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Distracted Daycare and Child Welfare: An Ethical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Parental overuse of portable technology poses a bonafide threat to the welfare and development of children. In the past decade, researchers have documented this phenomenon whereby parents pay far more attention to handheld electronic devices than to their children's safety and developmental needs. What most studies have failed to examine is the extent to which workers in privately owned and operated daycares also exhibit technology-induced distracted behavior. This article aims to identify the moral harm of caregivers' distracted behaviour in a private daycare setting or, more simply, the welfare effects of *distracted daycare*. First, with the assistance of recent research, the phenomenon of distracted caregiving is defined. Then, the documented harms of distracted caregiving in a daycare setting are catalogued. Next, an ethical analysis of the phenomenon of distracted daycare working is undertaken from four normative ethical perspectives: (i) ethical egoism, (ii) utilitarianism, (iii) principlism and (iv) care ethics. Five recommendations for reforming distracted daycares, each based upon one or more of the four ethical perspectives, inform the article's conclusions.

KEYWORDS

Childcare; daycare; parenting; child welfare; child development; technology; ethics

A toddler died in the back seat of a burning hot car after 'distracted' carers failed to carry out a proper headcount, it's claimed. [...] 'The worker was intending to go back and get (the girls), but she got distracted by something – she doesn't know what' [...] The daycare owners were arrested on child abuse charges resulting in the death of a child, and child abuse causing great bodily harm.

– World News (2019)

As a society, we need to reevaluate a child's relative worth in comparison with our technological devices. One can only hope that the child will come out the winner.

– Varda Epstein (2014)

Parental overuse of portable technology, especially smart phones and tablets, poses a bonafide danger to the welfare and development of children. In the past decade, research has documented this phenomenon whereby parents pay far more attention to hand-held electronic devices than to their children's safety and developmental needs.¹ The phenomenon is called 'distracted parenting', but it is not limited to parents. Indeed, it extends to other caregivers as well. What most studies have failed to examine is the extent to which workers in privately owned and operated daycares display behavioural patterns similar to and, in some cases, even more pernicious than those of distracted parents.

This article aims to identify the moral harm of caregivers' distracted behaviour in a private daycare setting or, more simply, the welfare effects of *distracted daycare*.² By 'daycare' I mean leaving children in the care of others, who are not relatives, in exchange for payment. First, the phenomenon of distracted caregiving is defined. Then, the documented harms of distracted caregiving in a daycare setting are catalogued. Next, an ethical analysis of distracted daycare is undertaken from four normative perspectives: (i) ethical egoism, (ii) utilitarianism, (iii) principlism and (iv) care ethics.³ Five recommendations for reforming distracted daycares, each based upon one or more of the four normative ethical perspectives, inform the article's conclusions.

Inevitably some private daycare workers, directors and owners will be offended by the foregoing ethical analysis. However, my intention is not to stigmatise daycare workers or private daycares that are the sites of chronic technology-related distraction. Instead, my motive is to improve the status quo, which as it stands endangers child welfare, by conducting serious normative inquiry into this disturbing behavioural phenomenon. While admittedly the problem is not universal, it nevertheless manifests in countries with privately owned and operated daycares and especially those where the legal-regulatory framework for monitoring these daycares is minimal, weak or insufficient for the task-at-hand.⁴ A more ambitious goal of this analysis is to motivate the creation of far-reaching regulatory policies for private daycares that will not only help daycare workers become more attentive caregivers, but also protect the children who suffer and, in some cases, die as a result of these workers' distracted behaviours.

Distracted parents and daycare workers

I begin with a discussion of technology-related distraction, followed by an account of distracted parenting; next, I extend the analysis to distracted caregiving, generally, and, then, distracted daycare, specifically. That smartphones and other hand-held digital devices breed user distraction is a relatively noncontroversial claim. However, the reasons why are not always obvious, even to the most educated users. Use of these devices interrupts selective attention through the introduction of 'variable rewards': once an alert icon, push notification or screen refresh occurs, the recipient experiences pleasurable anticipation of a future reward, not unlike a gambler who rolls the dice, picks up the hand of cards or pulls the arm on a slot machine (Ward et al. 2017). Smartphone users interact with their phones, on average, 85 times a day, including when they wake, prior to sleeping and sometimes in the middle of the night (Perlow 2012; Andrews et al. 2015). Repetitive interruption, anticipation and reward produces what psychologists call 'continuous partial attention', whereby the technology-user becomes so addicted to the anticipated pleasure that she finds it nearly impossible to focus on anything but repeating the process (Engle 2002). As an ethical agent, her capacity for autonomous judgment and choice is effectively compromised.

