

# THE DIGITAL FAMILY

Three stories about where we are in 2015

Geraldine Bedell



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Parent Zone

## Acknowledgements

Conversations with Vicki Shotbolt, Jonathan Baggaley and Charlie Leadbeater have been crucial to the development of the ideas in this report. I am grateful to my colleagues on Parent Info, Rachel Rosen and Lucy Doyle, for all their ideas; and to everyone at Parent Zone, especially Sophie Linington. And to all the parents, teachers, social workers, police officers and others who share their experiences of the digital age with us.

The Digital Family

*Published by:*  
Parent Zone

Unit 2, 1st Floor, Pride Court,  
80-82 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF

October 2015

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*Design by:* Glenn Orton

*Printed by:* Impress Print Services Ltd,  
19 Lyon Road, Hersham, Surrey KT12 3PU

# INTRODUCTION

On a couple of days in mid-September when I happened to be writing this, it was difficult to know whether to be more worried about the number of people who had heard of someone being cyberbullied (68%)<sup>1</sup> or about the fact that two-thirds of parents (67%) admit to resorting to ‘iParenting’, using screens to distract and humour their children<sup>2</sup>.

**S**ince the development of the world wide web in the early 1990s, digital devices and their software have become our organising technology, affecting more or less everything we do, changing business models, culture, entertainment and the way we manage our relationships. All this has also given us an unsettled sense of needing to adjust to the new demands of the digital world and a feeling of confusion about whether we’re responding well or wisely. In those two press stories, as in many stories about the family and the internet, there is an inference that parents aren’t managing to protect their children properly.

The family is at the centre of much commentary on the digital age. Children, young people and their parents have become a focus for the whirlwind of feelings – surprise, excitement, shock and worry – that are prompted by the pace and scale of digital transformation. It is easy to see why social anxiety is being played out through the family in this way: the family is where children are cared for, and children are exemplars of vulnerabilities

that affect us all. They are also our future.

In recent years, three stories have developed to explain what is happening to parents and children in the digital age, with consequent assumptions about how the family needs to respond. The first, most familiar and easiest to understand of these stories is one of risk. Children and young people are beleaguered by digital technology that threatens their wellbeing. 'It is our duty as adults to help [young people] navigate [the] online world safely,' says the UK Minister for Internet Safety and Security, Baroness Shields<sup>3</sup>. Technology companies support a range of initiatives designed to prove their commitment to keeping children safe on their platforms and devices. Yet the anxieties remain (all this talk of risk is frightening); and, according to Ofcom, a fifth of parents feel ill-equipped to prepare their children for the digital age. Parents worry that their children are seeing things and having experiences over which they have no control: in a recent survey for Parent Zone, 79% thought that being a good parent meant knowing what your children were doing online and 67% were prepared to snoop on their children's online activities to do that.

The second story about the digital family is less discussed, but is implicit in our behaviour. It is a story told by the screens open on the kitchen table, by our habit of checking our email while we're cooking or when we're watching our children play football. It is the story of the always-on, always available worker and of the child who has to grow up to make her way in a difficult world where, partly because of technology, it is hard to make a living. Both by our example (our need to be working) and by the kinds of progress we prioritise for our children – homework, grades, measurable achievement– we are urging our children to be productive. As technology reaches deep into family life, our response is to try to ready our children for a world of systems and measurement, to create children who are programmed to be a successful part of its machinery.

There is a third, less obvious, but more hopeful story. If the risk narrative presents the digital world as a threat, and the productivity one sees it as a harsh environment of data collection and performance measurement, the third envisages the digital world as something we have to govern together. This story is much less developed but it would repay attention. It is a story of creative engagement, of young people as agents of change and progress. It focuses on capabilities and requires us to prepare young people not to be tech drones, but makers and collaborators; to prioritise fitting in less than challenging; being questioning and thoughtful. It suggests that we need to urge our children towards autonomy, self-control and discernment, to help them become collaborative individualists who are able to work together towards common goals but in a spirit of emancipation, of freedom from groups, organisations and social institutions. It requires parents to trust young people, as much as control them.



# THE DIGITAL FAMILY: A STORY OF RISK

The first account of the family in the digital age is that the household is under threat.

The hazards come in various shapes and sizes and often tend to get jumbled up with one another, but it's worth breaking them down because they actually need thinking about in different ways.

In her 2008 government review, Tanya Byron classified the risks as content, contact and conduct (the child as recipient, participant and actor respectively). This has proved an enduringly helpful way of conceptualising online risk, but I am going to suggest a slightly different typology, reflecting social media's engagement of young people in ways that are simultaneously active and passive. The various mental health issues that are being played out online, for example, blur content, contact and conduct, so that a young person who is self-harming may be looking at other people's posts; participating in discussions of how 'best' to self-harm; and posting images of their own self-harming activity, making them a recipient, participant and actor all at once.

## **Content**

Sex  
Pornography  
Child sexual abuse images  
Violence  
Violent extremism

## **Attention**

Screen time  
Screen addiction  
Distractibility

## **Over-exposure**

Sharing personal data/  
invasions of privacy  
Digital footprint  
Sexting  
Developing unwise  
relationships  
Bullying  
Grooming

## **Mental health**

Body image  
Eating disorders  
Self-harm  
Suicide  
Drugs  
Gambling  
Attitudes to others

## CONTENT

**Sex** In a survey for Parent Zone in September 2015, nearly two-thirds of parents (62.8%) thought that the internet meant that children were exposed to sex too early.

