

Cellmates or Soulmates WUIS

The advent of the cellular phone has been a boon for families. You can call and say you're running late. You can track down your teenager. You can keep in touch anytime, anywhere.

But cell phones are increasingly encroaching on family time in America. Families **may** be sharing cellular calling plans but little else as we plug in to electronics of choice. Car rides to school used to be a great time for parents and children to talk about their day. Now, parents may be on the phone while children are connected to their iPods.

Connection has always been associated with power. Being on a cell phone may be a way of saying "I'm really too important to be confined to this space." Caring for children may be so **devalued** in our society that it's not seen as **worthy** of disconnecting from others' access.

Whatever the reason, there seems to be little question: Cell phones are interrupting family time. Sociologist Kenneth J. Gergen describes people on cell phones as having an "**absent presence**, physically present but absorbed by a technologically mediated world elsewhere."

When parents and children are on a stroller walk in the park, children aren't hearing "Look at that squirrel!" Instead they're hearing, "Yes, it's in the file on my desk," or "No way! He said that?" How confusing these one-sided conversations must be to little ones who are longing for the words which will describe their shared experience of the park.

Interactions with their parents are critical for children. One-on-one conversations help children learn about the world, about mutuality and taking turns. But the most important thing they learn about is respect—respect for their parents and respect for their own worth as well.

These opportunities are lost when a parent is "absently present," available only to the more highly valued voice on the other end of the call.

It's one of those universal experiences of parenthood. You can count on **loud misbehavior** in your child when you make a phone call.

This acting out in children obviously expresses their need for our recognition. I agree that it must be controlled—after all, children must learn to respect their parents' rights and learn to wait for attention. But I also appreciate the passionate demand for **togetherness** that it implies.

On some level, even the youngest child knows that we all need to be present with those at hand.

This is Claudia **Quigg** with Let's TALK **Kids**.