



## Role of parents in the use of technology in middle childhood

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### Abstract

The present study is an attempt to explore the parents' views and concerns regarding the role of digital technology in the lives of children aged 6 to 11 years. All the children went to private schools near their homes. The sample consisted of 22 participants (19 mothers and three fathers) belonging to middle SES and residing in of North-West Delhi. The data were gathered during home visits through interview of parents and observation of family interactions. The findings revealed that mothers monitored children's usage of technology and online activities and also worried about health and safety issues while fathers' role seemed to be negligible. The study points to a need for parents to play a stronger role in shaping children's digital use protecting them from digitisation's negative influences. It is also important to strengthen focus on reading and other means of active learning so as to encourage imagination, creativity and critical thinking.

**Keywords:** digital, technology, influence, health, parent's role

### Introduction: Background

We live in a world where technology is all around us. Technology has helped in improving human chances for survival, comfort as well as luxury and hence the quality of life. In today's ever-changing world our need for information, we can find out anything with just a click on any device. We are surrounded by technology all the time whether at home, at school, at workplace and even in public spaces. Children nowadays use digital technology for homework, leisure activity, staying connected with friends and it is a long list. Therefore, their interest in the use of devices has grown over the years.

To what extent children will use the devices depends on their environment and access. Strasburger, Wilson & Jordon (2014) <sup>[8]</sup> said "children who spend their days in environments filled with television sets, computers and video games have greater opportunity to use media." (p.570). A study was conducted by Saelens (2002) to explore home environment factors around television access and overall television viewing by children between the ages of 6 to 12 years. It was found that the more the number of televisions at home, a higher frequency of children eating meals in front of the television. Therefore, there was a direct link between television access and television viewing. (Strasburger, Wilson & Jordon, 2014) <sup>[8]</sup>.

In a survey conducted in 2018, in which it was found that over 30% of children in India spend approximately six hours staring at a screen. The survey also found that 57% of Indian parents were worried about the impact of screen on their child's eyesight. (Dutt & Ghosh, 2018) <sup>[3]</sup>. If parents use the screens in order to share experiences, it can be used as a tool for learning as it becomes interesting for the child to learn if he/she sees it themselves.

### The Role of Parents

Parents need to be very cautious in their own usage of technology and the amount of screen time they use. "Parents

may play a significant role in influencing their child's perception and the use of media since the majority of a child's media consumption occurs in his or her home" (p. 798, Hogan, 2012 as cited in Collier *et al.*, 2016) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Digital media has both risks and opportunities. It's important for children to use technology so that they are not left behind in this world, but it is equally important for them to use it sensibly and sensitively. Parents could choose what the child should watch and in consultation with him or her. Quality of content and its usage, 'co-use' should be enhanced as quality and quantity both are important. It's crucial to maintain connections with the child. For example, on YouTube, certain advertisements are objectionable. Parents need to take initiative and decide how much time children could participate in any screen related activity. The family can have segments of the day when there is restriction on media or internet use, for example, a family could decide not to use media in the bedroom or the dining table and use it only in the living room. Parents can play a more active role in finding out what is happening in their child's life. They need to approach technology positively and also learn the skills to lower the disadvantages and not be enslaved themselves.

### Risks and Opportunities of Digital Technology

Digital technology has both risks and opportunities involved. Besides making children lazy physically and mentally and loss of social values and relations there are also many unsettling issues. For instance, one of the most talked about sensational internet issue in recent times was the Blue Whale Challenge. Halim (2017) <sup>[4]</sup> in an article said that it was an online game that was said to lead to numerous suicides among children and adolescents. Also, cyber bullying has dangerous consequences for children's wellbeing. Internet *also* has massive number of sites with inappropriate content posing a grave danger for children. As emphasized earlier the role of parents becomes crucial.

The benefits of technology and how to use it well have been described in the earlier sections. It can play an important role in enhancing cognition such as in solving puzzles, creating in developing new concepts and thinking in a different way. Technology can play a role in supporting language (Lorenzo & Eva, 2016) [6]. Hence digitalization has changed a range of areas and domains in middle childhood such as the concept and practice of play and academic work.

### Objective

Keeping in mind the significance of foregoing discussion I wanted to understand the concerns of parents about their children's use and safety on the internet. It would also be meaningful to explore parental knowledge regarding the use of technology by children. Thus, the study explored parents' views and concerns regarding the use and the role of digital technology in the lives of children.

### Methodology

#### Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 22 participants (19 mothers and three fathers) belonging to middle SES with an average income of Rs. 50,000 to 80,000 per month. The participants for the study were selected from North West Delhi residential areas. The families resided in flats in these residential areas. Twelve mothers were graduates while seven mothers had postgraduate degrees. All fathers were graduates but only three were available for interview.

