"The Pedestrian" (1951)  
by Ray Bradbury

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do. He would stand upon the corner of an intersection and peer down long moonlit avenues of sidewalk in four directions, deciding which way to go, but it really made no difference; he was alone in this world of A.D. 2053, or as good as alone, and with a final decision made, a path selected, he would stride off, sending patterns of frosty air before him like the smoke of a cigar.

Sometimes he would walk for hours and miles and return only at midnight to his house. And on his way he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows. Sudden gray phantoms seemed to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still undrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomblike building was still open.

Mr. Leonard Mead would pause, cock his head, listen, look, and march on, his feet making no noise on the lumpy walk. For long ago he had wisely changed to sneakers when strolling at night, because the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel his journey with barkings if he wore hard heels, and lights might click on and faces appear and an entire street be startled by the passing of a lone figure, himself, in the early November evening.

On this particular evening he began his journey in a westerly direction, toward the hidden sea. There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside; you could feel the cold light going on and off, all the branches filled with invisible snow. He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whistle between his teeths, occasionally picking up a leaf as he passed, examining its skeletal pattern in the infrequent lamplights as he went on, smelling its rusty smell.

"Hello, in there," he whispered to every house on every side as he moved. "What's up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?"

The street was silent and long and empty, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in midcountry. If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the center of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company.

"What is it now?" he asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch. "Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?"

Was that a murmur of laughter from within a moon-white house? He hesitated, but went on when nothing more happened. He stumbled over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk. The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass. In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, not once in all that time.

He came to a cloverleaf intersection which stood silent where two main highways crossed the town. During the day it was a thunderous surge of cars, the gas stations open, a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarab-beetles, a faint incense puttering from their exhausts, skidded homeward to the far directions. But now these highways, too, were like streams in a dry season, all stone and bed and moon radiance.

He turned back on a side street, circling around toward his home. He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him. He stood entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn toward it.

A metallic voice called to him:  
"Stand still. Stay where you are! Don't move!"

He halted.

"Put up your hands!"

"But-" he said.

"Your hands up! Or we'll Shoot!"

The police, of course, but what a rare, incredible thing; in a city of three million, there was only one police car left, wasn't that correct? Ever since a year ago, 2052, the election year, the force had been cut down from three cars to one. Crime was ebbing; there was no need now for the police, save for this one lone car wandering and wandering the empty streets.

"Your name?" said the police car in a metallic whisper. He couldn't see the men in it for the bright light in his eyes.

"Leonard Mead," he said.

"Speak up!"

"Leonard Mead!"

"Business or profession?"

"I guess you'd call me a writer."

"No profession," said the police car, as if
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talking to itself. The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through chest. You might say that," said Mr. Mead. He hadn't written in years. Magazines and books didn't sell any more. Everything went on in the tomblike houses at night now, he thought, continuing his fancy. The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching them. "No profession," said the phonograph voice, hissing. "What are you doing out?"
"Walking," said Leonard Mead.
"Walking!"
Just walking," he said simply, but his face felt cold.
"Walking, just walking, walking?"
"Yes, sir."
"Walking where? For what?"
"Walking for air. Walking to see."
"Your address!"
"Eleven South Saint James Street."
"And there is air in your house, you have an air conditioner, Mr. Mead?"
"Yes."
"And you have a viewing screen in your house to see with?"
"No."
"No?" There was a crackling quiet that in itself was an accusation.
"Are you married, Mr. Mead?"
"No."
"Not married," said the police voice behind the fiery beam. The moon was high and clear among the stars and the houses were gray and silent.
"Nobody wanted me," said Leonard Mead with a smile.
"Don't speak unless you're spoken to!" Leonard Mead waited in the cold night. "Just walking, Mr. Mead?"
"Yes."
"But you haven't explained for what purpose."
"I explained; for air, and to see, and just to walk."
"Have you done this often?"
"Every night for years."
The police car sat in the center of the street with its radio throat faintly humming.
"Well, Mr. Mead," it said.
"Is that all?" he asked politely.
"Yes," said the voice. "Here. There was a sigh, a pop. The back door of the police car sprang wide. "Get in."
"Wait a minute, I haven't done anything!"
"Get in."
"I protest!"
"Mr. Mead."
He walked like a man suddenly drunk. As he passed the front window of the car he looked in. As he had expected, there was no one in the front seat, no one in the car at all.
"Get in."
He put his hand to the door and peered into the back seat, which was a little cell, a little black jail with bars. It smelled of riveted steel. It smelled of harsh antiseptic; it smelled too clean and hard and metallic. There was nothing soft there.
"Now if you had a wife to give you an alibi," said the iron voice. "But."
"Where are you taking me?"
The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes. "To the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies."
He got in. The door shut with a soft thud. The police car rolled through the night avenues, flashing its dim lights ahead.
They passed one house on one street a moment later, one house in an entire city of houses that were dark, but this one particular house had all of its electric lights brightly lit, every window a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness.
"That's my house," said Leonard Mead. No one answered him.
The car moved down the empty river-bed streets and off away, leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night.

