Attention to Attention!

A Growing Need for Educators and Parents in the Digital Age

Holly Koteen-Soulé

Watching a small child pursue a beetle as it crawls through a forest of grass, or follow the course of a silvery raindrop down a windowpane, or all-consumingly lick an ice cream cone is a study in devoted attention. As parents and teachers, we are tickled by the full-bodied, uninterruptible ability of the young child to focus on an object or experience.

These delightful images stand in sharp contrast to the all-too-common sights of a plugged-in park walker oblivious to his surroundings, or two people at a restaurant both looking at their phones rather than into each other's eyes!

What has happened in the intervening years? How might these contrasting phenomena be related? How has electronic media, the smartphone in particular, changed our lives, our children's lives, and our parenting?

We know that electronic technology can be both useful and challenging. We also know that research strongly suggests that excessive media use is deleterious, especially to the health and development of children and teens. While televisions and computers can be sequestered away or turned off, the smartphone has become a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. As with other electronic media, but to an even greater extent, the smartphone has tethered the attention of its user, mostly unconsciously.

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Warning Messages from Tech Workers

A recent special issue of the Weekend Magazine of the *Guardian* featured several designers and product developers who have begun speaking out about the dangers and unintended consequences of technological innovations, particularly the smartphone. One recent study, according to Justin Rosenstein, found that the mere presence of the smartphone, even when it is turned off, damages cognitive capacity. "Everyone is distracted. All of the time."[1]

A former Google employee, Tristan Harris, gave a TED talk in Vancouver, in which he said, "All of us are jacked into the system. All of our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are. I don't know a more urgent problem than this. It's changing our democracy, and it's changing our conversations and the relationships we want to have with each other."[2] Harris is the author of a 2013 memo to fellow Google employees, titled "A Call to Minimize Distraction and Respect User's Attention," and has subsequently made his concerns public.

Loren Brichter, who designed the "pull-to-refresh'" feature used in many apps, admits that "smartphones are useful tools, but they're addictive. … I have two kids and regret every moment that I am not paying attention to them because my smartphone has sucked me in."[3]

What Is Attention?

Attention is a primary factor in both parenting and education. We talk about "paying attention," "attention-getting behavior," and "attention deficit disorder," for example. Most generally speaking, attention could be understood as a basic constituent and function of human consciousness.

From this point of view, what does it mean for us and for our children that technology has "grabbed our attention?"

The American philosopher, William James, explored consciousness and attention, along with many other topics, in his seminal work, *The Principles of Psychology*, originally published in 1890. He describes attention as naturally selective, explaining that at any moment, outward life presents itself to us in myriad sensory possibilities. What interests us and what we attend to is what forms our experience of life.[4] Voluntary attention, requiring an effort of will, is quite different than the experience of involuntary attention.[5]

When we are online, our freedom to choose what to pay attention to may be more illusionary than real, in part because the interests of others are often leading and shaping us, as much or more than our own interests.

The Attention Economy

The Attention Economy is the title of a book by Thomas Davenport and John C. Beck.[6] It appeared in 2001, but the authors attribute the original concept named in its title to Herbert Simon, an economist and computer scientist, who wrote the following in 1971:

> In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else; a scarcity of whatever that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently.[7]

In the ensuing decades, the limited attention of the consumer has been recognized as an increasingly valuable resource in the information age, especially for online businesses. We can all bear witness to how often tantalizing ads and headlines interrupt our online sessions. We could even say that our attention has been commoditized, not unlike the way that labor came to be viewed as a commodity during the Industrial Revolution.

Matthew Crawford supports this view in his 2015 *New York Times* article:

> "All of our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are. I don't know a more urgent problem than this."

> Attention is a resource; a person has only so much of it. And yet we've auctioned off more and more of our public space to private commercial interests, with their constant demands on us to look at the products on display or simply absorb some bit of corporate messaging. Lately, our self-appointed disrupters have opened up a new frontier of capitalism, complete with its own frontier ethic: to boldly dig up and monetize every bit of private head space by appropriating our collective attention. In the process, we've sacrificed silence—the condition of not being addressed. And just as clean air makes it possible to breathe, silence makes it possible to think. What if we saw attention in the same way that we saw air or water, as a valuable resource that we hold in common? Perhaps, if we could envision an "attentional commons," then we could figure out how to protect it.[8]

Davenport and Beck refer to "attention as the new currency of business," but their focus is primarily on the psychological and organizational consequences of employees feeling overwhelmed by an imbalance of information to available attention, and on the importance of attention management. They describe four symptoms of organizational ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder):

1. Increased likelihood of missing key information when making decisions
2. Diminished time for reflection on anything else but email, etc.

