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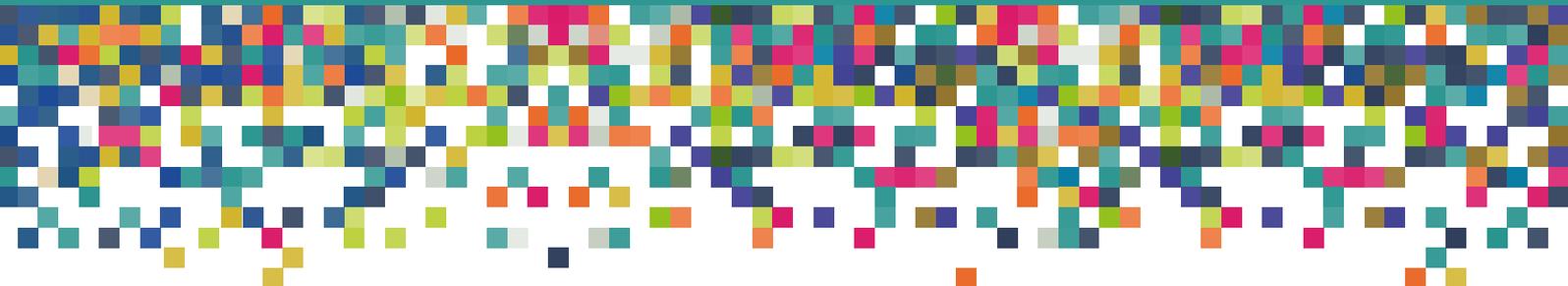
Parents' failure to plan for their children's digital futures

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ABSTRACT

There is extensive evidence that teenagers' social media and internet use is of considerable concern to a number of parents. But little is known regarding parents of much younger children. Given the widespread public debate about screen time and online risks, do parents have an intended strategy for socialising their very young children to prepare them to take their place in the digital world? While this might be driven by similar concerns to those expressed by parents of older children, it is possible that parents of younger children hope to find ways to parent differently, thereby avoiding some of the problems encountered by teenagers?

This paper explores the experiences of digital parenting of six families with a 'focus child' aged three years or under. These families are a subset of nine UK families and 12 Australian families with children aged between birth and five (inclusive) who participated in the research project Toddlers and Tablets funded by the Australian Research Council (2015-18). The project adopts a children's rights context (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) (Livingstone and Third, 2017), and interrogates issues of access, engagement, risk and the sense of control that parents have over their young children's technological interactions. In Australia, the data underpinning this paper was gathered in family-based investigations and interviews in an ethnographic setting involving two researchers, one of whom engages principally with interviewing the parent(s) and child, while the other focusses on taking notes and images to inform an ethnographic account of the target child's digital media use. In the UK, there was a little more variation in approach, with some single-researcher interviews.

In addition to the child's rights perspective, the conceptual foundations for the paper are derived from Lave and Wenger's theory of communities of practice (1989). These frameworks position children as having rights while parents and other caregivers learn from each other and from materials circulating in the public sphere in exerting the principal influence upon young children's early digital literacies. Parents are conceptualised as collaborating and sharing in communities of practice, but the available evidence also suggests that many parents engage in reactive digital parenting, rather than planning ahead to create a thought-through basis for the digital life of the future teen or young adult digital citizen. The paper suggests that this need not be problematic, however.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on the findings of a collaborative research project that engaged with very young children in families from the UK and from Australia. Colloquially described as *Toddlers and Tablets*, the project was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP150104734) and involved investigators in the UK, Ireland and Australia. The primary point of interest was an exploration of the digital lives, and information and communication technology (ICT) use, of children aged five and under; and each family included a 'focus child' aged between birth and five years as part of the research. The work presented here, however, draws principally upon interviews with younger children, all aged three or under, some of whom were the eldest child in their sibling cohort, and some of whom had older brothers and sisters.

For each child interviewed or engaged with, a parent or key caregiver was also interviewed, and the project as a whole consequently offered a means of capturing the perspectives of parents with children aged between birth and five years old who are engaged with digital media. This paper uses the terms 'digital media', 'digital technologies' and 'interactive ICTs' as essentially interchangeable but, in this very young age group, as principally referring to touchscreen technologies. The data collected reveals an unexpected finding from interviews with parents who have younger children which indicates that some parents lack a strategy for supporting their child's structured engagement with digital media. The possibility is thus raised, although it cannot be answered here, that a child socialised through reactive digital parenting is potentially less likely to enjoy a future where she or he feels in control of everyday technology use. Instead, it may be that a strategic parental plan or vision of the child as the future digital citizen will better support a trajectory where he or she can embrace the opportunities offered by digital media while being better prepared to navigate its challenges.