Eight mothers worked outside the home and 11 mothers were home makers. Seven mothers worked in a private organization and one mother was a teacher. Also, two fathers were working in the corporate sector and one father worked in a business sector.

#### Sample selection

Families who had children in the age group of 6-11 years were selected. The initial families were identified by taking help of resident families in the neighborhood known to the researcher. Later the rest of the families having children in the relevant age group were identified through snowballing.

#### Sampling technique

Purposive sampling (Non- Probability Sampling) and Snowball sampling techniques were used to select the participants.

**Method and Procedure of data collection:** Following methods were used for data collection

- Interview of parents
- Observations at home

Parents were approached through a prior appointment. Consent form was given to the parents. The study information sheet was provided to them in order to make them aware about the study. They were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary. All ethical requirements were met in accordance with the Institutional Ethics Committee, Lady Irwin College.

They were interviewed and observations were carried out at home. The data were collected over a period of three months. During the process of data collection, it was difficult to get interview time with fathers. Some were not willing to participate while others were not available. So,

the interview took place with only three of them.

### Data analysis

As the study is qualitative in nature, the data collected were subjected to qualitative analysis. Themes emerged through analysis of transcribed data. Themes were highlighted and commonalities, variations and the linkages between the different data sets were identified to prepare the findings of the study in accordance with the objective.

### Results and Discussions

In the present world technology is nearly everywhere and most people are using it in some way or the other. The use of both 'online' and 'offline' technology is growing rapidly among children and this has been a cause for concern for most parents. Children in middle childhood years are using technology in several ways such as for their school work, to play games, to watch videos or send messages. They use technology to acquire information, communicate and enhance learning. Particularly in the middle SES, they rely on technology for a majority of their activities such as play and academic work either alone or with siblings and peers. Technology is part of their lives in schools as well.

#### Parental outlook and concerns

All parents (19 mothers and three fathers) reported that technology plays a significant role in the lives of children. They said that it helped in studies and with a click; one can get information about any area. At the same time, they also said that it is important to monitor activities of children while they use technology. A mother reported, "*They are a great influencer. They force parents to buy things.*" She narrated the story of how her child was so attracted towards a food item that he saw on television that he forced the mother to get it and at the end of the day she had to buy it. A father said that technology has become an escape route for children because if both parents are working outside the home, the child engages more with gadgets. Parents said that technology is helping their children to gain knowledge of different fields and it is comfortable for everyone.

#### Monitoring and restrictions

All mothers (19) said that they do monitor their children's activity when they use any device and restrict the use. They all reported that it is important to know what children are watching on the screens as they can visit any website which is not child appropriate. Also, they restrict the usage of technology because it can affect their eye health or physical activity.

A mother said, "*Haan bilkul dekhti hoon. Mein hamesha saath hi hoti hoon. Yeh to sirf game hi khelta hai par mein usmein bhi nazar rakhti hoon.* (Yes I watch. I am always with the child. He only plays game but still I watch him play)" Another mother who works outside the home said, "*Mostly mera phone pe hi coordination hota hai ya fir mein kabhi ghar aaungi to ek dum se mein gussa hongy ki itni der se leke baithe hue ho.* (Mostly the coordination happens through phone else when I reach back home I scream at them as they had been using the phone for long)." Similarly, another reported, "*By talking to him and being interested in what he watches.*" She believed that if she engaged in a conversation then the child won't hide as there is trust. Another mother said she doesn't always monitor her child's activities related to technology but she makes it a point to

see what the child is doing or watching whenever she gets time. She responded, *"I don't watch her every time. Whenever she sees YouTube, I make sure I see what she is watching or she asks me whether to download a game or not. She reveals it to me. She comments on YouTube also, but she asks me first."* A few mothers' monitored the activities while moving from one place to another in the house. A mother said, *"mein watch karti rehti hoon. Aate jaate notice karti hoon, puchti rehti hoon ki kya dekh rahe ho. (I do watch. I ask them what they are watching)."* One mother reported that she doesn't keep an eye if the child is playing videogames but when he uses phone she does so. And TV is in the lobby and hence it is easy to monitor what the child watches.