3. Difficulty of holding others' attention without increased glitziness
4. Decreased ability to focus when necessary[9]

When I shared these symptoms with a group of educators, they agreed that all four could be descriptive of the learning problems they observe in grades and high school students.

What happens to a child's developing capacity to consciously direct his or her attention, when the attention of adults and older students is divided, distracted, or even deficient, as in the above description?

Attention and Presence

We used to speak about the importance of "quality time" with our children. Now, in the midst of our ultra-busy, multitasking lifestyle, we need to be as keenly aware of the quality of our attention. Are we fully present or are we only offering a shell of ourselves?

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The potency of a conversation or interaction between two people depends a great deal on the quality of attention that they give to each other. Is there a genuine interest in connecting? How well are we listening to each other? We have all experienced going through the motions of socializing while being preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, or plans that have nothing to do with what is happening around us at that moment.

This is particularly poignant in a conversation between an adult and child. A spouse who does not have the full attention of his or her partner may register an objection and get fuller participation. It is rare for a young child to be able to do the same. A tantrum may ensue, but if its cause is not recognized, it is unlikely to achieve a satisfactory resolution for either child or parent.

I did witness a four-year-old child say to his father, in a surprisingly wise and authoritative voice, as his father was glancing at his phone to see who had just sent him a message, "Put down your phone, Dad!" The implication was clear: 'I am talking to you!' The father complied, of course.

During my many years as an early childhood teacher, I had the opportunity to observe many interactions between children and adults. A young child can readily sense if and when "someone is at home." Typically, the child first relaxes and then becomes more animated. The image that best captures what can happen is of the long-absent spring sun coming out from behind a cloud! Children who sense the conscious, generous, fully present attention of adults around them can feel affirmed in their active devotion to life and supported to enter more firmly into their own beings.

Imitation in the Formative Early Years and Beyond

The attention of parents and caregivers is the critical factor in a young child's life because during the first seven years of life the child learns everything through imitation. We can recognize this fairly easily with regard to how children learn to speak, but imitation in the young child goes much deeper than what we can readily observe. Rudolf Steiner characterizes young children as wholly sense organs, such that they take in everything in their surroundings, especially everything connected to the human beings with whom they have daily contact. Here are Steiner's words to teachers and parents:

> But it is what you are that matters; if you are good, this will appear in your gestures; if you are bad-tempered, this will also appear in your gestures—in short, everything that you do yourself passes over into the children and makes its way within them. This is the essential

> point. Children are wholly sense organs, and react to all the impressions of the people around them. Therefore, the essential thing is not to imagine that children learn what is good or bad, that they learn this or that, but to know that everything that is done in their presence is transformed in the childish organisms into spirit, soul and body. The health of the children for their whole life depends on how you conduct yourself in their presence. The inclinations that children develop depend on how you behave in their presence.[10]

From this perspective, it seems clear to me that the quality of attention of the people with whom a child regularly interacts undoubtedly has an influence on the child, especially before the age of seven, when their development through imitation is strongest. The question that this brings up is how much of the rise of ADD and ADHD in our children today is due to their own constitutional situations and how much is it the result of, or aggravated by, the quality of the attention granted them by the adults in their surroundings.

Michaela Glöckler, a medical doctor and former Head of the Medical Section at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, gave a lecture in Seattle in June of 2017, in which she spoke about the relationship between fundamental experiences in the first three years of a child's life and three major health and educational challenges in older children and teens. She correlated attention deficiency problems with a lack of concentrated or focused attention in the first year of life; problems of depression and aggression with the lack of a peaceful atmosphere for listening in the second year of life; problems of addictions and dependencies with a lack of feeling accepted, or of having an inner space to feel at home during the third year of life.