**Pornography** Recent research, undertaken between 2013-2015 by a team of researchers from the Universities of Bristol and Central Lancashire with the NSPCC's Dr Christine Barter, found that 39% of boys in England aged 14-17 regularly watched pornography<sup>4</sup>.

**Online pornography is seen as a bigger concern than offline for the following reasons:**

- It is more extreme, violent and misogynistic.
- It is more freely available, allowing young people to spend more time looking at it.
- It is easier to come across accidentally.
- It can be gamified, encouraging viewers to call for more extreme subjections or humiliations, for example.
- Intuitively, there is a concern that exposure to extreme and misogynistic pornography at a formative age can affect the development of young people's (especially boys') sexual desires, their expectations of partners and their assumptions about gender roles.

**Child sex abuse images** CEOP estimates that there are approximately 50,000 people in the UK today sharing or viewing child sex abuse images<sup>5</sup>.

As Jamie Bartlett points out in *The Dark Net*, if you open a Tor browser, it takes two mouse clicks to arrive at a page advertising links to child sex abuse images. If you were to click again, you would have committed a very serious offence. 'It is hard,' he concludes, 'to think of anywhere else where doing something so bad is so easy.'

**'Quite a lot of kids are watching films that aren't age-appropriate. One girl in my son's class - he's 10 - found a scary image and showed it to him. He looked at it, thinking he was being brave, but he was frightened afterwards. He wasn't that grown up.'**

Liz, mother of sons aged 10 and 12

**The worries about child sex abuse images include the following:**

- Their role as a form of currency among abusers may encourage more abuse, and the documenting of abuse, ultimately making children less safe.
- Webcams have introduced the potential for remote abuse.
- The possession of child sex abuse images may be an inciting factor in the progression to actual abuse.

**Violence** Research\* for the UK Council on Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) with 25,000 children in 2013 found that they were as upset by violence on YouTube as they were by online bullying and pornography. They specifically mentioned animal cruelty and beheadings<sup>6</sup>.

**The worries about violence include:**

- The assumption that violence can become normalised through the playing of video games and that this ultimately affects behaviour.
- That children may have accidental access to frightening content, whether fictional or not, before they are developmentally able to cope with it.

\*Please note, this research was conducted by Sonia Livingstone for the European Commission, conducted by EU Kids.

**Violent extremism** 'Terrorist organisations, such as ISIL, are trying to radicalise and recruit young people through an extensive use of social media and the internet.' *How Social Media Is Used To Encourage Travel to Syria and Iraq, briefing note for schools*, Department for Education and the Home Office<sup>7</sup>.

The flight to Syria of three girls from Bethnal Green, Shamima Begum, 15, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Amira Abase, 15, brought home the importance of online radicalisation after it emerged that at least one of the girls had been in contact on social media with Aqsa Mahmood, who had left her home in Glasgow in November 2013 after becoming radicalised.

**Fears about online radicalisation include:**

- Online algorithms tend to feed us more of what we have already liked, so that propaganda can go uncontested, as we find ourselves in echo chambers of our own making.
- While it is possible to shut down websites promoting violent extremist messages, it is much harder to track social media interactions, meaning that radicalisation can occur in bedrooms, under parents' noses, but without their having any idea of what is going on.

**'The internet exposes my 10-year-old to things I don't think she should be watching, like tutorials on makeup. It's all too easy to find, too much in your face, not what you should be doing at 10.'**

Christina, mother of daughters aged 5, 10 and 15

## REALITY CHECK

There is no doubt that there is content that is illegal and, to many, undesirable, on the internet. It is commonplace to speak of the internet as a Wild West; and it does reflect the extreme libertarian values of some of its early pioneers. These values are quite unhelpful when you are trying to nurture, protect and develop a small person. But not all of the problems with content are as straightforward as they are often presented. For example:

### Child sexual abuse

- 90% of child sexual abuse is by someone known to the child, suggesting that online grooming is only a small proportion of abuse.
- Figures for abuse are not very easily obtained. The best stats come from the NSPCC's FOI requests to police forces, which show rates of child sexual abuse relatively stable for around the last 10 years, with an increase in all nations of the UK in 2013/14 (to a high of 2.2 per 1000 children in England). It is not known what caused the increase but the NSPCC says it may be partly accounted for by the 'Yewtree effect', a greater willingness to report; and by improved compliance by police in recording cases<sup>8</sup>.
- All sexual images of children are treated in the same way, which means that a teen sending an image to another teen, or a child over the age of 10 who has been coerced into sending a sexual image would be classed as having committed an offence.
- CEOP's report A Picture of Abuse reviewed the evidence and concluded that, on balance, possession of child sexual abuse images was a risk factor for offending; but the links are not very clear and are hotly debated in academia.

**Pornography** There is no proof of the long-term effects of online pornography on the attitudes of young people towards sex or on their sexual satisfaction, not least because online pornography has been available for a relatively short period of time.

It is not clear to what extent pornography reflects or differs from the sexualised culture that affects young people generally.

Neither is it clear what are the effects of gender, personality, strengths and vulnerabilities, or the influence of social and cultural context on how young people are affected by pornography.