The project engaged with 12 families in Australia and 9 families in the UK. It collected data via one-on-one interviews with adults, and concomitant, parallel exchanges with children. All data was de-identified, and pseudonyms are used throughout. The use of structured research interviews and participant-observer interactions was supplemented by focus groups in both countries (separately) involving parents, grandparents and early childhood educators. Families were offered the opportunity to engage further with the project when researchers left a GoPro or other video-capture camera with the family for up to four weeks following the initial interview. Parents and older siblings were invited to record examples of the focus child's digital activities. The ethical framework supporting this research meant that parents were under no obligation to continue participating (or, indeed, to participate at all). Consequently, some parents chose to facilitate additional data collection via video recordings while other families chose not to do so. Where further data was collected, this offered an opportunity for deeper engagement with relevant information, both in terms of the images produced and through asking the parent or older child camera operator to explain the rationale for each of

the recorded videos, the information they were intending to collect and convey, and why they had wanted to include it.

Even though parental mediation strategies (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Smahelova *et al.*, 2017; van Kruistum and van Steensel, 2017) were deemed important for the project, and information about these was specifically sought out, it was not until a detailed critical discourse analysis that parents' general lack of a structured plan to prepare for their child's digital futures became apparent. Instead, parents appear to be tentative and predominantly reactive in their decisions around mediating this very young age group. This is not entirely surprising since parents often "express confusion and guilt concerning their very young children's media use" and this can go hand in hand with judging other parents and feeling judged by them, according to Jaunzems, et al. (2019: 16). That chapter, 'Very young children online: Media discourse and parental practice', is an outcome of the same research project. It analysed materials circulating in the public sphere (from April 2015-March 2016) and found that many

were alarmist in tone and did not resonate with parents' experiences of everyday digital life with very young children. Instead of accepting dominant discourses around having 'none at all to very little' digital time for under-5s, parents are sharing and developing the practices that work for them, but this does not stop them feeling techno-guilt (Jaunzems, et al., 2019: 16).

The paper that follows explores the implications of these findings for parental confidence around planning a structured engagement for their child's digital media use into their adolescence. Conceptual frameworks used will first be addressed before moving into family-based data.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual framework for *Toddlers and Tablets* featured a range of interlocking perspectives that dealt with children's development, parents' mediation styles and children's digital engagement. We adopted a children's rights approach (Livingstone, 2019/2015) to children's and young people's access to and engagement with digital technologies. Although child rights are commonly classified into participation, provision and protection rights, Livingstone and Third (2017) have drawn attention to the disproportionate focus upon constructing children as vulnerable and as being in need of protection in relation to digital contexts. The focus placed upon this one aspect of children's rights in the domain of interactive information and communication technology (ICT) engagement in mature digital societies outweighs attempts to promote universal provision of access to digital technologies and/or children's participation in these contexts. Parents are also primed to construe their parental responsibilities relating to digital media in terms of an imperative to protect their child (Dias and Brito, 2019), with public discursive injunctions to promote interactive ICT provision and participation much less evident (Jaunzems et al., 2019).

In one of her early presentations on the subject, Livingstone analyses the different articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) as these relate to the child's right to participate in digital environments:

> *in all actions concerning children… the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Art. 3), including the right of children to be consulted in all matters affecting them (Art. 12), to freedom of expression (Art. 13), freedom of thought (Art. 14), of association and assembly (Art. 15), to information (Art. 17) and to participate fully in cultural life (Art. 31) (Livingstone 2015)*

In addition to construing participation in digital contexts as a human right, Livingstone also identifies provision as an important right in terms of digital engagement. According to the UNCRC (1989), every child is entitled to

> *Provision* to support children's rights to life and development (Art. 6), to preserve his or her identity (Art. 8), to an education to support the development of their full potential (Art. 28) and prepare them 'for responsible life in a free society' (Art. 29), to recreation and leisure appropriate to their age (Art. 31), to diverse material of social and cultural benefit to the child (including minorities) to promote children's well-being (Art. 17) and all appropriate measures for recovery from *neglect, exploitation or abuse (Art. 39) (Livingstone 2015)*

