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Prime-Time Parenting

HOW BEING FOCUSED FOR TWO HOURS A NIGHT COULD MAKE PARENTING LESS HAPHAZARD

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

A s director of an instructional design education company, HEATHER MILLER, ED.M.’00, spends a lot of time in classrooms and sees a lot of tired students. She wasn’t surprised with older kids, but when she started seeing more and more sleepy elementary students, she knew something was going on.

After talking to these kids, it became clear that technology was partly at fault.

“These young children were playing video games or interacting with screens until quite late in the evening,” she says. Even kids who went to bed earlier had difficulty falling asleep, possibly due to blue light from devices reducing melatonin, the hormone that makes you feel sleepy.

“It was clear that a major problem was forming that had to do with parenting and screens,” she says. She started to offer workshops on how parents could avoid the pitfalls of the digital age. “I realized that parents don’t really need abstract ideas; they benefit from concrete advice on how they can structure their lives as parents and avoid some of the pitfalls of technology,” for their kids and themselves. This fall, Miller also has a related book coming out called Prime Time Parenting.

One of the main points that Miller stresses is that in the age of smartphones and tablets, adults need to rethink how they parent and not let technology dictate the rules.

“Everything we do from working, socializing, parenting, and learning has been transformed by the digital age over the last two decades,” she says. “It is important not to just go with the flow, but instead to take a step back and look at what aspects of this revolution are working for us and which are not.”

One way to do this, Miller says, is for parents to focus exclusively on parenting for a two-hour block on school nights, rather than parenting haphazardly by doing other things, like constantly checking your phone.

“By better utilizing time, parents can have quality time with their kids and also time for themselves,” she says. Parenting nonstop isn’t the answer.

“It gets a lot harder to parent effectively when you are parenting every minute of the day and most of the evening,” she says. “We need to liberate parents from this idea that they need to be constantly parenting and move to intentional parenting for meaningful, but limited amounts of time each day.... Parenting can’t go on forever each night. There has to be a finish line.”

During this two-hour block, parents can focus on dinner, check that homework is done or help as needed, talk about the day, work with kids to get organized for the next day, play a board game, and ease into the bedtime routine, she says.

She acknowledges that it’s easy to get sidetracked and not utilize time well.

“With the advent of the digital age, we have a lot of blurring: for example, blurring of where and when we work. Many of us work from home or modify our work schedules to meet our children’s needs — and that is wonderful — but the same flexibility can turn us into people who never quite stop working or parenting,” she says. “The idea with Prime Time Parenting is that you create a structure for school nights and then let that structure protect you. Otherwise, we risk being ‘on call’ at any hour.”

Although Miller focuses on the 6 to 8 p.m. hours, she says this isn’t a rigid block, especially for parents who get home from work later or have kids older than her target group, 5 to 13, who need more time for homework.

She is pretty firm, however, about everyone in the family going screen-free during that time, aside from needing screens for homework, and turning them off 30 minutes before bedtime.

“If parents want to turn them back on after the kids are in bed, they’re adults,” she says. “That’s their choice.”