**Violent extremism** Websites promoting violent extremism get shut down quickly. It is extremely hard to reach material advocating ideological violence simply by typing something into Google; you will be directed instead to one of many organisations combating extremist ideology. So, although online interaction is undoubtedly important in confirming and facilitating extremist activities, you have to know where to look first. The initial stages of radicalisation happen offline.

# 49.8%

of parents think the internet has forced them to have conversations with their children that they would otherwise not have had

Survey for Parent Zone, September 2015

**Content: how bad is it?** Content was the first issue on the agenda for child internet safety. Parents were urged to keep the computer in the living room, advice that was still being given up until about a year ago, long after mobile technology had made it nonsensical. Today, some of the sting has been taken out of worries about content by the prevalence of parental filters and controls, which are now available at the level of home broadband, devices and applications and are often on by default.

Parents' belief that they need to monitor and restrict their children's online activities brings its own problems, as we shall see; but, for now, it is enough to note that parental filters work for some content (as long as they are not switched off, either by your child or their more adventurous friend), and that the old worry, that a three-year-old would come across pornography with a few accidental swipes on a tablet, need no longer be a general cause for anxiety.

But filters don't work for the other kinds of online threat that we have identified.

## OVER-EXPOSURE

**This covers a gamut of issues to do with children's online presence including:**

**Digital footprint** The idea that what young people post for their friends may be accessed by other people and could potentially impact on university admissions or career prospects. A general fear that young people may, sometimes unwittingly, give away information about themselves that their parents would prefer them not to publish.

**Unwise relationships** – including friends who aren't doing as well or are felt to have different values; bullying; plus the temptation to get involved in dares that are doing the rounds of social media. The sense that many parents have of the home as permeable to outside influences can leave them feeling their parental authority is being undermined.

**'My daughter's teacher asked the class (year 6 at primary school) who had Instagram and, according to my daughter, the majority raised their hands. The teacher did not challenge them (or their parents) about being on a site for over-13s but simply said she would be following them to see what they were posting. I am not happy about my daughter being on a social website sharing information she does not know how to control, and nor do I. However I also don't want to prevent her being part of a social network which most of her friends seem to communicate on.'**

Query to Parent Zone, Feb 2015

**Grooming** the use of gaming sites and social media by child sexual abusers to make contact with young people, with the aim of persuading them into online or offline activity (or into violent extremist activity; online radicalisation is increasingly understood as a form of grooming).

**Sexting** the sharing of sexually revealing selfies. In September 2015, it was reported that a 14 year-old boy has been placed on a police database by Greater Manchester Police for 'making and distributing an indecent image' after sending a naked image of himself to a girl on Snapchat<sup>9</sup>. Anyone under the age of 18 who sends a sexually revealing image of themselves is technically committing the offence of distributing an indecent image of a child.

### REALITY CHECK

**Unwise relationships:** Arguably, social media enables parents to see *too much* of the interactions of their children, including what can seem to us like bad manners, idiocies and skewed interests and priorities. We may be overhearing private conversations that were never intended for us.

**Digital footprints:** Concerns about digital footprints may be receding as both technology and young people become more sophisticated. Children are taught about privacy in school. Research by danah boyd suggests that young people calibrate carefully online interactions for different audiences, rather as some young people have always had different languages for their friends and their parents<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, the availability of apps like Snapchat and Whatsapp that make messages disappear or confine them to a group have made managing different levels of broadcasting easier.

**Sexting:** With sexting (a term that young people use less than adults) a distinction needs to be made between consensual and non-consensual

creation and distribution. Research by the Spirto project found that young people send sexual images of themselves for a variety of reasons, including flirting, teenage experimentation and as part of a sexual relationship<sup>11</sup>. On the whole, there are no consequences although, in a minority of cases, an image is shared beyond its original intended recipient. Meanwhile, the law has made illegal any sharing of sexual images by people under the age of 18 – even between those who can legally be naked together in person. Some might argue that this indicates that there may be something wrong with the law, rather than with young people or their parenting.

**Bullying** While some bullying has moved online, the research doesn't show that there is more bullying than there was pre-internet.

**Grooming** The deeply distressing case of Breck Bednar, who was groomed through online gaming and killed in 2014<sup>12</sup>, demonstrates that online grooming does happen, if rarely with such horrifying consequences. Again, it is worth noting that in 90% of abuse, the abuser is known to the child and their family.

## ATTENTION

**Attention, it is said, is the currency of the internet, and those who run online businesses deploy whatever techniques they can to hold it. In a recent survey for Parent Zone, 61% of parents thought their children were addicted to or spent too much time with their devices.**

