

Parents' Attitudes and Decision-Making Around Screen Time

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Introduction

Screen time is one of those hot topics that spark discussions within families, in the media, and the research community studying children's engagement with flickering screens, game consoles, and the seemingly boundless sphere of the World Wide Web. Oftentimes, children's engagement with screens is contrasted with adults' stories of their own childhood. *Back in the good old days*, it seems, children spent much of their free time roaming the neighbourhood's fields with playmates, and curfew was signalled by the weaning daylight.

While television is not exactly a recent invention, the level of ownership of digital devices and access to the internet has increased substantially over a relatively short period of time (Central Statistics Office, 2016; Weckler, 2015). Within the same family, it is possible to have someone who remembers watching black and white television, someone who remembers carrying around a chunky mobile phone and, finally, someone for whom *to google* was never anything but a perfectly acceptable verb.





There's a National Digital Strategy that aims "to help Ireland to reap the full rewards of a digitally enabled society" (DCCA, 2018, para. 1), and tablets are part of everyday lessons in many schools. Initiatives, like encouraging primary school children to learn how to write code, underline the message that being able to interact with digital technology is not just desired but essential to aid the youth of Ireland in their endeavour to become active and engaged global citizens (DES, 2018).

In contrast, discussions about technology at home are often described with very different terms. A quick search on the internet finds many articles with headlines such as "The harmful effects of too much screen time for kids" (Morin, 2018), "How too much screen time affects kids' bodies and brains" (Walton, 2018), and "Ed Power: How I banned screen time for my kids when I realised they were addicted" (Power, 2017).

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The mixed messages regarding the status of digital technology offer little to resolve arguments about screen time (all before we consider the implication of children sharing their personal data online). Parents' opinions matter when it comes to children's screen time engagement. Parental guidance and controls play a role in children's activities and screen time behaviour (Jago, Edwards, Urbanski, & Sebire, 2013; Norton, Froelicher, Waters, & Carrieri-Kohlman, 2003) but parents often struggle to set screen time limits, even if they think that there is value in doing so (Jordan, Hersey, McDivitt, & Heitzler, 2006). When it comes to putting screen time restrictions in place, not only do parents' beliefs and attitudes matter, but also what they perceive to be *the norm* among their friends and community (Bleakley, Piotrowski, Hennessy, & Jordan, 2013; Hamilton, Hatzis, Kavanagh, & White, 2015). A study of parental beliefs and attitudes towards the benefits of media use by preschool children found that, if parents regard screen time (television, computer, smartphones, and tablets) as positive contributors to their child's physical, cognitive, and emotional development, they are more likely to promote children's use of digital technology (Cingel & Krmar, 2013). Crucially, parents cannot merely be split into two groups and categorised as either proponents

or opponents of screen time. Parents may feel that technology is important for academic achievements and that it enhances children's career prospects (Ortiz, Green, & Lim, 2011). But they could simultaneously be concerned that excessive use of digital technology may have negative effects (Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2013).

The Study

As part of a more comprehensive study investigating children's engagement with screen time, I interviewed 12 parents about their children's pastime activities, focusing on screen time in particular. The aim was to explore how parents navigate their children's engagement with digital technology, to determine what rules apply to time spent with screens, and to identify what influences parental decision-making. Two fathers and ten mothers of children in primary school (aged between 7 and 12) took part in the study. Of the children discussed during the interviews, five were girls, 13 were boys. The sample was fairly homogenous in regard to education level (degree or higher), age (between 40 and 50 years of age), and family circumstances. All interviewees lived together with their respective (other sex) partners. Their children were all born in Ireland. About a third of the participants lived in a town, another third lived in a village, and the final third lived in the countryside.

Content

Parents were asked about the types of screen time their children engaged with. All children watched TV, although most parents said they do not have a regular TV. The children either watched DVDs, selected shows and movies from a movie box, or a subscription service. The majority also had a game console, and owned, or had access to, a tablet. Only a minority of children had mobile phones, but with restricted access to the internet. Children engaged with a broad variety of content, ranging from watching movies, YouTube videos, and cartoons, to playing games such as Minecraft and Roblox, football, racing, or app games. Children used the internet to find information about topics they were interested in, often together with a parent. Some children used apps that allowed the exchange of pictures and videos with other users.

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Rules

Rules around screen time varied significantly across families. In about a third of families, there were little restrictions around screen time and no fixed rules around the amount of time children were allowed to spend with screens. However, parents might ask children to stop if they felt they have been on a device for too long. Many families set a fixed daily screen time limit of one to two hours, which children could divide across different media. In some families, there was a significant level of restriction. Television was restricted to the weekends, and children either did not access the internet at all, or only together with their parents. Some children were allowed to play for an hour with their game console during the week. Of course, rules were not set in stone; for instance, parents mentioned that when the weather is particularly bad, or if their child is sick, they are allowed to exceed their allocated screen time limits. Rules were also adapted or adjusted, and particularly when something did not work out. Marie explains:

They did [take the tablets to the bedroom] at first, but we've pulled all that. They have to be seen. So they're downstairs and they can put earphones on, but they need to be able to be seen.

Negative aspects of screen time

Parents spoke at lengths about the concerns they have about the impact screen time might have on their children. Parents felt that screen time was addictive, passive, bad for concentration, that “it fries your brain,” and that it puts children in a bad mood. Jordan comments:

Yes, they're seduced by it: by the lights of [the screens], that's the way I see it. The lights and the movement, it attracts you to it and [...] that will keep them there for hours...

Many parents were also worried that their children spent too much time with screens, and that they might lose out on other activities that would be better for them; for example, spending time with family, playing outside, exercising, or reading books.

