

Are screens becoming substitute parents?

Before we are born our nervous systems are receiving stimuli from our mothers. If our mom feels pain, we sense it too. If she is stressed out, we learn what that feels like by experiencing the same rush of stress hormones like cortisol.

It's all part of a complex and beautiful neurobiological process preparing us for life outside the womb. So what happens when the mother and baby's touch, gaze and attention is diverted by digital distractions?

What starts in the womb continues as infants as we synchronize with our mother's physiological rhythms. The heart rate and brain waves of mother and baby are often in perfect alignment, a critical process in the development of the child's emotional life. Language skills, social skills and emotional regulation all begin taking shape in these critical early years.

Unfortunately, in many instances, the mother-child bond is interrupted when screens are used to placate a restless toddler.

Human cues like a caregiver's touch and eye contact that help young children work through difficult emotions like feeling angry or sad are often ignored when a digital device becomes a pacifier for an upset child.

Screens take on the role of surrogate parent in far too many situations, meaning that the young child's cognitive and emotional capacities are being programmed by both mother and machine.

The church offers us an antidote in the person of Mary. Many parents worry about how to navigate this complex environment of digital distraction, and they would do well to turn to Mary, the mediatrix of grace. If mothers mediate the world to us from the time we are conceived, Mary mediates God to us in the Word made flesh.

The Angelus prayer provides a step-by-step guide for following Mary's lead in the formation of a healthy interior life free of digital pollution.

“An angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit.” Mary was paying attention. How? By keeping herself in prayer whenever possible so that when the ultimate moment of grace arrived she had the capacity to utter the “fiat” that changed the world.

Cultivating attention by minimizing distraction and the things that get between us and our loved ones, especially mothers and children, is the first step toward a richer interior life where the word can take root and bear fruit.

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word.” Mary’s deep interior life where she frequently “pondered ... in her heart” gave her a clear view of her identity and vocation in God’s eyes.

She is open and receptive, the “holy soil” who receives the seed of God’s love and bears fruit a hundredfold. Mary had excellent reception. Not cellphone or Wi-Fi reception, but a connection to God that confirmed her identity and purpose.

“The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” The fruit of attention, a rich interior life and a sense of our God-given identity is a deep intimacy with Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. We are extensions of Christ in the world. This can be hard to remember when we are fixated on the technological extensions of ourselves.

Use this Lent as an opportunity to reconnect with Jesus through Mary by reflecting on her mediating role in our lives.

Copyright ©2019 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.