

'Put those phones away': Daycare's infant experiment may surprise you ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The children in the infant program at Ottawa's at Elizabeth Park Child Care Centre have no problem navigating a smartphone.

At 15-months-old, Caiden Nicol can easily swipe through the photos on her mother's device.

"More and more children gravitate to these cellphones because they see other people using it," Caiden's mother Candice Nichol told CTV Ottawa.

When administrators at the Ottawa daycare noticed that babies and toddlers at their facility are very comfortable using smartphones, they decided to conduct an informal experiment.

Margaret MacNaughton, the head teacher of the infant program that includes six-month-olds to 18-month-olds, decided to offer children both toy phones and actual cellphones to play with.

MacNaughton said, while the toy phones sparked some interest, the youngsters engaged with the real phones much more.

"They were actually texting and swiping," she said. "It's amazing to see at this age how much knowledge they had of cellphones."

But too much screen-time at an early age has been linked to mental health issues in children, according to Ottawa child psychiatrist Dr. Michael Cheng.

Cheng said babies' brains develop through face-to-face contact, and smartphones and other mobile devices can disrupt that connection.

"There is growing data that suggests that our misuse, our overuse, of technology is related to a lot of this rise in mental health issues that we're seeing," Cheng said.

A study presented at the 2015 U.S. Pediatric Academic Societies Annual Meeting showed that more than one in three children are getting their first hands-on experience of smartphones and tablets before they've reached their first birthday.

Meanwhile, MacNaughton's message to parents is to hold off on screen time while their children are around, and focus on face-to-face contact.

"Put those phones away," she said. "If you're at the park, be with your child, get on that climber with them. Build that bond. That bond is what's going to carry them forward into the world."

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