These rights include provision of communication opportunities and access to shared cultural materials, much of which is now enabled via digital media. Although comparatively little of the UNCRC's explanation of the child's right to protection relates to engagement with digital media, this is increasingly a public policy focus in western democracies (Livingstone and Third, 2017). Examining the UNCRC in terms of its applicability to a protection framework, Livingstone (2015) notes that the rights involved include aspects of the following articles:

> *Protection from any kind of discrimination (Art. 2), all forms of abuse and neglect (Art. 19), including sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Art. 34), and other forms of exploitation prejudicial to the child's welfare (Art. 36), from 'information and material injurious to the child's well-being' (Art 17e), 'arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, or correspondence [and] unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation' (Art. 16) (Livingstone 2015)*

Unfortunately, an expansion in focus from a 'protection' concern regarding children's digital activities to encompass the provision of opportunities for children's digital ICT participation has yet to register widely in the public sphere (Jaunzems *et al.*, 2019) or in parents' attitudes to the mediation of their child's digital activities (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017). Possibly, once this

reframing is more generally discussed and accepted, parents may make better strategic decisions to guide their child's journey from comparative dependency as a very young digital actor to a fully-autonomous digital citizen. Alongside a rights-based conceptual framework, and recognising parents' exploratory approaches to the mediation of very young children's access to digital ICTs, the project also embraces the proposition that people collaborate within 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Given that parents find it difficult to locate authoritative expert advice that makes sense to them in their everyday lives (Jaunzems *et al.*, 2019), parental sharing of information and views concerning young children's use of digital media works in an analogous way to a learning community, or community of practice. Parents look, listen and learn from each other. In this context, such learning is constructed as taking place within a social system. As Wenger notes:

> *Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly [… they] engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. (Wenger 2011, 1)*

In addition to parental learning through participating in shared community-based practices around mediating young children's access to digital technologies, the children themselves are learning behaviours and some information through the fun and the consequences of interactive ICT engagement from observing the actions of others. These influences include family members, educators and other adults and children in the children's social circles. Although not adopting the detail of Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development (1979), this paper posits that the immediate social circle encapsulating the very young child, including parents, educators and other key caregivers, has greatest impact upon the child's digital media use while this circle is directly influenced by the communities to which the parents and caregivers belong. This pattern of learning from observation within social contexts has been identified by Bandura (1986) as 'social cognitive theory' and applies to both parents and children.

As well as learning from people they encounter in their personal networks, children are hypothesised to learn from actors represented in the media they consume. Bleakley *et al.* (2014: 3) argue that synthesising Bronfenbrenner's and Bandura's theories "sheds light on the means through which the home environment can socialise children into various patterns of media consumption". They also argue that

> *The likelihood that a child will imitate the behaviour they view depends on various*
> *factors including the attractiveness or perceived similarity of the model [person*
> *modelling the behaviour] and the nature of the consequences of the behavior to the*
> *model and others around him/her (ibid: 2-3).*

Having established the conceptual underpinnings of this paper, attention now turns to parents' views and statements as regards their child's digital engagement.

3   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1   Parents' communities of practice

The *Toddlers and Tablets* research indicated that parents often feel tentative, conflicted and guilty around whether or not they should allow young children to use digital technologies (Jaunzems *et al.*, 2019). This situation is not helped by the fact that this is the first generation of parents to encounter both the challenges and opportunities posed by very young children's capacities to use digital 'touch and swipe' touchscreen technologies. As Rita, non-English-speaking background mother to 28-month old Lavinia, said:

> *I just don't know whether it's a good or bad thing to expose technology to the kids*
> *[…] I just sometimes confused. I can only say you know what I think is not too bad*
> *at this stage, but in the future it's … [trails away].*

These kinds of perspectives, and the idea that technology use in early childhood is so new that it is effectively unknowable, with results that cannot be anticipated, is possibly one reason why parents tend to be reactive in terms of mediating very young children's technology use. In such a situation, parents' point of reference often builds upon the experiences of other parents, as illustrated in the following example.

The Jenna-Adam family is a dual parent household with mum Jenna and dad Adam and one child, Julia aged 12 months, who is cared for three days per week by Jenna's mum, whom Julia calls 'Granny'. As Jenna notes, when she was a little younger, Julia

> *was pretty mad on Peppa Pig early on […] that used to make her laugh. But one of*
> *my friends told me that their child started out with a British accent because all they*
> *watched was Peppa Pig […] so we decided to mix it up [with The Wiggles].*

The Wiggles here refers to a quartet of Australian educators/musical entertainers whose focus is very much on pre-schoolers and their parents.

