The contradictions of digital parenting

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, a flood of advice about digital technologies is adding to the demands on parents to manage family life, money, health, education, work and more, all while being heavily restricted in their activities and resources. In this blog, Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross write about the realities of digital parenting today – how parents balance their hopes and fears about technology in a post-pandemic world where childhood is digital by default.

The advice parents receive is fundamentally contradictory. First, with familiar panics about screen time exacerbated by lockdown, parents have been expected to monitor, calculate and limit their children's time spent across multiple digital devices. Second, given heightened hopes that the internet offers a vital workaround for school work, as well as sustaining friendships and family relations, parents have been called upon to provide devices and connectivity, and to optimise children's online opportunities so that they don't fall behind or lose out.

Neither injunction is proving easy – parents are supposedly "ignoring screen time limits" and yet their children are "struggling to continue learning at home" because of a lack of digital devices. The consequences appear dire – "Coronavirus lockdowns are worsening child obesity due to kids spending an extra FIVE HOURS per day in front of a screen," evidence of a "sharp increase in UK child sexual abuse during pandemic" and yet the digital divide is growing as ever more children fall behind. Too much technology, and yet not enough technology. What are parents to do?

In our research for Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Children's Lives, based on in-depth interviews with London parents and a national survey completed before the pandemic, we found that parents have been living with this contradictory advice ever since the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued its famous 2×2 screen time rules nearly 20 years ago. Though few have heard of the AAP, it amazed us how the rules – not more than two hours per day and no screen time for the under twos – have filtered into UK parents' consciousness. Even though they were based on evidence about TV viewing, long before mass use of the internet and smartphone, they seem to have become more a source of guilt, and a rod for parents' backs, than helpful guidance to lighten parents' load. One mum, Melissa, told us:

> We've got so much information now about screen time being bad or just stuff being pumped at us. You sort of feel guilty […] if you let them have too much.

Our survey showed that parents report significantly more conflict about screen time than about how children use the technologies. All this is worrying because:

1. Parents told us they would prefer independent guidance on which digital activities are likely to be positive or negative for their child than just being told to count the hours and impose restrictions. But they (and we) don't know where to turn for this advice.
2. Informed judgements about the what, how and with whom of digital engagement can open up a positive conversation between parents and children, supporting the democratic model of family life that many parents now seek. After all, policing your child's digital life is reminiscent of the authoritarian Victorian family that most are glad to have left behind.
3. Parents are not digitally ignorant – many find pleasure in snuggling up on the sofa and watching, playing or coding something together, and many have some digital expertise they'd like to share with their children.

This last point is reiterated by the parent bloggers we interviewed. Lena began blogging for the community and self-expression it offered, also encouraging her 12-year-old daughter to blog her poetry and nurture her future 'brand.' Glad that her daughter was learning Scratch at school, (Lena believes "coding is the new Latin") we could see how this enabled interests and expertise to be shared between Lena and her daughter. Yet Lena felt overwhelmed by the "tsunami" of devices in her home, also seeking to control or even resist her children's embrace of all things digital.

Digital parenting is no single or simple matter. We found parents [variously embracing](#), balancing and resisting the role of digital technologies in family life at different times, and for a range of reasons that we explore in the book. Each approach brings its own anxieties, as parents ask themselves: Did I get it right? Will it pay off? Embracing means positioning yourself ahead of the curve, feeling exposed and acting before social norms and resources are in place to offer support. Balancing is an active and effortful process, like standing on a rolling log. Not simply a compromise, it invites constant self-questioning and adjustment: Is this right? How can I tell? Resisting may mean worrying about missing out professionally or personally, or that you're going out on a limb, taking a risk by not doing what everyone else seems to be doing.

Lena also confirmed our finding that parents often [feel unsupported in facing digital challenges](#) – especially when compared to other challenges, for which they can turn to their own parents or official advice that's more helpful than the dated screen time rules. Lena told us she experienced a "constant sense of being afloat on a sea of hysteria," not least because other parents seemed so quick to judge and criticise – turning to them could be like walking into "a pit of quicksand."

Whichever approach they choose, parents are clear that the future will be digital. 'Turning it off' is no longer feasible, especially in a post-pandemic world where childhood is digital by default. But a new contradiction is raising concern: the more society relies on parents to find ways and means to bring up their children for a digital future, the greater the digital inequalities will be, given families' very different circumstances and resources. Sending laptops into the poorest homes, [even if achievable](#), is far from sufficient. It's vital that the key institutions (government, health, education, welfare, employment) that rely on parents to provide a digital home should build a supportive infrastructure, tailored to diverse circumstances and responsive to parents' concerns.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Notes

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