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## How parents make the future



*Alicia Blum-Ross looks at children's digital 'future', and the 'intense anxiety' experienced by some parents in finding a balance between maximising their children's opportunities and future prospects, and limiting, for example, their 'screen time'. Alicia is a researcher at the LSE's*

*Department of Media and Communications. She is interested in youth media production and is part of the [Parenting for a Digital Future](#) research project.*

What does the future hold? That abstract destination – just *there* on the horizon, but out of reach – is fantasised about by policy-makers, researchers and parents, as a space of possibility, and of potential risk. The future, as anthropologist [Arjun Appadurai](#) describes it in a [recent book](#), is not yet a 'fact', but brought into being through a combination of 'imagination, anticipation, and aspiration.

[Judith Warner](#) describes modern parenting (especially mothering) as characterised by [intense anxiety](#) – much of which is connected to visions of the future. Parents are told that their actions (or inactions) in their children's '[early years](#)' can have serious consequences in later life. On the one hand, this is a kind of agency, reminding parents that they have some power to make a change. On the other, as described by



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...ured, this form of 'parental determinism' can have a negative  
ts feel as though they are to blame if they don't  
(or often can't) 'optimise' their children's environment.

## A dilemma of modern parenting

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While listening recently to one of my favourite **podcasts**, I was reminded how often this anxiety rests on the seemingly inevitable relationship between digital technology and children's future prospects. In the podcast, the host interviews parents navigating between wanting to limit their children's 'screen time', but at the same time, worrying that their children will be 'left behind' if they do.



Credit: W. Vota, CC BY-NC-SA 2

## Shaping the future

The very concept that people have the power to participate in shaping their own future is relatively recent. **Barbara Adam describes** how from the time of the Enlightenment people started feeling a greater sense of responsibility towards the future. Over time, 'the future [became] no longer a mere continuation of the past but ... a consequence of actions in the present.' In order to have an impact on the future, individuals need to imagine what they hope the future *will* look like – or sometimes what they hope it *won't* look like – so they can decide what to do. In many cases this is based on individual experience, for example, parents wanting their children to grow up to be either similar to how they are, or to avoid some of the challenges they themselves have faced.

Here are two examples of how parents may shape their children's future. The first is children acquiring **language** at young ages – which is

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...a predictor of later academic success. Well before the  
with language development, Levine et al  
studied Mexican mothers' **'parental belief systems'** around education,  
and how their own experiences of school influenced their interactions  
with their children.

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Their research compared children whose mothers had had some  
schooling versus those who hadn't. The children whose mothers had  
experienced school were more likely to have bigger vocabularies (and  
score higher on tests) as older children. This, the researchers  
proposed, was because the mothers who had gone to school implicitly  
prized their children's 'verbal ability', knowing from their own  
experience that public speaking is the 'kind of skill ... that confers an  
advantage in school.' It's not necessarily that this is the **'concerted  
cultivation'** (that we wrote about previously) by the mothers in a direct  
way, so much as through their own experience they were able to  
anticipate their children's future needs and prepare for them.

Although some of the parents in our research feel nervous that their  
children's futures may be so different from their own that they don't  
know how to support them, many use their own (often non-digital)  
experiences as a starting point.

The second example concerns a parent we interviewed who was  
trained as a creative artist. Although she didn't really use digital media  
in her own career, she recognised that her daughter seemed to have  
an interest in thinking about design, which was especially notable  
because she was struggling in formal schooling. She started taking her  
daughter to a London **Makerspace** to use a 3D printer, and helped her  
learn the basics of **3D modelling software**. She explained to us how she  
hoped these skills might help her daughter find future employment  
perhaps, or at the very least, something to enjoy and build her  
confidence in the present.

We don't know what will happen when her daughter grows up (she's  
only 11, so career choices or further study are still some way away),  
but at the moment it seems likely that these interests may be  
something she pursues for employment or pleasure. Research shows  
that **recognising young people's creative interests** and helping them  
access mentors can make a difference in terms of what they choose to  
pursue in the future. So this mother's imaginary of her daughter's

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ed by her own life, might well have an impact on  
poses to do.

## Parenting in the present

What we can see from these two very different examples are that  
parents' own experiences and expectations of what might come next  
for their children are significant in how they imagine, prepare for and  
anticipate the future. And how they imagine their children's future, and  
presumably how they feel about themselves, influences how they  
parent in the present.

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**Morgan Ames** June 13, 2015 at 12:39 am - [Reply](#)

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Love this work – both here and at DML! In my own research

strong class differences in parents' attitudes

towards kids' tech use, where middle-class parents were

highly anxious and restrictive, and working-class parents were more

permissive, seeing tech not as something that took away from family

time but could contribute to it – echoing Annette Lareau's findings

about parenting strategies more generally (our paper on this is here:

<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1958834>). Have you found a pattern like that in your research so far?

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**Alicia Blum-Ross** June 13, 2015 at 7:54 pm - [Reply](#)

Hi Morgan! Yes we have been finding some differences,

notably in his much middle class parents seem to feel

judged (judge themselves, judge and are judged by others) but we have

been finding many more working class parents engaging in intensive

parenting (hays) than we would have expected – hiring tutors, going to

classes etc despite having v few financial or time resources.

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