Demonstrating the operation of Lave and Wenger's (1991) informal parental community of practice, and learning from the experience of other parents, the Jenna-Adam family decided to change aspects of Julia's digital technology engagement by reducing the volume of British content (*Peppa Pig*) and by introducing some Australian content (*The Wiggles*). This vignette (Barter and Renold, 1999) concerning the impact of other parents' experience upon Jenna's and Adam's decision making showcases the active adjustment of parenting practice in light of new information available to parents. It implies both a tentativeness and a willingness to learn on the part of Julia's parents in their planning for Julia's digital future.

The Francoise-Craig family is also dual parent household with two children, Owen (3, the focus child) and Floyd (5). Francoise identifies herself as an adult who experiences issues around regulating her media use. She offers the example of an insight from when her mother came to stay with the family, on an extended visit from Belgium. This outsider's perspective is credited by Francoise as making clearly visible some everyday digital practices that had become taken for granted:

> *My mum came over last year and Craig and I were probably checking our emails or iPad. And she said 'You don't even notice but you're constantly on your machines and it's not very nice for the boys 'cause they probably would want to play a game instead'. And so we've tried […] I've […] mostly me […] to have a sort of detox, 'digital detox'.*

This story indicates how parents may be struggling with their own media habits even as they try to set an appropriate example and plan for their children's digital futures. Like Francoise, some parents may feel that if they restrict their child's ICT use, 'they should restrict their own media use too' (Nikken, 2017). Allowing for the fact that participating in the research gave Francoise an opportunity to vocalise her concerns and insecurities around her personal digital media practices, she nonetheless made several references to what she saw as her poor control over digital media, seemingly ignoring that her mother had commented on both her and Craig's behaviour. For example, "I am probably, more than Craig, addicted to it […] rather than taking [up] a magazine or book, I'll check my phone first". These contributions indicate the additional challenge for parents of dealing with perceptions, such as that of Francoise's mother, that construct everyday digital media behaviour as revealing personal inadequacies rather than specifically illuminating some one or more aspects of practice, that might be manageable on a case by case basis, such as by Francoise and Craig consciously offering Owen and Floyd more opportunities to play games with them.

Sometimes parents' use of digital media with very young children can raise unexpected problems. The Jenna-Adam household, with twelve-month old daughter Julia, uses Julia's Granny for three days' per week childcare while Jenna is working. Jenna says:

> *We FaceTime Adam when [he's] travelling and we Facetime Granny a few times up the road if she [Julia] hasn't seen her for a few days 'cause she has so much contact that it's a bit weird if she has a few days not – she looks really lost afterwards [after FaceTime], she's like 'Where are they?' You know, that's her – one time we FaceTimed Adam before [Julia's] bedtime when he was over east and I actually considered chatting to Adam and saying 'I don't think we should FaceTime anymore, I think we should just talk', 'cause she was so upset going to bed.*

These tales from family life reveal the ways in which children complicate adults' digital media choices (as noted by Francoise's mother, and as noted by Jenna), raising issues for the family as a whole, and prompting a reconsideration of behaviours that may not have seemed problematic before children were involved. The vignettes also illustrate how even very young children have agency within the family and help influence the mediation practices of their parents (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, parental responses are clearly contextualised by the developmental stage of the child being cared for. Once Julia understands the way in which digital media can connect people in two separate places she is likely to find FaceTime a positive experience.

The Francoise-Craig household, where mum Francoise struggles with her own media use, has enrolled their two children Owen (3) and Floyd (5) in sensory classes, which are available in the local neighbourhood, with a view to encouraging the boys' imaginative play. The boys' enrolment in sensory classes also increases the likelihood that the boys will make friends with children who might have like-minded parents, thus enriching the social cognitive (Bandura, 1986) resources available to the family. In a digitally-media rich world, Francoise and Craig aim to introduce Owen and Floyd to children whose parents are also focused upon providing non-digital stimulating experiences. They believe that this will create what Craig calls "a foundation" for their sons' future digital engagement. Their hope is that these kinds of non-digital activities will help make the boys immune to the negative aspects of interactive ICTs.

