

Turning Off, Dining In

Last night at dinner, I suddenly realized that no one around our table had said anything for quite a while. I looked at my son, who had headphones on and whose face was aglow with the white-blue light of his phone on which he was watching a YouTube video. My daughter was also bathed in this same glow, but a tap-tap-tap was coming from her phone as she was texting a friend. My husband didn't have a phone but was reading *The Economist*. I almost announced to my family that it was rude to bring phones or read at the table, but then I noticed that my own phone was right next to me. I tried to justify its presence to myself by reasoning that I thought my sister might call—she's been having a rough time at work. But then I realized that I do generally have my phone with me at dinner and I often use it to catch up on personal email.

I remember growing up and eating dinner with my mother and sister almost every night. There was a routine. Mom would cook, and my sister and I would take turns setting the table and cleaning up. This routine made sure that for at least an hour, we were all present in the same room with our hands occupied so that we were forced to acknowledge each other's existence, and maybe even talk. It wasn't always easy—adolescence is a stormy period—but at least we were present with each other.

I don't remember specific conversations that we had—nothing life changing most of the time—but generally we offered an account of how we had spent our time that day and what the schedule was likely to be tomorrow. It was also a time for negotiations about weekend plans, whether I could borrow the car, whether my sister could buy a designer shirt, and why that shirt was very necessary for her. Even though my parents split when I was young, I think these dinners helped us stay out of trouble, while other kids of divorced parents found it a bit too easy to evade the distracted attention of harried parents.

It seems to me that smartphones are slowly eroding connected quality time for families, and at no other time does this become more clear than at dinner time, which has traditionally been a time to reconnect and reinforce relationships through conversation.

I found that there's actually research backing up my views on this. According to a study printed in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, the mere presence of a cell

phone can decrease the quality of one-on-one conversation. Researchers Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein of University of Essex, UK demonstrated that interpersonal closeness and trust are less likely to form when a phone is present during a conversation about a meaningful topic. In addition, research subjects who conversed with a phone present reported that they felt their conversation partners had less empathy toward them (244).

Closeness, trust, and empathy are all important factors in family relationships. If a parent-child relationship lacks these characteristics, children are much more likely to operate independently of parents, often to their disadvantage. But parents are also more likely to miss key moments in their children's lives, finding that they know more about a colleague's project than their child's recent soccer game.

In a different study, cell phones were also found to reduce "prosocial" behaviors and lead to dehumanization. University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business found that after using a cell phone—or even thinking about using their cell phone—research participants were more likely to dehumanize strangers and were less charitable (Waytz and Epley 74). Although not often acknowledged, the relationship between parents and their children is prone to dehumanization and stereotyping: Children may think their parents are artifacts of a bygone era and don't "get" them, and parents may think that their children aren't mature enough to have real feelings or make important decisions for themselves. Is it possible that in an already-strained relationship, texting with friends or checking email while eating with your family might encourage more "us vs. them" thinking about family members?

So would putting down the smartphone at dinner ensure that families stay connected and children make it to adulthood without too much turmoil? Those who have studied the question can't provide a definitive answer. Some recent research has shown that while families who eat dinner together do see healthier, happier children, this relationship is one of correlation rather than causation. Children fared best in families with strong relationships between parents and children, participation in shared activities, effective monitoring, and financial resources, whether or not these families ate dinner together. However, a family with all of these characteristics is more likely to choose to have dinner together on a routine basis (Musick and Meier 492).

But even if dinner together is not a cure-all for the modern turmoil of adolescence, it is a shared activity, an opportunity to develop strong relationships, for parents to find out

information about their children's lives that will help them keep their kids out of trouble. And dinner is a good candidate for family quality time. The process of preparing, eating, and cleaning up a meal makes it a good "togetherness" task. If the whole family is going to eat at the same time, they may as well sit in the same place, and so they should probably just agree to treat that time as family time. People have recently begun various techniques for detaching from the technology, including screen-free weekends (weekends where people spend time actually doing stuff rather than watching TV, viewing the internet, or messaging with friends), screen-free evenings, and even screen-free weeks or months. These are generally a hard sell for modern teens. But a screen-free dinner is a good compromise that may lead to stronger relationships.

Works Cited

1. What is the context of "Turning Off, Dining In"?
2. Summarize the author's purpose for writing the article in one sentence?
3. Look back and try to find the actual sentence(s) in which the author states her main point
4. Identify one area in the text in which the author supports his main point with evidence.
- 5.. How would you describe the author's style and tone?