**Gaming and social media** These are the two main culprits when parents talk about too much time on screens. (On the whole, parents tend not to mind children doing their homework online.) Many online games offer rewards for persistence. Social media can feel compulsive and, the more your friends are using it, the more necessary it becomes to check your feed, leading to a kind of

~~~~~  
**54.9%**

**More than half (54.9%) of parents think the internet makes it harder to set boundaries for their child.**

Survey for Parent Zone, 2015

permanent upping of the ante.

The intimacy and privacy of a child's interaction with the screen can also make parents feel nervous. Is your child actually doing her homework, or is she on Facebook? Work, social life, entertainment and news all come through the same channel and the user must decide where to direct her attention. Parents don't always trust their children to make the decisions that we would make for them. It can feel peculiarly destabilising when we don't know what our child is doing but the outside world does.

'Family life feels more and more fragmented. The girls are separately in their rooms, watching YouTube on their own. The television is the place we all sit down together – but it doesn't happen as often as I'd like.'

Jonathan, father of daughters,  
14 and 16

**Distractibility** In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle argues that the internet, with its hyperlinks and pop ups and lists, is making us more distractible and shallower. Intuitively, most of us who are on social media or use our devices for email and other kinds of work will recognise the feeling of frayed attention, the slightly dizzy sense of distraction when an alert pops up or we decide to check a feed and we lose our train of thought. Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows* makes a similar complaint, specifically about the effect this is having on families:

*'Somebody excuses themselves for a bathroom visit or a glass of water and doesn't return. Five minutes later, another of us exits on a similarly mundane excuse along the lines of "I have to check something".... Where have all the humans gone? To their screens of course. Where they always go these days. The digital crowd has a way of elbowing its way into everything, to the point where a family can't sit in a room together for half an hour without somebody, or everybody, peeling off.... As I watched the Vanishing Family Trick unfold, and played my own part in it, I sometimes felt as if love itself, or the acts of heart and mind that constitute love, were being leached out of the house by our screens.'*

62%

of parents think family life has become more fragmented than it was as a result of digital devices.

Survey for Parent Zone, September 2015

## REALITY CHECK

In *It's Complicated: The Social Life of Networked Teens*, danah boyd argues that we project our priorities as parents onto our children and see them as addicted when they use their devices for socialising or entertainment. That young people prefer to talk to friends or play games rather than work, however, is probably not that much of a novelty.

As far as distractibility is concerned, it is again not clear whether what Nicholas Carr is describing is unique to our time. He may be partly reflecting the sadness of parents as their children grow up and other priorities crowd in, making us wish we had paid more attention when we had the chance.

There is no shortage of internet evangelists to make the counter argument that, rather than addling and scattering our brain cells, our networked existence is having a positive effect on cognition and creativity. Some envisage the internet as a kind of outboard brain, giving us fabulous access to more than we could ever have stored in our heads; others see it as a sort of communal brain, into which we are all plugged, making us capable of bigger thoughts; more social, collaborative and bonded.

These interpretations may not be mutually exclusive; it is possible that both contain a kernel of truth.

## MENTAL HEALTH

On most counts, young people's lives seem to be improving. Drinking, smoking and drug taking are down in the UK<sup>13</sup> and teen pregnancies are at their lowest level for nearly half a century<sup>14</sup>. But mental health may be a different matter. According to Young Minds, 1:10 children aged 5-15 suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder. Over the last 10 years, the number of children being admitted to hospital for self-harming has gone up by 63%. The number of young people aged 15 and 16 with depression doubled between the 1980s and 2000s<sup>15</sup>.

While better diagnosis and greater acceptance of mental health disorders may be inflating the figures, it looks, on the face of it, as though young people are in the midst of a mental health crisis. (The statistics are even worse in the US.) They may be turning their backs on the rebellious behaviours of previous generations but it seems that, rather than acting out, they are turning in.

The internet undoubtedly has a role to play in this. Eating disorders and self-harm are not caused by the internet, just as violent extremism isn't caused by the internet. But 20 years ago, a parent who was dealing with a child's anorexia would not have had to contend with 'pro-ana' and 'thinspiration' sites promoting a mental illness as a positive lifestyle choice.

My daughter is self harming and following suicidal, depression and self-harming people on Instagram. Is there any help available?

Query to Parent Zone  
September 2015

Facebook's famous happiness experiment, when, for a week in June 2012 it manipulated the feeds of some of its users, proves that our experiences with social media can affect our moods<sup>16</sup>. We are exposed to the changing status of our friends and frenemies on a constant basis. Fear of missing out has acquired its own acronym, FOMO. The internet amplifies the problems of adolescence and sometimes gives them new forms of expression.

### Overall, what can we conclude about our concerns about risk in 2015?

- There are a lot of things that we think we need to be afraid of on the internet.
- They are rarely as straightforward as they seem.
- The problems children and young people face on the internet are not really technical problems; they are social problems, which the internet may exacerbate, but does not cause.
