

'The tablet is my BFF': Practices and perceptions of children under 8 years old and their families

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Abstract

This article explores the practices of children under 8 years old with a tablet, focusing particularly on the home setting and on learning activities. Previous research has shown that children are being born in digital homes and coming into contact with digital media at increasingly younger ages. Also, the tablet is young children's favourite device. Our approach is qualitative, using interviews with families, articulated with activities suitable for children of this age range, and also participant observation. Our results show that the tablet is the children's favourite, due to the variety of activities it facilitates and also its portability, and children frequently have their own personal device. Their preferred activities are games, usually related to cartoon characters or toys that they already like, and these are significantly gendered. Children reveal developed digital skills, about which parents are frequently unaware. Both for parents and children, the

tablet is regarded as a "toy", and thus its pedagogical potential is under-explored. However, children learn other types of skills, such as problem solving, and independence. Most parents believe that children are not yet, at such a young age, exposed to many online dangers, mostly because they do not interact in social networks. Hence, parents monitor time of use, but not content. Yet children are actually exposed to risks, mostly on YouTube.

Keywords: Children under 8, young children, tablet, use practices, learning, digital technologies.

Introduction

Due to the fast pace of technological development over the last few decades, children are being born in digital homes and coming into contact with online media at increasingly younger ages (Hague &

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Payton, 2010; Kucirkova, 2011; Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake, 2012). Younger parents, aged from 25 to 45 years old, are themselves savvy digital users, and they allow their children access to a great variety of Internet-connected digital media (Findahl, 2013; Xiaoming & Atkins, 2004; Barr et al., 2005; Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Aidman, Heintz, Mazzarella & Wartella, 1990).

Most research on children's digital practices has, however, studied children over 8 years old (Arroz, Figueiredo & Sousa, 2009; Mawson, 2013; Given et al., 2014; Vatavu et al., 2014; Plowman, 2015), and thus our research addresses this gap.

Previous research points to the tablet as the preferred device for this age range (Chaudron et al., 2015; Plowman, 2015), one of the favourite "toys", a must-have for young children.

1. Children and tablets

1.1. Favourite activities

A report by OFCOM (2013) reveals that the use of tablets by young children is increasing rapidly among children from five to seven years old, and the most common practices are watching videos, playing games and browsing the Internet. Another study by CommonSense (2013) corroborates that three out of four children have access to mobile devices (smartphone and/or tablet) in the home. About practices, this report highlights games, watching videos or films and reading books.

Cotten, Shank & Anderson (2014) report

gender differences in the digital practices of children: boys predominantly play games, while girls engage in more diversified activities and multi-task more frequently.

Parents wish to share digital activities that they can enjoy with their children and also recognize that mobile devices are very efficient in keeping children entertained while they are busy with work or house chores. Thus, they allow children to use their devices from an early age, and eventually acquire personal devices for them (Plowman et al., 2008; Kucirnova, 2011; Genc, 2014).

1.2. Role of parents

Several studies agree that, at such an early age, although they are largely able to explore digital media independently, children often need guidance and support. Parents play a pivotal role, as they are the first mediators, it is with them that children share their first digital experiences. Children tend to look up to them as role models, and to mimic their practices and preferences (Warren, 2003; Livingstone, 2007; Plowman et al., 2008; Bittman et al., 2011; Craft, 2013; Kucirnova & Sakr, 2015; Lauricella, Wartella & Rideout, 2015).

The concept of parental mediation refers to the role played by parents as mediators of children's engagement with media, thus shaping their practices and perceptions (Dorr et al., 1989; Sang et al., 1993; Valkenburg et al., 2009).

More recent research on parental mediation has focused on digital media (Morentin et

al., 2014; Nikken & Jansz, 2013). There are several proposals that may be summed up as two trends: a) on the one hand, there are parents who control how their children use digital media (with younger children parents are more worried about time of use than content); b) on the other hand, there are parents who find engagement with digital technologies beneficial, and thus they support, help and teach (Barkin et al., 2006; Eastin et al., 2006; Rosen, 2008; Valcke et al., 2010).

1.3. Perceptions and attitudes; benefits and risks

The perceptions and attitudes of children concerning tablets are positive. McKenney & Voogt (2010) found that attitudes become increasingly positive as children grow up, as they become more frequent and diversified users. Also, girls usually have more positive attitudes than boys. This may be explained by the diversity of their uses, while boys mainly play games.