These observations, in addition to recent research, certainly underscore the foundational importance of the early years. I believe that the degradation of the quality of our own attention and its effect on our children is an area that bears greater study, as it may well have a role in many of the current challenges described above that are facing the children in our society today.

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My study has been focused primarily on the child under the age of seven. However, it is clear that further study of attention in relation to children age eight and up is necessary, given the significant developmental effects of electronic media on the capacity for attention in older children. Older children are still developing their capacity for attention and attention management and still need healthy role models in their parents and teachers, in relation to media use as well as in other areas of life.

Attention and Rhythm

Parental attention, as we are discussing it, does not mean being focused exclusively on one's child at all times. That kind of attention tends to be stifling and is not necessarily helpful for a child's development. Our attention, like our breathing, has to be rhythmic and fit the demands of the situation.

Some of our activities require us to be wakeful and others we can do without a lot of focus, as when an activity is very familiar or repetitive. The rhythm of taking hold and letting go of our concentration is normal and healthy. Working on a computer all day can be stressful for many reasons; a leading reason is the kind of wakeful attention that is required for such work. To be able to muster the force of concentration necessary for deep thinking, a significant meeting, or the timely completion of a project requires having rested and renewed one's capacity for attention.

With the young child, we alternate durations of being fully present with durations in which the child is free to be fully attentive to his or her own activities. There are also times when we are engaged in side-by-side activities. In this case our attention has a different, flowing quality, for example when we are walking, cooking, or gardening together with the child.

This kind of attention is different than multitasking, because the tasks being undertaken do not require the same kind of attention. Walking with a friend can sometimes promote a deeper conversation than if the two of us were sitting down in comfortable chairs. Occasionally, my best ideas come when I am ironing!

Many psychologists, physicians, and educators are recommending screen-free rooms in the home and screen-free periods in the day and week. These suggestions, if they are built into the family's living habits, can be tremendously supportive to creating healthy rhythms for both parents and children.

The Re-schooling of Attention

This article began with a few examples of the kind of attention typical of the young child. We clearly enjoy sharing our children's delight at discovering their world. Those of us who spend time with young children are sometimes fortunate to be able to slow down and enter into their mood of wonder with them. This can be both refreshing and illuminating.

The Hungarian anthroposophist scholar and thinker, Georg Kühlewind, in *From Normal to Healthy,* describes the differences between a child's and an adult's perceptions:

> Above all, perceiving in a child is based far less on predetermined concepts, because these have not been formed. This is why the activity of the senses is more intense; everything has to be looked at, touched, and listened to. Also, this intense sense activity is still intertwined with the world of feelings, and the feelings are partly cognitive, that is really feeling, feeling toward the outside, not the self-feeling of the adult. The wonder of discovery and the wonder of mental experience are still united. The capacity for devoted attention is much greater in children than in adults, and this is so to the extent that the child does not yet turn his attention egotistically to himself. Psychic experience is multicolored and many-sided and can be characterized by joy. The joy does not apply to the thing perceived, but to perceiving itself. Or rather, perceiving is not yet as separated from the object as for the adult.[11]

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A rich tapestry of sensory, feeling, and cognitive perceptions, that are outwardly oriented and not egocentric, can arise from devoted attention. This way of being and attending to the world, which is completely natural in a small child, is the conscious goal of many a mindful adult!

Toward this end, Kühlewind offers us three relevant pieces of advice: 1) Valuable practical experience in freedom of will can be gained by learning to concentrate our attention. 2) The intensity of our sense perceptions can be strengthened "with light, careful attention." 3) Both of these practices can help us transform our cultural addiction to external, passive pleasures into creative, artistic joy.[12]

Attention is important in a mindfulness practice, but no less important in everyday living, according to the research of the Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi initially studied particularly creative and artistic individuals and coined the word "flow" to summarize what was common about their optimal experiences. In a subsequent study, he documented stories of ordinary people who also found flow in many aspects of their lives, including work, hobbies, and relationships.

Csikszentmihalyi characterizes flow as a state of complete immersion in an activity that is

intrinsically rewarding and lifts the course of one's life to a different level. The intense absorption in such a state is more like the joy for joy's sake of the small child, than it is like an adult's typical pleasure. "The important thing is to enjoy the activity for its own sake and to know that what matters is not the result, but the control one is acquiring over one's attention."[13] He maintains that while it is usually difficult to change the external circumstances of one's life, changing the focus of one's attention and thereby the contents of one's consciousness, is a much more reliable way to achieve a feeling of fulfillment.

