

Digital engagement affects families

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

The Norton family spends most of their free time playing or working in the great outdoors near Sisters. They watch a few TV shows and play some video games, but place limits on screen time. It sounds like good old-fashioned common sense: People need fresh air and healthy activity, right?

Common sense has taken a hit in recent years, especially since online devices became handheld. Smartphones, tablets, and ubiquitous wi-fi hold children, parents, and everyone else in their sway. It's no accident, either. Welcome to the Attention Economy of the 21st century. To function, it requires what marketers call "engagement."

From the smallest startup to the Googliest mega-corporation, attention-related companies earn revenue through advertising. Ads are nothing new. What's new is the slot-machine-style, addictive technology serving up today's ads. What's new is convincing people to pay folding money for the honor of carrying a brainwashing device on their person 24/7. Grabbing their

attention and keeping it, over and over: marketers call it "engagement."

Research shows disturbing trends that link digital engagement to social and mental health problems (see previous articles in this series). Emma Norton observes its effects at her Sisters workplace:

"On a typical school holiday you can see seats and corners full of kids glued to screens," she reports. "Very rarely are they communicating with each other or running around in the big grassy area outside." The parents are often physically active, while their kids "zone out on screens — a big juxtaposition."

Enter Emma's child Max, who is "totally left out of the 'fun' and it makes me sad. The potential peers do not look up or say hello, even though they usually know each other... no one is free to chit-chat or play. So my kid awkwardly hangs with peers and looks over their shoulders, hangs with the staff, or reads."

Today's software and hardware are designed to engage users constantly—and make them feel anxious if they step offline. "It became this kind of puppet-master effect, where all of these products are

puppet-mastering all these different users," admitted Tristan Harris, formerly a product designer at Google, in a recent interview. "That was really bad."

Harris and other prominent Silicon Valley technologists have begun to speak out against the Frankenstein they helped create. Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, says he puts boundaries on the kids in his life: "There are some things that I won't allow; I don't want them on a social network." Virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier has been a deep thinker in the industry for decades. His current thinking can be summed up in the title of his latest book, "Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now."

"For the sake of child sleep, health, and family balance, it's time to rethink user engagement as the primary goal of child technology design," asserts Dr. Jenny Radesky, writing for the American Academy of Pediatrics. Until that happens, everyday folks struggle to regain balance between real and digital life.

Peer pressure affects adults as well as kids. "Aside from a core group of like-thinking



PHOTO BY T. LEE BROWN

Sisters kids model the Phone Zombie look.

mom friends," Emma says, "I often feel alone in the struggle of how to parent screen-time."

The issue follows Max to Sisters Elementary School and even on the bus ride home. "My kiddo's school does not allow toys on the bus, but they allow screens," she notes. "Um, what? How does this even make sense? It's crazy." Temporarily calming kids with devices has been likened to giving them drugs. Audry Van Houweling, founder of She Soars Psychiatry in Sisters, refers to them as digital pacifiers.

"It's heartbreaking for my kid to feel left out," Emma laments. On the other hand, Emma recently noticed that Max is learning while the other kids are absorbed in their

devices. Max develops conversational skills by chatting with adult patrons who stop to say hi, while the others lose out on the "unknown, missed opportunity" of playing, learning to have conversations, and meeting new people. In the long run, Max has an advantage. For now? Responsible device use is tough on child and parent alike. (See "Techniques for happier screen time" on page 15.)

This is part five in *The Nugget's* series on digital media, nature, and kids. If you are affected by screen-time issues or have found healthy solutions, please share your story by emailing freelance writer tiffany@plazm.com.

Names and details changed to preserve anonymity.

Serving the Sisters, Camp Sherman and Black Butte Ranch Areas

Ponderosa Properties LLC

REALTORS AND PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

541-549-2002

1-800-650-6766

www.PonderosaProperties.com

221 S. Ash St., Sisters

The Locals' Choice
for Real Estate
Sales



Kevin R. Dyer
541-480-7552
CRS, GRI,
Principal Broker



Rad Dyer
541-480-8853
ABR, CCIM, CRB,
CRS, GRI,
Principal Broker



Carol Davis
541-410-1556
ABR, GRI, Broker



Catherine Black
541-588-9219
CRS, Broker,
Realtor Emeritus
40 Years



Shane Lundgren
541-588-9226
Broker



Debbie Dyer
541-480-1650
GRI, Broker



Carrie Koepke
541-419-1575
Broker



Greg Davidge
808-281-2676
Broker



Jackie Herring
541-480-3157
Broker