Distracted parenting represents a constellation of behaviours, including hand-held technology use (and overuse), parental neglect of children's basic needs, breakdowns in meaningful and caring parent-child relationships, child endangerment resulting from parental distraction and the miseducative effects of parents' technology-use on children's moral, intellectual, emotional and social development. Pediatrician Jane Scott (2014) defines the distracted parenting phenomenon in terms of present-day parents' habit of

compulsively checking social media sites (e.g. Facebook) and how this habit affects parents' relationships with their children:

Parents today are probably the most informed and involved generation in history. And, yet, in the company of their children, they often act as though they'd rather be someplace else. That's what they're saying when they break eye contact to glance at their push notifications or check Facebook when they think their child's distracted. The parents are present, their attention is not.

Parental inattention caused by the distraction of portable devices can have a substantial impact on the learning and development of young children. It can contribute to developmental delays in speech and cognition, and lead to behavioural issues, such as temper tantrums, severe anxiety and resistance to discipline.

Distracted parenting is a form of escapism. Parents flee to social media sites, whether Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or Instagram, in order to escape a banal existence or the grind of daily childcare. The receipt of push-notices (or pings) immediately draws the parent's attention away from their children's needs and wants, and toward a virtual world of titillating adult interaction (Morin 2014). In a study conducted by researchers at the Boston Medical Center, parents and other caregivers were observed interacting with children while dining at fast-food restaurants (Radesky et al. 2014; Nierenberg 2014). Of 55 caregivers, 40 were consumed with their portable devices, to such an extent that their 'primary engagement was with the device rather than the child' (Scott 2014). When the child tried to gain the caregiver's attention, the common reaction of the parent was irritation. In one case, a woman violently pushed her son away from her when he took her face in his hands, hoping to divert her attention from a tablet. The upshot of this study is that distracted parents communicate to their children that the priority is not them.

Harms caused by distracted parenting fall into three categories: physical injury, cognitive damage and emotional harm.

- (1) *Physical injury*: Between 2000 and 2007, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission compiled statistical evidence that support the claim that caregiver inattention causes physical harm to children. Playground injuries for children younger than five spiked 7%; nursery accidents went up 3%; and swimming pool injuries jumped 36% (Blake and Worthen 2012; Worthen 2012).
- (2) *Cognitive damage*: Distracted caregiving can also undermine children's cognitive development, resulting in postponed speech acquisition, social-emotional delays and, in extreme cases, the onset of psychopathological disorders. 90% of brain development occurs in the first three years of a child's life (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2019; Ganea et al. 2007). Neglecting to interact with the child during these formative years can cause lasting cognitive damage. Children can develop an array of pathologies that survive into adulthood, including an aversion to healthy relationships, anti-social behaviour and several psychopathological disorders, such as opposition defiant disorder and conduct disorder (Alexander 2014).
- (3) *Emotional harm*: A third harm distracted caregivers inflict upon children is emotional trauma. One study shows that the lack of attentive care in the first three years of a child's life makes the child more prone to emotional disorders, especially depression, in their adolescent years. Distracted caregiving can effectively stunt a child's capacity to develop healthy emotional relationships with others (Molet et al. 2016).

Distracted parenting can magnify a child's social and emotional delays and contribute to the development of abnormal behaviour. A child of a distracted parent may be unable to communicate with peers and adults, manage their emotions, show empathy, address basic life problems or feel closeness to others. In the worst cases, distracted parents can be thoroughly unresponsive to their children. 'In extreme cases of neglect, with very little interaction between parents or other caregivers and peers', Brian Alexander (2014) notes, 'children can develop a variety of pathologies'. When a parent fails to react or a reacts harshly to the child, it teaches the child that relationships are either one-way affairs or second-best alternatives to a solitary existence (Tizard and Hughes 1984).

Children of distracted parents may prefer technology over human contact, develop an aversion to healthy relationships, and display anti-social behaviours. In extreme cases, distracted parenting can lead to harsh caregiving, or the imposition of explosive discipline upon children, such as when the parent pushed her son violently after he tried to divert her attention from the tablet (Simons et al. 1994, 208; Scott 2014). According to psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore (2014), 'what's important is responsiveness: when our kids are trying to get our attention, how do we react?' In the domain of care ethics, a parent or carer tasked with the responsibility to supervise a child must display, at a minimum, responsiveness – or, alternatively, attentiveness – to the cared-for child's needs and desires (Klaver and Baart 2011). Thus, a lack of responsiveness or attentiveness on the part of a caregiver signals a similar shortage of care, concern and compassion for those she is charged to look after.

