Parenting for a Digital Future – one year on

It's been an eventful year in many ways, and a tough one for most people. Children's lives became digital by default. Education went remote. Screen time hit the roof. Researchers had to do their research via Zoom. And parents? There's never one answer to that question: parents are as diverse as society, and their experiences of the pandemic have surely varied hugely. For www.parenting.digital, Prof Sonia Livingstone talks about how digital parenting has changed during the past year.

I have had to think on my feet about digital parenting over the past year, since I have spent much of it launching my book with Alicia Blum-Ross on Parenting for a Digital Future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives. The book was researched and written just before the pandemic. Yet, I suggest, our findings became even more relevant since lockdown led us all to rely on screens more than we could ever have imagined. In each book talk, podcast or news report, I was asked about the effect of the pandemic on families' digital lives.

The book argues that parents focus intensely on the changes that digital technologies bring to their lives in part because they symbolise the difference between their childhood and that of their child(ren). Further, technologies act as a lightning rod for deep-seated anxieties about the present, amplified because of a felt lack of control over their child(ren)'s future. This is not made easier by the practical difficulties of understanding how technologies work, combined with the dystopian imaginary promoted in the media (the end of in person communication, the take-over of the machines, the triumph of all-powerful corporations). Still, many are resourceful, and find ways to assert their values and accommodate the digital in their lives.

In their efforts to manage what one parent called the tsunami of devices arriving in their homes, parents adopt three distinct genres or constellations of practices – embrace, balance and resist. Do they work? As we said on publication,

> When we look to the future, we can't say for sure which practices will pay off. But we show how the families most in need or already facing more risk are often those who place the most hopes in technology, and embrace it the most enthusiastically. This is especially the case for the families whose children have special educational needs and disabilities, and for some of the "geeky" families who have chosen to vote with their feet for a digital future.

What difference did the pandemic make? One possibility is that these sometimes-negative responses to the digital have intensified. Another is that parents have found a degree of balance, even of new opportunities, by creatively mixing digital technologies (Zoom, Netflix, Fortnite, WhatsApp) and local resources (chatting at the front door, meeting in the park, arranging a picnic) to stay in touch with friends and family. Perhaps the pandemic has led to more parents also embracing digital technologies, though some may be ever more resistant.

I'd anticipate, therefore, that when we later look back on this period with the advantage of hindsight, we'll see all the more clearly

> the pincer movement of parenting in the digital age, in which parents are, on the one hand, more burdened with responsibilities given the erosion of state support and an increasingly uncertain financial future and yet, on the other, charged with respecting and encouraging the agency of their child as they negotiate "the democratic family".

Looking back over this extraordinary year, I'm grateful to all those who invited me to talk about the book. For those who'd like to catch up on what we said about the book over the past year, here's some links.

Watch

- The US book launch *hosted by Sesame Workshop: Joan Ganz Cooney Center*
- Sonia and Alicia in Conversations with Common Sense

- Sonia's TED Talk, Parenting in the digital age
- A Conversation with Sonia Livingstone and John Palfrey, *Family Online Safety Institute*
- Distinguished Career Award winner talk, *British Psychological Society*
- Parenting for a Digital Future, *ConnectSafely*
- Parenting for a Digital Future, *Children's Media Association*
- Parenting for a Digital Future, *Public lecture, LSE*
- Parenting for a Digital future, *University of Hyderabad*
- Parenting for a Digital Future, *European Association of Viewers' Interests*
- Parenting for a Digital Future, *National Association of Media Literacy Educators*

Listen

- When it comes to screens, kids need a guide – not a disciplinarian. NPR Podcast
- Sonia talks about the book for UCL's Lifecourse Podcast
- Sonia talks about digital parenting during COVID-19
- Should screen time be limited? BBC Parentland
- Why you shouldn't worry about your kids' screen time use
- Parenting for a Digital Future. Interview by SafeToNet
- Parenting for a Digital Future. Podcast with the Cyber Safety Lady
- What kind of world will children face, and how can we prepare them? Parent Zone
- Parenting for A Digital Future. ITSP Magazine conversation with Sonia Livingstone
- Parenting for a Digital Future. Interview by the New Books Network

Read

- Author interview: Q and A with Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross
- How families respond to unprecedented digital transformation and why?
- Interview with Sonia in the Chronicle of Evidence-based Mentoring
- And lots of blog posts available at parenting.digital

Academic articles (open-access)

- Livingstone, S. and Blum-Ross, A. (2017) Researching children and childhood in the digital age. In James, A. and Christensen, P. (Eds), *Research with children* (pp.54-70), 3rd edition. London: Routledge.
- Blum-Ross, A. and Livingstone, S. (2017) "Sharenting," parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self. *Popular Communication,* 15(2): 110-125.
- Blum-Ross, A., and Livingstone, S. (2018) The trouble with 'screen time' rules. In Mascheroni, G., Ponte, C., and Jorge, A. (eds.) *Digital Parenting: The Challenges for Families in the Digital Age (pp.179-187).* Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Livingstone, S., and Blum-Ross, A. (2019) Parents' role in supporting, brokering or impeding their children's connected learning and media literacy. *Cultural Science Journal*, 11(1), pp.68–77. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/csci.124.
- Livingstone, S., and Blum-Ross, A. (2019) Imagining the future through the lens of the digital: parents' narratives of generational change. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A Networked Self: Birth, Life, Death*. London: Routledge (pp.50-68).
- Livingstone, S. (2021) Family Risk and Uncertainty in the Digital Age. In Ribeiro, N., et al. (Eds.) *Media and Uncertainty. 2nd Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication* (pp.17-24).

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