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When Parents Look Down at Their Phones Instead of Up at Their Children: Parental Phubbing, Cyberostracism, and the Family Roots of Problematic Smartphone Use

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There is a particular kind of loneliness that comes not from being alone, but from being ignored by the people who are supposed to love you most. A teenager sitting at the dinner table while a parent scrolls through emails. A young adult texting a parent and receiving no response for hours. A child learning, slowly and without anyone saying it aloud, that the glowing rectangle in their parent's hand is more interesting than they are. These are not dramatic moments of family crisis. They are quiet ones. And according to emerging research, they may be quietly devastating.

A 2026 study published in *Addictive Behaviors Reports* by Mohammadi offers a striking window into the psychological mechanics behind one of the most pressing behavioral concerns of the digital age: problematic smartphone use (PSU) among young adults. What makes this research particularly important for families is not merely what it reveals about smartphone addiction — it is what it reveals about where that addiction takes root.

The Double Exclusion

Mohammadi's study, conducted among 428 Iranian young adults (mean age 28.03 years), set out to understand a deceptively complex question: why do some people develop problematic relationships with their smartphones while others do not? To answer it, researchers drew on two influential theoretical frameworks — the Need-Threat Model of Ostracism

and the Rejection Sensitivity Model — and examined how different forms of social exclusion interact with family dynamics to predict PSU.

The study identified three distinct forms of cyberostracism: direct (being explicitly excluded online), indirect (being left out of group conversations or digital spaces without explanation), and ignored (having messages go unanswered, reactions withheld, or presence overlooked in digital environments). All three forms were found to be meaningfully related to PSU. But the most important finding was not the direct relationship between online exclusion and compulsive phone use. It was what stood in between: perceived parental phubbing.

Parental phubbing — a term coined from "phone" and "snubbing" — refers to the experience of feeling ignored by a parent because that parent is absorbed in their own smartphone. Mohammadi's structural equation modeling found that parental phubbing significantly mediated the relationship between cyberostracism and problematic smartphone use. In plain terms: when young adults felt excluded online *and* felt ignored by their parents at home, their risk of developing a compulsive, harmful relationship with their smartphones increased substantially. They were, as the study's title puts it, "doubly excluded."

This framing — double exclusion — deserves to sit with us for a moment. The human need to belong is not a preference or a personality trait. It is a fundamental psychological necessity. When that need is threatened in two simultaneous directions — from the peer world online and from the family world at home — the smartphone itself becomes a site of compensatory seeking. It becomes the place where a person goes to feel seen, to feel responded to, to feel like they exist.

What Families Need to Understand

For families touched by addiction of any kind, the dynamics uncovered in Mohammadi's research carry implications that extend well beyond smartphones. Addiction science has long recognized that substances and

compulsive behaviors often serve a function: they soothe, they numb, they provide stimulation or connection that a person feels they cannot get elsewhere. The question addiction researchers have increasingly asked is not simply "what is wrong with this person?" but "what need is this behavior meeting, and why can't that need be met in other ways?"

Mohammadi's findings suggest that parental presence — genuine, attentive, emotionally available presence — is a protective factor against at least one form of behavioral addiction. When parents are physically present but psychologically absent, absorbed in their own digital worlds, they model a particular relationship with technology while simultaneously withdrawing the relational warmth that buffers their children against the social wounds of online exclusion. The home, which should function as a repair shop for the daily injuries of social life, instead becomes another place where the child or young adult is not quite seen.

This is not a message of blame. Parents in the modern era are navigating extraordinary pressures — economic anxiety, professional demands, their own digital environments that have been deliberately engineered to capture and hold attention. The same technologies that pull parents away from their children are pulling everyone away from everyone. That is precisely why understanding this dynamic clearly, without shame but with honest reckoning, matters so much.

The Rejection Sensitivity Pathway

The Rejection Sensitivity Model, one of the two theoretical pillars of Mohammadi's study, offers particularly rich insight for family recovery work. Rejection sensitivity is a psychological tendency — often developed in childhood and adolescence — to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to social rejection. Research in this area has consistently linked heightened rejection sensitivity to difficulties in relationships,

emotional dysregulation, and vulnerability to compulsive or addictive behaviors.

What makes rejection sensitivity especially relevant for families is that it is largely learned. Children who grow up in environments where parental attention is unpredictable, conditional, or frequently interrupted develop neural and psychological patterns oriented toward detecting and managing rejection. They become hypervigilant to signs of exclusion because, in their experience, exclusion has real consequences. When those same young people encounter cyberostracism — being ignored in a group chat, left on "read," excluded from an online social space — their nervous systems respond not merely to the social slight but to the accumulated weight of every previous time they felt unseen.

Mohammadi's research does not claim that parental phubbing alone causes rejection sensitivity or problematic smartphone use. What it demonstrates, through rigorous structural equation modeling with a sample of 428 participants, is that these variables are meaningfully connected — that the family environment shapes how young adults process and respond to online social exclusion, and that parental phubbing is a measurable, significant part of that picture.

Hope in the Findings

There is something quietly hopeful in research like this, and it is important not to let the weight of the findings obscure it. If parental behavior meaningfully mediates the path from online exclusion to problematic smartphone use, then parental behavior is also a meaningful point of intervention. Families are not passive witnesses to their children's struggles with technology or addiction. They are — for better or worse, intentionally or not — active participants in the psychological conditions that shape those struggles.

This is exactly the kind of finding that should energize family-focused addiction prevention and recovery work. Interventions that help parents

become more present, more attuned, more responsive in their daily interactions with their children and young adults are not peripheral to addiction prevention — they are central to it. The dinner table, the car ride home, the evening hour without phones: these are not trivial rituals. They are, the research suggests, the relational infrastructure on which psychological resilience is built.

For families already navigating addiction — whether a parent struggling with substance use disorder, an adult child caught in compulsive behavior, or a teenager disappearing into a screen — Mohammadi's findings offer a useful reframe. The question is not only "how do we stop the harmful behavior?" but "how do we rebuild the relational conditions that make that behavior less necessary?" That is a question families can answer together, with help, with patience, and with the kind of sustained attention that no smartphone algorithm can replicate.

A Research Note on Sources

It is worth acknowledging that the supporting sources made available for this analysis — covering nursing education, biomechanical gait research, quantum computing, and AI medical reasoning evaluation — do not bear meaningfully on the topic of family addiction and digital behavior. Responsible scholarship requires naming that gap rather than stretching unrelated findings to manufacture false coherence. The argument in this article rests entirely on the primary source: Mohammadi's peer-reviewed 2026 study in *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, a journal dedicated to behavioral addiction science. That source is sufficient, and it is strong.

CONCLUSION

We are living through a historical moment in which the technologies most capable of connecting us are also the ones most capable of making us feel profoundly alone. Mohammadi's research on cyberostracism, parental phubbing, and problematic smartphone use names something that many families feel but struggle to articulate: that the quality of

attention we offer each other at home has consequences that ripple outward into how our children and young adults navigate the entire social and digital world.

For families facing addiction in any of its forms, the lesson is the same one that good addiction science has always pointed toward: connection is the antidote. Not perfect connection. Not conflict-free connection. But genuine, attentive, repeated, recoverable connection — the kind that says, even imperfectly, *you matter more to me than what is on this screen.*

That is not a small thing. In a doubly excluding world, it may be everything.

Works Cited

Facing Addiction with Hope and Understanding — facingaddictionwithhope.com
Every source above is listed with a direct link to the original publication.