

Toddlers pose a serious risk to smartphones and tablets

Another report has wrongly suggested that children's brains are at risk from smartphones and tablets. There is, however, plenty of evidence for the opposite; smartphones and tablets are at risk from children

Dean Burnett

Tuesday 3 February 2015

It's been said repeatedly that tablets and smartphones are "bad" for children's brains. This happened again just last weekend, and as ever the evidence for these claims is incredibly flimsy. The criticisms and analyses of these claims are constant, but they always fail to address the elephant in the room in sheep's clothing with burning ears; it's actually children who pose a danger to smartphones and tablets, not the other way around!

Think about it. Children have numerous mechanisms to help them recover from all sorts of injury or damage, often faster than adults do. Modern phones and tablets have no such thing. You so much as accidentally tap one on the corner of a desk and you could be looking at a steep repair bill. And it can be very traumatic when this happens. This isn't to say that children are less valuable than personal gadgets, it's just pointing out that your personal and expensive gadget is less likely to play the "What's the tallest thing I can jump off while my parents are out of the room for 8 seconds" game, then laugh in your borderline-heart-attack-experiencing face.

But there are several ways children pose a direct danger to your tablet or smartphone. Firstly, interaction with a touchscreen requires, as the name suggests, touching it. There's a lot of sophisticated technology behind a touchscreen, but one constant problem is that this makes them alarmingly dirty. There are specific ways to clean a touchscreen, most of which involve a lot of

effort and care. But if a child uses one, it's only going to get dirtier faster. Child skin is growing a lot more than adult skin so is shedding a lot more too; they're far more prone to eczema as a result, and this means screens getting dirtier faster if a child uses them, requiring more cleaning or stress from having a dirty screen, which people hate.

And that's if your child practices adult standards of hygiene, which is quite a big expectation. Most children are naturally curious, and this includes curiosity about substances and objects which adults know better than to make actual physical contact with. Add to this that many toddlers are still getting to grips with basic toilet techniques, and letting a child use your tablet or smartphone may well result in them turning it into something akin to a petri dish, a petri dish in a laboratory which probably isn't legal under the Geneva convention.

There's also a good chance your toddler won't have developed the neurological complexity to be fully coordinated in terms of movement, meaning they're more prone to falling or bumping into things. This is fine if they are running around in a soft play area or holding some plush toy, but it's less than ideal if they're carrying a delicate device worth hundreds of pounds. Especially if they're running whilst carrying it, usually being pursued by an adult yelling "YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO PLAY WITH THAT!" or some variation of this phrase. Add to this the fact that most personal touchscreen devices aren't built to child proportions and their hands are likely to be more "slippery", and the odds of device damage are increasingly high.

The field of developmental psychology is a very extensive one with numerous theories and notions that are constantly being revised, but there's a general consensus that toddler brains aren't quite developed enough yet to deal with complex abstract concepts, like value (e.g. "I'm told this rectangular object I'm holding has great monetary value"), fragility (e.g. "this rectangular object is more vulnerable to physical force than many other objects") and forward planning (e.g. "If I do throw this rectangular object out of the window onto the patio below, it will likely not survive the encounter in its present form").

Even if it's not physical damage, a child or toddler's quick learning skills combined with their flimsy grasp of money and financial value means they can soon work out how to alter settings or download things on an internet compatible device, without grasping the true cost of them. Although, in fairness, virtual items having actual value is a concept many adults still struggle with.

You might think it's all well and good saying all this, but where's the evidence? Well, look what happened when I asked Twitter if anyone has had a personal computing device damaged by a child.



Dean Burnett @garwboy 02 Feb
Anyone got any good examples of children ruining smartphones/tablets/etc? It's for a thing.

Matt Wall @m_wall
@garwboy My nieces installed a load of awful Barbie makeover apps on my iPad when they visited. I had to burn it. Had to.
4:07 PM - 2 Feb 2015
5 FAVORITES



Mark A Colman @markacolman
@garwboy my 10yo nephew kicked a football into his mothers iPad while trying to film himself with it.
4:11 PM - 2 Feb 2015
1 FAVORITE



Patricia Rosewell @stormpetrel
@garwboy Daughter aged 9, otherwise quite clued up, leaned elbow with her full weight upon tablet screen :-(
4:10 PM - 2 Feb 2015
1 FAVORITE

— Penny Peebles (@girlsluvscifi2) February 2, 2015

@garwboy our 4 year old decided to watch the ipad in the bath, unfortunately quite literally!

— Abby (@minibeastgirl) February 2, 2015

@garwboy I know someone who's kid chewed on their phone so much while teething that their saliva corroded the phone on the inside.

— Penny Peebles (@girlsluvscifi2) February 2, 2015

@garwboy our 2 year old used a touchscreen laptop as a trampoline (cracked bleeding screen).

— SionedLumley (@SionedLumley) February 2, 2015

@garwboy my two year old son removed all the keys from our laptop using a teaspoon

— TheErasmusCollective (@RevErasmus) February 2, 2015

@garwboy youngest daughter broke screen holding it in her teeth to use as a torch while climbing a tree in the dark. That what you want?

These are just some of the ways in which children and toddlers with their still-developing brains pose a far bigger threat to smartphones and tablets than the other way around. Sure, there may be some minor evidence to suggest that touchscreen devices can affect a child's development in some limited ways, but there's just as much evidence to suggest they help as much as hinder, and there's nowhere near enough to base sweeping generalisations on, and certainly not enough to justify the constant alarmism we see in the media.

If you are worried that your child spending 15 hours a day using a tablet is making them insular or unsociable, you may have to consider the possibility that it's not so much the tablet that's doing that as the fact that they have a parent who's willing to let them use a gadget for 15 hours a day. It's a very formative time of their development and parental interaction is key to this, so it might be an idea to do some of that rather than finding a scapegoat.

And if you are still worried about how much time your toddler is spending with a computing device, you can just take it from them. That's another thing about toddlers; they're pretty small, it's usually quite easy to overpower one.