



WHAT'S IN A SMILE?

By Wilson McCaskill

I have been saying for quite some time now, that children are smiling less and less and the more students I work with, especially junior primary students, the more convinced I become.

Something is robbing children of this crucial means to connect with others, self-soothe and convey warmth, openness and belonging. Everyone benefits from smiling. Making yourself smile can change your mood; receiving a smile is invariably uplifting and sharing a smile makes you feel good about yourself.

Of all the human social interaction tools, none transcends smiling. The importance of this facial expression is best measured by simply asking ourselves if we would rather live in relationships, families, communities that have a propensity to smile or ones that do not. The answer is obvious, even if you smile little and justify that by saying you have little to smile about. (I dare say that a prisoner in solitary confinement with only a mirror for company would prefer to see his own smile than a scowl, assuming he could find the means to manufacture a smile.)

I have been pointing the finger of blame at our adult addiction to digital devices and more specifically smart phones. (Please read my article, **One Handed Parenting**.) When I raise this issue with parents and press home the belief that their phone addictions maybe creating the first generation of children without the natural impulse to smile, I am often met with looks of disbelief and sometimes accused of being alarmist without the hard facts to back my assertion.

Sadly, research is starting to confirm that smiling in babies and children is on the decline. The Origins Project, a \$26 million, decade long investigation into the impact and influence of electronics and the environment on a child's risk of chronic health problems, delivers some unsettling evidence.

Professor Desiree Silva, Head of Paediatrics, Joondalup Health Campus, Perth, WA.

*“Social interaction from an early age is changing and we are finding that some **babies at six weeks of age are not smiling...** and smiling at six weeks old is a key milestone.*

What we have noticed is a lot of parents are holding their phone or iPad and not actually looking at their child. What worries us as pediatricians, is that platform of the child's brain might be affected. That early brain development could be affected by that lack of interaction, or reduced amount of interaction, because parents are distracted by their phone.



These devices are very addictive. So, what does it replace? Basically, interacting with your child, or looking at what your child's needs are, or responding to what your child is doing."

You will have noticed, I am sure, the increasing number of mothers who breastfeed and fathers who bottle feed while looking at their phone, thereby giving baby no option but to look at a frozen face rather than one that looks back lovingly, deeply and responsively. Being genuinely present during intimate moments allows the transfer of emotions that help to establish empathy, understanding, acceptance and belonging... especially in the first one thousand days of a child's life.

This interference of face-to-face contact, from an addiction to digital devices, has been given the name "*technoference*" and as it is an addiction, it is hard to believe that the damage it is causing will diminish simply because addicts are made aware of the consequences of their addiction. While we wait for some intervention (medical or otherwise) to cure or at least curb this addiction, it might be wise to make a conscious effort to increase the exposure of young children to smiling.

I believe schools can play a significant role here by ensuring that staff makes the conscious effort to be perceived by students and parents as a happy and smiling community of educators. "*Smile and the whole world smiles with you*" may be decidedly unrealistic but giving it a go is certainly better for you and the collective health of your school community than the alternative. (Please read my article, **Greetings and Farewells.*)

Following is a poem some attribute to the late and great Spike Milligan but the poet is generally accepted as anonymous.

Smiling is infectious
You catch it like the flu
When someone smiled at me today
I started smiling too
I walked around the corner
And someone saw me grin
When he smiled I realised
I had passed it on to him
I thought about the smile
And then realised its worth
A single smile like mine
Could travel round the earth
So if you feel a smile begin
Don't leave it undetected
Start an epidemic
And get the world infected.



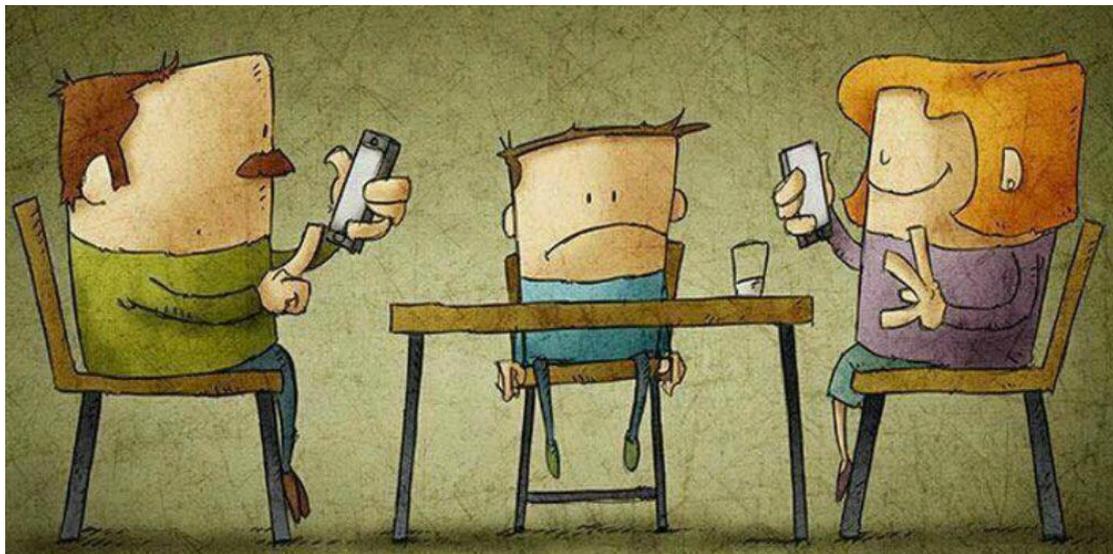
I would like to suggest that this poem be creatively interpreted as an assembly item by one, some or all classes with the singular objective of promoting the importance, value and necessity of smiling.

Perhaps it could be turned into a song with accompanying actions and moments of smiling that are fun for the whole school to learn. The poem could be used as the subject of discussion during health lessons or the theme for art classes or the catalyst for creative expression in literacy, dance or drama. The possibilities are many and varied.

I think the evidence that babies as young as six weeks old are not smiling is the canary in the coalmine of modern existence, and it is time to return to our children what has been stolen from them. It is time to make smiling the most common behaviour in our schools and for educators to lead by example. It is time to give and receive smiles and as much as possible be fully present when we do so.

What's in a smile?

Quite simply...more than we can afford to lose.



*Note: The articles *One-Handed Parenting* and *Greetings & Farewells* can be found on our website www.playistheway.com.au in the ARTICLES section.