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Online technology and very young children: Stakeholder responsibilities and children's rights

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At the moment, there is a dearth of literature about the use of digital technology by very young children. Yet by the age of three, many youngsters have access to online devices in the home and will certainly have parents and carers who fully engage with it. With younger children, our focus should be on how and when the child interacts with the technology, and on the use of technology by stakeholders who have responsibilities for their safeguarding and welfare.
Keywords: digital technology, young children, screen time, digital pacifier, children's rights

While children from newborn to the age of two are very unlikely to engage independently with digital technology, stakeholders around them are fully engaged with it and therefore even children of this age will be, at least vicariously, exposed to its reach and impact. The OFCOM (Office of Communications, UK) media literature highlights the trickle down of digital tech to younger and younger children. In their recent review (OFCOM, 2016) it was reported that:

- 41% for 3-4 year olds go online; 37% of these have used technology to engage in creative activities (photographs, making videos, etc.)
- 45% of 3-4 year olds have played video games
- 37% of 3-4 year olds access online content through YouTube
- 3-4 year olds spend an average of 8 hours 18 minutes a week online
- 55% of 3-4 year olds have access to a tablet

This article focuses upon the two key stakeholders responsible for a very young child's welfare – parents and the early years and childminding settings.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PARENTING THE VERY YOUNG

Parents can be both a positive and negative influence in the relationship a very young child has with technology. It is important for health and social care professionals to reflect upon the fact that it is unlikely parents have received any formal education in 'online safety' (the school curriculum around 'online safety' has existed for only 3-4 years) and public awareness is generally informed almost entirely by popular media. Parents' knowledge of online risk will have emerged from their own use of digital technology, peer learning and the media.

Given the dearth of public education in the area of technology, it is little wonder that parents have concerns both about the developmental impact on their children of screen time, and also about safeguarding issues such as grooming, cyberbullying and harmful content.

Let us take screen time and its impact on young children. I have often been asked, 'How long should my child be online for?' My usual response is, 'How long do you think your child should be online for?' However, what parents really wants is a simple metric that they can apply. For a long time, the 2+2 guidance from the American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP, 2011) was considered appropriate. This simply stated, with little empirical evidence to underpin it, that children under the age of two should not be online at all, and those between the ages of two and 16 should have a maximum of two hours a day online. However, such arbitrary measures fail to acknowledge different types of 'screen time', including passive consumption (for example, watching a cartoon); single user interaction (for example, playing a game); multi-user interaction (playing a game with friends) or creative interaction (for example, drawing a picture or producing a video). More recently, the AAP has, in fact, produced a more nuanced guidance (American Academy of Pediatrics 2016), although 2+2 is still being quoted.

Parents may also see technology as a part of responsible parenting, for example by using trackable technologies to try to protect very young children once they are outside the home environment. Devices can be attached to a child that send feedback to the parent on his or her

location. An early years practioner recently told me that a parent came to collect her two- year-old one lunchtime and commented that she was disappointed that the child had not gone outside to play until 11 o'clock. She had been viewing the child's movements in the setting on her mobile device. While one can understand why a parent might do this, it might be asked whether a parent really needs to know all of their child's movements around the early years setting? What reassurance does this offer? An over-reliance on technology can only result in increased anxiety for parents and potentially obsessive behaviours around their child's activities. For many years, parents have placed their trust in the childcare setting; why do some now feel the need to observe their child the whole time just because technology makes this possible?

While such practices might be viewed as coming from a place of concern about child protection, some aspects of parenting in relation to the use of technology are causing increasing debate.

For example, the 'digital pacifier' is perhaps something many of us have observed in public settings. A distressed infant is calmed by a parent by showing them a song, a cartoon or something similar on a mobile device. However, pacifying the child in this manner is a non-interactive act by the parent; while the parent does something else, they hand the child the mobile device to distract them. Repeated use of such a technique may lead to dependency by the child on the device for comfort, and contribute toward increased use of screen time to distract the child.

Also concerning is 'sharenting':– parents using social media to share images of their children or information about them. If we consider the fact that a child can have their image posted online before they are born, it may be time to consider the impact of digital technology on children's rights. Unborn children, and very young children, cannot consent to their image being posted. In my conversations with older children about digital media, many tell me that they seek out a parent's social media profile to find 'embarassing' photographs of their peers when they were younger. While a lot of the time, this is just used for light-hearted banter, sometimes it can be used for more abusive practices, such as distributing pictures to cause upset. Parents seem to believe it is their right to post images of their children, regardless of the views of the child. I recently saw a comment on social media about the 'back to school picture':

'I couldn't get <daughter> to have a photo taken in her new uniform. But she's more than happy to take selfies '

Clearly the parent believed that her daughter had let her down because she hadn't consented to the 'back to school' picture being posted when, in the eyes of the parent, this was no different from posting a selfie. However, the child has full control of a selfie and where she posts it, while an image taken and shared by a parent may be beyond her control.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

The early years setting is probably the first environment where a very young child will be exposed to adults and other children outside of the environment of close friends and family. It is the first time they will interact with children and adults who have no close relationship with them. It is crucial that such settings are equipped to engage with digital technology and that they fully understand the related risks to very young children.