It is tempting to speculate that the boys' participation in the sensory classes may indicate a family belief that non-digital play is more cognitively stimulating and/or a balancing influence for digital media use. Of particular note, however, is the fact that even though digital ICTs are a salient issue in the Francoise-Craig household, there is no sense of Francoise and Craig having developed a 'fast forward' plan for a media engagement trajectory that would guide their sons' used of digital technologies in the years ahead. Although Craig described the sensory classes as a foundation, neither parent indicated the structure to be built on that foundation, or what their sons' digital activities might look like at key socio-emotional development stages such as the transition between pre-school and primary, between primary and high school, in adolescence and, ultimately, in adulthood.

Like the Francoise-Craig household, Lavinia's mother Rita also has as a range of concerns about digital media. In Rita's case she locates these concerns in her husband's (Stanley's) enjoyment of video games:

> [We] heard lots of horrible stories, yeah, even my husband, he doesn't play anymore but when he was at school he plays PlayStation like soccer games but no […] it's just addiction, those ones they can just open and so addicted to it so, even with the games, I don't put any games on my apps for her [Lavinia, …] but at least you know Peppa Pig program, I just find that cartoon is teaching a lot of things, not just you know purely cartoon […] they teach what Christmas is about.

This quote shows Rita, by implication, explaining the boundaries for what Lavinia, at 28 months, is and isn't allowed to do online, and why. Rita locates the challenge as being in the addictiveness of games *per se*, rather than as a failing of her husband or, potentially, of Lavinia. She uses an organising principle that positions games as addictive, and thus not to be made available to Lavinia; while targeted children's programming (*Peppa Pig*) is educational, and thus appropriate content. From the perspective of this migrant family from a non-English speaking background, *Peppa Pig* offers culturally-relevant information, such as explaining "what Christmas is about", better enabling Lavinia's future incorporation within a children's community of practice.

Rita's comment about *Peppa Pig* being "not just you know purely cartoon" reflects some parental anxiety around the negative judgments of others concerning their decisions regarding young children's access to digital content (Jaunzems et al., 2019). It may also reflect a perceived 'gold standard' of infant digital engagement proffered at the turn of the 21st century by the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of no 'screen time' for very young children, and reaffirmed by Brown et al. (2011), although this is now reframed in a more nuanced way (AAP, 2016).

One of the key justifications available to parents who support very young children's digital engagement is the significant power and reward offered by western culture to those adults who are highly competent in ICT use. Understandably, parents believe that their child's future life trajectory will partly be influenced by her or his capacity to demonstrate skill with digital technologies (Barron et al., 2019). Thus, concerns about excessive exposure are weighed against the benefits of preparing children to be competent users of interactive ICTs, with parents taking pride (as with the example of Rita, below) when their child surprises them with their digital skills. Naturally, the dual imperative to protect the child from the perceived excesses and negatives of digital media, while promoting ICT competency and digital skills, complicates any parental ambition to chart a roadmap for the child's progressive journey through different stages of digital socialisation (e.g. Hurwitz and Schmitt, 2019). Such

considerations underline the fact that digital parenting is one of the more challenging aspects of child rearing in contemporary society.

3.2   Just in time parenting?

It is possible to hypothesise that interactive ICTs, while key components of the socio-cultural and media environments, are positioned somewhat differently from other major socialising institutions in Western societies. Arguably, young people's relationships with digital technologies might have a similar impact upon their future employment prospects and well-being as their educational engagement, their involvement (or not) in faith-based institutions and their physical robustness and well-being. Children's engagement with education and religion, and the development of healthy life habits, are guided by established systems and processes. These serve to integrate young people, or not, within institutional hierarchies, helping socialise them into their future role as adults. This contrasts with the complex relationship between individuals and digital technologies, mediated on young children's behalves by their parents. Parents who treat their child's relationships with educational, religious and health-based institutions in the same way that most parents structure their child's engagement with interactive ICTs would be perceived as unusual and possibly negligent.

Sometimes, parents' accounts of their child's engagement with digital media is presented as if this were an evidence-based experiment, with each new parental understanding informing the next iteration of the child's exposure to interactive ICTs. Thus, Lavinia's mother Rita commented of her 28-month daughter: "I'm not really reluctant [about] giving her all this technology as long as I know what she's doing". At the same time, Rita is willing to admit that she may not actually know what Lavinia *is* doing and that Lavinia sometimes surprises Rita with her digital prowess. This underlines parental appreciation that children have a developing sense of agency. For example, Rita told the researchers that Lavinia hadn't been formally taught how to use digital media by her parents. Instead, she

> *just watched what we did and we didn't really tell her step by step […] my mum got*
> *a new phone like she [Lavinia] find the YouTube by herself. I didn't even know there*
> *was a YouTube app on my mum's phone and she find it and open it up and watch.*

While this is an exemplar of Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), Rita is essentially admitting that while she doesn't know exactly what Lavinia is doing with digital media, she is happy with the general trajectory. This indicates that Lavinia enjoys some agency in engaging with and controlling aspects of her own digital media use.