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Attention as Love

Attention and consciousness are all-encompassing topics; it is advisable to study these topics ourselves and explore our own experiences with young children, as I have done above, in addition to working with the research of others.

Through the course of my own exploration, I have also begun to understand that, whether one is the giver or the receiver of attention, or sharing an experience with others, attention in the fullest sense involves all of our soul faculties—thinking, feeling and willing. As Mary Oliver, the poet, writes, "Attention without feeling… is only report."[14]

My own experience of genuine attention involves saying "yes," inwardly, in three different ways. Bringing myself to a specific focus is the first "yes," which is mostly connected to my thinking. In my feelings, the quality of "yes" is more like a listening, or creating a free space. While a portion of will is required in committing to both of these first two aspects, there is a third "yes" that comes as I let go of my own needs or agenda in giving attention to something or someone else; this aspect is a kind of selflessness in the will. To be the recipient of such full attention is to receive a rare and sometimes startling gift.

Simone Weil, the French philosopher, activist, and mystic, wrote compellingly about the role of attention in life and education:

> The poet produces something beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with an act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.
>
> The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of the human being are the result of the one and same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act.[15]

Supporting the Forces of Life and Growth

The concern about our attention being co-opted by values and interests that are not our own, and, as such, significantly influencing our own and our children's lives, seems well founded. Some of the young people I know are beginning to be aware of the need to consciously manage their media use, but they seem to be exceptions to the norm.

It is equally clear that attention is a powerful force that can be transformative. An image that kept recurring to me, as I was working with this topic, was of two contrasting qualities of light. The light that we associate with our consciousness, which is largely metaphorical, is a warm, lively light. The light of our screens is cool, and I have often experienced it as drawing life

forces out of me. It is the former quality that can warm one's heart, "light up" one's eyes, nourish and heal us.

If we, parents and teachers, are willing to look at our own habits of attention and try to be healthy models for our children and students, it is possible to preserve and even strengthen the best of our human capacities.

ENDNOTES

1 Paul Lewis, "'Our Minds Can Be Hijacked': The Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia," www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia?CMP=fb_us.
2 Lewis, "'Our Minds Can Be Hijacked'."
3 Lewis, "'Our Minds Can Be Hijacked'."
4 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume One (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), Chapter XL: Attention.
5 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume Two (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), Chapter XXVI: Will, pp. 562–579.
6 Thomas H. Davenport, and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).
7 Herbert Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *The Economics of Communication and Information*, edited by Donald M. Lamberton (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1996).
8 Matthew Crawford, "The Cost of Paying Attention," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2015. www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/opinion/sunday/the-cost-of-paying-attention.html?_r=0. Crawford is the author of the book, *The World Beyond Your Head: Becoming an Individual in the Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015).
9 Davenport and Beck, p. 7.
10 Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1955), p. 18.
11 Georg Kühlewind, *From Normal to Healthy* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1988), p. 142.
12 Kühlewind, p. 143.
13 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 129.
14 Mary Oliver, *Our World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007). This quote is taken from the following excerpt from Oliver's elegy in photographs and writing to her partner, the photographer Molly Malone: "It has frequently been remarked, about my own writings, that I emphasize the notion of attention. This began simply enough: To see that the way the flicker flies is greatly different from the way the swallow plays in the golden air of summer. It was my pleasure to notice such things, it was a good first step. But later, watching M. when she was taking photographs, and watching her in the darkroom, and no less watching the intensity and openness with which she dealt with friends, and strangers too, taught me what real attention is about. Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness—an empathy—was necessary if the attention was to matter. Such openness and empathy M. had in abundance, and gave away freely… I was in my late twenties and early thirties, and well filled with a sense of my own thoughts, my own presence. I was eager to address the world of words—to address the world with words. Then M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles. I think of this always when I look at her photographs, the images of vitality, hopefulness, endurance, kindness, vulnerability… We each had our separate natures; yet our ideas, our influences upon each other became a reach and abiding confluence."
15 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 119–120.

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