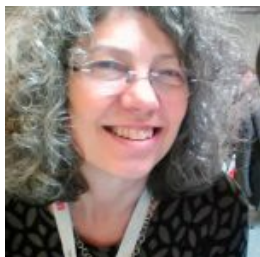


## “I recognise how important technology is, now more than ever”: the dilemmas of digital parenting



*At a time so many everyday activities have gone online, parents are confronting the need to balance the desire to ensure children’s online participation and future opportunities with traditional “screen time” advice. For [www.parenting.digital](http://www.parenting.digital), [Sonia Livingstone](#) discusses the challenges of digital parenting in lower socio-economic status households as we learn from Ariam and her daughters (from Sonia’s [new book](#)) how they actively negotiate “the rules” around technology use.*

Ariam Parkes, originally from Eritrea, is a stay-at-home mother to three girls (aged two to nine) whom she is raising in privately-owned home on a council estate in inner London with her Irish husband. Ariam has a quiet but firm grasp on what she thinks is [acceptable \(and not acceptable\)](#) within her family. Although the family isn’t well-off (with one income they live on less than £40,000/year) nine-year-old Elen describes that they have:

Playmobil. Board games. We have millions of them. Musical instruments... swimming costumes. We have arts and crafts, dancing, a pet, Lego... Barbie, a bicycle, a TV, a football, two Wii controllers, iPad, sort of an old MP3, a computer... laptop.

When nearly three-year-old Sarah interjects “we got ‘puters!” Elen corrects, “we sort of have three computers, but one of them doesn’t work.”

Ariam’s experience as a parent in London and her emphasis on [giving her daughters resources](#) is coloured by her own childhood growing up in Eritrea and then as a refugee in the Sudan. She made her own way to London and contrasts the array of opportunities her daughters have in London, where they are enrolled in dance, violin, piano, swimming lessons and beyond, with her own childhood. She tells us:

I grew up in Africa and I didn’t have, you know, any of those opportunities. I want them to grow up having... the chance to try a wide, kind of activities... so they can decide what they want to do.

Ariam laments that although she was bright in school she couldn’t “really do much more with myself because access wasn’t there... They’re here and they’ve got the potential and they’ve got to take the chance and do well.” And so Ariam spends considerable time and financial resources shuttling her daughters to different lessons, along with extra tuition for Elen to study for the [11-plus exam](#) that will help her compete for a spot in a more elite secondary school.

The girls are, relative to their ages, [confident users of digital technologies](#). Elen is on the ‘digital leaders’ team at her local primary school, helping the IT teacher with set-up for some audio-visual equipment and taking part in some basic [coding and robotics activities](#) after-school. As Elen grows up her parents want to support her digital interests and independence, but are also [occasionally frustrated](#) by these. They gave her a Kindle Fire pre-loaded with books and some apps for Christmas but as Elen describes:

For a week I wouldn’t talk to anyone, I wouldn’t go outside. It was in the countryside... And we made like a playground in our back garden... But I never played in it. I just sat there and wanted to be on my Kindle.

Ariam does not put explicit rules in place but instead she says that she “kind of, play[s] it by ear. If I think they’ve been on it [the family iPad or Elen’s Kindle] too much I’ll take it away. They normally try to test... but I just take it away and say that’s enough.” Unlike some other families in our study, Ariam says this with confidence – knowing that she can manage any pushback from her daughters and not questioning whether hers is the right decision.

The family had purchased a Wii game player and had, for a period, enjoyed playing together when extended family and friends had come over, but when one of the controllers broke they had neglected to repair it so had, in Ariam’s words “fizzled out.” Although she provides her daughters with digital resources she explicitly privileges the other, non-digital, ways that they spend time together, detailing how “we go for walks in the park or they go cycling with their dad... so it’s not *all bad*.”

On the one hand she embraces technology is and really wants her daughters to “keep on top of that,” recognising “how important technology is now, you know, more than ever.” But on the other, it “bothers” her that her daughters watch endless YouTube videos of pop videos that she worries are inappropriate or simply “brain-dead” or “annoying.”

Elen and Ariam had gotten into a few power struggles related to technology of late. Recognising the [powerful motivation](#) that her daughter’s Kindle represents, Ariam punished her daughter for a non-technology related misbehaviour by taking the Kindle away for a week. Immediately contrite, Elen changed her behaviour because, as Ariam put it, “she really desperately wanted her Kindle and she would have done anything then.” The second struggle was about when Elen will get her own phone, something at nearly 10 she is anxious for and that several of her peers already have. For Ariam it is “too soon,” in part because she finds her own phone “very distracting” but also because she worries that if Elen has a phone, unlike with her Kindle, she will be using it out of the house and not in a “controlled environment... it’s kind of exposing her out to the wider world a bit more... and I wouldn’t be able to know about it.”

While on the one hand Ariam trusts Elen to be sensible, knowing that “ninety per cent of the time” Elen won’t look at things that Ariam feels are inappropriate, the potential to access social media fills Ariam with trepidation. Ultimately, Ariam’s main “parenting rule” is that:

I’ve got to bring her up right and hopefully she’ll make the right choices. And she might make a few mistakes along the way, but you know, generally, you just have to let them learn and trust them.

In many ways the Parkes family represent [practices and dilemmas](#) familiar across the 73 families in our study – what to allow children [access to](#), how to balance between wanting to provide coveted devices and [managing their use](#). Yet families each have their own histories, beliefs, [values and desires](#). Analysing the relationships in this family, both around and beyond digital media, we see Ariam’s [desire to be a “good” parent](#) and yet that this is open to interpretation and contestation. Ariam engages intensively with her daughters, even volunteering as a school governor to ensure that her daughter’s low-performing school improves where possible. The identities and trajectories of mother and daughters are entangled, inextricable from each other. Yet both Ariam and Elen acknowledge that Elen is becoming more independent, and the acquisition of the phone has become the totemic symbol that demarcates that boundary.

*First published at [www.parenting.digital](http://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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