Most parents were also concerned about content that was not age appropriate, particularly regarding violence and sexual content. Exposure to potentially negative messages was often linked to advertisements, either on websites or in mobile phone apps. Laura said:

[My nine-year-old daughter] loves watching infomercials and there are always people in their bikinis, working on their abs and [then there is] a picture of them when they were fat [...]. As a woman I have to be very careful for her growing up, now she is starting to look at her body [...], she is starting to hear what kids

say to her, criticising themselves, or her, or other adults criticising their own bodies. So, I have to be very careful, and I tell her this is bad.

Parents' strategies

Parents used a range of strategies to shield their children from potentially negative impacts. These varied according to the level of access their children had to digital devices and to the internet in particular. Strategies included checking children's devices to see what they had downloaded or “looked up” on the internet. A number of parents also mentioned parental controls, although their effectiveness was questioned. Parents spoke about engaging their children in conversation about content they might encounter online. Anna explained:

Well, we just say to them, 'You know you could click [on something] that [...] could link [to something else]. Next thing, you're seeing these horrible images that you can hardly get away from your head and really you're better off not seeing, that it can be very traumatic and can disturb you' and those sort of things.

Many parents stressed the importance of an open dialogue policy. This was particularly evident in households with fewer or no screen time restrictions. Kathryn emphasised the need to be available to talk and to provide a perspective on inappropriate content that children might see but not fully understand:

[Y]ou can't control everything that is going to go in. It is more about talking to them so that they know if they find something to be able to talk to you about, it doesn't mean that they are in trouble and secondly that they understand that these things aren't the whole story.

Decision-making

Parents' decision-making emerged as a balancing process. When asked what they base their decisions on, most parents said that ultimately, they trust their “gut feeling” or “instinct”. This is not to say that they did not seek advice. Parents mentioned friends, family, the internet, the child's school, books, and parenting talks as sources of advice. The key thing was the integration of their own beliefs and attitudes with the advice others gave. Kathryn described the process:

I would just Google and get a few different forums and see what different things have been done, and sort of say 'Right, no, I don't agree with that' or 'Yeah, that sounds okay, I could do that' or 'No, that's a bit too much' and I'd just try [to find] a happy medium. [I would also talk to my] girlfriends to find out where they are at with



their children, and not necessarily follow any of them, but take a pinch of salt from what they're doing, and just sort of say 'Right, well d'you know, I'm doing the right thing here'.

One of the major influences for parents was their children's peers. Many parents described arguments they had with their children over wanting more devices or more access to screen time. Paul, a father of a nine-year-old girl, explained:

[Her cousin has] an iPhone 8, so she's miles ahead of them [...], she has her own laptop now, she has her own iPad, [...] like, what do you get her next, an Apple watch? [...] And then the argument always is, 'well why can't I have a phone because such and such [...] has one'. And I always say, well unfortunately I'm not their father so I can't determine what they do or don't do. And unfortunately, whatever their father's name is, is not your father. And you're not getting one [...].

YouTube and advertisements

Children engaged with a wide variety of screen time. A recent study highlighted the move from more traditional media, like TV, to more interactive and user-generated content; a third of Irish primary school pupils list YouTube as their favourite app (Everri & Park, 2018). The same study also found that Irish children start accessing the internet at age six or seven. YouTube videos do not offer age-appropriate labelling information for parents. Many popular YouTube channels are aimed at teens and tweens (Knorr, 2017), but they are often watched by younger children. Aside from the content, children are exposed to advertisements, which are not regulated in the same way as TV advertisements (UNICEF, 2018). Many parents mentioned advertisements that were inappropriate for their children, yet unavoidable, even with parental controls. Online advertisements operate in complex and often non-transparent ways, and advertisement technology companies show little interest in entering discussions about responsible marketing and the responsible use of personal data. Of course, the issue of children's personal data online has been further complicated by the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation. Websites and apps typically have a minimum age of 13, or even 16, so children must choose between not using the service or lying about their age. The discrepancy between regulation and reality introduces a range of moving parts that do not contribute to making the internet a safer space for children.

Screen time = sugar?

All parents expressed concerns about potentially negative impacts of screen time. They engaged in a balancing act of creating, maintaining, and adjusting rules amidst influences from the communities they live in, their children's peers, and what parents perceived to be the norm. The key here is moderation, which in itself does not indicate anything, but is dependent on the parameters set within each family. A useful comparison might be to consider sugar, since it shares the appeal and popularity with screen time. In its simplest form, the general premise is that sugar is bad. Sugar consumption is too high, especially among children, which results in an increased risk for several health issues (e.g., Azaïs-Braesco, Sluik, Maillot, Kok, & Moreno, 2017), but this does not mean that all children who eat sugary foods have health issues. Most children like sugar, and tend to want to consume more than they are allowed. Habits vary across families; in some families, giving young children foods and drinks with added sugars is delayed until they are older and, even when introduced, the intake is strictly regulated. In other families, sugar is introduced early and children have relatively free access to sugary foods and drinks. Does that mean children who do not eat sugary foods early are more healthy? Does it mean that children who are used to sugary foods are better able to self-regulate? It certainly means that we are all different, and moderation is not a one-size-fits-all concept. There is a lot of diversity across families regarding their attitudes and approaches to screen time, about the rules within households, and with regard to the level of access children have to the internet. This means that if the aim is to support parents in their decision-making, this needs to be taken into account. No one-size-fits all approach will work to support children and their parents. Some families might be concerned about young children co-watching movies with their older siblings that are not age-appropriate while others are navigating their children's use of picture- and video-sharing apps.

It is important to acknowledge that this study cannot be viewed as documenting screen time habits of Irish families in general. However, the findings highlight a few important points regarding parents' decision-making that are of value moving forward. The data also suggest that there is a level of uncertainty around screen time, and many different approaches to balance concerns about screen time.

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