Private daycares as sites for distracted caregiving

Technology-induced distraction is not limited solely to the behaviour of parents though. Indeed, it extends to other caregivers including carers employed by privately owned and operated child daycares. In most American states, daycare business employees are considered low-skilled, low-wage workers. Education expectations for entry-level daycare workers are typically at the lower end of the spectrum.⁵ Pay at American daycare businesses ranges from the minimum wage to twenty percent over the minimum.⁶ Many daycare workers are contingent, seeking employment through temporary agencies and at multiple daycare businesses in order to support themselves and their families. In daycare businesses, women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are commonly employed. Most daycare employees are therefore members of the Millennial or later generations, who tend more than any previous generation to own and use portable technology as well as to access social media regularly while at work.⁷

Human resources policies regarding technology use by daycare employees vary widely across childcare businesses. In a Q & A blog post at the National Association for the Education of Young People (2013) site, an expert identifies the difficulty of regulating the use of portable technology by teachers and daycare workers, even though these distracted behaviours pose a threat to child welfare:

People are used to texting, posting, and calling at all times. Sometimes they can't resist the temptation to do it while at work. I'll bet you know at least one colleague with this problem. Such minor but frequent distractions are harmful to a safe and productive classroom environment. It's also hard to monitor. Frustrated directors have responded with blanket prohibitions on personal phones in the classroom.

While some daycares have a no-portable-tech-in-the classroom policy,⁸ others take a more laissez-faire approach, only banning recordings daycare workers would make of children and post to social media platforms.⁹ Even when daycares have adopted portable technology policies, supervisors typically enforce them either casually or not at all.

Injuries to children resulting from daycare workers' distracted behaviours are also likely underreported. If a child is injured because of a caregiver's distracted behaviour, the caregiver rarely reports that the cause is the distraction related to technology use. Wally Ghurabi, emergency centre medical director at the Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center and Orthopaedic Hospital, insists that it is simply human nature to deny distraction: 'Folks are not going to admit to the fact that – look I was doing this [e.g. texting or posting on a social media platform], and that's why ... [the] kid fell off [the playground equipment] and broke his arm' (Worthen 2012). According to Timothy Golden (2015), caregivers 'generally report that they are only on their mobile devices for a few seconds at a time, when in fact video evidence shows that they can be absorbed for upwards of 3 min at a stretch'. Likewise, daycares rarely report their workers' distracted worker behaviour as the cause of a child's injuries.

Most states require that accidents at daycares resulting in injury to a child be documented in incident reports that are then shared with the child's parents. However, an incident report can hide the real cause of the injury by blaming the accident on (i) self-harm, (ii) harm by other children, (iii) justified distraction of the daycare worker consumed with some official duty (e.g. looking at daily time/activity sheets) or (iv) the failure to witness the injury in the first place. Since the injuries to the child are not directly caused by the daycare worker, but by the worker's inattention or neglect, the if-but-for (e.g. checking the smartphone) rationale for imputing blame to the worker is often difficult to prove and nearly impossible to get the daycare worker to admit.¹⁰ So long as the real cause is properly hidden, those injuries resulting from technology-induced distraction do not trigger visits from state health and child welfare agencies.

Parent coach and author of *The Nanny Whisperer*, Tammy Gold (2015, March 24) believes that parents should monitor caregivers' distracted behaviours:

If babysitters, daycare workers or nannies are on their smartphones, texting, emailing and otherwise distracted they are not only stunting this important emotional bonding, but also cognitive growth. Sadly, most parents are unaware of how dangerous these distracted caregivers can be, as they are focused on the child's physical needs such as being fed, clothed and kept safe, but they are unaware of the 'benign neglect' being committed as these equally important emotional and cognitive needs are overlooked.

Unfortunately, intensive parental monitoring of daycare workers' distracted behaviour is impractical. While most daycares have an open-door policy,¹¹ owners and supervisors rarely allow regular or unannounced visits, since a parent's presence tends to disrupt the flow of activities.

So, the modern child daycare is a site for distracted caregiving and resulting harm to children. Distracted caregiving in today's daycare businesses demands oversight and regulation. It is both a serious human resources problem and a pressing child welfare issue.

