

managing distractions

By Elise De Silva *

We live in a modern society where distraction abounds and multi-tasking has become the latest buzzword. But is multi-tasking just a glorified term for distracted-tasking? Have we lost our ability to single-task and stay focused? The stakes are raised when we have children under our care – distractions can be devastating. So how can we manage distractions and keep our children physically safe and emotionally secure?

Distractions come from both internal and external sources. Internal sources are the things happening inside our brains or inside our bodies: our thoughts, feelings, worries, or physical issues. External sources are the things happening around us: other people, the environment, the next door neighbour's barking dog.

when are we most vulnerable?

- **In new or novel situations.** International travel is a good example. Being out of our normal routine means there's more to concentrate on and more information for our minds to process.
- **In intense situations.** These situations pull so much of our focus that other needs can be missed.
- **In stressful situations.** These situations may include pressure from work, a spat with our partner, or financial strains. All of these factors can weigh on our minds and draw our focus away from what's happening right now.

a conflict of interest

We all love our children, but let's face it, they can be very distracting. A couple of years ago, I suffered my very own Home Alone moment. I had been so engaged in settling my distraught 6-year-old at school one morning that, when the bell rang, I said goodbye and began the short walk home. I reached the school gates and suddenly remembered I had left my 4-year-old back at the school playground! The intensity of settling my older daughter had completely distracted me from remembering my younger daughter. Now I have a better understanding of why.

The distraction-conflict model states, 'in the presence of others there is a conflict between attendance to the person and attending to the task'. This couldn't be truer than when driving with children. According to one study, children are twelve times more distracting to drivers than mobile phones. When discussing this subject with a girlfriend she noted, "It's kind of ironic, you know. I won't let my kids walk to school because it's too dangerous, and yet when I drive them, I pick up their drink bottles off the back seat floor, I peel bananas for them, I turn around and referee their arguments. I even text. Maybe they'd be better off walking."

And she's right – we're drivers, not flight attendants. It's important for children to learn that some tasks require our full focus and attention, especially driving. It's okay to tell them, "Quiet, please. This is a busy intersection. I need to concentrate." Even at home, children will benefit from positive role-modelling. We can tell them, guilt free, "I just need to finish peeling these vegies, then I'll help you get Teddy out of the tree."

children as our focus

There are times, of course, when children do need our undivided attention. For instance, we all know how babies love to stare into their mother's eyes. This is an important way they learn language and form bonds. Mother and baby are both missing out if mum is rocking the pram and staring at her smartphone.

It is said that children who have regular sit-down meals with their family achieve better at school and are less likely to get into trouble with drugs or alcohol. It's important to realise though, it's not just the munching on shepherd's pie together that makes the difference, it's the



dialogue that takes place during the meal which helps children feel valued. We want to try and engage in real conversations with our children, rather than spend the entire dining experience playing Candy Crush. Children who are constantly ignored can feel neglected, or unworthy of our time.

keys to managing distractions

Ken Hodge, Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Otago, teaches 'mindfulness' to help athletes manage distractions. He says, "Mindfulness is about accepting that we are human and that at times we become distracted. The key is not feeling guilty about it or, worse still, ignoring the distraction, otherwise that in itself becomes a distraction. We acknowledge the distraction and redirect our thoughts back to the task or goal we do want to focus on." This is good advice, not only for athletes, but for any parent or caregiver.

Children also benefit from this self-awareness. Pause, Breathe, Smile is a mindfulness in schools programme developed by the Mental Health Foundation as part of its Mindful Aotearoa initiative (www.mindfulaotearoa.co.nz). It has been delivered to 21 schools throughout New Zealand, and is helping children to, among many things, improve their focus and attention. Teachers also benefit. One shares, "As a teacher, I am constantly trying to juggle several tasks at once. The training has encouraged me to learn to focus on the task at hand and to take pleasure in that."

Distractions are inevitable, but we can pause, take a breath and redirect our thoughts and actions back to what is the bigger priority. We can also help our children to manage distractions and build good mental habits.

Now, I wonder if there's still a slice of that chocolate mud cake in the fridge ...

How can we manage distractions?

- Recognise that we have become distracted.
- Acknowledge the distraction.
- Don't feel guilty about the distraction – we're only human, after all.
- Redirect our thoughts back to what we do want to focus on.

Remember:

- Be a good role model for your children. Let them see how you manage distractions in a positive way and stay on task.
- Recognise when you may be vulnerable to distractions in new, intense, or stressful situations.
- Taking control of your thoughts may be difficult at first, but with practice it gets easier.
- Teach children not just the joy of a job well done, but also the joy of a job done.

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