

Common Sense on Managing Multitasking

Multitasking: Good or Bad?

Pop Quiz: Is being able to do 2 or 3 things at once:

- a) good preparation for the future?
- b) a guarantee that homework won't be absorbed completely or completed on time?
- c) a bit of both?

Some facts

The average 8- to 18-year-old crams more than 10 hours of media use into 7 1/2 hours of media time every day (*Kaiser, 2010*).

Every year, kids spend more and more time using two or more forms of media simultaneously.

The impact of multitasking differs by what kind of multitasking your child is doing.

Experts disagree on some aspects, but all agree that multitasking prolongs the time it takes to do individual tasks, such as homework.

Research shows that multitasking affects kids' ability to filter and retain information.

The answer is C: A bit of both.

Since not all multitasking is the same, the impact on our kids differs depending on what they're doing. The most common forms of multitasking are:

1. Your kids "listen" to you or another human being while doing something else — like playing a videogame.
2. Kids toggle back and forth between two distinct mediums — for example, they watch TV while doing homework.
3. Finally, there's the all-in-one-device kind of multitasking like listening to music on the computer while researching homework online and keeping up with several instant message conversations.

Why multitasking matters

Being able to process several things simultaneously in a media-rich world can be a real skill. When kids are constantly being interrupted by IMs, phone calls, and texts, multitasking can help them keep many balls in the air at once without dropping them.

But there are real costs: A study performed at the National Academy of Sciences showed that even though students thought they were good at toggling back and forth (because that's really what multitasking is), there were real consequences. Specifically, the study found that kids couldn't filter — they couldn't focus on one thing and shut out others. And they were really slow at being able to return to their primary task — like homework — once they had shifted their attention to a text, an IM, or a TV show.

Bottom line? Multitaskers understand less of what they're doing, and the next day they aren't able to remember what they learned while multitasking.

How to tell if multitasking is working for your child

How do you know when multitasking may be a problem for your kids? Here are some warning signs to look for:

- » **Distraction from school work.** Can your child remember what she read last night? Does her book report thesis make a consistent argument? If not, her divided attention has hurt her ability to recall and retain information.
- » **Grades start dropping.** Homework isn't finished on time, and reflection and analysis suffer. Experts say that the brain is programmed to respond more readily to a habitual task — like texting a friend back or IMing a response — than to perform the deeper tasks of analyzing information.
- » **Situational attention deficit disorder.** Is your child disorganized? Slow to get things done? Irritable? It's not just his age — it could be his multitasking.
- » **Social costs.** Studies show that multitasking doesn't do much for intimate family relationships. We all know that kids' friends trump their parents. So if you were counting on a lovely family dinner, the moment a text comes in from a boyfriend, the connection with the family takes a back seat.
- » **Taking too long to complete an activity.** Kids take longer to finish things when they're doing many things at once, and they simply absorb less information.

Tips for managing multitasking with kids of all ages

- » **Encourage your kids to read more.** It turns out that the brain is like a muscle. Reading actually builds the muscles that counteract the impact of multitasking. The more people read, the better they become at reflection and analysis.
- » **Start good habits early.** Establish boundaries. Start when your kids are young. Turn the phone off during homework. IM, too.
- » **Model what you preach.** This means no checking the BlackBerry while asking your kids how their days were.
- » **Keep distractions to a minimum.** Try to help your kids do one thing at a time. Granted, this is easier with younger kids. But having the computer in the same room as the TV? Not going to help. For older kids, make sure social networks and chatting happen after homework is completed — or at timed intervals.
- » **Pay attention and connect the dots.** If you see your kids' grades slipping, make the connection between listening to a favorite band and doing algebra homework. If your children begin handing in work late or if they are staying up too late to complete homework, consider turning off the Internet, the cell phone, and the TV, and see if the situation reverses itself. The grades will tell if multitasking is taking its toll.