The moral harm of distracted daycare

What follows is an analysis of distracted daycare's moral harm based on four widely accepted ethical theories: (1) ethical egoism, (2) utilitarianism, (3) principlism and (4) care ethics. The first, ethical egoism, assesses an agent's behaviours according to how they impact the agent's own interests. The second, utilitarianism, evaluates distracted caregiving in modern daycares by the lights of the behaviour's consequences for all those persons who are actually or potentially affected. The third, principlism, scrutinises distracted daycare relative to how it creates competing principled moral claims. The third and last, care ethics, judges daycare workers' behaviour as morally harmful insofar as it fails to (i) respond to the child's needs, (ii) nurture the cared-for's growth and development and (iii) attend to the child's interests as a competent and attentive carer should.

#1: An ethical egoist perspective

Ethical egoism is an ethical theory that recommends those behaviours which ultimately promote the agent's self-interest. Although some ethicists contest the claim that ethical egoism is by its very credentials ethical (see Singer 2001), the theory is often contrasted with utilitarianism insofar as the former limits the scope of moral consideration to the agent herself, while the latter expands the relevant moral community to all those affected by the consequences of the agent's actions (including the agent herself) (Regis 1980). Ethical egoists will sometimes include friends and family within the ambit of self-interest, so that egoism is not necessarily tantamount to selfishness (Rand 1964, 45).

Justifications of a daycare workers' distracted behaviours commonly involve appeals to the agent's self-interest and, thus, implicate ethical egoism. The variable rewards, continuous partial attention and conditioned responses to technology-induced stimuli start with agents' desires for stimulation. They yearn to repeatedly escape the drudgeries of present caregiving responsibilities and enjoy a virtual world of adult titillation (Engle 2002; Ward et al. 2017). Besides the desire for distraction, there is the accompanying desire to avoid detection and censure. The motivation for covering up the harmful consequences of distracted caregiving is also strongly influenced by self-interest. However, it is not simply selfishness that motivates the code of silence or omertà among distracted caregivers. Self-interest extends to friends and work colleagues. The omertà is motivated by self-interest of a transactional nature. Daycare worker A's silence about a fellow worker B's distracted behaviour and the harm it causes to children secures that B's silence in the future when A is the perpetrator. While the cover-up is prudent for avoiding detection, most would agree that the motivation behind the code of silence is anything but ethical, insofar as the harm that daycare workers' distracted behaviour causes to children makes these schemes morally suspect.

#2: A utilitarian perspective

According to the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer (2001), 'the classical utilitarian regards an action as right if it produces as much or more of an increase in happiness of all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not' (8). The behaviour of a distracted caregiver, including a daycare worker, is probably more accurately described as inaction

than action. It is an omission or failure to pay attention to the needs and desires of a child while distracted by hand-held technology. Compared to undistracted or attentive caregiving, distracted caregiving undoubtedly generates less happiness (more unhappiness) for the child. Besides developmental issues, distracted caregiving can result in harmful consequences for a child's safety and welfare.

In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Ben Worthen (2012) questions whether distracted caregivers are properly monitoring the children in their care:

Is high-tech gadgetry diminishing the ability of adults to give proper supervision to very young children? Faced with an unending litany of newly proclaimed threats to their kids, harried parents might well roll their eyes at this suggestion. But many emergency-room doctors are worried: They see the growing use of hand-held devices as a plausible explanation for the surprising reversal of a long slide in injury rates for young children. There have even been a few extreme cases of death and near drowning.

Distracted caregivers are compromised protectors of children's best interests. They are also more likely to blame the resulting harm to their children on causes unrelated to their distracted caregiving behaviour (Worthen 2012; Golden 2015, 102).

On a utilitarian analysis, the harm and unhappiness that these distracted behaviours cause to children (and their parents) are what make distracted daycare working a serious social and ethical problem. One possible solution that follows from this analysis is to raise awareness. Informing parents of the potential consequences of distracted caregiving (similar to raising awareness of the dire consequences of drinking and driving or texting and driving) could cause changes in daycare policies and their enforcement, thereby preventing consequent harm to children. However, awareness alone might not deter the distracted daycare worker. Perhaps a regime of punitive measures (as is the case for drinking and driving) should be in place to make distracted caregiving a less attractive behavioural pattern.

