

Parental Phubbing and its Effects on Adolescents: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Parental phubbing is the act of parents using smartphones while neglecting their children. Previous studies consistently find that higher parental phubbing is linked to an increase in problem behaviors among adolescents- both internal (anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem) and external (aggression, addiction, conduct issues), and leads to reduced self-concept and social-emotional competence. Therefore, the present study focused on the impact of parental phubbing on adolescents' wellbeing. Researcher used both theoretical and empirical evidences to examine the study. The findings reveal that parental phubbing is an emerging threat in our technologically advanced society affecting the adolescents and is expressed as certain psychological problems, some of it happen within one self, whereas some other problems are outwardly expressed.

Keywords: Parental phubbing, mental health, anxiety, problematic smartphone use.

Introduction

The advancement of technology has made smartphones an integral part of day-to-day life of every individual (Niu, Yao, Wu, Tian, Xu, & Sun, 2020). Most of the individual predominantly rely on electronic devices for an easy and effective lifestyle (Varkey, Micle, MS, & Shiji, 2022). This has led to excessive use of smartphone which in turn has emerged as a phenomenon causing difficulties in individuals' life. One of the most prominent outcomes of this growing dependence of smartphones is *phubbing*. The term phubbing is a combination of two terms "*phone*" and "*snubbing*" which means ignoring the other person through phone while having a conversation (Roberts & David, 2016). When a person is having a face-to-face conversation with another person, either a friend, a partner or parents, ignore the conversation and remain busy on their smartphone, it is termed as *phubbing*. When a parent exhibits this behaviour towards their children while having a daily interaction,

it is termed as *parental phubbing* (Varkey, Micle, MS, & Shiji, 2022). This behaviour of parents leaves a huge negative impression on their children. Gradually, when the face-to-face conversation reduces and replaced by smartphones, children lose their parental warmth. This behaviour not only reduces the quality of communication but also effects the relation of a parent and child. When children are neglected by their parents due to the over use of smartphones, the children feel neglected and often expressed as psychological problems such as loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety and depressive symptoms. Parental phubbing not only affect the psychological health but also affects the social development, academic functioning and behavioral patterns of adolescent children.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical models explain how parental phubbing may lead to various problems among adolescents. Expectancy Violation Theory is one of the prominent theories. It is explained in this theory that we expect some specific behaviour from the person while we communicate. Such as adolescents expect attentiveness while having a conversation with their parents. Parental phubbing violates these interaction norms by focusing on the smartphone and ignoring the conversation (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015).

Another theory, The Politeness Theory mention that parental phubbing violates the established norms of politeness, which are made to safeguard the feelings. This theory explains why phubbing is considered as negative behaviour in society. Family System Theory explains that an individual cannot be understood alone separating from their family, where family functions as a unit (Murray, 1978). Therefore, the behaviour of family, their bonding matters the most for every family member. So parental phubbing on adolescents can affect their emotional bonding.

Self-Determination Theory emphasize on basic psychological needs, including relatedness. Parental phubbing violates adolescents' relatedness need. It was found that parental phubbing leads to adolescents' depression symptoms and is mediated by need satisfaction (Xie & Xie, 2020). Attachment and Emotional Security theory says that every individual has an emotional attachment with their family and always needs and emotional security for it. When phubbing damages perceived parental availability, it likely induces feelings of insecurity and abandonment, risk factors for depression (McDaniel, 2021). According to social learning theory children starting learning from the family environment itself before going to school. Children usually imitate the behaviour of their parents and adopt those by themselves (Grusec, 1992).

From these theories, it is clear that the family bonds and social relations are important in the life of individuals and especially the adolescents are looking at the parents for their emotional needs. If the parents start remain tied up with the screen, the children may feel lack of warmth and depth in relations and they also would eventually start using the mobile phones leading to addiction or they may seek parental and social attention by expressing anti-social behaviour or they become vulnerable to various other psychological issues. Many studies have explored the

effect of parental phubbing in the life of children and adolescents. Most of them substantiated the theoretical underpinnings of parental phubbing.

