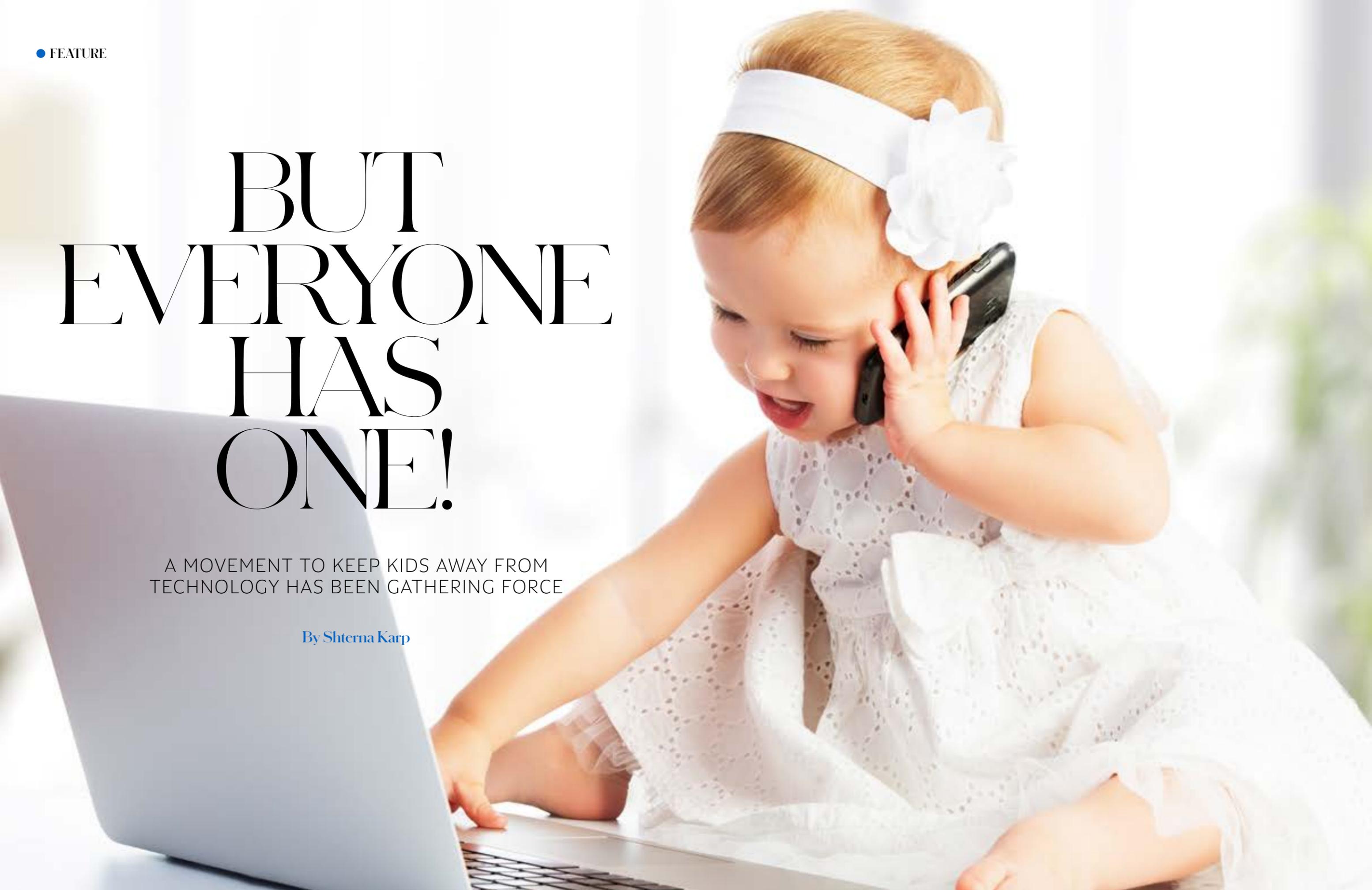


BUT EVERYONE HAS ONE!

A MOVEMENT TO KEEP KIDS AWAY FROM
TECHNOLOGY HAS BEEN GATHERING FORCE

By *Shterna Karp*





Four years ago, two mothers saw what was happening in many of their contemporaries' homes. In their community it was par for the course that young children were given cellphones, iPads, Nintendo Switches, tablets and laptops. Screens, screens and more screens. Even parents who felt that this was wrong were under pressure to comply, so they did. They handed their children a device, a channel to distraction. They felt they had no choice. What else could they do? Their children were feeling left out. Everyone else in school had at least one, how could they be different?

