

Parenting for a digital future: Beyond “screen time” rules

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When parents look back to their childhood and compare it with their children’s, the absence then and presence now of multiple digital media in the home marks a glaring difference. In trying to understand the significance of this difference, parents are torn between competing visions – fears of personal risk and addiction on the one hand, and of being left behind in the competition for future digital jobs on the other. No wonder that digital media catalyse myriad uncertainties about parenting. To help parents navigate these twin challenges, parenting advice is proliferating. But not only does much of it invoke moral panics but also much of it underestimates today’s parents’ growing expertise with digital media, offering bland advice (limit screen time, install filters, talk to your children) but leaving parents feeling judged yet unsupported.

Building on three years of research with parents, children and educators, my current research project explores the lives of families who are variously enjoying the pleasures or wrestling with the challenges of digital media. Focusing on families with young children, I will argue that, while often engrossing and demanding in the present, parenting is inherently future-oriented: each act of parenting has a double meaning – as an intervention in the present and an effort to bring about a particular future. But bringing up a child poses parents with an almost impossible feat of imagination – for who can anticipate the world twenty years hence? Can parents take action in the present to optimise a largely-unknowable future?

Complicating parents’ task to optimise their children’s future is the paradox that, especially in wealthy Western countries, increasing responsibility is being devolved to parents (often in the guise of “choice”) yet at the same time the family is being reconfigured to devolve more rights from the parent to the child. Through interviews and observations with parents of young families, including asking parents to recall their own childhoods and anticipate their children’s adulthood, I will argue that the digital has become a site in which personal, public and political struggles over parenting are staged. These struggles are engaged in both by parents and by society as it speaks for and about parents, in responding to wider social changes.