Learning from parents who are confident about raising digital kids

Parents are full of questions about the digital future: What's good or bad technology? What helps or hinders their child and when? These are not easy questions to answer, and our society is struggling with them. Following her TED Talk and Good Thinking podcast, Professor Sonia Livingstone discusses the evolution of parental approaches to technology and her forthcoming book with Dr Alicia Blum-Ross.

When I became a social psychologist in the 1980s, I started interviewing families about what's new: then it was where to put the home PC and whether children should have a television in their bedroom. Parents were worried about violence and advertising, and they weren't sure what the benefits would be. But generally, they were optimistic.

Fast-forward 30 years and the world has changed: digital technologies are everywhere. Parents' hopes and fears about them are almost overwhelming – and so they're eager to discuss everything from **screen time** to gaming, pornography to coding.

Why are we all so focused on **the digital**? Many things have **added to our anxieties** over the past few decades – uncertain work, new kinds of families, rising inequality, intense educational pressures on our children, and more. But when we look back to our childhood and then at our children's, digital technology symbolises the difference between then and now. All these devices **in our homes** – we love to talk about them, but we feel we should be able to control them.
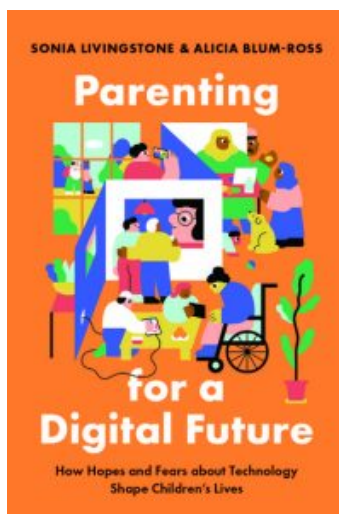
In our **Parenting for a Digital Future** project, we have been **interviewing London families** from many walks of life. We visited them at home, or in a café or while they waited for their child to finish coding club. We asked them to reflect on their parenting, looking back how they were brought up, looking forward to their child's future.

Parents told us lots of different stories. Some were finding life hard, so we had some tears. Many were concerned about the risks, which are indeed serious, as I have **addressed before**. But there was also something to be learned from the parents who were pretty positive about their families' digital lives.

First: parents who seemed relatively calm and confident about the digital have found a way to be clear about their own values and to live close to them – including with digital technology, so that the technology isn't something weird or contradictory in their lives.

- Daisy and Jacob live on a low income and have an arty background; they really value creativity. Their small flat is crowded with papier-mâché projects, crafting and photography materials, and Daisy curates computer games for her children which reflect her alternative aesthetic – including games resembling Escher's art.
- Leila is a single parent, also on a low income, and with health problems. Like many migrants, she really values education. Her family helped her buy a computer, and now her daughters do their homework on it, and even teach her about the digital world.
- Ryan and Amy are committed to building their son's confidence since he has moderate to severe autism. When, at 13, he became passionate about digital design, they could draw on their professional media expertise to support his creative learning.
- Dani values the digital for itself – she's excited about the digital future, and she believes that geeks will inherit the earth. So she encourages 12-year-old Josh to learn programming, saying that coding is the new Latin.

Second: parents who seemed relatively calm and confident about the digital share the decision-making within the family, **negotiating instead of imposing,** respecting their children's interests and finding pleasurable ways to share digital activities.

- Dani loves it when Josh invites his friends round and they all play Minecraft together. She sets them coding challenges, and she enjoys their collaborative problem-solving.
- Amy and Ryan take their lead from Kyle, taking digital pictures together for his designs. They see a special affinity between his educational needs and the digital world.
- Daisy and Jacob accept their sons want to play standard commercial games with friends. But by sharing some alternative games with them, they also get to share their values.
- Leila relies on 10-year-old Nareen to fix the computer when it goes wrong. Then as a family, they share in her home culture by using it to play music from Ethiopia.

I'm not saying that a **digital future** is the only or best way forward for children. I'm saying that parents may have their own reasons for hoping it might be. I'm also not saying that parents can solve all of their problems by discussing with their children how to apply their values to their digital activities. But I believe it will help, because then we're not asking parents to fight against the inevitable, since the digital is not going away. And they needn't try to do – or be – the same as everyone else; instead, they can play to their strengths.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Notes

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