

Can Kids Multitask?

Is this scene familiar to you? You think your child is diligently doing homework. You knock and hear a cheery “Come on in.” As you enter, your daughter is holding the telephone in one hand, a message is popping up on her Facebook page, and the latest song from her favorite group is blaring from her speakers. The only thing resembling homework is the math book open on the table next to the keyboard. “I thought you were doing homework,” you say. She gives you a puzzled look and responds, “I am.”

A Multitasking Generation

Your daughter, and most of her peers across the country, are electronically connected like never before. Young people spend 53 hours a week with entertainment media and much of that time is spent multitasking. According to the **Kaiser Family Foundation**, almost a third of all kids say that they are using another form of media "most of the time" while they are watching TV, listening to music, reading or using a computer. This isn't just about kids either. Studies of adults have demonstrated that it's not unusual for someone to check their email 30-40 times an hour during the workday! For the multitasking generation, if you aren't doing a couple of things at once, you begin to feel like you're slacking off.

Wired for the Web

Does being wired make kids capable multitaskers? Yes and no. Heavy Internet users are certainly more adept at sifting through massive amounts of information very quickly. As young people's brains adapt to the daily bombardment of media messages, images, and bits of information, they get better at processing this information in efficient ways.

For example, a researcher in the United Kingdom found that frequent Web surfers took only two seconds on any given Web site before deciding to move on to another. Remarkably, she found the sites where surfers stopped and focused were ones most relevant to the search terms. In other words, our brains get better and better at synthesizing and evaluating information at lightning speeds. This is an important skill in the digital age and is useful a lot of the time.



The Cost of Multitasking

However, other times, this rapid fire processing comes at a significant cost. When kids are multitasking, their brains are spending so much energy making quick decisions and responding to stimuli that they have fewer mental resources for comprehension and retention.

A couple of researchers at Cornell brought this issue into clear view. They divided a class of students into two groups. One group was allowed to be online during a lecture and the other group was not. It turns out that the online group did check out some information related to the lecture content, but they also checked email, tuned into Facebook, and watched videos - all typical online activities. The second group had to listen to the lecture unplugged. The unplugged students performed significantly better on measures of memory and comprehension following the lecture. Similar studies have produced the same results. Frequent interruptions scatter our thoughts and erode our memories.

Our Brains Focus on One Thing at a Time

It's not that we can't do some tasks simultaneously. We can all chew gum while walking, and most of us can drive a car and carry on a conversation. But if we are lost in heavy traffic in an unfamiliar part of town, the radio goes off and the talking stops. If two tasks are performed at once, one of the tasks has to be familiar. We perform a familiar task on "automatic pilot" while really paying attention to the other one. If they both require attention, we're in trouble. The brain can only do so much at one time. That's why insurance companies consider talking on a cell phone while driving as dangerous as drunk driving.

So flooding our working memory with information makes it difficult to really focus. But is this really a big deal? Yes. The brains of the multitasking generation are getting a lot of practice with fast and superficial spurts of attention at the expense of deep, creative, and focused thinking. We may be living in the Information Age but our brains have not been redesigned yet. When a task requires concentration, there is a cognitive cost to juggling too much at the same time.

So the next time your kids tell you they can do homework while watching TV or talking on the phone, just say, "Sorry. One thing at a time."

Here are some tips to parent multitasking kids. They may complain but their brains will thank you!



- Explain to your child that his or her brain is like a spotlight. It can only shine on one thing at a time. Share the research on multitasking with your kids.
- Encourage your child to get ready for studying by relaxing and focusing their attention on the task at hand. Most children also thrive on a studying schedule so they can plan on always doing their homework right after dinner, for example.
- Make sure that your child's study space is free from digital and other distractions. This means that when the textbook opens, TV and Facebook go off.
- Make sure your child's cell phone is in the other room. No ringtones, no vibrations, no distractions.
- Set aside a time right after studying for your child to check their Facebook page and look at texts.
- The Internet can be a wonderful study tool. Help your child develop the skills to use the Internet to aid learning instead of eroding it. For example, unrelated YouTube videos are a distraction while other videos can be a great part of the self-directed learning and exploration possible online.
- It can take a while to develop the important skills of concentration and focused attention. Don't expect your kids to thrive in a calm studying environment right away! Don't give up.
- Set developmentally appropriate expectations for how long your child can focus deeply on a task. For example, your six year old isn't likely to last more than fifteen or twenty minutes on a task. Your teen, on the other hand, can focus for a full fifty minutes with short two minute "brain breaks" every fifteen minutes or so.
- Set a technological curfew in your household. Getting texts all night robs children's brains of much needed rest.
- Create clear expectations and consequences about "driving while texting or talking." Distracted driving is very dangerous. Talking while driving is as dangerous as drunk driving and texting while driving is a recipe for disaster.
- Try technology-free dinners. When any of us multitask at the table, we lose an important chance to connect with one another.