To take an extreme example:- we can reflect upon the case of the Little Teds nursery in Plymouth, UK (Lucy Faithfull Foundation, 2009). In this instance, a nursery worker was involved with a male with a history of child sexual abuse who encouraged her to sexually abuse the young children in her care and to capture this abuse and send the images to him.

The subsequent serious case review (Plymouth Safeguarding Children's Board, 2010) highlighted key issues around safer recruitment of staff, the nursery environment and channels for raising concern. It also highlighted two technology related issues:

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One tangible lesson that has come out from this review has been the danger of mobile phones within day care settings. However, whilst stopping staff carrying mobile phones is an important preventative measure and will mean that images cannot easily be transmitted electronically, this alone will not prevent abuse taking place.

The additional factor that should not be overlooked is the role of the internet in providing the opportunity for vulnerable and dangerous people to meet each other and be encouraged in abusive behaviour that they may not have otherwise considered. The additional risks posed by the availability of technology which may provide additional opportunities mean that the safeguards within any organisation need to be strong.

The nursery had no policy, training or operational checks around the use of mobile phones by staff and there were no reporting routes for parents or carers to raise concerns about the setting.

However, the review also pointed out that stopping staff using mobiles will not, of itself, prevent abuse from happening. This is fundamental because one of the key problems with addressing safeguarding issues related to technology is that many may mistakenly see the solution as banning or restricting access.

I was recently at an early years setting which had received two tablet devices, a donation from a parent. The leader of the setting told me that while the gift was generous, there was 'no way' they could use the devices in their setting due to 'risk' related to digital photography and distribution. When I asked her to explain this,

she said that in her view the risk was twofold:

1. Children taking 'inappropriate' images of peers that might then be shared
2. Staff making use of devices in 'inappropriate' ways that could not be controlled

She went on to say she believed the overarching issue was one of 'data protection'. While I did not challenge her directly on her interpretation of the Data Protection Act (1998;2003) and its relevance in an early years setting (in fact, the Information Commissioner's Office (2017) states that most use of photography in schools will not fall under the Act), I did suggest that risk aversion was counter-productive and potentially compromised the setting's statutory duties. The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Guidance (UK Department for Education, 2017) specifically expects that technology should play a part in young people's education:

Technology: children recognise that a range of technology is used in places such as homes and schools. They select and use technology for particular purposes (p12)

As well as being part of 'Understanding the World', technology is also mentioned in the Department of Education's guidance under the headings of 'Being Imaginative' and 'Expressive Art and Design', where the use of technology for young people is encouraged in relation to communicating thoughts and feelings. Therefore, a setting that decides, due to lack of understanding of risk in relation to the use of technology, lack of training, or fear of inspection, to ban digital devices, may fail to deliver on its statutory duties.

The Early Years Toolkit published by the South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL, 2012) is an excellent resource for early years settings, detailing policies that should be in place to address concerns around digital risk:

- Acceptable Use Policy – How technology is used in the setting; agreement between setting and parents about the responsibilities of each;
- Internet Policy – How online technology is used within the setting and how its use is managed in a risk free manner;
- Camera and Image Policy – How digital photography is used in the setting; who is allowed to use it; storage of images; length of time for which images can be retained; whether parents can take photographs in the setting, etc.
- Mobile Phone Policy – Use of mobile phones by staff; management of their use in the setting; policy around parents' use in the setting;
- Internet Misuse Policy – Procedures if/when something goes wrong.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

If we prohibit, or use, digital technology for our convenience without considering the impact on the child, we risk hampering their development and resilience. We need to reflect upon the impact of technology on children's rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) highlights issues related to a number of rights:

Scenario	Rights Impacted
Tracking a child to ensure they are 'safe'	Article 3 (Best interests of the child) Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child) Article 16 (Right to privacy)
Removing 'risk' from the childcare setting by not using digital technology	Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child) Article 17 (Access to information; mass media) Article 28: (Right to education)
Digital pacification	Article 3 (Best interests of the child) Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child)
Excessive sharing of content about the child, without their consent or respect for their privacy	Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child) Article 16 (Right to privacy)

Children have a right to be safe (Article 6 - Life, Survival and Development) and should expect those who care for them to be fully informed and able to fulfil this right. However, safety must be considered alongside other rights. Parenting and early years settings lay the foundations for the child to grow into a rounded, resilient and empowered young adult. If these foundations are not laid effectively, owing to excessive risk aversion, the healthy development of the child may be compromised. By establishing potentially problematic behaviours in early life, such as dependence on digital pacification or acceptance of being monitoring or tracked, we risk that unhelpful behaviours will impact the child across the life course. Digital and online technology may introduce some risks (as well as many benefits) into children's lives. We therefore owe it to our children to reflect carefully on these emerging technologies as they are not going to go

away. We must seek to understand the risks they pose from a position of knowledge rather than fear, and keep fully informed in order to do the best for our children.

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