It is also useful to distinguish between the well-known concepts of act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism mandates that one should act so as to maximise pleasure or happiness for all those affected by one's actions (Bales 1971). In contrast, rule utilitarianism requires that one should follow a rule which tends to maximise pleasure or happiness for all those affected by the rule (Hooker 1990). In any instance an act and a rule utilitarian may disagree as to whether the distracted daycare worker's behaviour is morally objectionable. An act utilitarian might argue that the pleasure derived from the momentary engagement with one's device justifies its use, while a rule utilitarian would struggle to justify generalising this conduct to all daycare workers who could potentially be distracted by their devices. On the rule utilitarian's analysis, the generalised harm that would result outweighs whatever pleasure daycare workers might experience from interacting with their devices.¹²

#3: A principlist perspective

Principlism is a standard approach for addressing dilemmas in biomedical ethics, particularly those involving conflicts between moral rules, rights and obligations. In settling these conflicts, problem-solvers should reframe ethical issues in terms of competing norms before weighing them up relative to the facts and determining an appropriate outcome (Gillon 2003; Beauchamp and Childress 2013).

Principlism addresses individual cases by recourse to groups of moral principles. In this way, it roughly resembles casuistry (Kuczewski 1998). According to Beauchamp and Childress (2013), there are 'four clusters of moral principles':

- (1) *respect for autonomy* (a norm of respecting and supporting autonomous decisions),
- (2) *nonmaleficence* (a norm of avoiding the causation of harm),
- (3) *beneficence* (a group of norms pertaining to relieving, lessening, or preventing harm and providing benefits and balancing benefits against risks and costs),
- (4) *justice* (a group of norms for fairly distributing benefits, risks, and costs) (p. 13).

Since the judgment of distracted caregivers is compromised, moral autonomy or the freedom to make independent moral choices is rarely at stake. Also, justice, while a relevant consideration, usually is only a factor after the fact of harm or once the caregiver's negligence has resulted in the child's injury. Only after the harm is inflicted does the concern become how to rectify the injustice (i.e. corrective justice).¹³

The ethical issue of distracted caregiving implicates nonmaleficence and beneficence most strongly. Nonmaleficence dictates that caregivers should avoid causing harm, especially to those for whom they are tasked to care. Many of the cognitive and emotional harms resulting from distracted caregiving (e.g. emotional/learning delays and psychopathological disorder) are directly caused by the distracted daycare worker's inattention. However, ignorance of these harms is the most common excuse. Abiding by the duty toward maleficence therefore demands raising awareness. The caregiver that pays more attention to their mobile device than to the needs and desires of the cared-for clearly violates the norm of beneficence, especially when the diverted attention could have been used to prevent harm. Beneficence requires that the caregiver lessen, relieve or prevent harm, or at least reduce the risk of injury. For example, imagine a child – call her Child A – flings herself rapidly across the monkey bars at a daycare playground. The child progresses half way through the series of eight bars, but due to another child – so-called Child B – running underneath Child A, Child A loses the grip of her right hand and dangles freely, about to fall to the ground. Standing closely enough to prevent the fall, the daycare worker, distracted by her phone, does not notice the crisis situation. Child A falls and breaks her arm. The reported cause is Child B, even though the distracted daycare worker was negligent through her own inattention. Since she might have easily prevented the harm if but for the technology-induced distraction, she has violated the norm of beneficence.

#4: A care-based perspective

Ethicists of care conceive the ideal moral agent as a friend, caregiver or parent who acknowledges her dependence on others, her vulnerability to different choice outcomes and the contextualised nature of moral decision making. For care ethicist Carol Gilligan (2008), what is vitally important is how morally appropriate one human being's response is to another, not whether her actions accord with an abstract, universal standard of right (469).

A care-based ethical analysis emphasises a carer's responsiveness to the cared-for individual's needs as well as the value of nurturing their long-term growth. Bonding starts in the earliest days of the caregiver's contact with a child:

Previous research has shown that even newborns are primed to gaze into a mother's eyes seeking social information. This is partly how bonds are formed. Very young children learn about the world largely through face-to-face interactions, vocalizations and touching with parents. They develop language skills this way (Alexander 2014).

Distracted caregiving potentially damages the caregiver-child bond by depriving the child of that valuable initial interaction and feedback necessary for early cognitive development. Kennedy-Moore (2014) insists that no caregiver 'is ever going to be 100% responsive, but we can try to be more aware of when our children are looking for attention. We can try to turn toward our kids in kind ways more often than away'. In the worst cases, distracted caregiving resembles abuse and neglect. It converts caregiver's relationship with the child from a relationship based on nurture to one based on transaction. For instance, some distracted caregivers model the obligations that grow out of their relationship with the child on a legal contract (i.e. 'I must look after you because I am your caretaker'), not upon a bond of compassion and care (i.e. 'I am your caregiver, which means I love and care for you'). Daycare workers are, of course, paid to monitor and care for young children, not necessarily love and nurture them. However, they are also expected to, at minimum, protect the physical welfare of the children whose care they are charged with, show responsiveness to those children's wants and needs and, ideally, nurture their cognitive and emotional development through age-appropriate play and instruction.

