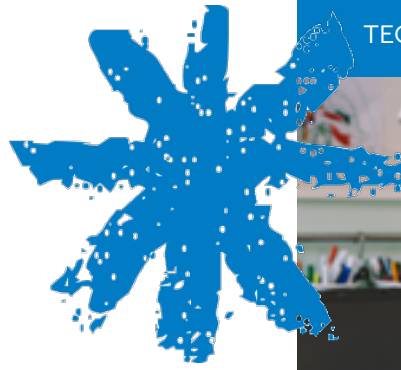




The Myth of Multitasking

by Martine Oglethorpe



Being a parent today has plenty of challenges, none more so than keeping up with what our kids are doing on their devices. This is particularly the case when we think they should be using their time more productively.

These days so much of the kids' school work and study is done on a computer or tablet that it gets tricky to discern how much of their screen time is work and how much is scrolling on Instagram or snapping on Snapchat.

Of course our kids don't see a problem with this. They believe they are pretty proficient multitaskers, able to scroll a social media feed, live stream music, answer a text message and study for their maths test at the same time.

And we shouldn't be surprised that they think this, because most of us think the same. Most parents are also now regular users of a digital device and also believe we can multitask with ease. We routinely scan Facebook while simultaneously stirring the cheese sauce, breaking up an argument in the other room and listening to our partner recap their day at work.

The truth is that neither our kids nor ourselves can effectively multitask and do the best job possible at any given time. Research tells us that the brain has a finite amount of attention it can devote at any one moment in time. When we pile tasks on top of one another, we reduce the effectiveness of our brain as it must now share that limited resource amongst those multiple jobs. We are not multitasking – we are switch tasking. This means that each of those tasks takes longer as we rapidly flick our attention from one of them to another, refocusing each time. We lose momentum and we lose efficiency.

So how can we help our kids (and ourselves) stay focused and concentrate on one task at a time?

Have them set up study blocks

This can start with time slots as short as 20 minutes in which they focus on one task only for that period. The blocks need to be timed and need to be devoted to only a single task.



Turn off notifications

The binging and beeping of a device will always encourage diversion as the owner feels the need to respond to their messages or check that email. By turning off all the noise-based distractions, your kids (and you) are less likely to be interrupted during a focused study period.

Allow them to reward themselves

Each time they manage to complete a set study period, they can be rewarded with a short break to do

something else. If this is checking social media then they need to set a timer and stick to it. We all know how easily we can get sucked into the vortex of social media feeds and never-ending scrolling. Other breaks might involve playing with a pet or listening to a song. Getting up and moving to get the blood pumping is a great way to take a break and ensure your brain is ready to refocus when the time comes for the next block.

Invest in an analogue clock

Use a clock or a visual timer that counts down the time for each study period. When the brain sees time literally ticking away it finds it easier to grasp the concept of how fast time is going and, in turn, what is being accomplished in that time. This doesn't quite work the same way when we use a digital clock, so using an analogue clock can be a really useful exercise to try.

Monitor your child

When parents lament to me that they don't know if their child is doing any work, or they are always distracted by their devices, then I ask them to have the conversation with them. Find out what they are doing and if they are struggling with anything. Look at how they are keeping up with all aspects of their lives. Ask their teacher if they are still on track. Remember that monitoring your child – and not just on their devices – is the best way to ensure they are in control and getting the things done that they need to be doing.

There are certainly some tasks that we can do at the same time without compromising efficiency. Hanging out the washing while listening to a podcast is something I can confidently achieve. But when it comes to more cognitive pursuits that require greater focus, then we must remember that our brains need to be able to focus solely on one task at a time in order to achieve them in the most productive manner possible.



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