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# Barrier or Benefit? Media Use During Infant Feedings

by Shannon Haddock



If you search “Should I use my phone while feeding my baby?” online, you’ll find an overwhelming number of articles clamoring for parents to put down their phones during feeding time and interact with their baby. Still, many parents admit they use their phones and other sources of media while feeding their infant. Dr. Sarah M. Coyne of BYU’s School of Family Life and her fellow researchers set out to discover why so many parents use media during feeding time—and discovered this media use may actually be a *good* thing.

Dr. Coyne and her associates designed two studies to examine parental media use and infant feedings: one study explored why mothers use media during feeding time, and the other study used longitudinal data to see how media use during feedings affects parent-child relationships over time.

## Study 1: Why do mothers turn to media during feedings?

In the first study, mothers with infants met to discuss why they use media while feeding their infants. Mothers gave two general reasons: the first reason was to cope with the challenges of feedings and motherhood. Some mothers expressed that feedings were painful, frustrating, or monotonous, and using media helped them endure feeding times. Additionally, when they used media to cope with their challenges, their feelings toward their baby were more positive at the end of the day. Mothers also shared that they used media while feeding their baby to connect with other moms through social media and with their own families over text; this connection helped mothers feel less lonely and isolated as they transitioned into motherhood.

The second general reason mothers gave for using media during infant feedings was to be

productive. Many mothers said they used this time to search the internet for information about their infant, asking questions like, "Is this normal?" Mothers also said they used this time to work, read, or send texts. They viewed feedings as a kind of "set-aside" time to get things done.

### Study 2: How does media during feedings affect the parent-child relationship?

So, parents use media during feeding times, and they have good reasons for doing so. But how does this media use affect parent-child relationships as infants grow up?

To address this question, the second study used data from Project M.E.D.I.A., an ongoing study on how media affects child development. Parents were initially asked to estimate what percentage of time they use media while feeding their infant and to complete a report measuring parent-child dysfunction.

One year later, parents were asked to again complete the measure of parent-child dysfunction as well as an assessment on their child's attachment.

Analyses of the data revealed fascinating correlations between media use during infant

feeding times and parent-child relationships. Surprisingly, the data indicated no connection between a parent's media use and their child's attachment security. However, the data did indicate a positive relationship between parent media use and parent-child dysfunction, with more media use related to higher dysfunction at the first collection of data. One year later, though, higher parent media use during infant feedings was related to lower parent-child dysfunction.

### What does it all mean?

Is it bad for parents to use media while feeding their infants? The results of this study suggest the answer is no! Parents and their children may actually *benefit* from parental media use during feedings in the long run. A possible interpretation of the results of these two studies is that parents who feel frustrated with feedings and overwhelmed by the transition into parenthood turn to media during feeding time to take care of their own mental health. Parents' improved mental health may in turn help them be better parents going forward.

Dr. Coyne and her associates suggest, "Perhaps instead of making parents (mothers especially)

feel guilty about the potential impact media use while feeding may have on their infants, society should focus on helping mothers to utilize their technology in specific ways that assuage the difficulties of parenting and improve parents' mental health." Next time you feel overwhelmed, discouraged, or isolated while feeding your baby, don't feel bad reaching for your phone and using media to find comfort and connection—your mental health is vital to you being the best parent you can be.

## Reference

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Coyne, S. M., Shawcroft, J., Gale, M., Reich, S. M., Linder, L., McDaniel, B., Stockdale, L., & Booth, M. (2022). Digital distraction or accessible aid? Parental media use during feedings and parent-infant attachment, dysfunction, and relationship quality. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107051>