

Parenting for a Digital Future... the book!



This post introduces our forthcoming book, [Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape our children's lives](#). Based on in-depth interviews of British parents, educators and children, we ask how parents are tackling the challenges of the digital media landscape. We identified three main approaches to digital parenting, 'embracing', 'challenging' and 'resisting', that were adopted by groups of parent across different backgrounds. [Sonia Livingstone](#) is Professor of Social Psychology at LSE's [Department of Media and Communications](#) and

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In policy predictions and in the news, by their peers and by their children's teachers, parents are asked to consider radically different visions of life in the 'digital age'. On the one hand, there are promises of [digital jobs requiring 21st-century skills](#), new avenues for learning and creativity and expression. On the other, digital technologies seem to lead to social alienation, [addiction](#) and [time-wasting](#).

In a time when nothing stands still, the risks and opportunities of new technologies and media are offered up long before the previous ones have been worked out. Only yesterday we were questioned constantly about [Minecraft and Pokemon Go](#), today [Fortnite](#), who can predict what will be next? How do parents feel their way through this radically shifting landscape? How do they balance [hopes and fears](#), for themselves and their children as they prepare for the prospect of a digital future? Who and what helps or supports them (or does not)? And how do debates about digital technologies – in all their evocative symbolism and real-world consequences – come to crystallize the anxieties perhaps more [properly attributed](#) to other profound [social shifts](#)?

These are some of the thorny questions we tackle in our forthcoming book, *Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape our children's lives*. As we near delivering the manuscript to our publisher ([Oxford University Press](#)) and begin to move on to new ventures (of which, more soon), we wanted to take this moment to share some of the insights and themes that our book will explore.

How do parents find their digital parenting solutions?

The book is based on in-depth interviews with British parents, educators and children, put into context by a [nationally-representative survey](#) of over 2,000 parents. Learning from our previous work on [The class: Living and learning in the digital age](#), we examine how parents look back to their own (often) pre-digital childhoods and forward to an unknown and unknowable future. *Although we contend that parallel shifts – political, economic, social – are no less consequential, it is the absence then and presence now of the absorbing, glowing screen that seems to mark the difference.*

In our interviews with parents we found them grappling with immediate puzzles: when should *my child* have a smartphone? How long can they spend on screens of one kind or another? How much is [too much to share on social media](#)? What will using a [tablet do to my baby's brain](#)? [What is coding and should we sign up](#) for a class?

Some of these are here-and-now questions, yet others look ahead: how can we prepare for an uncertain future, for jobs which haven't been invented yet, for a world so different from that which we grew up in ourselves? Ours is not primarily an advice book (although we have [attempted this elsewhere](#), and are glad that [others](#) are also [stepping forward](#) to offer their [wisdom](#)). Rather our aim is to show how parents come to find their *own answers*, based in their distinctive [values, resources and experiences](#) and what happens when they put them into practice. We also identify where they need [more support with digital parenting](#), and in what ways the problems parents face go much deeper.

Embrace, balance, resist: three genres of digital parenting

Reflecting on the experiences of parents of babies and of teens, those living in multi-million-pound homes or in council flats, we identify three categories or 'genres' through which we can describe approaches to digital parenting. These genres are clusters of practices rather than categories of people or families – for sometimes a parent might engage in one set of practices at one moment or with one child, and then switch when another child or situation demands. They are:

- **Embrace**, in which parents seek out digital technologies either for themselves or for their children to ease family life or to gain valued professional or academic skills.
- **Balance**, in which parents try to hedge their bets by encouraging some digital practices and not others, often ad hoc, weighing opportunities and risks felt in the present or anticipated in the future.
- **Resist**, in which parents articulate their efforts as attempting, at least some of the time, to stem the seemingly unstoppable incursion of digital technology into family life.

These genres are animated and made meaningful by being underpinned by particular values, beliefs and [imagined futures](#) in ways that are not always conscious or coherent. Sometimes they have unsettling or unintended consequences.

Embracing means positioning oneself 'ahead of the curve,' and so one may feel exposed, acting before the social norms and resources can offer support.

Balancing is an active and effortful process, like standing on a log. Not simply a compromise, it invites a constant self-questioning and adjustment – am I getting it right? How can I tell?

Resisting may mean worrying about missing out professionally or personally, taking a risk by not doing what everyone else seems to be doing. For some parents, seeking to resist comes in response to some kind of trouble. Yet we were also surprised by how often resistance was less reactive than value-driven, reflecting a desire to prioritise other non-digital activities and visions of the future, sometimes as a way of resisting social pressures and commercialism more generally.

Each genre embeds values that parents seek to adhere to or judge themselves against. Parents may experience anxiety as they ask themselves – did I get it right; will it pay off? Of course, similar questions apply also to sleeping, eating, behaviour, achievement in school and more. But we show how normative questions are especially fraught in relation to digital technologies, for [the digital adds its own peculiar twist](#), and because since little precedent exists, a new generation of parents feels they must work things out afresh.

Summary of the book

The book has seven chapters, which explore these questions from different angles.

- **Chapter 1** establishes the stakes of ‘digital parenting’ in a time of social, economic and political change, including the rise of the ‘risk society’ in which parents feel responsible (and are often made responsible by others) for ensuring their child’s individual life chances.
- **Chapter 2** takes the frame of a ‘day in the life’ to reveal the multiple ways in which digital technologies are [embedded in family life](#), including waking up, going to work and school, coming home to relax, play, eat and connect, and going to sleep. Here we examine how [debates around ‘screen time’](#) are put into practice in the daily lives of diverse families.
- **Chapter 3** considers the (unequal) resources – not only economic but also social capital – in impacting on how parents approach technology. We contrast the experiences of families living in very different circumstances, finding that most families irrespective of income or education now share a pressurised approach to parenting in which efforts must be made (and resources found) to shore children up against a risky digital future, yet with very unequal consequences.
- **Chapter 4** turns to those who already, or who are grappling with whether to, embrace the idea of a digital future, by considering ‘geeks’ both young and old. Although these parents and children are in many ways exceptional, their stories reveal the considerable lifestyle and identity commitment that is required in adopting the premise – promoted by both public and private sectors – that the future is digital.
- **Chapter 5** focuses on a group who experience an intensified version of the struggle to balance risks and opportunities – parents of children with special educational needs and [disabilities](#), especially children with autism. These parents, we argue, have even less support – and often more acute hopes and fears – when they consider how to balance between embrace and resistance of their children’s digital interests.
- **Chapter 6** explores how parents conceive of the ‘learning’ potential of technology and how they conceive of digital technologies as ‘creative’. We bring in our observations of digital learning sites such as [code clubs and makerspaces](#), including the voices of educators as they look towards parents, questioning how parents are, and how they might be addressed as, partners in, and supports for, children’s digital learning.
- **Chapter 7** draws our conclusions, showing how the genres of practice – embrace, balance, resist – map on to instrumental or romantic visions of technology in children’s futures, with tangible consequences for families in the present.

Academic writing and publishing, we admit, do not move at the breakneck pace of technological change. So while we await reviews and revisions we will continue to blog some periodic sneak peeks. Please do share your feedback, either by contacting us on s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk or find us on Twitter at [@Livingstone_S](https://twitter.com/Livingstone_S) and [@aliciablumross](https://twitter.com/aliciablumross).

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