



EVENT NOTE

Workshop Families and 'screen time': challenges of media self-regulation 10 May 2016

The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants included a range of expertise from academia, civil society and the private sector, and included researchers, policy-makers, industry and parenting organisations. This note was jointly prepared by the [LSE Media Policy Project](#) and [Parenting for a Digital Future](#) as a record of points raised in the discussion. It is not a verbatim summary nor is it a statement of a consensus position.

General

The aim of the workshop was to discuss emerging research and current policy developments relating to digital media use and technology management in UK families with children aged 0-17 years. Speakers presented new research (including from the LSE project [Parenting for a Digital Future](#)) that explores parents' evolving motivations for managing children's media use. The workshop analysed the current messages given to parents about 'screen time,' whether those recommendations are up-to-date and/or are evidence-based, and how parents are accessing this advice. It also considered the absence of a UK policy-level resource (akin to guidelines offered in the United States by the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#)) which would provide guidance and evidence to parents regarding 'screen time', and explored what future guidance might look like and how it might reach parents.

The workshop engaged with the following key questions:

- How do parents evaluate the resources available to them and does the available guidance reflect the realities of parenting? Does it alleviate their concerns and provide practical support?
- Should and could guidance be developed that is more nuanced in terms of balancing the opportunities and risks presented by digital media, and in terms of addressing the different needs of children depending on their age, gender, interests and abilities?
- What are the roles for regulators, policy-makers, family and child-focused professionals (i.e. professionals working in health care, social work, education, youth work and so on) to ease the burden on parents?

‘Screen time’: current messages given to parents and their evidence-base

There is currently no UK-specific advice on screen time equivalent to the advice published by the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP), which recommends no screen time for children under the age of two and a maximum of two hours per day for children older than two. These rules are known as the ‘2x2’ rules, and are currently under review. The AAP’s 2x2 recommendations tend to be used as the international standard for discussions around regulating digital screen time, although there was considerable discussion at the workshop about whether or not these guidelines are evidence-based or are applicable to the current realities of parenting. As the media environment becomes more complex, parents hear recommendations from a variety of sources, but are not in a position to be able to reconcile every piece of advice to make an informed assessment. There was overwhelming support for the need to review what parents are being told. Three related challenges were identified in this regard:

- The majority of existing advice addressed to parents about how to manage children’s media use focuses on risks rather than opportunities: digital parenting means restricting or policing media use, rather than highlighting the positive role technology can play in order to encourage and teach children, and to share opportunities with them.
- Parents are therefore told that ‘good’ parenting means ‘media-free’ parenting. Many parents, especially middle class parents, feel as if they have failed when they allow their children to use screens.
- There is a lack of knowledge about available resources that inform and support parents in managing their children’s media use and that explain how to access these resources.

There was general agreement that effectively reaching parents poses a challenge. While some participants felt that parents would welcome further accessible, realistic information and recommendations, other participants suggested that parents do not like to be told what to think or do. There was further disagreement about whether advice to parents should reflect simple, easy-to-remember messages (like the aforementioned 2x2 guidelines), or rather should take the form of more contextual advice that could be adapted to parents’ and children’s individual circumstances.

Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone’s [policy brief](#) provides a review of the current advice for parents. It demonstrates that recommendations for parents about children’s digital media use often lack a sound and consistent evidence base and tend to focus on the risk of harm that digital media is perceived to pose, rather than on potential opportunities that it offers children. It was suggested that existing guidance and recommendations given to parents show a disconnect between so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ media, thus suggesting a difference - unsupported by evidence - in parents’ attitudes about the value of digital versus non-digital activities. For example, many parents are encouraged (and appear willing) to spend money on books or board games, but are unwilling to invest in high quality apps for digital devices. So-called ‘educational apps’ were seen as especially problematic, as the term ‘educational’ in this context is often used by commercial providers as a marketing tool, with little reference to either the necessary evidence or evaluations that would support claims of an educational benefit. The result is that parents often do not know how to judge whether these apps really are beneficial to their children or not.