Psychological Effects of Parental Phubbing

Previous studies show that parental phubbing is associated to adolescent emotional distress. Xie and Xie (2020) studied parental phubbing linked with depression in late childhood and adolescent by using a structural equation model through two path model: one through reduced parental warmth and another through increased parental rejection. It was revealed that undermining the basis attachment and relatedness buffer depression. Similarly in the study of Wang et al (2020), the finding reveals that when the parental phubbing was higher it predicted a higher level of depressive symptoms among the adolescents. Harianti and Kurniawan (2022) also found that parental phubbing has a negative impact on adolescents' mental well-being.

Parental phubbing has also been associated to anxiety in adolescents. For instance, Wei et al (2022) found that anxiety mediate the link between parental phubbing and cyberbullying. According to Jiang et al (2023) findings, parental phubbing increased adolescents' shyness and fear of negative evaluation, this in turn exacerbated social anxiety.

A key psychological mechanism is self-esteem and need fulfillment. Wang and Qiao (2022) found that parental phubbing predicted lower adolescent self-esteem, which in turn mediated risk for suicidal ideation. This suggests phubbing may make teens feel less valued, eroding self-worth (core self-esteem) and contributing to despair. As Roberts and David (2016) have argued, being ignored in favor of a phone conveys a message of insignificance; in turn, adolescents report feeling unloved or rejected. Collectively, these studies portray parental phubbing as a form of social exclusion that undermines the adolescents' psychological security.

Social Development

Parental phubbing also effects the social and relational development of an adolescent. In practical terms, adolescent's phubbed by parents tend to have weaker parent-child bonds and social skills. For example, Liu et al. (2020) found that phubbing undermines adolescents' satisfaction with their parent relationship, which then reduced overall life satisfaction. In the study of McDaniel (2021), it was found that parents busy with their mobile phone reduce relationship satisfaction among adolescents. Yang et al (2024) found that adolescents exposed to parental psychological aggression reported more phubbing and more anxiety; anxiety in turn fully mediated the aggression and phubbing link.

Academic Performance and parental phubbing

Emerging evidence links parental phubbing to poorer academic engagement and higher burnout. In the findings of the study by Jiang et al. (2023), reveals that parental phubbing increases the academic burnout. It was also found that parental phubbing was indirectly predicting academic burnout through mediating social anxiety.

Li and Ye (2023) likewise found that parental phubbing was related with lower learning engagement in adolescents. They found loneliness as a mediator when parents phubbed, adolescents felt lonelier and excluded, which in turn reduced their motivation and participation in learning. Although there are fewer studies which have measured test scores or grades directly, the indirect evidence is compelling.

Phone Addictions and Phubbing

Studies revealed that parental phubbing have leads to addiction of mobile phone among adolescents. Liu et al. (2019) in their study found that parental phubbing is positively related to the increase of adolescents' mobile phone dependency. Similarly in the study of Xie et al. (2019), it was found that adolescents who are being phubbed by parents increases adolescents' mobile phone use. The study examines the effect by using mediating role as parents and children attachment and moderating role as genders. It was also revealed that parental phubbing increases the mobile phone addiction by adolescents in the findings of the study by Niu et al. (2020). Higher mobile phone dependency is itself associated with insomnia, poor concentration, and ultimately lower academic achievement leads to loneliness which emerged as anxiety and depression (Ding, Dong, & Zhang, 2023). These studies highlight the fact that the imitating nature of children and adolescents is actually occurring and the parents who use mobile excessively are giving a bad modelling to their wards and causing them harm. The phone addiction gradually leads to problematic smartphone use among children.

Problematic Smartphone Use

When adolescents use mobile phones for their internet use, gaming and other online social interactions as their parents give them no quality time, they gradually develop phone addictions and which in turn develop into problematic mobile phone or problematic smartphone use. Many studies have shown that parental phubbing and problematic smartphone use are interrelated. For example, in the study of Geng et al. (2021) it was found that both mother and father phubbing predicts problematic smartphone use among adolescents. Likewise, in the study of Niu et al (2020) it was revealed that parental phubbing links to the adolescents' problematic mobile phone use. This study was conducted to examine the mother phubbing on problematic social networking site use. It was found that there was a positive association between the two selected variables (Wang, et al., 2021).