Besides Gilligan's work on responsiveness, care ethicist Joan Tronto's 'competencies of care' framework offers a robust set of analytical tools to tease out the moral harm of distracted daycare. Tronto (1993) defines care as

a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. The world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web. (p. 103)

She divides care into four analytically separable, but conceptually interrelated, categories:

- (1) *Caring about* (i.e. acknowledge the necessity of care),
- (2) *taking care of* (i.e. taking responsibility to care for another's interests, needs and wants),
- (3) *care-giving* (i.e. acting to meet the needs of the cared-for),
- (4) *care-receiving* (i.e. evaluating the quality and adequacy of care from the cared-for's perspective), and
- (5) *care process* (i.e. connecting the initial four together into a well-functioning whole) (107 ff).

For Tronto, the first four categories indicate 'care competencies', or minimum levels of carer ability. For our purposes, the first, *caring about*, is the most crucial since it implies the competency most relevant to distracted caregiving: *attentiveness*. Good carers ought to

display an attentive concern for the welfare and safety of those they are charged to care for, without which they cannot function responsibly as carers.

Attentiveness is the caring competency which distracted daycare workers demonstrate a deficit. On a care ethics analysis, their inability to show a minimal level of attentiveness to the needs of the young children they supervise makes their distracted behaviour not only harmful but also morally objectionable. As mentioned earlier, daycares must notify the state child welfare agency when children are injured. However, if the child's injuries were caused by a daycare worker's technology-induced distraction, daycares tend to report that the harm was self-inflicted, the result of another child's actions, the outcome of a justifiable distraction unrelated to technology use (e.g. the worker attending to an administrative matter) or that the injury was never witnessed. When an injury to a child was the result of a carer's distraction, the last rationale is the most accurate in the sense that the worker was so distracted that the worker never witnessed, and thus never could have prevented, the injury. However, Tronto's care competency of attentiveness offers an honest portrayal: The distracted daycare worker was so inattentive to the needs of the child, owing to distraction from a mobile device, that the child suffered harm as a result of the worker's morally blameworthy behaviour.

So, on a care-based ethical analysis, distracted daycare not only undermines caregiver responsiveness and nurture, it also exposes the carer's lack of a competency to render care: namely, a deficit of attentiveness. Without this competency, distracted daycare workers should be ineligible, on ethical grounds, to supervise young children.

Conclusion: five recommendations

The ethical analysis so far points to the conclusion that distracted daycare causes moral harm. It also suggests several recommendations for reforming distracted daycare workers and daycare businesses. My intention here is not to demonise low-skilled, under-paid daycare workers who compulsively check social media sites with their smart phones and tablets during work hours. Instead, I intend to draw attention to the distracted daycare problem and propose some possible strategies for addressing it, keeping in mind that the highest priority should be placed on the protection of child welfare.

(1) Ban phones in the daycare workplace.

According to Worthen (2012), most caregivers 'don't self-report distraction as a cause for accidents'. They tend to underestimate the risks that distraction poses to their children's safety and blame avoidable accidents on other causes. The same goes for daycare workers who habitually text and check social media sites during work hours. However, the consequences of distracted daycare working, similar to distracted driving (or texting and driving), can be life-threatening. One approach is for the daycare owner or manager to ban phones and tablets in the workplace, either taking them away upon entry to the daycare or requiring that they be turned off and put away. While this policy might upset daycare workers, it is meant to protect the safety and welfare of the children they are charged to care for. Moreover, a ban on phones and tablets, adopted as a workplace rule, would need to be part of the daycare's employment contract and strictly enforced.

(1) Ensure that daycare workers are present.

Like yogic meditation, being present, not distracted, is crucial for good caregiving. According to Scott (2014),

in an era of constant distraction, we must decide what's more important: heeding the constant ping of our devices or telling our children, in word and deed, 'I am listening. I am here. And there's nowhere else I'd rather be'.