Sherryl is the single parent of four children aged 16, 12, nine and the focus child Flynn, 14 months. Acknowledging the pressures of raising four children mostly by herself, Sherryl said:

"People say 'how do you do it?' […] I don't know, I just take it one day at a time". It might be expected that with teens in the house, Sherryl would have a conscious parenting approach to Flynn's engagement with interactive ICTs. However, when asked how Flynn first got access to Sherryl's phone, (i.e. "Did he seek [out] the phone, or did you give him the phone?"), Sherryl replied: "I'm not entirely sure, to be honest, that's a […] I would presume that I gave it to him to start off with, just […] he was always a bit of a sook [crybaby] when he was little, so it was kind of 'What can we do just to keep him quiet for the next five minutes?'". In parenting her fourth child, and one that is eight years younger than his closest sibling, Sherryl is demonstrating a relaxed parenting style that also recognises the individuality of Flynn (as "a bit of a sook"). Flynn's home is also likely to be a rich media environment in which the older siblings have personal digital media, and model digital media use to Flynn. Even though some parents might learn skills of digital media regulation when parenting older children, the features of these media have changed dramatically over the 16 years of Sherryl's parenting journey, and it may be that she feels that lessons learned from parenting the older children are not immediately transferable to her youngest child, Flynn.

Kate is another single parent research participant. She is the principal carer for three children aged eight, five and two (the focus child, Scott). Asked whether she could remember how old the *older* two children were when they first used the touch screen, Kate replied with a reference to Scott:

> *No. I think […] The thing is, it's always been around for Scott […] I do everything on the iPad, I read and […] I do the reading, like read my books [on the iPad] and so it's always been there.*

While this answer may indicate a lack of conscious decision making or awareness around the issue of Scott's first engagement, it may also acknowledge that, for Scott, interactive digital media has always been a part of his environment. Arguably, interactive ICTs are a natural part of a family techno system, with the inauguration of a young child into that system requiring less attention than when parents wean a baby from milk-only onto solid foods.

Kate's answer also indicates, in her reference to her younger child Scott, when the question was about her two older children, that prior parenting decision making and experience is often overlaid by the experience of parenting the youngest child. Whereas Kate may have exercised conscious decision making around her 8-year old's introduction to digital media, this sense of 'introducing' Scott appears to be an irrelevant concept for her since many of her everyday parenting activities, reading stories, etc., are enacted with the assistance of digital media. Kate went on to explain how Scott was seamlessly integrated into the ICT-engaged family lifestyle.

So he would sit on my lap and try and move it [the iPad] when I was trying to read so, just playing with it more than anything and to get my attention, and looking at pictures, and things like that, was always exciting. So it's more just, I think, just an experiment from […] I can't remember what age.

3.3   Parental pre-planning

What some people might construct as haphazard and just-in-time parental decision making around children's interactive ICT use can be contrasted with very particular planning with regards to other aspects of their child's life. For example, at 28 months Lavinia has never experienced formal child care. Instead, she is cared for by her maternal grandparents, recent migrants who live nearby, and by Rita (her mother), who works part time. Even so Rita, talking about her plans for Lavinia's next six months, notes that

maybe from the second half of the year […] we can put her in about three hours in a child centre and just get her ready to pre-kindy [preparatory kindergarten] next year, and kindy [kindergarten] the following year, so just get her to be ready.

This indicates a very clear progression in Rita's mind of how her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter will benefit from limited exposure to childcare until she's three, preparing her for the move through pre-kindergarten, to kindergarten, and ultimately into school and the wider education system. At the same time, it is worth noting that Rita's planning has a time horizon of about six, the age at which compulsory schooling starts in Australia, and this family is the one where *Peppa Pig* is embraced as teaching "what Christmas is about", helping Lavinia fit into her Australian context.

In the Jenna-Adam family where Julia (12 months old) is the target child, a different preparatory script is in play. As Jenna notes, as a parent

You get these little snippets where you learn things […] a child that gets three books read to them a day from birth starts school a year ahead […] and we've read to her like three stories a day since she was born type thing.

