



Digital families across the lifecourse: Briefing from Seminar 1 Children and digital technology



Digital families across the lifecourse is a knowledge exchange project from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute.

Background

There is increasing interest in the influence of digital technologies on everyday life. The Scottish Government's ambition is to increase the use of broadband across all communities in Scotland. Aims to improve the digital health of our population, to promote internet safety, and use technologies to support learning are well established. The digital families programme aims to add to this growing body of knowledge by providing opportunities to explore the increasing presence of domestic digital technologies within family life, and to debate both the benefits and pressures these technologies bring. Organised within three groupings – childhoods, family life and older age and caring – the programme will address a range of issues, including:

- the different experiences of rural and urban families;
- the role of digital communication in the lives of trans-national families;
- the impact of digital technologies on cross generational relationships within families;
- the contributions that digital technologies can have in maintaining and developing social networks across the lifecourse;
- the effect of digital technologies on education, work/life balance, lifelong learning and wellbeing; and
- the social and economic inequalities that arise from different access to, and adoption and use of, technologies across the lifecourse
- the differential experiences of 'digital natives' vs 'digital immigrants'

The digital families programme aims to consider these issues within a broader political and social context, to focus our understandings of the impact of domestic technologies on family life and to create a vision for research, policy and practice in Scotland in 2016 and beyond.

Seminar 1: Children and digital technology

50 people attended the Seminar, held in Glasgow at the Scottish Universities Insight Institute on 18 November 2015. Delegates included academics, practitioners, policy makers and voluntary sector representatives from a wide range of organisations.

The aims of the seminar were:

1. To explore how digital technologies are changing childhood, including both positive and negative factors
2. To identify key issues in the influence of digital technologies on children, and how to address these
3. To develop new collaborations between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers interested in taking issues forward

Speakers and presentations

Professor Sam Punch (Professor of Sociology) and Dr Joanne Westwood (Senior Lecturer in Social Work) both from the University of Stirling introduced the seminar and provided a background presentation.

[Download the presentation here](#)

Sam presented the aims of the Digital Families programme and the expectations for Seminar 1, while Joanne highlighted some of the issues around the use of digital technology by young people, and the impact on family life.

Key aims of the Digital Families programme:

1. Understand how digital technologies are impacting on family life and personal relationships in Scotland.
2. Identify the issues that families are grappling with in relation to digital advances, and stimulate new ways of addressing these.
3. Foster innovative collaborations between academics and non-academics with the potential to both raise new questions and inform policy and practice.
4. Establish a 'digital families' research network.

Joanne provided some context by describing the unprecedented growth in the use of digital technologies by young people. There are concerns about the impact of these changes on children and young people, including fears about isolation, addiction, online bullying, concentration, emotional health the negative impact on physical health (obesity, eyesight, posture). There are also concerns about children accessing inappropriate material, keeping secrets from their parents and about online privacy and safety. But is this a 'moral panic'? Digital technologies can strengthen family connections in a number of ways. The use of technology is now important in young people's social lives.

Dr Christine Stephen, Research Fellow at the School of Education, University of Stirling, gave her presentation on 'Growing up in a digital age: Young children and digital technologies'.

Christine considered the questions and issues:

1. To what extent do young children engage with digital technologies?
2. What kind of play is afforded by digital technologies?
3. Do digital technologies support learning?
4. Mediating influence of children's perspectives, families and educators.

The kinds of play afforded by digital technologies are: Exploration, Problem-solving, Skill-acquisition, Intentional use, Symbolic, Innovative/creative. Digital technologies can support learning but the technology alone is not enough. Children have personal preferences and are discrediting users when it comes to technology. Children's use of technology is mediated by family and educators.

In summary, digital technologies are welcomed as additional resources but are not replacing traditional activities and playthings. There is no definition of 'digital play' – it is more productive to focus on what these resources afford for children. There is evidence of encounters with digital resources supporting operational learning, knowledge and understanding of the world and positive dispositions to learn.

[Download Christine's presentation here](#)

Dr Natalia Kucirkova, Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, gave her presentation on 'Digital childhood: myths and realities'.