Concerning parents, Plowman, McPake & Stephen (2008) discuss the “technologization” of childhood, claiming that most parents do not regard this process as negative. In fact, most parents believe that digital technologies are important tools for their children’s professional future. Others add that they are a source of learning (mostly informal, because at such a young age children do not engage in many pedagogical activities on a tablet, neither at school nor at home). More negative perspectives are usually found among experts who tend to highlight

the risks to which young children are exposed.

Barreto & Adams (2011) studied parents’ perceptions of online dangers. Parents of children over 12 identify several risks, namely addiction, excessive digital immersion, disclosure of private information, plagiarism and cyberbullying. But parents of younger children do not perceive so many dangers, especially if children are not yet active in social networks. Parents of preschoolers (from 3 to 5 years) fear most for their children’s health, as they may get too excited or tired if they play for too long.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research questions

This article explores the following themes: a) the integration of a tablet into a home and the family dynamics associated with this device; b) children’s practices of use, their competencies, difficulties and preferences; c) the perceptions of parents and children concerning tablet use, focusing particularly on benefits versus risks.

2.2. Research design and sample

Our approach is exploratory and qualitative, and our main method is semi-structured interviews. These are supported by other techniques in order to facilitate data collection and encourage the participation of young children (e.g. board games, ‘digital tour’, activity with stickers), and also by participant observation.

We interviewed a sample of 25 families,

with children from 3 to 8 years old, who used at least one digital technology, at least once a week. The sample was selected theoretically according to Strauss & Corbin (1998), in order to obtain variety of variables such as gender of the child, family composition (both parents vs mono-parental; without vs with siblings; older vs younger siblings) and socioeconomical level. The visits took place between June and November 2015 and involved a group activity and different interviews with parents and children. The data were gathered as audio recordings and photographs, as well as participant observation notes made by the researchers and subsequently coded using thematic analysis, following Boyatzis (1998) and Braun & Clarke (2006).

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Table practices

The tablet is children's favourite device, as it is interactive, attractive and portable. As one mother noted, it is their "new BFF" (best friend forever). Children usually engage with one between finishing their homework and having their evening meal, or a little bit before bedtime. At the weekend, their use is more frequent. Most children have their own personal tablet. They mainly use it to play games, in many cases replacing a console, or even television, as they can watch similar content on YouTube. Children's tablets are loaded with games apps. Preferences concerning games are strongly gendered.

Watching videos on YouTube is the second most frequent activity mentioned by

children. Another common activity is taking photographs, including selfies. Some of the children know how to edit them on apps, adding props and words. They also like making videos.

Children rarely perform any educational or pedagogical activity on a tablet. Very few use them to support them in doing homework.

The only cases of the use of educational apps were mentioned by girls. One of them had apps for learning English and Maths, but they are far from being her favourites: "I don't really like maths." These apps were installed by parents or suggested by teachers.

3.2. Family dynamics

Most of the time, children use a tablet on their own. When parents are busy, allowing them to play with a tablet is the perfect strategy to keep them entertained and happy. The tablet is the new 'babysitter'. Thus, this device is more often a 'companion' for children than a source of family interaction. This lonely use exposes children to risks.

Concerning rules, although Goh et al. (2015) report that parents are often permissive when it comes to digital media, parents describe frequent 'negotiations' with their children, while children perceive rules as being imposed.

Most parents set restrictions after observing negative consequences of using a tablet for too long. One mother claimed she cannot spend quality time with her son anymore.

Others justify this rule with the fact that children have trouble falling asleep if they use a tablet just before bedtime. PT7m and PT7f told us how their oldest son, 7 years old, modifies his behaviour when playing with a tablet, leading them to restrict its time of use.

There was another rule mentioned by all families: children may not install bought apps. Parents believe it is not worth 'spending money' on apps related to games, but most do not discard the possibility of buying educational content.

3.3. Perceptions of benefits versus risks

YouTube is one of the most frequently used apps. Children search for videos they like, using different strategies to overcome their lack of proficiency in reading and writing. They follow suggestions from the app in the search box, or they choose suggested videos. Other children know how to identify letters and ask their parents or older siblings how to write the words desired for their search, memorizing their shape to reproduce them later. Children also know whether or not they are connected to the Internet. They know where in the home to get the best connection, they acknowledge that their parents' devices are usually faster than theirs and they complain about not having Wi-Fi at their grandparents' houses.

In spite of children developing all these skills and resourcefulness to play with tablets, most parents undervalue both their children's digital literacy and tablets' potential for learning. So, the tablet remains

a source of entertainment for children, in many ways a "toy" that extends other types of offline activities and preferences (Chaudron et al., 2014; Merchant, 2015).

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