Discussion

The evidence reviewed shows that parental phubbing broadly undermines adolescents' developmental needs through several converging mechanisms. Theoretically, phubbing is a situation where a person ignores the other person by repeatedly attending to their mobile devices while having a face-to-face conversation. According to expectancy-violation theory, every person has an expectation from the other person while having a face-to face conversation. Similarly, children expect responsive attention from parents; when a parent's phone diverts that attention, the child feels ignored. Empirically, this is revealed as a factor that lower the perceived parental support

and warmth. Attachment theory predicts exactly this outcome: a parent's unavailability signals rejection, undermining secure attachment. In support, multiple studies document that phubbing erodes parent-child attachment (lower relationship satisfaction, decreased relatedness satisfaction) and that these relational deficits mediate the link to adolescent distress.

Self-determination theory also suggests that adolescents need love and affection, and independence to grow well. Xie & Xie (2020) identified the relation among parental phubbing and adolescents' depression. Need satisfaction found to play a crucial mediator role on the phubbing's effect on depression. Social learning theory further explains how phubbing shapes behavior: Liu et al. (2019) explicitly invoke this framework, finding that parental phone use models as a subjective norm that teens internalize, leading to their own increased phone dependency. In addition, it is observing that parental phubbing disrupts child's working memory or emotional bonding, making it harder for them to self-regulate as in the social anxiety to burnout model of Jiang et al., (2023). Loneliness and rumination have emerged as affective mediators: phubbing tends to make adolescents feel lonely, and lonely or anxious adolescents may be prone to over thinking, which can lead to mobile phone addiction, depression, and even can lead to self-harming actions.

It can be said that adolescents with higher resilience could deal with parental phubbing and depression. Personality and temperament also play roles: extraverted adolescents were less prone to fall from low self-esteem into suicidal ideation under phubbing conditions. Attachment style is a key moderator: secure attachments markedly buffer against the effect of parental phubbing. Similarly, if the child's social environment is supportive, such as having supportive teachers and peers, can offset neglect at home. For example, a strong teacher-student relationship weakened the effect of maternal phubbing on teens' internet addiction. Conversely, factors like harsh parenting and non-conducive social environment exacerbate phubbing's impact. Age and gender may also moderate outcomes: some evidence suggests younger adolescents or boys are more reactive to phubbing in terms of anxiety, though other studies have found no sex differences, indicating this area requires further research.

Overall, the literature draws a consistent picture about the effects of parental phubbing. Parental phubbing undermines adolescents' well-being by damaging key psychosocial supports. When parents are more engaged on their mobile phones while having a conversation with their adolescents, adolescents feel ignored and undervalued. This reduces the emotional bonding between the parent and child and lead to reduction in parental warmth. This, in turn, lead to mobile phone addiction among adolescents and further to loneliness and depression. The erosion of self-esteem and relatedness needs, as a consequence of phubbing and addiction fosters negative affect like anxiety, loneliness and maladaptive coping, and ultimately spills over into poorer social skills, school attitudes, and behavior. The process is partly moderated by personal and environmental factors like resilience, emotional attachment, social support, which can reduce the impact.

Conclusion

Recent empirical studies converge on the conclusion that parental phubbing has broad negative consequences on adolescents. Across psychological, social, academic, and behavioral domains, higher parental phone distraction predicts worse adolescent outcomes. Phubbing acts like a form of neglect, violating adolescents' need for parent attention and affection. The effects are mediated by factors such as parental warmth/rejection and adolescent loneliness, and moderated by resilience, emotional attachment, and support contexts. Given these findings, interventions to limit parental phubbing (setting family mobile use norms) and to bolster adolescents' support systems (strengthening attachment and coping resources) is warranted. It can be concluded that, in our digital age, mindful reduction of parental device use may be important for promoting adolescents' mental health, social development, and academic success. It is high time, that the parents should understand the fact that a seemingly harmless action of using mobile phone can have detrimental effects on their wards, if not taken care of.

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