When mothers were asked if they restrict the usage of digital devices, so all mothers (19) responded that they do restrict. One of them was very strict and allowed only *"half-an-hour for TV and nothing else."* When she was asked about her child's reaction, so she replied, *"He is not okay with it. He complains that other children are watching and not him but I am quiet cautious because he wears specs from an early age. No means no, and no questions after that."*

For restricting the usage of devices, a mother reasoned with the child that it would harm his sight which was successful while another believed she needed to restrict her own usage of mobile phone. One of the mothers was very much worried usage of technology. He was using it for long periods and became aggressive if stopped. She said, *"vo maarta bhi hai, pehle aisa ho chukka hai, tab se mein strict ho gayi hoon. (He hits me also. It has happened before and from then on I have become strict)."* And therefore she restricted child's usage of digital devices. Five mothers said that they restrict when they feel that the child had used the device a lot as they feared addiction. Children bargain for extra time which mothers do allow. Out of three fathers, one father didn't restrict the usage of devices. He responded, *"Not yet, because I don't see them spending that much on downloading or surfing."*

Parents can mediate the child's media time including restrictive, active and co-viewing. Restrictive mediation occurs when parents pose some rules to limit the duration of media activity. Active mediation includes the conversation among parents and the child in terms of content and to promote critical thinking. And co-viewing includes parent and child watching media together. (Collier *et al.*, 2016) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **Advantages and limitations of technology**

Technology has both advantages and disadvantages. If technology is used for learning purpose, then it will be advantageous and if the activities are not monitored then it can lead to a disadvantage as well.

Mothers felt that technology has several advantages and at the same time it has negative consequences. The advantages that were reported by mothers were that technology helps children to connect with the outside world and can go one step further than their counterparts by getting information from Internet. Also, they believe that the child is gaining knowledge of different fields and it can help them in their future. They said that technology which the school provides like Smart classes are important to improve the skills of children.

Technology when used for academic purpose helps children to learn, Mothers (19) said that technology is advantageous

in finding or searching for clarifying concepts of children. For instance, a mother said, *"Studies mein helpful hota hai, jo cheezein humein nahi pata hoti vo hum pata laga sakte hai. (Helpful in studies, we can find about the things we don't know)."* Another mother felt that technology is helpful for them in doing school projects. Through technology, children can learn new skills without going anywhere. It helps in fast learning, is extremely convenient and saves time and effort. The disadvantages that the mothers reported were related to their health, decrease in physical activity, addiction, safety issues and children becoming precocious. Eighteen mothers and three fathers said that technology has disadvantages and only one mother thought that technology had none. She said, *"Nothing. Digitalization is the present and the future of young generation."*

A mother who believed that technology has disadvantages said, *"They are glued to it for long and that affects their eyesight and make them inactive."* Use of technology can be harmful for children such as poor posture, eyestrain are caused at times. (Hatch, 2011). Another mother replied, *"Bacche used to ho jaate hai. Kuch bhi search karne lag jaate hai aur games mein kho jaate hai. (Children become used to the technology. They search whatever they want to and play games on them)."* One of the mothers responded that physical activity decreases, she said, *"Children don't like to play games outside the home. They want to sit in front of TV and computers. In fact, they have become lazy."* One of the disadvantages of technology that was said by mothers was health issues. When children are exposed to high levels of technology, they tend to think through things only superficially and don't develop the ability to think critically or be creative when learning new concepts and hinder self-discovery (Bernstein, 2016). Technology has both pros and cons. If mediated by adults, in case of young children, it can be used to enhance skills and gain information logically and critically.

The study points to issues involved in children's use of technology and the role of parents in mediating children's access and usage. For this age group parents can make a big difference to what children watch and use and a much depends on what the parents are doing themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Digital technology is growing at a very rapid pace and so is its usage among children. It has made life easy in many ways, but it has caused concern because it seems as if technology is taking control of our daily lives, our social interactions and making us dependent. Children are natural users of technology and in their case digitalization has changed the concept of play and academics particularly in middle childhood over the years.

All the families reported that technology is being used extensively and it has become easy for everyone to access information from anywhere thereby saving time and effort.

Technology has both pros and cons. If a child uses technology in the early years under the supervision of an adult, then it can eventually help the child in learning new skills and gain knowledge if used to enhance these skills. Children get easily attracted towards advertisements. Parents should talk to children and explain and give reasons to them why they should not get influenced by the advertisements. It does not help if parents say no, discussion and reasoning are important.

Children are happy playing alone on any gadget which has decreased their physical activity and parents are also therefore worried about the health effects that the technology has on the child. It also means that parents themselves must nurture some activity outside and create time to be with the child and involve friends. Talking to them of the negative consequences of technology and discussing alternatives about how they can use it effectively with them can ensure more meaningful engagements.

Children learn while observing their surroundings. If parents facilitate as well as monitor children's use of technology while interacting with children, the experience benefits the whole family. In an article it was reported, a mother enrolled her daughter in dance classes to decrease her screen time and it showed positive results and she engaged herself in dance and reciting poetry (Dutt & Ghosh, 2018) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Families that can afford to invest much on technology can surely bring back the print media: a variety of magazines, books and newspapers to engage with. Reading together great books can capture children's imagination, bring in fantasy, and nurture creativity. Parents need to play stronger role in protecting children from digitisation's negative influences and also continue to enhance their learning as well as quality of life.

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