- It is hard to know whether we are worrying about the right things, let alone what we ought to do about them.

**'Solutions' to risk** By focusing on risk, we arrive at solutions involving protection, whether they be technical, through parental controls and filters, or social, through 'talking to your child' and building resilience.

Researchers are good at measuring risk. They know quite a lot about the likelihood of seeing a sexual image online, for example. What they can't tell us is what turns this into harm, and why some children will be affected and not others.

This lack of a finessed understanding of what turns risks into harms has led to responses that are quite crude. One form of protection has been to restrict children's access. Parental control filters and monitoring certainly have their place (in preventing the three-year-old from swiping her way to pornography, for example) but, as EU Kids Online has found, children and young people in the UK are more monitored and restricted than any others in Europe, yet, also, less safe<sup>17</sup>. Parent Zone's research with the Oxford Internet Institute found that high levels of monitoring and parental restriction not only made children less confident and creative online but, again, also less safe<sup>18</sup>.

If you never encounter risk, you never learn how to deal with it. Aside from the more obvious drawbacks of parental filters – that they can be switched off and that, in a mobile age, your child is only as safe as the least parentally-controlled child in the playground – the evidence is that over-monitoring and restrictions undermine resilience. They can prevent children learning the key skills of digital literacy and critical consumption that are going to enable them to negotiate the online world in the long term.

By proposing a technical response, we also lose sight of the growing evidence that the children and young people who are most vulnerable online are very often the ones who are the most vulnerable offline. This is an uncomfortable truth, which it is understandable that those of us who are concerned about

internet safety struggle to address. Those children are the hardest and most expensive to reach; their deprivations tend to be multiple and complex. And they tend to have less articulate and demanding advocates.

The urge to switch off the internet remains. Camp Grounded is an American organisation offering digital detox weekends ('disconnect to reconnect'), including woodworking, pickling, analogue photography and archery. Participants hand in their digital devices when they arrive and enjoy a switched-off weekend of nostalgia, engineered to resemble a 1960s summer camp. But presumably, when you leave Camp Grounded clutching your smartphone once more, your social media feeds and all the other things that felt like a chronic problem will still be there, and still problematic.

The internet is unquestionably changing our lives. How could it not be, when it underpins most of what we do? This summer, I found that I was taking photographs differently – not to jog my memory or remind my family of where we'd been, but with captions already forming in my head. Not because the subject was particularly interesting or memorable, but because it might present the opportunity to say something quirky, or witty. To show off, basically. (Or, if you are less judgemental, to be a cheery sort of friend.) At any rate, the moments of our lives, as Laurence Scott says, increasingly audition for digitisation.

The effects of the internet, for most people, are noticeable in the changes – often quite small, but cumulative – that it brings about in our moods, manners, feelings and ways of going about our lives. Just a couple of examples connected to social media will do: formerly written-off political outsiders can surge from nowhere to become winners. Previously unknown people can be demonised on a global scale, without any means of redress or much concern for the context of their alleged misdemeanours. Both phenomena are broadly the result of the way that social media privileges anything that a) shares easily and b) makes the person posting it look good. The important thing is to display your righteous anger; much of social media, as Helen Lewis has memorably said, is virtue-signalling. We suddenly find ourselves with slightly different imperatives, slightly shifted approaches, a slightly different sense of ourselves. None of this is comprehended by the risk agenda.

**'This summer, whenever I went out with the younger children, leaving my 14-year-old daughter at home, I switched off the wifi. As a Muslim, I worry that my daughter will be exposed to people who will distort and manipulate her ideas. I look at those girls who went to Syria from Bethnal Green and they were good students. They look ordinary.'**  
*Ifrih, mother of six, London*

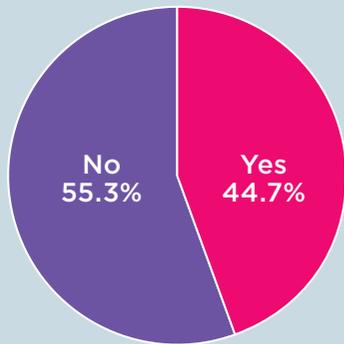


# PARENT ZONE'S LATEST RESEARCH

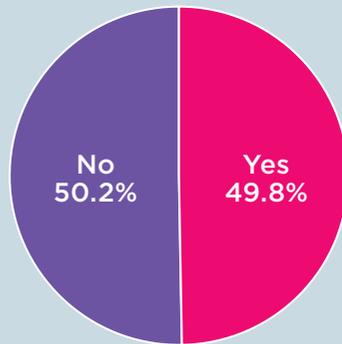
With 1000 UK parents of children between the ages of 4-16 who use the internet

Research conducted between 14th and 17th September 2015.

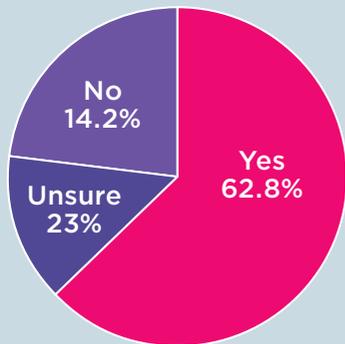
1. Do you ever worry about your child finding out about behaviours like self-harm and anorexia online?



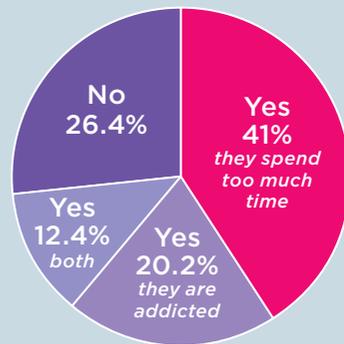
2. Do you think the internet has ever forced you to have conversations with your child that you might not otherwise have had?



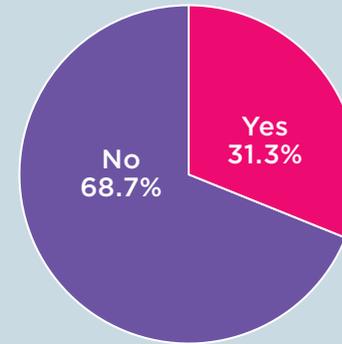
3. Do you think that children are often exposed to sex on the internet too early?



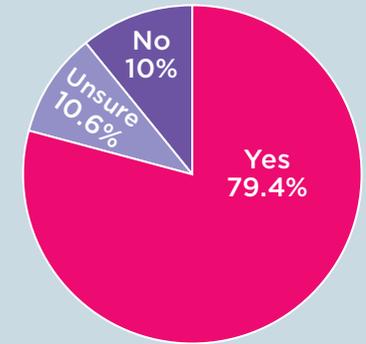
4. Do you think your child spends too much time on technology, or is addicted to their devices (e.g. mobile phone, computer)?



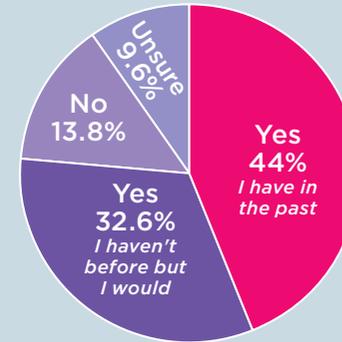
5. Do you ever worry that your child puts too much information online?



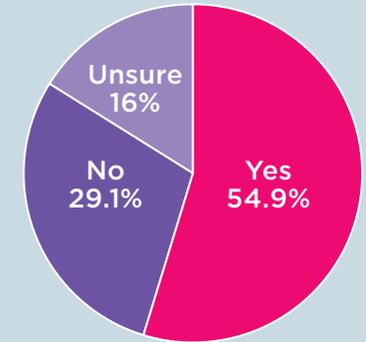
6. Do you feel that being a good parent generally means being aware of what your children are doing online?



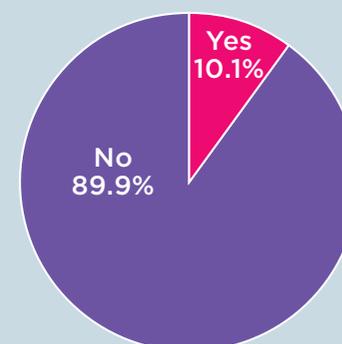
7. Do you think you would ever snoop on your child's online activities?



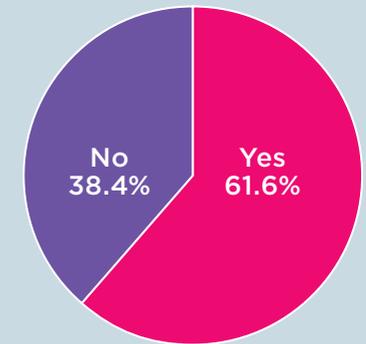
8. Do you think the internet ever makes it harder for you to set boundaries for your child?



9. As far as you know, has your child ever found out anything embarrassing about you by looking online?