But what if that narrative changed? What if, instead of caving in to peer pressure, parents created peer pressure of another kind?

With that thought in mind, Michal Klerer and Nechy Eichenstadt launched MUST—Mothers Unite to Stall Technology. The initiative is exactly what it sounds like: parents banding together and making a pact to delay their children's access to

technology until a certain date. Until that time, which may be years away, they all commit to not giving their children phones.

So when the deadline comes, the parents consider their options again. Do we want to hold out for another year? Two? This simple system works. Armed with support, parents can keep themselves from handing their child a phone.

In the four short years since Michal and Nechy founded MUST, the movement has taken off. Parents have joined forces, uniting behind the battle cry that it really is possible to make a change. Today there are MUST chapters in California, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Toronto, New York and New Jersey, with plans to establish others in Eretz Yisrael. Kids who would otherwise have not done so are now growing up without the distraction—and dangers—of technology, and mothers are learning how much they can accomplish when they unify for a cause.

And it all started when two mothers set out on a mission.



No matter how old the child is, the second the device belongs to him, the parent will lose control. It's scary.

Michal Klerer

BROOKLYN

Mother of seven children ages six to 22, *ka'h*, and a social worker who stopped working in an official capacity after her kids were born.

I'm in a place where I have kids in all stages. The oldest three, who were born before MUST was even an idea, have had devices for years and years. I saw what that was like for them, and that's when I started wishing there were something I could do about it. It's a slippery slope. It's one thing when kids want to use a phone to be in touch with people and maybe even play a game, but once it becomes *their* phone, once they have their own device, it takes on a life of its own. Technology becomes a monster.

No matter how old the child is, the second he has a device that belongs to him, the

parent will lose control. It's scary. You *think* you'll still have some say and be able to offer guidance—and it's your child, so technically you should be able to—but you don't. You lose some of that ability to impose discipline and structure. The child starts to feel empowered and takes ownership.

I realized very soon that I wasn't in charge. It's a recipe for disaster, because they quickly end up charging it in their rooms and sleeping with it in their beds. I always knew it was a problem, but I didn't think there was much to do about it. Kids in our community get cellphones, and that's that.

Meanwhile, as I was noticing how unhealthy kids' phone habits were, my mother and I, who are both social workers, were organizing a mental health conference upstate. We do this every year, inviting mental health professionals to speak to parents. At the time, devices were the hot topic. Everyone was struggling with them. "My kids are pressuring me. All their friends have one. What should I do?"

I asked our guest speaker, Dr. David Pelcovitz, if he could talk about cellphones. Dr. Pelcovitz, who's a brilliant psychologist, was excited about the idea, and we named his speech "But Everyone Has One." I felt like we were doing something tangible about the problem, even if it was something small.


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The night before the program I couldn't fall asleep. I tossed and turned. I kept thinking, *How did I get to this point? I hate devices, and always said I wouldn't let my kids have one until they were married. How did they end up having them anyway?* Although I knew that Dr. Pelcovitz would draw attention to the problem, there was still no solution.

I was upset that I'd felt so pressured. How could I have let it happen? Then I realized

that if I felt pressured, there was a good chance that a lot of other parents felt the same way.

What if we all banded together? What if we made a collective decision not to give our children devices? If no one wanted to do it, we shouldn't be doing it! The plan would not be to abolish technology forever. But if we stalled, even for a few years, we could give our children a better start. We could give them a healthier, more balanced

childhood that would be the foundation for a stronger adulthood.

With that thought in mind, I finally fell asleep. But when I woke up the next morning, I wasn't so sure. Was the idea even realistic? Did it actually make sense by the light of day? I had my doubts.

Dr. Pelcovitz came over for a visit before his talk, and I decided to run my idea past him over a cup of coffee. "Can I ask you something crazy?" I said. "What if we started



I kept thinking, "How did I get to this point? I always said I wouldn't let my kids have devices... How did they end up having them anyway?"

a coalition of parents who would unite to delay technology? What do you think?"

He absolutely loved the idea—and then told me that I should get up and present it at the conference.

"But I'm not prepared!" I told him. I'd only thought of it the night before. It was nothing more than the kernel of a concept. I had no idea how such an initiative would work, or even what to call it.

