PARENTING FOR A DIGITAL FUTURE

How are families responding to unprecedented digital transformation and why? Research authors **SONIA LIVINGSTONE** and **ALICIA BLUM-ROSS** spoke to *InterMedia* about the hopes, fears and needs of widely diverse parents

Parenting for a Digital Future, by Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, is based on in-depth studies of how families approach and self regulate the highly mediated world they inhabit.

The book explores the choices being made by parents around children's use of digital technology at a time when advice and guidance is either absent or out of step with the nuanced realities of digital life today, and as the connected world of tomorrow only begins to take shape.

Rather than present a "how to" guide, the authors seek to acknowledge the balancing act parents are engaged in, understand how values and attitudes shape children's digital experiences and provide realistic insight into the pragmatic reassurance and support parents and children actually need.

The book invites parents, policymakers and professionals across health, education, media, telecommunications and technology to become the village it takes to raise a child in the 21st century.

SONIA LIVINGSTONE AND ALICIA BLUM-ROSS:
Parents are always thinking: what will I do now, how would it help my child, in ten years, in twenty years, to become who they're going to become? Nobody knows the answer to that question; it's just a kind of existential unknown that parents have to face. But this generation is living through faster change, a lot of pressures, a lot of tensions, many unknowns about employment, about technology, about the future of family life and how we're all going to live together and – during the COVID-19 pandemic – whether we're ever going to leave our houses. The unknowns pile up and parents are worried about many of these things.

When they look at their kid holding their smartphone, there is nothing that seems to be more symbolic of the change from their own childhood to the present day as the presence of digital technology. Yet there are many other changes that affect family life; things like living further away from their own families of origin and not having extended networks of support, or a loss of social support in terms of government aid. A lot of the broader social shifts impacting families are invisible to them, often because they are slow, gradual changes over time.

Parenting is taking place between a remembered past and an imagined future. Parents look back at the time when using media and technology was a choice. More and more, digital is becoming a default; the default way to learn, engage with family and spend time, and parents are still trying to find their own way through this.

There's a sort of science fiction rhetoric around technology as being very non-human but one thing we were struck by, when looking at the everyday life of families, is how much digital media are incorporated in very human and everyday interactions. Families are leveraging these technologies as ways of connecting and being together in very deeply human and embodied ways. It's the parent who checks their emails in bed and goes into work a bit later, or it's the kid who won't eat breakfast unless they're watching cartoons with the tablet on the table or the child with ADHD who won't be cuddled unless the family is watching TV together.

Generally, parents are either trying to embrace the digital world, resist the digital world, or find some kind of a balance, which is most parents.

Resisting or embracing is a very strategic

response that requires a kind of identity commitment or philosophy on the part of the family, because it's sort of bucking the trend.

The parents who are more likely to embrace the digital world feel they have a way into the future because they know something about technology – as lots of parents do; they're not the digital immigrants of old. They see digital as the ideal way of taking their child forward and perhaps overcoming problems that the child is facing at present or might do at some time in the future. Some have a particular reason to invest in and use digital technology, for example assistive technology for children with disability.

Of the parents that try to resist, not all are successful. Some have a proactive narrative about other things they want to do with their time, like going for walks or bike rides. Some were families who'd had some kind of bad experience and felt they needed to pull back or detox, or had a sense their child could become addicted to technology.

The parents who are more likely to balance are not so much comfortably trying to find a half-way house between embrace and resist, but constantly putting effort into finding a balance. It is a balance between wanting something positive about the future world but also fearing that future. They worry about whether they are striking the right balance or that they are pushed by circumstance.

There were also a lot of families for whom a consistent approach to technology was just not top of mind or achievable. We talked to many families who were struggling for many reasons that were nothing to do with technology, but about family difficulties or demands like having a child with special needs or dealing with poverty.

One thing we were really struck by in our research is how few sources of advice parents feel that they have when it comes to digital dilemmas. Parents will ask their own parents for advice on general parenting with relative frequency but not when it comes to digital dilemmas. The assumption is that grandparents won't know anything about which games to download or when a child should have a smartphone, or what to share on social media or whether to enrol in coding class. Parents also find other parents to be judgmental or difficult to have honest conversations with.

A lot of the organisations that do get to parents, like health services or schools, don't know enough about the technology. There's a real communication gap between the professionals who might support parents and the parents themselves. Parents don't have the sources of advice and support that they need either in their community or from the state or others, and there's a real kind of vacuum around parents being able to express what they would like.

SONIA LIVINGSTONE & ALICIA BLUM-ROSS

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How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives

Parents just feel stymied; they don't know that they're doing the right thing, and no one is really supporting them with this. Parents are left with very little source of calibration or support and mostly end up searching for answers on the internet.

Screen time advice is a blunt instrument that has become more of a problem or source of anxiety for parents than any kind of solution. The health framing is often very focussed on time spent rather than what that time is spent doing. Is it spent dancing or connecting with people, or is it more sedentary and passive? Regulators could offer more practical and thoughtful guidance on what's good about different kinds of apps, sites and services, and where the problems are. The focus needs to be: what is the content, who are you connecting with, what are the child's needs?

One thing that is really difficult to reconcile from a regulator or a platform perspective, is that families are diverse and their needs and interests are varied. The normative two parent, privileged, able-bodied family does not reflect reality. Parents and children should be consulted in the making of regulation, campaigns, messages and tools. There should genuinely be more co-creation and co-design. Child rights advocates have been calling for this for a long time, but it just doesn't happen. There needs to be more joined up thinking and development of professionals who support parents. The advice really needs to reflect the messy and lived reality of family life.

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