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Bradbury, Ray (1920- ), is an American author best known for his fantasy stories and science fiction. Bradbury's best writing effectively combines a lively imagination with a poetic style.

Collections of Bradbury's stories include The Martian Chronicles (1950), The Illustrated Man (1951), The October Country (1955), I Sing the Body Electric! (1969), Quicker Than the Eye (1996), and One More for the Road (2002). His novel Fahrenheit 451 (1953) describes a society that bans the ownership of books. His other novels include Dandelion Wine (1957), a poetic story of a boy's summer in an Illinois town in 1928; and Something Wicked This Way Comes (1962), a suspenseful fantasy about a black magic carnival that comes to a small Midwestern town. He has also written poetry, screenplays, and stage plays.
How Electronics Could Be Affecting Your Child’s Health

Parents: Put down the phone!

LET’S FACE IT: WE HAVE all played on our phone while with our kids. Whether it’s a quick text or a social media post, it can be difficult put the electronics down. I’m guilty of it, and most parents are guilty of it. But in reality, our email and Facebook can wait – especially if it means setting a good example for our children and protecting their health, since increased screen time is associated with higher rates of childhood obesity, behavior problems, ADHD, poor sleep quality, poor physical activity and poor school performance.

Multiple studies have shown that as parents increase their screen time (whether it be smart phones, TV, computers, video games), their children do the same. Our children are constantly learning from us and following in our footsteps. When we focus on a screen instead of our child, we are sending a message that says, "My phone or the TV is more interesting than you." Parents in my office often ask me why kids are so interested in our smartphones and tablets, and it’s because from the day they’re born, they see us glued to these devices. In turn, children are fascinated by electronics and want to use them, too.

In addition, a recent study found that as parents increased usage of electronic devices while sitting at a playground with their children, the children were more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Although the study wasn’t able to dissect why children were more risky, it may be because the kids were trying to get a parent’s attention. This is definitely something to think about!

In my office, I’ve met with some parents who are worse than their teenagers when it comes to electronic media. They refuse to stop playing video games or scrolling through social media during medical visits. Often times, I have to repeatedly ask the parent to put the phone away.

It’s time that we set an example for our children and put down the devices. Here are some tips that will help you and your kids slowly unplug:

Remove the TV from the bedroom. Take the TV out of your room and your child’s room. Screen time at bedtime has been shown to influence sleep patterns and lead to less sleep and increased behavior problems.

Ban electronics from the dinner table. Make mealtime an electronics-free zone – no TV, no smartphone, no tablet on the table. Eating with screens on makes you more likely to consume more calories and less likely to have a conversation with your child. Take the
time to find out what happened in your child's day instead of reading posts about what's happening in other people's lives.

Put limitations on screen time. Limit as much screen time as possible – ideally no more than one hour per day. The more our children use electronics, the less physical activity they do. Fight the boredom by making a list of things to do to keep the kids occupied.

Set aside play time. Show your child he or she is more important than the screen, and do things the old-fashioned way. Play with your kids, and let their imaginations run wild. Take them to the park, a museum or help them build a fort in the living room.

Get interactive with your children. There are times when screens are OK, but if you're going to use electronics, use them together as a family in an interactive way.

This summer, make a resolution to unplug as much as possible. By doing so, you'll not only create more memories with your children, you'll also help improve your family's well-being.

Sara Lappe, M.D., Contributor