

Is secondhand screen time the new secondhand smoking?

But children, even babies, notice these habits. They see parents reach again and again for a seemingly magical object that glints and flashes, makes sounds and shows moving images.

BY JOEL ABRAMS

A decade ago, the unwillingness – or perhaps the inability – of the college students in my writing classes to stay off their phones for 50 minutes at a stretch catalysed my interest in screen use. And my students have only grown more unwilling to put down their phones, a trend that has also gotten worse outside of my classroom.

Curious about my students' phone use, I began researching screen addiction and conducting my own surveys.

Roughly 20 percent of my students have used the word "addiction" when describing their phone habits, and many more have expressed misgivings about their phone use.

While I encourage them to examine their habits, I blame students less for their tech addiction than I did a decade ago. They've learned this behaviour from adults – in many cases since the moment they were born.

Checking Twitter in front of children is not the same as blowing smoke in their faces. Smartphones and cigarettes do, however, have some things in common. Both are addictive and both be-

came wildly popular before researchers learned about their addictive properties and health dangers.

On average, American adults touch their phones over 2,500 times a day. According to the American Psychiatric Association, that fits the definition of addiction: "a condition in which a person engages in the use of a substance or in a behaviour for which the rewarding effects provide a compelling incentive to repeatedly pursue the behaviour despite detrimental consequences."

While researchers continue to study the effects and extent of phone use, the scientific consensus is that phone addiction is real.

Desiring objects

What's a parent to do while nursing or when an infant falls asleep on one's chest?

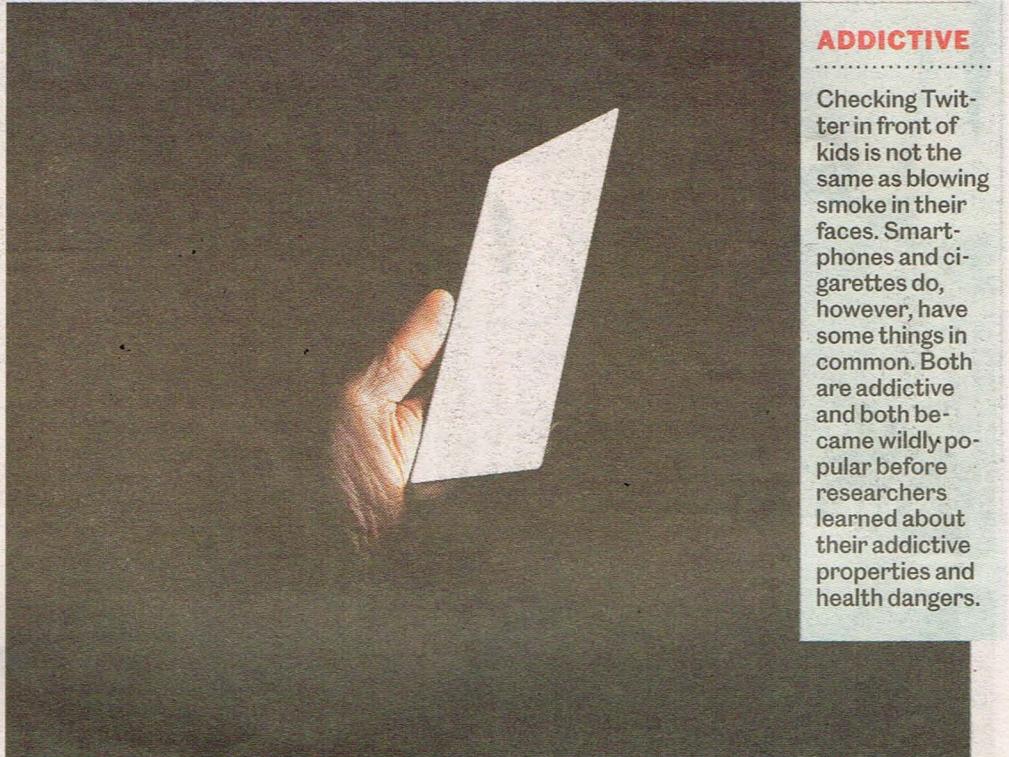
Perhaps they'll read the news, check email, text friends or scan social media parenting groups. A phone or tablet can be a portal to the rest of the world – after all, caring for small children can be isolating.

But children, even babies, notice these habits. They see parents reach again and again for a seemingly magical object that glints and flashes, makes sounds and shows moving images.

Who wouldn't want such a wonderful plaything? Trouble is, if the desire for a phone builds in infancy, it can become second nature.

Troubling research

Some researchers have already found links between excessive screen time,



While researchers continue to study the effects and extent of phone use, the scientific consensus is that phone addiction is real. PHOTO/ COURTESY

particularly phone use, and attention deficits, behavioural issues, sleep problems, impaired social skills, loneliness, anxiety and depression.

Researchers from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Centre and Israel's Educational Neuroimaging Centre recently published a study in *JAMA Pediatrics* that focused on cognitive-behavioral risks of exposing preschool-aged kids to screen-based me-

dia. That includes video games, TV, websites and apps. Phones are particularly problematic, the study found, because they provide mobile access to all of this media. They found that screen exposure impedes the formation of nerve systems involved in language development, expression and reading skills.