‘Screen time’ is not an appropriate indicator of media use

Participants agreed that, despite being commonly used, the term ‘screen time’ is deeply problematic for a variety of reasons. ‘Screen time’ is too simplistic a term, as the activities and practices that fall under its umbrella are too diverse. For example, ‘screen time’ might mean that children play video games or watch television, that they use internet-enabled devices to complete and submit homework and school assignments, that they use video calling services like Skype to stay in touch with family living elsewhere, or that they interact with the screen of a supermarket self-service check-out machine. The discussion explored whether parents could instead be advised to consider screen *context* (what, where and with what effects digital media are accessed by children), *content* (what is being watched or used), and *connections* (how digital media support or undermine relationships) rather than simply the quantity of screen *time* itself.

It was suggested that parents tend to pathologise their child’s behaviour if they do not understand his or her engagement with digital media (for example, their use of gaming or social media), so that what may appear to be ‘excessive’ screen use may not in fact have negative outcomes for that child or young adult if assessed in the broader context of whether he or she is healthy, engaged with school and hobbies, and can relate to others both via and away from digital media. There is a need to deconstruct the existing perception that people have about ‘screen time’, in order to (a) help parents better understand the value of different content and platforms, and (b) build intra-family relationships that facilitate such understanding.

Some participants proposed that in any case, the distinction between the online and the offline environments is no longer meaningful or useful. As these worlds may no longer be clearly distinguishable in children’s lives, the very concept of ‘screen time’ has become obsolete. While not all workshop participants fully concurred with this view, there was nonetheless agreement that what today’s children do online is, to a large part, akin to activities that used to happen offline: for example, communicating with friends and building relationships. While in principle these sorts of activities remain the same, the conditions under which they happen have changed dramatically since the advent of digital technologies. This new environment needs to be acknowledged.

Recognising diversity: families, parents and children

Participants reached the conclusion that much of the advice for parents establishes “white middle class” families as the default norm, since the illustrations of families in many online resources targeted at parents appear to show this demographic. In this way, the existing advice does not acknowledge parents’ and children’s diversity, be it related to socio-economic, ethnic, religious, gender, age or special needs factors.

Family context and media use are linked

Participants agreed that there is a need to recognise that families are diverse. In particular, the role of socio-economic status was highlighted. For example, research (including that undertaken as part of the *Parenting for a Digital Future* project) has shown that low income families often invest heavily, and sometimes disproportionately, in digital technologies at home because they are hoping for positive socio-economic outcomes for their children in the long-term. In these families, there is often a contrast between parents’ aspirations related to digital technologies and reality. For example, parents may spend money on devices, including computers, but often

these are purchased cheaply and suffer technical malfunctions, or parents may lack the resources to troubleshoot if things go wrong.

Today's parents have more digital media skills

Participants discussed whether today's parents possess more digital skills than in previous generations. It was suggested that there is a growing level of digital expertise amongst parents that is not necessarily reflected in the advice available to them. Within the family unit, parents can take on different roles when it comes to digital media beyond simply policing children's screen time. Inspired by recent [research from Stanford University](#), participants discussed how parents might instead be presented with diverse models of how to engage with digital media – for example, by acting as teachers, collaborators, learning brokers, resource providers, non-technical consultants and employers – and as learners themselves. Further questions around parental development were highlighted, such as recognising the unique (and different) circumstances of both first-time parents and experienced parents.

As children grow up, parents' relationships with them change. Generally speaking, a child's age is a prime determinant both of parent-child relationships and of a child's media use (for example, children explore the digital environment more independently as they turn into teenagers). Participants agreed that in recognition of parents' knowledge of digital media, advice and resources for parents need to be broadened out so that instead of simply focusing on risk and safety issues, such information also highlights how families can enjoy digital media together.

Children have different abilities, needs and interests

Participants acknowledged that parents have different concerns about digital media according to children's general developmental stages. For example:

- During early childhood, parents may be happy to let their child play with a digital device for a short time, but may wonder about developmental questions such as whether media use is damaging their child's brain.
- During middle childhood, parents may not want their children to be outsiders and fall behind either educationally or socially, but may also worry about media use having a negative effect on family life.
- During adolescence, parents may want to keep an eye on what their child is doing online and understand how to keep them safe.