Being there in mind and body, paying undivided attention to the child's desires, demonstrates care and concern. It also shows a keen awareness of how distraction and neglect can prove harmful to a child's welfare. Timothy Golden (2015) conceives the issue of distracted caregiving as a 'problem of presenteeism'. He illustrates how pressing the problem is by citing evidence of recent statistical spikes in playground accidents and child injuries directly linked to distracted caregiving (102). Professional development, workplace education and regular reminders to be present for the children could, consistent with the principle of beneficence, assist daycare workers in minimising their distracted behaviour and preventing harm to those they care for. Merely acknowledging child accidents through state-mandated incident reporting without any mention of distracted behaviours is insufficient. Instead, effective reporting systems should set off alarms that the distracted daycare worker is inattentive to the children's needs, is not present because of distraction-inducing portable technology and, therefore, must be disciplined or terminated if distracted behaviours persist.

(2) Direct daycare workers to concentrate on the child, not the screen.

Katia Hetter (2011) recommends that the caregiver, 'make a conscious effort to dedicate a few minutes each day to focus on what ... children are saying – without any media distracting you or them – and see what happens'. Responsiveness for the care ethicist requires, at a minimum, attention to the child's wants and needs. Distracted daycare workers forfeit these opportunities in exchange for the temporary titillation of a tweet, text or social media post. For the care ethicist, too, nurturing the child in the development of healthy relationships requires that the caregiver to model dispositions towards empathy and generosity (Harris 2012). Two mechanisms that would minimise distraction and facilitate responsiveness are (i) better training of daycare workers and (ii) clearly articulated and uniformly enforced employee technology-use policies.

Staring at a screen without interruption creates distance, alienation and separation in the caregiver-child relationship, anticipating future problems for the child, such as delays in the development of social, emotional and speech skills, and in extreme cases the onset of psychopathological disorders. Attentive caregiving and daycare working, on the other hand, promote the healthy cognitive development of the cared-for children. According to Tammy Gold (2015),

[a]chieving this cognitive growth is not expensive, nor is it complex. All it requires is for a caregiver to be looking at the eyes of a child, talking to him, responding to him, smiling at him and engaging him all day long.

(3) Stop the denial and start recognising the consequences of distracted daycare.

Caregivers commonly deny their own technology-related distraction or underestimate the risks these distracted behaviours pose to the cared-for children's welfare and development (Worthen 2012). According to Timothy Golden (2015), caregivers 'generally report that they are only on their mobile devices for a few seconds at a time, when in fact video evidence shows that they can be absorbed for upward of 3 min at a stretch' (102). For the utilitarian ethicist, weighing the actual and potential harms to the child's mental, emotional and physical health, as well as consequent unhappiness, should be at the fore of any project to address the distracted daycare problem. Daycare workers must also become educated about the serious social, emotional and speech delays that a children under their care could suffer as a result of their inattention.¹⁴ For the care ethicist as well, substituting nurture for distraction requires that the daycare worker move past denial, admit their prior mistakes and begin cultivating habits of attentive care, habits that are hallmarks of good caregiving. Responsible caregiving habits are easily undermined through the development of countervailing habits of inattention.

(4) Surveil employees of private daycares.

The last and most radical solution would be to install cameras in daycare facilities in order to surveil daycare workers. While this approach displays affinities to the Foucauldian notion of panoptic power (Foucault 1977), the intention behind the design is not to undermine privacy for the sake of security, but instead to protect the welfare of the most vulnerable by ensuring caregiver accountability. At present, most daycares have security systems established to prevent external threats (e.g. kidnappers and paedophiles), but not internal threats (e.g. the daycare workers themselves). Surveillance would verify that daycare workers are not engaging in distracted behaviours and endangering children under their supervision. Part of the problem with distracted daycare behaviour is that many daycare workers uphold an omerta, or an arrangement of reciprocal promises to lie in order to cover up harms caused by each other's distracted behaviour. A system of state-mandated internal surveillance within childcare centres could expose these cover-ups, solve the problem of distracted daycare and prevent harm to children. Daycare workers would internalise the imagined watcher, regulating their own distracted behaviour, since they would know that detection triggers dire consequences, such as disciplinary action, possible termination and even the stigma of placement on a child abuse registry. Probably the biggest obstacles to implementing this highly effective approach to child welfare protection – i.e. requiring all child daycares to conduct active internal surveillance – would be the expense and concerns for privacy. However, if protecting child welfare is the top priority, the costs and sacrifices to worker privacy might be warranted.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, the Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis (2001/1942) tells the story of how the devil Screwtape becomes angry at his nephew Wormwood. Wormwood was to tempt a man to the cause of evil through the artifice of distraction, but instead permitted the man 'to go for a walk and read a book'. According to Lewis, the shallow and distracted person (e.g. the inattentive daycare worker) is more easily tempted to a life of vice than the deep thinker. While the world is full of distractions and it is easy to succumb to them (as it is to vice), the challenge for today's caregiver is to develop intelligent habits of impulse

