struggles of adults to disconnect from these devices, it is important to examine technology in family relationships, such as coparenting relationships with young children. Little is known about how the everyday use of these devices may impact the quality of parenting that children receive. If the quality of coparenting, or the coordination between parents as they engage in childrearing (Feinberg, 2003), is altered negatively by the presence of these 'always on' devices, child development and well-being may also be negatively impacted.

1.3. The potential for technology interference in family relationships

The use of technology plays many roles for parents. For example, some parents utilize social networking sites and blogs in order to connect with family, which increases feelings of social support and relationship satisfaction (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014; McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012). Technology can also be used in healthy ways during shared family time to strengthen relationships. For example, watching TV and playing video games together as a family have been linked with greater feelings of connection (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). However, since technology is pervasive and potentially intrusive, interactions with technology have the power to interrupt or interfere with parenting in small ways at times. For example, some individuals speak of being pulled toward their technology and experiencing difficulty resisting the urge to check their devices (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Middleton & Cukier, 2006; Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012; Rainie & Keeter, 2006), perhaps even in parenting situations. This can lead some to develop problematic mobile phone use behaviors, such as turning to their phones when they feel down, being preoccupied with or feeling anxious about receiving a message or email, feeling lost without their phone, or spending too much time on the phone (e.g., Bianchi & Phillips, 2005). Some have shown that problematic use is associated with later depression, even after controlling for earlier mental health (Thomée, Härenstam, & Hagberg, 2011). In a sense, these tools which connect us to others can become a hindrance at times in everyday interactions (e.g., Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Turkle, 2012).

A few studies have begun to examine how negative technology use may intrude in family relationships. Studies find that the use of cell phones/smartphones blurs the boundaries between work and home, leading to increased negative work-to-family spillover, negative mood, and lower satisfaction with family life (e.g., Chelsey, 2005; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2005). Others have looked at problematic cell phone use or social networking use. Miller-Ott, Kelly, and Duran (2012) found that when partners were less satisfied with the way cell phones were used in their relationship they showed lower relationship satisfaction. Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) examined the ways in which romantic couples use media, and although the focus of their study was not on technology interference there was a single item that asked how frequently they connected with others via technology while interacting with their romantic partner. This type of behavior was associated with poorer relationship satisfaction. Finally, Elphinstron and Noller (2011) found that when Facebook use became problematic (e.g., taking time away from others) relationship satisfaction suffered. These processes would likely be similar within coparenting relationships.

Recently, researchers have begun to *explicitly* examine the everyday intrusions and disruptions caused by technology (especially mobile devices) in relationships and the potential effects of these interruptions on these relationships. In a recent Pew Research Center report, 89%