10. Do you think family life has become more fragmented in general because of technology and personal devices?



# THE DIGITAL FAMILY: A STORY OF PRODUCTIVITY

To understand the second of our stories, it is worth beginning with the way that much of the worry about the effect of the internet on young people is currently refracted through its effect on school work.

It was recently reported, for example, that the Department for Education has appointed Tom Bennett to review the impact of mobile phones in the classroom as part of an inquiry into how best to manage student behaviour. One-third of schools, it was reported, already ban mobile phones in class (which makes you wonder about the other two-thirds: are they really allowing kids to go on Facebook in lessons?)<sup>19</sup> In September, a Cambridge University study reported that an extra hour of screen time a day in Year 10 can reduce GCSE results by up to two grades across the board.<sup>20</sup>

The cumulative effect of such stories is to convey the sense that digital technology is damaging academic performance, that it has become a distraction. This is rather odd, when you think about it: we are worrying that digital technology is waylaid children from learning how to survive in a world of digital technology. These sorts of stories are proliferating at a time that tablets are being widely introduced to help learning, especially in primary schools. The question that struck me as I read the Cambridge University findings on GCSE grades was: why are we so certain that GCSEs are the best possible preparation for adult life? How do we know they're so much better than gaming, composing music, making vines, debating, networking, watching documentaries, or any of the other things that young people might plausibly be doing on their screens?

At any rate, the underlying assumption is that maximising academic achievement has become a key goal of parenting – and middle-class parents, certainly, have taken this on board. The other day I caught myself telling my

Photo: Woodleywonderworks



15-year-old that he should go for a walk because he'd focus on his homework better afterwards. Although this was probably true, it seemed a rather sad reflection on my parenting. There are lots of benefits associated with going out for a walk; I might have suggested he observe, reflect, daydream, bump into people, enjoy being alone, stride out or idle along with no aim in mind.

But no: going for a walk was all about improving his productivity. Middle class parents spend an awful lot of our time monitoring our children's academic tasks and progress and urging them to be more productive, get through the next set of exams, jump over the next hurdle.

**What is all this productivity for?** Digital technology means that many parents now have to manage home from work and work from home. For those on higher salaries, the link between hours in the office and pay has been eroded; they are expected to be always available. The most highly rewarded are paid simply to exist, their productivity at all hours a given. Yet, despite all this frenetic work, the job prospects for our children look rather shaky. A 2013 study by the Oxford Martin School suggested that 47% of all jobs in the US are susceptible to automation<sup>21</sup>. The OECD's projections for the world economy between now and 2060 are for slowing world growth and near-stagnation in advanced economies. On current trends there is no hope of improved social mobility; by 2060 it is predicted that the most equal countries, such as Sweden, will have levels of inequality currently seen in the UK.<sup>22</sup>

This doesn't exactly look like the great digital future we have been promised. Why is it necessary to work so hard, simply to stand still? The Uber economy may have eased the pains of the current recession; but, if perpetual, unreliable freelancing becomes the norm, many – by some estimates most – young people in advanced economies can look forward to a future as part of the precariat, with zero hours contracts and the stress of perpetually hustling for paid work. Artificial intelligence threatens middle class jobs, not just jobs in call centres and supermarkets.

Unless there is massive redistribution, all the indications are that the profits from robotic improvements to productivity will accrue to the

**'If one of us isn't checking a smartphone at the dinner table I worry that either my husband has been sacked or my kids are playing truant.'**

*Rachel, mother of three children, 9, 11 and 13*

**Why is it necessary to work so hard simply to stand still?**

owners of the robots. There is no sign at present of the will to reorganise in a way that would make that redistribution possible; to date, the internet has tended to the creation of monopolies. Meanwhile, frightened by our sense of the competitiveness of modern life and the winner-takes-all economy, we parents are complicit in furthering what we fear, by propelling our children forward in the hope that they will be among the few who reap the rewards – even though, rationally, they almost certainly won't be. All the focus on productivity means we are sleepwalking into a landscape organised not for the benefit of most people, but for the owners of tech platforms. The danger is that we are becoming part of the machine without even realising what is happening to us.

A recent report in the Financial Times identified a new kind of job, 'nursery consultant', a person who is employed to find the right nursery for your child and make sure she gets in. One such expert reported being instructed by employers that they wanted 'Cambridge and Deutsche Bank,' which seems to be rather advanced planning for a pre-schooler.<sup>23</sup> It suggests that what matters most in life is competition for jobs and that it's never too early to start. Creepy as this is, if the choice is going to be between Deutsche Bank and scrabbling around for work in the Uber economy, it may be rational. The nursery consultant is a niche market, of course; but the emphasis on the need to compete educationally with China, Singapore and South Korea percolates into mainstream parenting and leaves many of us uneasily feeling that unless our children are educationally productive, they will fall behind.