This clear trajectory of parental preparation to support Julia's future as a reader engaged with stories, and her hoped-for prowess in the educational system, is only tangentially echoed in terms of her family's ambitions to prepare Julia for her relationship with interactive media. Jenna says

We've got this whole thing about technology where I go 'I want her [Julia] to be able to be at the forefront but I don't want her to be a screen-playing kid […] We went on a holiday recently

for 12 days and we did use the iPad more during that time, we'd downloaded lots of the Wiggles […] and that was really useful. But we haven't taken the iPad out [to cafés]

The unspoken implication of this statement is that Jenna believes that parents who take iPads to places like cafés risk creating the kind of 'screen-playing kid' that Jenna doesn't want Julia to become. Alternatively, or additionally, Jenna's comment may indicate an awareness that other parents (like her) may judge 'screen-playing kids' negatively. Keeping Julia's screen time out of the public gaze is one way of avoiding such judgements, as well as a means of avoiding the behaviour that is judged.

In both these situations, the parents have an underlying pre-planned aim that informs their apparently reactive stance to digital media use. For Rita, it is a way in which Lavinia can use *Peppa Pig* to develop cultural capital that she will ultimately share with her future classmates. For Jenna, who is keen that Julia should not be a screen-playing kid, digital media can be a "really useful" resource, but shouldn't displace everyday social experience such as developing skills of behaving appropriately in cafés and public places. The absence of a long-term time horizon, such as a clear idea about the kind of digital teens that their parents want Lavinia and Julia to become, may reflect the complexities of rearing children in this age group and an awareness that the digital environment continues to evolve at a fast pace, possibly rendering detailed planning for a decade or more ahead somewhat fanciful.

3.4   Accidental ICT routines

Across the 21 families involved in the in-depth interviews in the UK and Australia, it was almost impossible to identify parental routines that indicated a planned and deliberate strategy to prepare young children for future engagement as digital citizens and as fully-fledged adult internet users. While there were approaches evident and implied around a household's daily ICT use, and some strategies that might stretch out to a two or three-year time horizon, these rules rarely took the form of a pre-planned element in a deliberate and cohesive approach to developing full-scale digital socialisation, as indicated by Kate's experience.

Kate, the sole-parent mother of focus child Scott aged two and two other children, acknowledged her media-rich family environment, and was asked whether the household had any media rules or routines. Like many parents who have been conditioned to feel guilty around screen time (Jaunzems et al., 2019), Kate took this as a prompt to discuss her attempts to regulate her children's digital media engagement:

> *Oh yeah, we try. We always try and say 'half an hour', but it never is. But we, yeah, try and say half an hour and after a while, whatever time it is […] we say 'that's enough' and then […] but like on weekends and school holidays that gets extended*

out a lot. But they get very upset if we've had a busy afternoon and they haven't had a chance to have their screen time. They get really upset […] the older two […] I do have a rule that after [… bath and] dinner, there's no more screens because we've had it in the past and they'll just lay there and not sleep.

This snippet indicates that Kate's household does have rules around their ICT use, although the perceived 'screen time' rules are more acknowledged in the breach than the observance. What is implicit in Kate's account is that she accepts that her children have agency in this matter and have developed their own rules around screen time. This includes a clear expectation that the children should be allowed screen time on a daily basis and are entitled to feel "really upset" if that is not provided. Further, this family values children having a good night's sleep, so there is an evidence-based rule about not having screen time after bath and dinner. Given the emergence of greater emphasis upon children's rights to (digital) provision and participation, such consultative engagement with children's expectations might be expected to play a more active part in future parental planning to support children's digital socialisation.

In another example of a child-developed rule Lavinia, at 28 months, enjoys structured routines in her day. Rita, Lavinia's mum, and Lavinia's grandparent-carers, have a firm agreement around the importance of Lavinia's afternoon nap: "every single day we go out we make sure we come back before twelve so she can have her afternoon nap. So that's basically afternoon for her, wake up about four". This deliberate routine, however, features an accidental element based on the tradition of the pre-nap story. As Rita says, Lavinia

has story time as well, has to watch Emma [Wiggle] […] then she wants to see the goodbye at the end of the show […] and then she'll say 'goodbye'. I'll say 'last one' and then 'goodbye', and then she will say 'time for sleep' and I'll turn off everything [...] I don't really want to bring the device into the room, but I think it's now become the routine. Unfortunate.

