Mayim Bialik: Why I Refuse to Get My Kids Smartphones

My children do not have smartphones. My children want smartphones. Kids their age have smartphones, even with limited functionality (i.e. some kids have smartphones for video games and phone calls but no internet access). Why won't their dad and I get them a smartphone, they ask all the time.

When I heard that someone wrote a new book about the tech age and kids, I rolled my eyes. "This is going to be a book basically telling me I am a fuddy duddy for not letting my kids have smart phones with a nudge to give in and dumb pointers about how to think I have control over their screen time when I actually don't."

Well, I was wrong. Devorah Heitner, author of the forthcoming book "Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in their Digital World," has a doctorate in Media/Technology and Society, and she explains media in a way that really speaks to me. She specializes in understanding the needs of the changing world of technology, and I am so glad she wrote this book.

Let me take a step back here, though, to explain why I've been so anti-screen time for my kids.

First of all, I am a fuddy duddy. Just kidding—but not really. I don't think an 11-year-old needs a phone unless they are physically away from me, and in the city I live in, there is nowhere I would leave my child without an adult present. Period. When I was 11, I was dropped at the mall with friends, but that's not part of my kids' life. It just isn't. When they get older and need to be away from me—when they start taking classes at college, for example, as many homeschooled teenagers do—they will need a way to communicate with me. Right now? I don't think they need a phone.

Second of all, I don't think my kids need video games in their hand. They see other kids playing games and I'm fine if that works for other families, but for us, we set aside distinct times when our boys play games. I don't want them having constant access to games when they have so many other things to play with, look at, think about, and do.

Third, I don't like the social interactions I see a lot of kids having on social media, and I don't think it adds to my sons' lives to take part in that right now. I know my kids better than you do, I promise. It's not healthy for their personalities.

What Heitner is accomplishing with her [TedTalk](#) where I first learned about her and with her book is a sense of perspective about kids. She talks about really truly understanding their framework for wanting these things. She gives the example of your 10-year-old watching a slumber party they were excluded from play out on social media. That made me cringe. It gave the 10-year-old inside of me the chills. I would be absolutely devastated to grow up now. I was left out of so much and it was painful enough to imagine the girls I wanted to have accept me spending time without me. To watch it online would be that much more mortifying and so incredibly painful. Heitner talks about some of the dangers of the tech world for kids: their belief both in the necessity of others being able to communicate or respond to them instantly and if they don't, what that means, and the belief that they need to immediately respond to something the second it comes in…or else. As an adult, I totally get that. But I can't imagine that pressure and what a lack of response would mean to the 10-year-old me!

She talks about the kinds of things kids find on the internet that could be potentially upsetting. She's right—we all know this. My boys are always supervised when they have internet access. Always. I don't need to "trust" them, I need to protect them. The internet is a wonderful place but it's also a potentially very disturbing scary place with images and videos of things that can absolutely harm them and make them very upset.

Heitner also touches on what I think is the most upsetting aspect of this discussion: Kids acknowledge that parents are on their phones way too much. This hit me like a ton of bricks. I am that person. The immediacy of smartphones has made my manager, publicist, and assistant able to reach me at all times and expect answers at all times. I've bought into it. I feel a compulsive need to respond to things and to make that little "envelope" in the upper left hand corner of my Droid disappear every time it comes up.

It has to stop. I had stopped bringing my phone with me into restaurants when I am out with my boys; that lasted a month or so and now I'm back in the rat race. We don't interact with our kids in present and healthy ways when we are glued to our phones. We can try and we can do better than others, but the fact is this: Just like reading an actual paper book and reading a book on a Kindle are not the same thing, and just like seeing your child walk for the first time versus spending that moment recording it are not the same thing, being with your kid and being with your kid while also on your phone are not the same thing.

Heitner has done something significant and brave in taking on this wave of technology that so many of us assume we have no control over. We do have control, and we all have a lot to learn in this realm.

At my 8-year-old's birthday party recently, I realized as my ex and I brought him his cake that neither my ex nor I had cameras with us. We didn't even say to anyone, "Make sure you get a picture!" We just had our eyes and our hearts open and ready to be present in the moment. I knew others would take pictures, but it also didn't matter. We had regained that ability to be present, and I want to regain that in more ways.

Screen time and phone time has shifted our notion of being available and of being present. It is impacting our children in very meaningful ways for good and potentially for not-so-good. I am committed to making shifts in ways that bring me closer to my kids and closer to a sense of peace with technology for me, for my kids, and for the sake of all of our interactions, virtual and otherwise.