This is not purely a middle class preoccupation. Lynne Schofield Clark has explored the different values brought to parenting in the digital age by higher and lower-income communities over a 10 year period.<sup>24</sup> She concludes that the challenge for many less advantaged families is twofold:

- How parents can foster a relationship of trust with children when those children are living large parts of their day in an environment they don't find trustworthy;
- How to balance a lack of experience in and knowledge of a digitally-saturated world with a desire to help children thrive.

When lucrative and reliable jobs are less available than they once were, less advantaged parents, she argues, come to see leisure as something that can

**The danger is that we are becoming part of the machine without even realising what is happening to us.**

undermine job prospects. The focus at school on promoting values of achievement and individualism (all that competition for a place in the Pisa rankings) suggests to parents that academic survival is the main hope, and anything that is classed as time-wasting (and that includes children's sometimes mysterious activities with screens) is a threat to the future.

So, if young people are suffering from mental health problems, perhaps they have reason. In *How To Raise An Adult*, Julie Lythcott-Haims points to a 2013 American College Health Association survey of 100,000 students from 153 college campuses that found that 84% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do; 60% felt very sad; and 51% felt high levels of anxiety. She believes this is the result of pressure caused by parents' belief that their job is to make their children achieve. Parental egos are bound up with their children's progress through education, she argues, and this is putting intolerable pressure on their children not to let them down. Her Stanford colleague Bill Deresiewicz says in his 2014 manifesto *Excellent Sheep*: '[For students] haunted their whole lives by fear of failure – often, in the first instance, by their parents' fear of failure, the cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential.'

**What has this got to do with digital technology?** Well, first, it seems perfectly possible that our obsession with safeguarding and protection may be preventing children from having the experiences that would enable them to develop resilience, online and off.

Second, its effect is to make it our job as parents to be productive, to generate wealth, if not for ourselves then for the owners of all that useful and enticing equipment, those platforms and applications. We can see the potential, of course, and it is amazing – and we benefit as consumers, choosing entertainment, booking taxis, finding hotels or rooms in other people's homes from a cornucopia of new products online. There are some ways we benefit as workers: remote working has undoubtedly helped some parents, even if it sometimes means putting in longer hours. But the background picture is that much of Europe is in the grip of austerity. In more and more markets a small group of superstar entrepreneurs takes most of the rewards. The economy is creating jobs, but they are low-paid, part-time and low-productivity service jobs. As workers, we have good reason to feel insecure.

If parenting has become about productivity, the next phase of technological development looks set to have a profound effect on family life. The internet of things is going to be capturing data about a much wider range of activities. Already, people are wearing devices that measure our steps and our sleeping patterns. Why on earth would we want to do this? The answer has to be so that we can optimise ourselves. As we turn our subjective experiences into data, and so make our inner lives comparable, we are approaching the idea of an optimisable human.

## If the business model of the internet is advertising, the business model of the internet of things will be insurance.

In 2014, Russia's Alfa Bank introduced an Activity Savings Account, which encouraged customers to wear a fitness-tracking device, like Fitbit, Runkeeper or Jawbone. For every step that the device monitors, a small amount of money is transferred into the Activity Account, where it earns a higher rate of interest. The bank has found that customers who use this account are saving twice as much as other customers and walking one and a half times as far as the average Russian. Which is fantastic if you are healthy and fit.

If the business model of the internet is advertising, it has been said, the business model of the internet of things will be insurance. As our bodily interactions with the world are monitored and our moods assessed (in 2014, for example, BA pioneered a 'happiness blanket' which measures passenger contentment through neural monitoring), why would there not be rewards for those who are doing better? A Marxist and feminist reading of the family has always been that it is the place for the production of human capital; and as other forms of value – land, machinery – have become less important, the value of human capital has risen and, with it, the pressure on the family. What is the point of capital? To make us more productive. It is not hard to imagine that there will be rewards for parents who provide the right kinds of nutrition and send their children out for the optimum number of walks.

Already, the wellbeing industry promotes caring for children, socialising with friends, giving to charity and being married as strategies for an individual's psychological enhancement. This is a very instrumental – selfish, even – take on what families do. No wonder families – which are by definition not selfish – feel under threat. The family is on the side of the non-optimised and non-optimisable: the child who is hopeless at school, the old person with dementia, the relationship that has no end other than itself. The family is bigger and more gracious than the quantifiable self. It has larger ideas.



# THE DIGITAL FAMILY: A DIFFERENT STORY

The third, largely hidden story about families and the internet is that families are where we can make the future. We do not have to sleepwalk into a future in which we are part of the machine, our lives dictated by technology.