Dr. Pelcovitz said that I didn't need to worry about the details right now. "Just get up and share the idea the same way you just shared it with me. I assure you that parents are going to get on board."

By then it was time to go to the auditorium for Dr. Pelcovitz's speech. As we were walking into the room, I bumped into my friend Nechy Eisenstadt and told her what was about to happen.

"I have no idea what this thing is going to look like," I said, "but could you be my partner? Can you help me get it off the ground?" Nechy, who is a go-getter, immediately agreed.

I also mentioned the idea to another friend who was sitting in the front row with us. "I'm speaking about this in less than ten minutes, and I don't even know what to call it," I explained.

She took out a piece of paper and started scribbling on it. A moment later, she passed it to me. "Here," she said. "This is the name you're going to use." Written in bold letters was MUST, an acronym for Mothers Unite

to Stall Technology. It was perfect, the exact message I hoped to get across.

I presented the idea—with the name—a few minutes later. Then I looked out at the crowd and asked, "If you regret giving your child a device, please raise your hand." Half of the people in the audience raised their hands. "Now, if your child doesn't have a device yet but you're scared to give him one, raise your hand." Between the first group and the second, every one of the 300 people in the audience had a hand in the air.

At that moment, MUST turned from a dream into a reality.

When the initiative first launched, people were only able to learn about it through word of mouth. People who were at the presentation reached out to Nechy and me; others who heard about it tracked down our numbers. We encouraged them to present the idea to fellow class mothers and make a pact to take the same stance on devices.

A lot has changed since that first summer. We learned through trial and error what works and what doesn't. The dream of a tech-free class and the reality of creating one isn't always the same.

For example, we quickly realized that it's extremely difficult to turn back the clock. Once someone has a device, you can almost never go back. We also didn't know how to deal with classes in which some kids had devices and others didn't. Did that necessarily mean that the first group had to give them up?

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Baruch Hashem, we've learned a lot since then, and we now have a protocol for all possible situations. The Preferred Pact, for classes in which none of the children have devices, is an agreement to delay technology altogether. The Pause Pact, for classes in which some kids already own a device, is an agreement to freeze things where they are and not to introduce any new tech moving forward.

Meanwhile, Dr. Akiva Bergman heard about our program and immediately came on board. As a physician and someone who is active in the community, he believed that an initiative like MUST could do a lot of good. He organized an event with representatives of all the schools in the Five Towns (on Long Island, NY), and it pushed us forward even further. We weren't home-grown anymore; entire schools were ready to hear what we had to say.

At that point, we recruited advocates for each class and ran training sessions. There's a right and a wrong way to approach parents about something like technology, and if even one parent isn't in agreement because of a faulty approach, the whole thing can fall apart. It was important to us that every ambassador be properly trained, because if the protocol isn't set up correctly, it can backfire.

The pacts were successful in most of the classes—and then COVID hit. The lockdown changed our trajectory completely. Kids who had never had devices suddenly needed them for school. Parents who had been able to hold out until then felt that they had no choice but to give in. It seemed that MUST was the unfortunate collateral damage of the coronavirus. There were no new classes getting involved, no new pacts, and the ones we had in place were falling apart.

And then a few mothers in other communities like Crown Heights heard about MUST and revived it. Even after COVID, or maybe because they had seen its effects, they wanted to implement the program in their schools. *Baruch Hashem*, we've trained

dozens of new ambassadors in the past few weeks.

At first, Nechy and I attended every single ambassador meeting, but as the initiative spreads, that's just not possible anymore. It's growing so fast that we are switching to a virtual model for the new trainings.

One of the unique things about MUST is that it's not about content, which is its own challenge. We're talking about healthy childhood habits: a healthy mind, a healthy body, and healthy interactions. Interestingly, there's a non-Jewish organization called Wait Until 8th that's doing exactly

the same thing. They also want to empower parents so that their kids don't get smartphones so early.

We started MUST when my son was in the second grade. It was easy then because no one in his class had a phone or any other devices. When I suggested the idea of a pact, everyone wanted to do it. Now, four years later, the kids in my son's class spend Sunday afternoons at the park. It seems like a small thing, but it's only happening because they aren't on devices. Without technological distractions, they organize ball games and play sports all the time. I consider it a huge success story.