Thus, even in a family with very clear routines and a commitment to a structured progression to introduce Lavinia into the school system, this vignette provides evidence of the evolution of 'unfortunate' routines around digital media. In this case the mother, Rita, may have been privileging digital content in English language as part of Lavinia's daily routines, given Lavinia's non-English speaking background. Although 'unfortunate', this routine is a long way from catastrophic: Rita (or Lavinia's grandmother) stays with Lavinia throughout her chosen sleep time ritual and joins in with the customary exchanges before 'turning everything off' at the end of the goodbyes. Parents may often find themselves with unexpected or 'unfortunate'

digital routines, but that awareness can be the next step towards developing an appropriate family-based media use plan (AAP, 2016).

4   CONCLUSION

Parents of children aged from birth to five may hope that their children will grow up to be digitally savvy, and 'at the forefront' of technology use, but they rarely seem to have clear strategies as to how this end is going to be achieved in the longer term. Parents in this study do not seem to have developed a clearly structured approach for preparing their child to maximise her or his chances of having a self-directed engagement with interactive ICTs. Moreover, the parents' more ad-hoc or socially-influenced approaches don't necessarily equip a child with a firm foundation for making a positive contribution as a digital citizen at the point that they move into adulthood.

Parents feel the impact of significant media coverage around the issue of screen time. Parent interviewees contributing to this project indicate anticipation of social judgements around whether and how well they limit their child's exposure to and engagement with screen time. Thus Kate, when asked about her family's media rules, immediately felt the need to apologise while explaining that she tried to limit screen time but was often unsuccessful. Arguably, all the parental energy that might otherwise be directed to planning a structured engagement for children's graduated exposure to interactive ICTs is instead consumed in worrying about screen time exposure and other panics around children's digital technology use circulating in the media.

There is some evidence that parents are using a 'just in time' strategy and 'just for the moment' approach to children's ICT use which may have longer term repercussions. This suggests a reactive approach to the digital parenting of younger children and might preclude a more proactive engagement with planning a positive, progressive digital future for the maturing child. Without active mediation, support and some sense of anticipating the challenges that will confront children in digital contexts, both the parent and the child risk being taken by surprise at the point where school-aged children are exposed to risks that may be harmful. A 'just in time' parent might be unprepared for the child's exposure to bullying via social media, or for when she or he first encounters pornography. The 'we will cross that bridge when we come to it' mentality, which is implicit in some of the interviews discussed in this paper, becomes an increasingly less credible strategy for parenting in digital contexts as children move autonomously into worlds that are beyond parents' easy observation and control. While that may be the point when parents first wish they had developed a strategy for a graduated development of skill and expertise in relation to their child's technology engagement, it may also indicate the complexity experienced by parents attempting to chart a digital future for their child. In aiming to provide positive, firmly structured approaches to children's ICT use,

parents may fail to anticipate both opportunities and risks that will be encountered by their children as they move towards being autonomous digital agents. At the same time, avoiding the rigidity of a fixed plan may help keep channels of communication open, with parents responding to their child's digital experiences in a nuanced and supportive way. In such cases, acting reactively, parents may be best placed to offer support and guidance at the point of need.

One reason why parents might find it hard to plot a structured path for children's engagement with ICTs is that some might not have achieved critical distance from their own digital practices, and may not be paying attention to the personal media habits which help determine the ways in which their child will engage with digital technologies. Given that most parents have been digitally socialised by an unstructured engagement with interactive ICTs in their own lives, this (lack of a) framework is the approach that they may repeat for ICT engagement in their children's lives, even though many parents can identify snagging points in their own relationships with digital technologies. In fact, even as some parents see their own experience as a cautionary tale, they still feel powerless to mandate or model a different way of interacting with digital media for their children. Instead, for some families, the response chosen to address the issues arising in ICT use prompt a privileging of and emphasis upon non-digital activities. This may represent a conscious strategy to create a balanced environment for the children with both digital and non-digital experiences.

The vignettes in this paper have demonstrated the contingent nature of parents' understandings of their actions in supporting the development of their child's right to empowered digital media use. The stories here also chart how children have developed autonomous preferences around interactive ICTs, and the parents' acceptance of their child's views. In conclusion, having examined the perspectives of parents of children aged three and under, a conscious, ongoing, negotiation between parent(s) and child might be better expected to prepare the child for an empowered future as a digital media user than an inflexible structured progression of digital media use.

5   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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