Smart phones and tablets in the early years: A waste of time or a valuable opportunity for accessing information and communicating?

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New digital media surrounds us. Everyday, we see young children using smart phones and tablets, whether it is at a café in a shopping centre, a medical centre, or travelling on public transport. Open any toy catalogue and you’ll see advertisements for tablets designed specifically for toddlers and children, with some even able to be attached to strollers. The prices of smart phones and tablets are dropping, and tablets can be purchased now for less than one hundred dollars in some chain stores. These mobile devices are competing for the consumer dollar alongside other more traditional toys and experiences, such as bikes and board games.

Little is known, however, about the influence of technology devices such as tablets (e.g. iPads) and smart phones on young children’s lives in home and school settings, and what it means for them throughout their schooling and beyond. Most research to date has focused on children aged six years and older, and much less (with a few exceptions) on preschool-aged children. The commonsense view has been that children need to be literate in reading and writing in order to engage with the technologies of text and image. Anyone, however, having watched a two-year old engage with an app on a smart phone or tablet knows that literacy attainment is not necessarily a barrier to successful engagement.

It is no surprise that recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) data show the extremely high uptake of Internet use in Australia by families and young children. Approximately 90 percent of Australian children aged 5-14 years in urban and rural settings access the Internet at home, and we can assume that younger brothers and sisters are also engaging with their older siblings. The most popular purpose was for educational activities. By the time children attend early childhood classrooms, many come with experiences and understandings of what games and activities can be done on smart phones and tablets. Parents and early childhood educators are making decisions everyday about what this rapid uptake of technology means for family life and in early childhood classrooms.
Among parents and teachers there is a diversity of perspectives related to young children’s use of digital technology and a continuum of beliefs about its value in the early years. On one hand, early childhood teachers are embracing the new media technologies in their personal lives and in their classrooms. Others, while embracing technologies for personal use at home, are more wary of the value of using technology in their classrooms. Some teachers feel uncomfortable with the pedagogy of introducing technology into their classrooms, and others are strongly opposed to technology in classrooms arguing that the traditional activities based on foundations of play are most important. These differing views were most evident at a recent early childhood education forum in which I was a member of a panel. Audience members, many of whom were early childhood educators, parents and grandparents, discussed their views of young children using technology – their concerns about possible dangers such as internet safety and social isolation, and also their passions for what they saw as valuable in digital technology.

With national agendas of accessible broadband to families across Australia and the strong endorsement of engaging with technology in national early childhood curriculum documents, parents and educators are immersed in a national context where mobile technologies are everywhere. For example, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (2009) highlights the importance of young children accessing and using digital technologies, and values technology as a significant avenue for promoting communication and for children learning about their worlds. Given this national emphasis, understanding how parents and teachers make decisions and manage this new digital environment with children is important for understanding children’s changing everyday lives.

As a QUT researcher, I am conducting an Australian Research Council research project *Investigating mobile technologies in young children’s everyday worlds* that seeks to understand how young children access and use online mobile technologies for learning and play in home, preschool and community contexts. This ethnographic study of young children’s everyday practices investigates how mobile technologies are part of the flow of everyday home and school life. As well as video recording young children’s practices using digital technology, I am asking parents, teachers and children about their views on the role of technology in young children’s lives. Understanding young children’s everyday practices provides empirical evidence to
inform policy development about online use in the early years and to support early childhood educators and families. Studying new forms of practices associated with technology use helps understand young children’s participation in social interaction (Hutchby, 2001).

Below, I present two short extracts from parent interviews (two mothers) about their kindy-aged children’s use of digital technology in their family lives. Both these families had a child in kindy and older children in the primary school settings. These extracts specifically discuss family rules of use.

**Parent 1:**
Mother: there are rules because if they wake up in the morning and go straight on to them, they won't get changed, they won't have breakfast, they will stay on their tablet. So I've told them they're not allowed to play on the tablet, it has to stay on the charger, they can go on it after school, after they've done their homework, after they have their afternoon snack and after they've had dinner. That's when they can go on.

They've got their own but fight over each other's. Can I play? I let you play on my one. So the rules is a bit shaky at the moment

**Parent 2:**
Mother: Typically, I try to get them to do it in a room where I'm floating in and out of but only this week it happened again. It was like, what's that noise? So it's really difficult because you can't be around them all the time and we're not adept enough to screen things out or whatever else, so they do hear it.

But yeah, I suppose they need to encounter it somehow and we just try to limit it and make them understand that was right but I don't know. [Aside] So yeah, it is a challenging.

Susan: Do you have rules around the use?

Mother: There's supposed to be no computers in the bedrooms but it's typical with laptops and iPods that they easily go walking. From my perspective, the silence is bliss until I realise why it's silent and hunt after them.

In these two brief extracts above, both mothers reported that the children were drawn and motivated to use the mobile devices. The children in the home contexts were
engaging intensively with the tablets and smart phones. The mothers reported managing the children’s use of technology against a backdrop of everyday family life where the mothers constantly monitored what the children were doing, when they were using the devices and where the activities were taking place.

Following well-publicised guidelines about rules of use, such as keeping the computer in a public area of the home for all members of the family to use and see, seems relatively straightforward. The reality, however, is that following this guideline is not as clear cut as one might think, particularly when the devices are becoming increasingly smaller and more mobile. In these interviews, both parents addressed managing the practical aspects, such as dealing with a flat battery, and they emphasized the social nature and social interactions occurring when children were using these devices.

What became evident in the discussions with the mothers was the role of social interaction around the use of these technologies: about when to use them, who used them, how the children and adults negotiated the conditions of use, and how the children interacted with their siblings. How family members engaged with technology as part of the flow of everyday life was shown in these interviews: how does engagement with the devices co-occur with other more well-known activities of getting ready to go to school, having breakfast and doing homework? How are practices such as sharing and using each other’s devices negotiated, and under what conditions of family life?

The bigger question is not just about the technology that is being used, but rather how mobile technologies provide new interactional opportunities for family members to communicate with each other and find solutions to living together in family life. The ways that these matters are resolved by parents and children, and what they see as important issues and matters for attention, are constant matters of negotiation among family members. While the extracts discussed here are from family contexts, these bigger questions about how these devices afford particular types of communication practices are as relevant in early childhood classrooms where teachers also make decisions about how technology is part of the flow of everyday classroom life.
Communication is central to successful social interaction, and an integral aspect of participating in everyday social life of the home and classroom. Understanding how young children engage with digital technologies provide opportunities for understanding, in more graduated and distinctive ways, the impact of such technology. Only time and increased understandings of everyday practices will tell the real values and scope of using digital media.

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References

