

## **Blog by Heidi Coetzee, Chief Executive, Save the Children NZ**

### **Put the kids first for Children's Day**

I arrive home after a busy day at work. My two teenagers are on their tablets, usually gaming. I check my work phone and flick off a couple of emails. This scenario is probably played out at hundreds of homes across the country. I sort dinner and we all sit down at the table.

A few months ago, everyone would have been silent, eyes still on their screens. But recently this has changed. The dinner table has become a technology free space. With me as the leader, I put down my phone and we all sit down together, we talk about what's happened during the day, what's coming up and other things that are happening. It's been a positive move and something I'd certainly recommend to others.

On Children's Day on 3 March I'd like to encourage all parents and caregivers to turn off the technology, put the phone down and interact with the kids. It doesn't have to be at meal times but any time during the day. Really engage, interact, maybe play a board game together, kick a ball down at the park or go to the swimming pool.

Children's Day – Te rā o ngā Tamariki, provides New Zealanders with an opportunity to celebrate and give time to children. It is a day of national awareness, annually recognised on the first Sunday of March. It was introduced by the first Children's Commissioner in 2000.

There's lots of reasons to put those phones away. Not only do you get the chance to talk but it's good for children's development. Here's some examples of why it's a good move:

1. Providing positive attention when kids are doing positive things builds a strong value system and positive self-esteem. Responding with enthusiasm to their attempts to master new things ensures that they will keep trying. The "look at me's" you hear on the playground and in the kitchen, are your kids asking for your approval and encouragement. When you do look, and I mean really look, and smile and wave, the kids soak it up. They try again. They push themselves to the next level.
2. Giving kids positive attention also puts a big deposit in their emotional bank. When kids know that someone thinks they have what it takes to handle life's problems, they develop confidence in their ability to take on life's challenges. When parents put their phones down (or turn off the TV or shut down their computer) and talk to them seriously about what they are doing, their skills grow and their self-confidence blossoms.
3. Babies light up when bigger people make eye contact and talk directly to them. They are taking in the rhythm and sounds of our voices. They are learning the words for the things and people of their world. They are learning how those words get strung together. Television doesn't help children learn language. It's too passive. They need to experience the give and take that comes with interacting with another warm, caring human being. Parking them in front of even the best children's TV is no substitute for the give and take that goes on between even babies and their parents. Many parents are amazed when their little one suddenly moves from saying one and two words at a time to a full sentence. "Where did that come from?" they ask. It came from listening to adults who talked to them, not around them because they're on the phone.

4. Conversation builds brain power. Little kids' brains are sponges. The more we talk to them, the more their brains absorb. Even children who are far too young to carry on a real conversation are taking in far more than adults may realize. Parents who talk to their kids with complicated sentences are setting them up for success in school and in life. One and two word answers don't do it. Commands don't do it. A momentary break in your phone conversation to acknowledge them doesn't do it either. Kids need to hear language used to describe and explain their world. That's one of the many good reasons to read to children. It's not just for the entertainment of the stories. It's also an important way for them to hear and take in the richness of language.
5. Our kids need our priority to be our relationships with them, not with our phones. Children learn how to be with other people and how to love by being with people who love them, teach them, encourage and comfort them. Contrary to popular belief, quality time is not a substitute for regular moments of interest, talk, and participation in their lives. Yes, quality time has a certain special quality. We all remember big celebrations, vacations, or trips to the zoo. But those days are special because they are occasional events. For kids to grow, they need us to be curious about their experiences and to comment on what is going on around us in an ongoing way.

Please don't get me wrong, I love my phone as much as the next person. I love that it helps me stay regularly connected with my extended family. I find it reassuring that my kids can always reach me. I stay in touch with family and friends overseas through Facebook and email. Like anyone I check the weather, glance at headlines and Google information. There's no way I want to go back to the old days with a land line phone and no technology in the house. But when we are with our kids, we need to put our phones away.

So please give it a go on Children's Day – put the phone down and have some fun with the kids or try the technology free space, you never know, it might become a regular thing in your house.

As part of Children's Day, we're running a competition on [Facebook](#) for you to tell us what non-technology activity you'll be doing with the kids on Children's Day. Go in the draw to win a \$100 voucher from [Bebabo](#).