control, turn off those distracting devices and give children the gift of their undivided attention – all of which surely indicate something on the order of virtue. The challenge for today's daycare owners and directors is to minimise the moral, physical, emotional and cognitive harm to the children in their care (consistent with the principle of beneficence), especially as those harms are a consequence of the distracted behaviours of daycare workers under their supervision.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Molet et al. (2016), Radesky et al. (2014), Nierenberg (2014) and Bale et al. (2010).
2. I coined the phrase 'distracted daycare'. See Ralston (2016, 2019).
3. All of the theories are selected for reasons related to the nature of the inquiry. The first two are consequentialist theories because the question motivating the inquiry is, by its very construction, concerned with consequences, specifically what harmful moral consequences distracted daycare engenders. The second two – principlism and care ethics – are standard approaches to analyzing biomedical ethics issues involving matters of consent, authority and attentiveness – all of which are pertinent to distracted daycare. Thank you to the referees for their helpful feedback on the proper ethical theories for conducting the present analysis.
4. Thank you to the referee who posed the objection that the focus on private daycares is too American-centric. Much of my analysis does rely upon the American model of privately-owned daycare as the exemplary case. However, the United States does not have a monopoly on privately owned and operated daycares. The question is how extensively monitored and regulated these private daycares are. Although Britain has an extensive regulatory environment, especially since the OFSTED (2019) was created to inspect private daycares, prior to that the situation was similar to the U.S. in that daycares were only casually monitored by Local Authority Social Services. The problem of distracted daycare also manifests in Canada, especially in unregulated child care facilities, where child deaths are not even tracked. See Monsebraaten and Chown (2014).
5. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), 'Childcare workers must meet education and training requirements, which vary by state. Some states require these workers to have a high school diploma or equivalent, but many states do not have any education requirements for entry-level positions'. This is not universally true or the case in countries across the globe. In France, for example, the government mandates that all daycare workers have, at minimum, a college degree and, in some cases, a specialized post-graduate degree. The same is true in many Scandinavian countries. See Cohn (2013).
6. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), in 2015, the median hourly pay for a daycare worker was \$9.77 or \$20,320 per year.
7. For statistical evidence that millennials use cell phones and other devices to the point of distraction more than members of previous generations, see the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2012, November 12) report.
8. See the technology policy of Kinder House Day Care (2015, January).
9. See the social media policy of Hooper Academy's (2017).
10. Ralston (2019) characterizes some of the reasons why daycare workers see themselves as free from any responsibility for their own technology-related distracted behaviour and any consequent harms to child welfare: 'These daycare employees ... typically feel: (1) resentful towards daycare owners and clients for their low wages; (2) entitled to use internet-enabled devices during work hours *even if* there is a policy against it; (3) blameless for any accidents that could have been prevented had they not been distracted; and (4) convinced that they should protect and be protected by fellow daycare workers when accused of distracted caregiving, even when the coverup involves lying or other forms of deceit (what I call 'distracted daycare workers' omerta)'

11. See, for instance, the open-door policy of Toddler Town (2017).
12. I would like to thank the referee for the helpful suggestion to discuss the different treatments of the issue by act and rule utilitarians.
13. Principlism is not without its critics. The ethical theory has been criticised from a communitarian perspective for being too individualistic and inadequate for addressing some substantive areas of ethical inquiry. See Callahan (2003). Principlism's claims about the usefulness of principles has also come under scrutiny. See Clouser and Gert (1990).
14. One objection to claims that distracted caregiving produces social, emotional and speech delays is that ignoring a child cannot, by itself, have this strong an effect on their early development. On the medical model of child psychology, most developmental delays are hereditary or based on biological, not social, factors. While in the majority of cases distracted parenting is probably only one contributing factor, extreme cases (e.g. a child placed in a highly restrictive environment deprived of most speech input) can produce dire consequences for a child's development. Although a child with minimal speech input from a distracted caregiver is not the only influence on that child's poor speech development, it is nonetheless one less input (and a very critical one), which can lead the child to cultivate language skills at a slower pace than a child with undistracted caregivers. Thank you to an anonymous critic for this point.

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