

Where do US mothers go on the internet to get information?

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Parents are increasingly looking to the internet for information, help and advice. **Juyoung Jang**, **Jodi Dworkin** and **Heather Hessel** explore the varying online spaces mothers, in particular, visit, and how they can be effectively supported in their parenting roles. Juyoung is a Visiting Scholar in

the **Chao Center for Asian Studies** at Rice University, where she was a postdoctoral fellow, Jodi is an Associate Professor and Extension Specialist in the **Department of Family Social Science** at the University of Minnesota, and Heather is a doctoral student in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota.

Parents are going online looking for both **information** and **social support**, and they now have a large array of choices about where they can find helpful resources. However, while information provided by traditional sources, such as medical websites, tends to be explanatory, this may satisfy general questions but not all the dynamic information needs related to the **challenges** of raising children these days. More experience-based and interactive online information spaces have subsequently evolved to help parents learn through dialogue and the personal experience of other parents.

Online spaces and tools

Using a subsample of US parents from our larger **Parenting 2.0** study¹, we **analysed** data to better understand what kinds of information-seeking activities mothers were doing in a variety of different online spaces. Because mothers and fathers have different levels and patterns of online **information-seeking**, and our data had unbalanced sample sizes, we focus here on mothers.

We looked at four types of online spaces and tools that mothers use to help them answer parenting questions: from the more interactive blogs and discussion boards/chatrooms to **the more**

static emailed newsletters and online classes. And we focused on six information-seeking activities that mothers use these tools for:

- seeking information, advice or support about parenting and families
- identifying problems, warning signs or diagnoses the child(ren) might have
- resolving conflicting parenting information or guidance
- exploring different family or parenting perspectives
- confirming that what they are already doing or what they believe as a parent is right
- checking to see if something their child is doing is normal.

Online information-seeking activities

We identified five groups of mothers based on patterns of their online information-seeking activities, each with features reflecting their distinct parenting situations and concerns:

- The most common was what we called the *limited gap-bridging*. These mothers reported only seeking information, advice or support about parenting and families, but were using all four online spaces to do so.
- Mothers in the *active gap-bridging* group reported participating in all six of the information-seeking activities using all four online spaces.

These first two groups reveal that few mothers are quite active in their use of different online spaces while many others limit their use to specific activities. This finding is consistent with **other studies** that have found a few individuals account for the majority of activity on websites. The remaining three groups of mothers, however, present a more complex picture.

- The *problem identifiers* reported both information-seeking and working to identify problems and warning signs regarding their children. They were most common in discussion boards, which are highly social and interactive online spaces that offer a variety of dynamic content introducing mothers to new ideas. Mothers can also learn about warning signs here that they might not otherwise have known to look for because they can easily ask other parents questions and share their ideas and experiences.
- The *perspective explorers* reported frequent information-seeking and exploration of different parenting perspectives. These mothers were active seekers of parenting information and resources, working to gather a variety of information. This suggests that perhaps they may be concerned that the information they found was not complete or up to date. They may be dealing with a specific issue or problem, and working to gather as much diverse information on the issue as possible.
- Finally, the *reassurance seekers* emerged only for emailed newsletters and online classes, the two least interactive online tools. These mothers are seeking reassurance by trying to confirm their parenting practices and checking their child's normative development. It is possible that they want to use authoritative sources for these activities, for example, reading newsletters from organisations they trust and taking online classes taught by professionals, rather than risk getting inconsistent or even inaccurate feedback from other parents online.

Supporting parenting

We know that parents are using a variety of different online tools and spaces to get support and to find answers to their parenting questions and concerns. Our study contributes to the understanding of how technologies are used in daily life to **fulfil** parenting roles and responsibilities by filling in some of the gaps between 'where' mothers are going online and 'what' they are doing to support their parenting.



This information is essential if we are to **design** effective online tools that meet mothers' parenting needs. For instance, these data suggest that when mothers are working to identify a problem with their child, they seek out interactive online spaces, such as chatrooms; in contrast, when they are trying to normalise their experiences, they seek **more static environments**, such as newsletters.

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¹ Visit the authors online to learn more about the **Parenting 2.0** project.

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