'Is that appropriate?' Parental judgements about the risks and opportunities of teenagers' digital media use

The notion of inappropriateness is vague and subjective, yet often used by teachers, cyber safety educators, the media and other authority figures to highlight online material and behaviours which may pose a risk to children. For many parents, the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate uses of digital media can be blurry and do not always align with the cyber safety advice. For www.parenting.digital, Catherine Page Jeffery discusses her research on how parents make judgements about appropriateness showing that they are struggling to navigate between what might enhance or disrupt their child's development.

"That's inappropriate" – a somewhat surprising, yet frequent, claim made by my eight-year-old daughter about various online media. The characterisation of entire social media platforms such as Tik Tok, or any image with even the slightest hint of nudity as inappropriate by my daughter (before she has even set a virtual foot within them), suggests that the cyber safety messages from her school have been received loud and clear. Some of the online material most commonly deemed inappropriate by educators and experts includes violent content, pornography, sites promoting self-harm, and sites thought to be frequented by online predators. Practices typically labelled as inappropriate and harmful to children include cyberbullying and sexting.

Amongst the more 'appropriate' uses of digital media is its use for children's schooling and educational purposes, which is generally valued and widely encouraged. This is especially the case in Australia, where digital media have long been touted as providing numerous opportunities and benefits for children, and computer use in schools is the highest throughout the OECD. Parents are thus tasked with regulating their children's digital media use not only to protect them from the risks of inappropriate content and conduct, but also to foster appropriate, educational uses of digital media.

How do parents make judgements about appropriateness?

Despite many of the unequivocal claims about the appropriateness or otherwise of different media-related content and activities, my study found that for parents the distinctions are not always clear. Through focus groups and interviews with 40 Australian parents of teenagers aged 12 – 16, my study explored parents' concerns about their children's use of digital media. Unsurprisingly, it found that parents considered extreme forms of online content depicting violence, self-harm or pornography, as well as sexualised self-expression by young people, as inappropriate for their children. Parents, however, judged the appropriateness of other online activities in terms of whether they had the potential to enhance or disrupt their child's development.

Attention and critical thinking

Parents in my study were somewhat sceptical of claims about the educational opportunities offered by digital media. They expressed concern about the impact of digital media on their child's physical brain development, their attention spans, and their critical thinking skills. Parents observed their children navigating multiple online environments simultaneously, including social media, while (allegedly) completing their homework on devices. They worried that this simultaneous 'surface engagement' with tasks may be shortening their attention spans and compromising their critical thinking skills, jeopardising their intellectual development. As one parent said:

> Not being able to focus on a long piece of writing, it's detrimental to your thought processes … It kinds of stunts your mental capacities.

Parents suggested that children need to establish the foundations of learning offline before migrating to digital technologies. In other words, children must be allowed to follow the normal developmental learning trajectory, which involves mastering skills offline first. As one parent said in relation to her daughter's use of digital media for her schooling:

> I think they've got to get the foundations right, and I think they can skip that if they're just given a tablet.

Negative online interaction and cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is one example of 'inappropriate' online behaviour that presents a risk to children. Parents, however, were not so hasty to characterise their children's online peer conflict in this way. While acknowledging the seriousness of overt, targeted bullying intended to cause harm, parents suggested that much more common behaviours of online drama, gossip and exclusion – which would still be captured by many cyberbullying definitions – were not a serious cause for alarm.

Online conflict and drama were considered by parents to be an extension of offline peer relationships, and therefore something that has long been part and parcel of growing up. Parents recognised that these behaviours could be distressing and hurtful, but at the same time thought that these experiences provided a learning and development opportunity for their children, who need to build resilience, navigate peer relationships, and learn how to cope with hurt, betrayal and exclusion, both on- and off-line. As such, rather than presenting a serious risk to children's normal development, parents considered that online conflict and exclusion provided an opportunity for enhancing their child's development by cultivating and nurturing their capacity for resilience and conflict resolution.

What does this mean for cyber safety education and policy?

The accounts shared by parents in my study highlight that the boundaries between risk and opportunity, inappropriate and appropriate online activity, are dynamic, subjective and context-dependent. In many cases, they do not map neatly onto the risk/ opportunity binary that is present in many of the cyber safety narratives and resources.

Parents' accounts suggest that some activities labelled inappropriate and risky, such as online bullying, may provide opportunities to enhance their child's development, as they can facilitate learning, growth and resilience. By contrast, parents considered some activities promoted as being appropriate and beneficial, such as educational uses of technology, to threaten their children's learning and development in many ways.

The blurring of traditional boundaries between inappropriate/ appropriate and risk/ opportunity has important practical and policy implications. First, it confirms earlier studies which show that balancing the risks and opportunities of digital media is one of the key challenges facing contemporary parents and that overly restrictive regulation of children's media use may no longer be a realistic option for parents. Second, it suggests that government policies, as well as cyber safety resources, need to recognise and account for the various ways that young people use digital media and the complex range of both risks and opportunities engendered in children's online activities.

First published at www.parenting.digital, this post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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