There are associated questions about the boundaries of age-appropriate content. There was disagreement around the use of age brackets in terms of categorising content aimed at the under 18s and what it can achieve. Some participants were unsure about whether or not age brackets could ever provide an accurate reflection of children's developmental stages, given the huge variation in individual circumstances. Compared to older forms of media, the internet provides different kinds of media access, such as offering multiple entry points and so on. This means that applying age ratings and content classification consistently across traditional broadcast and online contents is challenging, both within individual countries and across Europe as a whole.

Balancing risks and opportunities

Throughout the discussion, the need to find a balance between risks and opportunities was a recurring theme. It was highlighted that different parenting styles received much attention in research from the [1960s and 70s](#), but that these findings have yet to be fully explored in the modern context where parenting needs to take the digital environment into account. As a result, parents may be encouraged to favour non-digital activities for their children on the basis that they fear risk, and because of the lack of support on how to both use and teach their children about the opportunities offered by digital technologies.

There was further agreement among workshop participants about the need to differentiate between risk and harm. Potentially risky content does not always have a harmful outcome, and some exposure to risk is necessary to build children and young people's resilience. Participants referred to the range of diversity and vulnerability that can be identified within different families, which suggests that what is considered "harmful" may vary according to families' different social and cultural contexts.

Stakeholder involvement

The UK press' representation of the notion of children's screen time was described by some participants as too focused on risk. There is little reporting in the mainstream media about types of media and technology that encourage and facilitate constructive engagement by children and young people. Parents clearly have a responsibility for managing their children's digital engagement, but the responsibility is shared with others (for example policy-makers) as, like adults, children face challenges related to privacy and data protection that need to be addressed beyond the immediacy of the parental sphere. Workshop discussants provided the following suggestions for broader stakeholder involvement:

- Communication between parents and children is key. Parents may not need help to set more rules or restrictions, but rather require support in recognising when their child is *not* doing well with digital media.
- The responsibility for children does not rest with parents alone, but must be complemented by regulation, government, and efforts from within the media and technology industries.
- Policy-makers should consider a multi-stakeholder approach to include relevant points of contact for families with children (e.g. carers, teachers, health professionals, parenting organisations, etc.). These professionals should receive proper training and should be involved in designing the infrastructure that provides parents with access to information, advice and support.
- School curricula in the UK are in need of adjustment to more accurately reflect the reality of children's media use. For example, secondary schools are teaching young adults about the digital world, but primary schools do not cover the subject. This is despite the fact that a large majority of 4 year olds in the UK are already using tablets.
- There is an immediate need to update and link existing advice and resources for parents to the appropriate evidence from scientific research.
- Parenting organisations can encourage parents to share more of their 'happy' moments with media and be confident about it, rather than focussing on risk and concerns.

The challenge of industry self-regulation

The workshop concluded with a debate about the role of industry in regulation, including the possibility of self-regulation. Some participants highlighted how industry has shown a willingness towards self-regulation in the UK. Referred to as a “coalition of the willing”, these industry members are perceived as having made an effort to identify and contribute to resolving current and future issues associated with children’s digital media engagement.

Other participants objected to this suggestion, arguing that the commercial model of the internet is built on the premise that the more time an individual (including children) spend on a site and/or with particular content, the higher the financial return for a provider. It is thus not in the industry’s best interest to self-regulate and to put constraints on children’s media engagement, and there are limited incentives for them to do so. The commercial exploitation and monetisation of minors, especially in the games and apps industry (for example, in the way that in-app purchasing often requires payment to continue playing a game or to progress from one level to another), represents a significant ethical issue that needs to be discussed.

Despite these disagreements, participants agreed that a mixed regulatory regime is to be preferred, balancing co-regulation, industry self-regulation and parental regulation or mediation in the home.