If I could tell parents one thing:

Just this week, a parent contacted me to help her implement the initiative in her child's class. It was a difficult situation; they needed a complicated Pause Pact since some kids in the class already had devices. When I asked her if this was her youngest child, she said no. She had children in the first and second grades as well, but she wasn't calling about them because it wasn't a problem. I explained to her that it wasn't a problem yet because no one had devices, which was precisely why it was the best time to start. It would take less than five minutes to arrange! But if she waited until even one child had a device, she would be in the same situation as she was with the seventh-grade child. Stay strong when it's easy, and with Hashem's help, you'll be able to keep it up.



If I could tell kids one thing:

It's not easy for your parents to say no to you, but they're doing it for your own good. I know your older siblings may have gotten phones and now your parents are changing their minds, but they're doing it for the sake of your future.

Let's say that your parents used to buy a certain kind of bread and then found out that it contained dangerous ingredients. Of course they'd stop feeding it to you, even if they'd already fed it to your older siblings. Today we have much more information. We know that having a phone so early is dangerous, and because we love you so much, we want to do what's best.

Nechy Eisenstadt

BROOKLYN

Mother of six children from six to 22 and a creative arts therapist who works part time in a nursing home and volunteers for organizations like Yad Batya L'Kallah, Hatzolah Air and the Flatbush Community Fund.

I've been part of a learning group with other mothers for almost a decade. One time we were discussing technology, and everyone was saying the same thing—that it's frustrating that our children are subjected to so much peer pressure. It keeps getting worse and worse. It's a constant battle, and with each new advancement in technology, we feel less likely to win it.

I remember that Chaya Bistritzky, *a"b*, who was a close friend of mine, was sitting next to me during the conversation. She slammed her hand down on the table and said, "Guys, the schools can't help us. It's the mothers who have to do something!"

When Michal told me about her plan a few minutes before she spoke at that conference we'd organized with her mom, I immediately agreed to be her partner. I didn't even know what she had in mind at the time, just that it was something to do with technology, but Chaya's words were still reverberating in my head. I knew that joining Michal was the right thing for me to do for the sake of my children. It's always the women who define the narrative. We mothers are the ones with the most control over what becomes of our children.

After the conference, we jumped in blindly. We didn't know what we were doing, just that we had to do *something*. We had passion and a real concern for our children's future. That alone was enough to propel us forward.

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Chaya was our first ambassador. She believed in the initiative from the very beginning and was excited about getting it off the ground. Everything that **MUST** accomplish is a tribute to her. Along the way, we also received strong endorsements from community leaders who encouraged us to continue with our mission.

I remember one of our first meetings. It was a group of around 15 mothers, and most of them were confused about what we were trying to do. They insisted that their kids' phones were safe because they'd already removed all the browser apps. I asked them if any of their kids had PicCollage, a seemingly harmless photo app, and most said yes. What many parents didn't know was that their kids could get on the Internet from

almost any app because the apps have an internal browser.

We parents are the technology immigrants; our kids are the natives. They know their way around a lot better than we do. We need to educate ourselves and understand that no matter how protected we think our children are, we can always be doing more for them. It's not only that we *can* do something; we must.

When Rabbi Motty Lipskier spoke at one of our recent events, he pointed out that it isn't easy to say no to a child. But we do it because it's the right thing to do, not because it's the easy thing. A mother does what's right for her child even when the child is kicking and resisting. We must be confident that we are doing the right thing. This is not

a fight. This isn't about phones; this is about healthy kids. When our children feel that we are on their side, they are amenable to what we have to say.

We are trying to shift the trajectory of a community. Rabbi Lipskier shared a story about the Rebbe Rashab, who fought the *Haskalah* movement back in the late 1800s. The Rebbe's wife asked him why he was trying so hard since it wasn't likely that he would make a huge difference. The Rebbe explained that when a ship is veering off course, the most important thing is to turn it in the right direction. We need to have the courage to turn our ship in the right direction, even if it seems like a small move. That is our job as parents—to make sure that our children are heading the right way.



If I could tell parents one thing:

The common denominator among all the people I talk to is that every single one had regrets about allowing her kids access to technology too soon and not restricting it enough.

So many mothers feel hopeless. They think they're the only one saying no to their kids, so they throw up their hands and say, "Oh, well, that's just the culture. I can't change society."

