

the Random Acts of **Kindness** foundation

Is Technology Killing Kindness in Kids?

by Drew Hendricks



It's a trend that people who've taken [early childhood education courses](#) and psychology experts can easily identify: today's kids just aren't as empathetic as kids from previous generations. Many people blame technology for the loss of compassion, and research is beginning to suggest that they may be right. Researchers who reviewed 72 studies over the period between 1979 and 2009 found that millennials scored up to 40 percent lower on [tests of empathy](#) than did previous generations. The biggest drop in empathy scores occurred after the year 2000.

Professor Sara Konrath of the [University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research](#) blames media for the drop in compassion. She blames video games and other media, saying that American children consume up to three times as much media as children from other generations. Konrath argues that her research shows that exposure to violent media makes kids less likely to relate to the pain of others.

Another researcher on the project, graduate student Edward O'Brien, suggested that social media may be the culprit. He pointed out that having friends online and not in front of us makes it easier to tune the other person out when that person is experiencing and communicating negative emotions. Technology has also created a fast-paced world, says O'Brien, in which kids aren't given the time to slow down and to pay attention to others.

Government executive John K. Mullen, in a piece in the [Journal of Applied Social Psychology](#), writes that people today, including children, may have had their brains "rewired" by the Internet. In addition to missing facial expressions, tone of voice and body language, today's digital addicts may miss signs of deception and insincerity in-person. Mullen also says that over-reliance on technology can diminish valuable social skills, such as the ability to make eye contact.

The good news about technology is that it is increasing IQ scores and making kids more and more capable of multitasking. The price? Kids are losing the ability to have empathy for one another. Because more time these days is devoted to screen interactions than personal interactions, Mullen suggests that young people

may be under-stimulating the neural pathways that hone social skills, leaving those skills completely underdeveloped.

College graduates with underdeveloped empathy are entering the workplace and suffering the consequences. Mullen tells the story of a U.S. wealth management firm that fired a series of bright young employees because they could not communicate empathetically with clients who had lost everything in the 2008 financial crisis. Instead, this company went out and hired older advisers who would sit down with clients and discuss their situations face-to-face and with compassion. The lack of empathy cost those young financial advisers more than just their social relationships; in this case, it cost them their jobs.

Putting the kibosh on screen time in kids lives is one key to teaching empathy, particularly if their screen time is spent consuming violent content. Emphasizing face-to-face interactions is another. Ultimately, parental influence will outweigh the negative effects of technology as long as parents are willing to keep communicating with their children.