Children today spend more time on screen-based activities, use more digital devices at a younger age while touch-screen technology is pervasive, even in lower income homes. But in terms of myths and realities, what are the key issues? Natalia suggests that these key issues are:

1. Pedagogy versus technology
2. Technology versus nature
3. All technology is equal
4. Technology is either good or bad
5. Strategies to influence attitudes

The main messages from the research are:

1. Be clear about what you mean by technology, be more specific to predict impact & assess merit
2. Learning is situated (including w. iPads & apps), consider the child and the complex interrelationships in relation to the learning environment
3. Be the change you want to see in the world, join communities and forums to share best practice & resources and address common challenges

[Download Natalia's presentation here](#)

Discussion

Discussion 1 – delegates participated in roundtable discussions and were asked to consider the following:

1. Reflect on what you have heard so far. What do you recognise? What is new to you?
2. What are the benefits and challenges associated with children's use of digital technology?
3. What are your top 3 issues – for action and/or for further research?

From these discussions, the following topics were identified for further discussion.

1. Access to technology. What is the impact of different access on equalities and inclusion issues?
2. Educational opportunities and challenges – what are the implications for teachers, practitioners, policy, funding, parental involvement?
3. Everyday relationships – what is the impact of technology on everyday relationships between family members and between friends?
4. Impact of technology on children's social, emotional and cognitive development and emotional literacy
5. State of current knowledge – what do we know? How do we get message out to practitioners, families and policy? What are the gaps?
6. How can we research digital life? What are the methods and challenges? How can we overcome them?
7. Growing up on-line: who controls information and images about you as you grow up? How to support and inform young people to manage an on-line identity.

Key questions and action points from the discussions

1. Access to technology. What is the impact of different access on equalities and inclusion issues?

A broad concept of 'technology' is needed to when considering access. Technology is more than the device – it is also infrastructure, content universality of platforms, broadband availability.

Factors that can influence access to digital technology – cost, mindset, attitude, understanding, skills, health, location. However, access with support for use when required is not very useful.

The approach to children's access to digital technology is often very cautious, compares with the very positive message for adult digital inclusion.

2. Educational opportunities and challenges – what are the implications for teachers, practitioners, policy, funding, parental involvement?

Teachers need time to learn how to embed technology into teaching. The landscape is very varied in terms of confidence and leadership. Teachers can find it hard to cope with the speed of change. We should acknowledge the role of children and young people in 'teaching teachers'.

Concerns about the impact on children's concentration and focus, where the whole class have ipads. The ethics around the sharing of images should be discussed before children start using social media. Schools should work more collaboratively e.g with Police Scotland, on the issues of on-line safety.

Gaps in knowledge:

What are the differences between socio-economic groups in terms of accessing on-line spaces?

What are the roles of schools and parents? Are the boundaries blurred? (e.g. around issues of on-line bullying)

What is the best way of improving the delivery of CPD material on digital learning to teachers? (it is not enough to have one 'IT specialist' in each school)

How important is it to designate 'tech-free' time for children and young people?

How is the digital world shaping young people's identities? Is it now easier for children to engage with other children with similar interests?

3. Everyday relationships – what is the impact of technology on everyday relationships between family members and between friends?

We don't know much about this area. There is such diversity in the ways that people use digital technology. We have a tendency to draw on anecdotal examples but have limited real 'evidence'. For example, we hear a lot about on-line bullying but a survey for Respectme found that face-to-face bullying remains more prevalent. There is an issue around scaremongering – we need to use make more use of positive evidence around how digital technology can be used for building and maintaining relationships.

Parents say that they have lots of concerns about technology yet they let their children access it regularly – is there a mis-match between what parents say and what they do? Parents are role models and should reflect more on their own on-line behaviour.

How do policy and support organisations keep up when the technology develops so quickly? E.g. resources were developed about safety on Facebook but now young people are using SnapChat. Perhaps this is not about the technology but about ‘adult free’ space for young people. This was the same for previous generations (in the physical world).

Would be interesting to look at gender differences in the use of social media and how it can impact on extroverts vs introverts.

There are interesting differences between online and face-to-face communication practices e.g. misinterpretation, body language, subtleties.

Are parents really panicking as the moral panics suggest?

Actions:

Organisations should spread information about these diverse issues and embrace the impact of technologies on relationships. They should promote positive stories e.g. use of technology to facilitate communication in migrant and separated families.