Yes, it's an uphill battle, but there's power in numbers. We have to realize that when we stand united, we really can do something. It's not just about the pact each class makes; it's about mothers knowing that they aren't alone and that they have a support system of other parents who also want their kids to have a healthy future.



If I could tell kids one thing:

Technology is a jungle, and no parent would send her kids out into the wild without the tools to survive it. Everything we are doing is for you. We are facing the problem head on in order to give you the best possible life.

“A Young Brain Is Plastic, Not Elastic”

According to Dr. Eli Rosen, a family medicine specialist in Crown Heights, early technology use is “a failed experiment,” and now that we have that knowledge, it’s time to make a change.



the causes of the epidemic of anxiety, is something we can act on.

“There’s a lot happening that we cannot change, but this we can. It strikes me when a mother walks into the office with a two-year-old who is understandably nervous about going to the doctor. The first thing the mother does is put on a video, and the screaming child immediately calms down. And if, G-d forbid, the mother tries to take the phone away—*kolos uvrakim!* The child won’t stop crying.”

Instead of teaching children important self-quieting skills or allowing them to be soothed through connection to their mothers, we are using phones as a substitute for real connection, and Dr. Rosen says that’s where the anxiety begins.

“When you experience disconnection from a spouse or someone close to you, there’s a deep sense of discomfort and anxiety that enters your heart. Just like the children I see, you don’t sleep well at night. You don’t eat well. That disconnection is at the root of the anxiety and all of its manifestations. And one of the most powerful drivers of disconnection is the cellphone.”

Dr. Rosen stressed that kids in school need to be happy. They need to be learning and playing and not worrying. He referred to a talk by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in which the Rebbe said that the most important thing a child should have to worry about is his next test—and even that should be underplayed.

“With devices, all of a sudden kids are exposed to everything. They are worrying

about tremendous amounts of sadness. If somebody dies in Australia, the eight-year-old in America hears about it right away. Why should an eight- or ten- or 12-year-old be involved? Why should he be worrying himself sick? And when I say sick, I mean literally sick.”

The kid turns to his phone for comfort, but it’s illusory. In reality, it’s a source of increased anxiety. Even adults can understand and relate to this idea.

“What is this surrogate comfort really offering children?” Dr. Rosen asked. “Discord. Pressure. Yes, technology can be used for Torah, but unfortunately, I don’t think our kids are spending too much time on their phones learning.”

He explained that early exposure to technology is like offering alcohol to a child. If you introduce alcohol to a 15-year-old, it will affect his brain differently than if he were 25. A young brain is plastic, not elastic. It becomes deformed and won’t return to its natural state.

“It is my contention that constant early exposure to technology is deforming our children. I’m not even talking about the immorality they can access. I’m talking about dinnertime, when everyone in the family is on his or her phone instead of talking. I’m talking about when kids should be playing with each other and are instead exposed to controversy, disagreement and bad news.”

Dr. Rosen said that we need to look at cellphones as a failed experiment. We tried and we see the results, so it’s time to change the paradigm. ●



If I could tell parents one thing:

I don’t think there’s a single thinking person who can tell me he thinks that a phone is good for his kids, so why on earth are we giving it to them? It’s like serving a ten-year-old vodka. We need to delay exposure until their brains are formed enough to handle a cellphone without being destroyed in the process. And to do that, we need the strength that comes when all parents band together.



If I could tell kids one thing:

Of all people in the world, you know about the increased anxiety that you and your friends are having. You know that you and your friends are struggling, and we need to connect the dots. Your anxiety is being fed by cellphones. All of us know in our hearts that this is bad for us.

“I am in a wonderful position, where I see hundreds of our youth who come through my office,” Dr. Rosen said at a Crown Heights event organized by MUST. “I’m in the trenches. I get the time to talk with them, to look and to listen. I’m seeing something I never saw before, and it’s frightening.”

Dr. Rosen said that he is seeing what he calls an epidemic of anxiety. An 11-year-old with anorexia. A 13-year-old who isn’t going to school. A 15-year-old who is suicidal. And when the doctor asks more questions, the child explains that he or she is extremely stressed out and anxious. “I don’t sleep at night. I don’t eat properly.”

“It is very profound and very, very disturbing. I don’t have all the answers, and I wish I could plug in the cure like a dose of penicillin, but it wouldn’t work. Yes, we’ve been through a terribly traumatic year and a half. Yes, being at home instead of in school has been very costly. But early exposure to technology, one of



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