

Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Children's Lives

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Chapter 1 – Expectations

How should parents manage digital devices, and what should they expect of them? Why are these questions so contested within families, among policymakers and in the media? This chapter introduces fieldwork grounded in the day-to-day experiences of families. The broader concern is how arguments about 'parenting' have become a crucial means by which society explores pressing dilemmas over how to live, what constitutes well-being and what 'good life' to hope for. The text explains how parents were invited to look backwards to their childhood to reflect on how they were parented, and then forward to the conditions in which their children might themselves parent in the future, conceptually positioning parenting in relation to theories of late modernity and the risk society. The chapter then introduces three distinct genres for 'digital parenting' – embrace, balance and resist – thereby referring to particular constellations of practices, values and imaginaries rather than the neat classification of individuals or families.

Chapter 2 – Family life in the digital age

The frame of a single day is used to introduce the grounded realities of everyday parenting in the digital age and to reveal the multiple ways in which parents move between and amongst our genres of digital parenting within the day. Through negotiating the now-mediated activities of getting up, homework, family time and bedtime, parents articulated their values not only about digital technologies but, importantly, about family life. The authors contrast public policy that, problematically, exhorts parents to police their children's 'screen time' with parents' efforts to sustain a more democratic mode of family life which respects their children's interests in digital technologies. Eschewing the myth of parents as unremittingly digitally ignorant, it is revealed how their own interest in and hopes for digital technologies leads them to seek new modes of parenting, surprisingly often focused on shared digital pleasures.

Chapter 3 – Social inequality

Chapter 3 contrasts the experiences of families living in very different circumstances. It is not only privileged families but, indeed, families from across the social spectrum that now invest in the kinds of 'concerted cultivation' practices by which parents try to realize the future they imagine for their children. This includes practices that embrace the digital. Recognizing the distinctive intersections of cultural and economic capital that exist in a global city like London leads us to qualify the standard linear classifications of households. The position of educated but low income families emerges as particularly interesting insofar as they seek creative ways of engaging with digital technologies. The chapter then traces how class nonetheless remains important in differentiating parenting practices and, therefore, in shaping the unequal opportunities enabled by digital technology.

Chapter 4 – Geek identities in the digital family

This chapter addresses families that have most actively 'voted with their feet' to embrace the idea of a digital future, by considering self-declared 'geeky' children and parents. Although these families are in some ways exceptional, their lives reveal the considerable emotional, financial and time investment required by the premise – avidly promoted by both the public and private sectors – that the future is digital. But the outcomes remain unknown and are, arguably, riskier than more traditional routes. Families accept these terms, it is suggested, insofar as they see the adoption of a 'geeky' identity as offering them a plausible pathway to overcome some unique biographical challenges. However, the authors avoid celebrating them as 'positive deviants' even though they may yet benefit from being in the vanguard.

Chapter 5 – (Dis)abilities

Parents of children with SEN and disabilities often experience an intensified struggle to balance the risks of digital technologies while embracing the opportunities. Chapter 5 argues that, rather than being the exception, these families illustrate more intensely the dilemmas of the digital age felt in varying degrees by many families. These dilemmas, we argue, arise from parents' efforts to chart individualized pathways under conditions of heightened uncertainty and, often, reduced structural support. Digital technologies, in short, seem to suggest a clear path towards a socially sanctioned and innovative future, along with some creative workarounds to resolve a lack of domestic resources or capacity. However, the hopes raised digital technologies for some of the families discussed in this chapter may turn out to be false, and the provision of better state services might serve them better.

Chapter 6 – Parents and digital learning

Recognizing that it is the promise of digital learning for a digital future that leads many families to invest in digital technologies along with digital skills and learning opportunities, Chapter 6 explores parents' practical efforts to realize this promise. These efforts span the main learning sites of children's lives – home, school and extra-curricular activities. Since it is these last that combine the resources, flexibility and expertise to experiment with digital learning, our fieldwork contrasts the values and imaginaries of three extra-curricular learning sites, bringing together the voices of educators and parents to understand how each conceives of the learning potential associated with digital technologies. Somewhat unexpectedly, although the chosen learning sites vary considerable in resources, each tends to underplay the importance of parents in scaffolding children's digital interests and, through a series of minor but significant barriers, to disconnect parents from their children's learning.

Chapter 7 - Imagining the future

In Chapter 7 the conclusions are developed by revisiting some families from earlier chapters to demonstrate what differences their conceptions of the future make to parenting in the here-and-now. It is observed that the genres of practice – embrace, balance, resist – can be accounted for, at least in part, by the generational stories that parents tell, looking back to their childhoods and forward to particular visions of an often-digital future. Whether parents embrace, balance or resist technology, it is through these practices, and the values that parents invest in them, that parents shape their family's present and their children's future. Given that families' lives are, further, characterized by risk and inequality the results vary considerably and the inevitable future uncertainties compound parental anxieties – after all, parents' fascination with the digital might well be misplaced. Having listened to parents and sought to recognise their concerns, the authors end with recommendations for action for the organizations tasked with addressing and improving families' lives and their futures, digital or otherwise.

Appendix – Research methods

To research this book, the authors explored the parenting practices, values and imaginaries of 73 families in London in 2015 and 2016, supported by a survey of 2000 parents across the UK in late 2017. They recruited families with dependent children (below 18) who were highly diverse in socio-economic status, family composition, ethnicity and age of children, as explained in the Appendix. In an effort to listen to parents' own voices and experiences, they conducted some intensely emotional interviews, a process itself telling about the experience of parenting in the digital age. Parents described how they attempt to optimize their imagined future by establishing family values and practices designed to improve their child's life chances, drawing on diverse and highly unequal resources to do so. Within this effort, 'the digital' seems to offer a distinct pathway, with children tasked to carry society's hopes into the future; even though such efforts to control the future in turn generate new risks, compounding adult anxieties about both today's children and tomorrow's adults.