In this account, families don't need to feel under duress, their values of care and empathy at odds with the imperative to supply data on performance and to keep improving. The third approach to technology takes a different tack, assuming that it is still in our power to raise children who are capable of making a hard-edged, clear-eyed critical assessment of our part in the digital future that is being created by us, with us, out of us; who believe it is in our power to control this world and are up for the challenge. Many of the values that will be needed to thrive in the digital age are those that are developed in families. They are the social and emotional qualities that make relationships possible – empathy, intuition, creativity, deftness in dealing with others.

This story is only starting to be explored and there are many implications to be teased out of it, but there are some principles on which everyone engaged in it should be able to agree:

Families need to be supported. Family policy has largely slipped off the agenda for this government, but families cannot be taken for granted. Many families are struggling and feel socially excluded, disconnected from the modern world and its technologies.

**What might support look like?** A few suggestions:

- More spaces between home and school, where parents and children can work collaboratively, often using technology to develop skills of flexibility, complex problem-solving, imagination, commitment, consensus and creativity.
- Mentorship schemes.
- Peer-to-peer learning.

Photo: Honza Soukup



## Inequality is not the inevitable consequence of technological innovation; it is the result of decisions made.

Photo: Stephan Hochhaus

- Emphasis on critical skills, on technical, media and social literacy (the way technologies work; the interactions they enable; the social behaviour this reflects and allows for).

- Empowerment of young people as makers, doers, as having political and social authority and agency, rather than being simply consumers of tech.

Support is not about wellbeing programmes in an ameliorative sense, but about developing the capabilities that mean young people don't feel that they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

Young people should be seen primarily as collaborative, self-governing problem-solvers rather than vulnerable and in need of protection, or as productive workers who need to be corralled to work harder.

### Policy should emphasise a wider range of measurements of success:

- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Problem-solving
- Originality, trying things and failing.
- Young people as makers
- Digital and media literacy and critical thinking
- Attention management
- Empathy, intuition, relationships

Policy should also acknowledge that inequality is not the inevitable consequence of technological innovation, but is the result of decisions taken. When the government talks about investing in tech capacity, typically the language suggests that innovation will be the answer to economic fears. But there has been no evidence that is the case to date and innovation without a *social* digital policy is only likely to lead to greater inequality.



# CONCLUSION

It is still commonplace to talk about the online world and the offline as separate, even though the online now underpins most of what we do.

Envisaging the digital world as something ‘out there’ – in our computing devices and their software – has two major consequences. It makes the world of technology seem like a looming threat, framing the issue for families mainly of one of risks and harms. While risks exist (if sometimes somewhat differently from the ways in which they are presented to us) and are worth guarding against, they are not the whole story about how digital technology is affecting families.

Second, it makes us struggle to meet its demands and, when we fall short, to blame ourselves for our inability to adapt; to conclude that we are not getting it right, that we are developing addictions, not being mindful enough, or failing to keep up and parent properly. The World Health Organisation caused a stir in 2001 by predicting that mental health disorders would become the world’s largest cause of disability and death by 2020; but it is difficult to feel happy and at ease when you feel buffeted by forces beyond your control – job insecurity, images of bodily perfection, relentless performance measures or the ways in which social media alters our behaviour. Many of the responses to the mental health crisis, such as wellbeing programmes, imply that it is our minds and brains that are at fault; they focus on our shortcomings, rather than how we might arrange things differently.

It is a truism that if you’re not paying for a service on the internet, you are the product. The digital age is not a looming future thing, making incursions, something we can potentially keep at bay; it wraps around and encloses us, because we are its product. It is the air we breathe, our medium. But it may not always be operating in our interests, and, if we fail to grasp that we are part of it, if we fail to take hold of it and make it work for us instead of in spite of us, then our digital devices will continue to impose upon us behaviours that make us feel ill-at-ease.

Young people are going to have plenty of problems to solve – the environment, the costs of ageing populations and the ways in which digital technologies shift behaviour and terms of debate. Many young people show

signs of being disengaged from the structures we have set up for them, looking for new ways to make their voices heard, evident in the thousands who got involved in the Corbyn campaign or in commitment to issues through online campaigns, or online giving. This urge to agency is something we should celebrate.

Of the three accounts of families and the internet, the least explored holds the most promise. We need to focus more attentively on how families are crucial to fostering the skills and capabilities that are going to make the difference between a prosperous digital age at ease with itself and a hellish one marred by gross inequalities and high levels of mental health problems.

The family is where social and emotional capabilities and the qualities needed for individualistic collaboration are – or can be – developed. Families need to fight back, more combatively and with greater pride in family values than we have managed so far. And they need all the help they can get to do it.



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