Adults and parents should remember that the most important factor is the quality of the parent-child relationship, not the device. Adults should not prohibit access to devices but embrace conversation about the positives and negatives of digital technology.

4. Impact of technology on children’s social, emotional and cognitive development and emotional literacy

We don’t know as much as we should about this topic. Longitudinal research is required to examine these issues. We should not assume that technology is ‘bad’ for children’s emotional development – there is a need for balance.

Future research and knowledge exchange should be linked to the Mental Health Strategy for Scotland. We need more research on the impact of social media on mental health and this should be communicated outwith academia (in a format similar to today’s seminar).

Children and young people should be taught how and where to use technology. Peer mentoring is effective and there should be more of it.

5. State of current knowledge – what do we know? How do we get message out to practitioners, families and policy? What are the gaps?

Dissemination about the [MOOC](#) course available from the Open University (FutureLearn) 'Children in the digital age'.

24/7 phone use. What do we know about this?

How much do we know from children and young people themselves about how technology is affecting their daily lives?

Actions:

1. Map out the disciplines required to collaborate to deliver new research and create new knowledge.
2. Create briefings from existing literature reviews (CRFR?)
3. Identify other key researchers working on these topics and link to a Digital Families network.
4. Policy led research?
5. Promote a 'Scotland wide' approach to digital ?
6. Map out and seek to influence the CPD and training currently delivered for teachers, early years practitioners, social work, youth work etc.. on these issues.

6. How can we research digital life? What are the methods and challenges? How can we overcome them?

Borrow/ develop methods used in non-academic research / commercial research e.g. Google analytics

Consider ethical questions around the use of publicly available data/ big data

Consider reliability/ trust in data collection methods – data quality and integrity

Develop the research skills and expertise required for carrying out research on digital life and current and future researchers.

Policy appears to focus on digital access or participation but not about the levels and type of engagement.

Interdisciplinary research methods should develop beyond traditional methods (surveys, interviews etc..) Develop new digital methods?

7. Growing up on-line: who controls information and images about you as you grow up? How to support and inform young people to manage an on-line identity.

Acknowledge that the pace of change has an impact on our ability to advise younger people.

Look into the 'construction of identity' – particularly for adolescent girls.

Multiple online identities.

Parents also building online identities e.g. through the posting of baby photos on Facebook

Knowledge/ visibility/ permission – in the digital age, have we lost the right to be forgotten?

We need to make sure that young people are aware of their rights in relation to the above – Young Scot. I-rights. We need principles, not 'rules'.

We need to identify narratives from young people themselves.

Research summary infographic

To accompany the seminar, an infographic sheet was produced, to highlight some key statistics about children and their use of digital technology.

[Download the infographic here](#)

Twitter

A number of delegates tweeted throughout the day using [#digifam1516](#). Following the seminar, this hashtag has been used to highlight further items of interest in relation to the digital families agenda,

Blog

Following the seminar, one of the participants, Professor David McGillivray, Chair in Event and Digital Cultures at The University of the West of Scotland, posted a blog summarising his thoughts about the seminar.

[Read David's blog post here](#)

Feedback from delegates

Selected comments from SU11 evaluation forms

Most interesting/ useful element

Being able to interact with other individuals interested in digital technologies and impact on children and young people.

The discussion in the afternoon. Well focused on different topics.

Discussion on the effects of technology on mental health – very motivating and interesting.

The discussion about upskilling teachers to use IT in class and building confidence in teachers to use IT effectively.

Hearing about the research

Meeting practitioners

Really great event – I enjoyed the breadth of topics

What will you take away from you?

An enthusiasm to take my research forward!

A developing knowledge of the use of digital technologies in the lives of young people

The emotional and social effects of technology needs to be researched as much as the intellectual and physical effects – I see a gap!

Lots of contacts, ideas and signposts

Technology is not the devil – children find balance themselves.

Inspiration, contacts, shared knowledge

So much information, knowledge and understanding

Really useful for building knowledge/ networks across disciplines

Project team

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Project webpages

<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/digital-families-across-the-lifecycle/>

<http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Programmes20152016/DigitalFamilies.aspx>