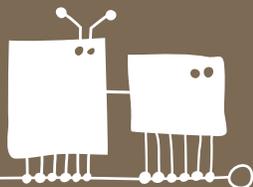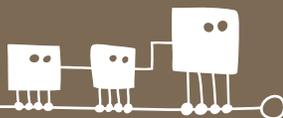# Families matter:

Designing media for a digital age

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executive summary

This report focuses on two complementary studies that document how families with young children are integrating digital media into the rhythm of daily life. Results from a survey of more than 800 parents of children ages 3 through 10 reveal how parents nationwide feel about raising children in a digital age. In-depth case studies provide further insight into these statistics, probing how parent attitudes toward technology, along with family values, routines, and structures, are shaping young children's experiences using digital media. This research assumes an ecological view of development and learning, which considers the many different spheres of influence — from parents to peers to the social and economic context — that a child now must navigate while growing up.

Key findings

Forces outside of the home shape children's experiences with digital media

Institutional factors determine parental work schedules and childcare arrangements, which in turn affect how much time parents can spend on media-based activities with their kids. *Cultural* factors prioritize certain activities (e.g., socializing with friends and family) over others (e.g., playing video games alone). And *parents' personal histories* — what they played as young children, how they learned to operate new technologies for the first time, and their own experiences raising older siblings, for instance — inevitably shape their childrearing practices around media.

Parents prefer participating in activities with their kids that involve older media

Two-thirds of young children play on TV-based video game consoles, but only half (52%) of their parents are playing along with them. The media activities parents reported *doing* most with their children — watching TV (89%), reading books (79%), and playing board games (73%) — aligned with reports of what they *enjoy* doing most with them. In other words, parents aren't participating in media activities that they themselves don't take pleasure in.

Not all digital media are created equal in parents' eyes

Parents rated computer-based activities as most valuable for young children's learning, but a surprising majority also thinks video games develop skills important to school success. Mobile phones are viewed as least valuable for learning, and the device most prohibited by parents for young children's use; handheld gaming consoles and MP3 players are much more accepted. These perceptions are based on parents' still evolving understanding of what their kids *should* be doing with digital media at certain ages.

Parents worry about digital media interfering with the healthy development of young children

Fifty-nine percent of parents believe that digital media prevent children from getting physical exercise, while 53% are concerned about their children's online safety and privacy. And 40% percent believe that mediated activities infringe on time that would otherwise be spent in face-to-face interactions.

… Yet most parents don't believe their own kids are at risk

Only 18% of parents indicated that their own children spend too much time with technology. Why the apparent paradox? Parents may be unaware of just how much media their kids are consuming. Laptops, MP3 players, and handheld gaming devices tend to be used in the outer reaches of the home, and less typically positioned the way TV sets are, in a family or living room where parents can see *when* and *what* their children are watching, and *for how long*.

Nearly two-thirds of parents restrict their kids' media use on a case-by-case basis

The multiplicity of new platforms and the rate at which they change may explain why so many parents don't impose a firm set of rules — they find it either unnecessary or simply impossible. Meanwhile 22% percent say they do have strict rules around what their kids can do with home-based media, and 8% say they have rules but don't always strongly enforce them. Only 7% of parents claim to have no rules.

Research recommendations

Map children's development to new platforms

Children today have access to a wide array of media platforms, many originally designed for adult use. Just as researchers did for television, the formal and content features of these newer platforms need to be mapped to children's developing cognitive, social, and now even motor and visual capacities, given the availability of gesture-based and 3D gaming systems.

Conduct research on the learning potential of new platforms

Millions of dollars and countless hours have been invested in studying the potential of video games in fostering learning. This large body of research may, in part, explain why 69% of the parents we surveyed believe certain games can develop academic skills. Techno-enthusiasts today are claiming that mobile

devices hold as much potential to transform learning, but we have yet to amass the research base necessary to alter parents' perceptions about mobile devices and other emerging platforms.

Investigate the new coviewing

In the 1970s, researchers discovered that children whose parents talk about *Sesame Street* as they watch learn more from the show. Now, with over two-thirds of mothers in the workforce and more platforms delivering media into homes than ever before, children more often engage with media by themselves, at earlier ages, and for longer periods of time. Today, researchers must turn their attention to mobile devices, virtual worlds, e-books, and other new platforms for media coparticipation, and the ways in which grandparents, older siblings, and other family members can also support young children's learning.

Industry recommendations

Design with the full ecology of the child in mind

Most producers of children's media are tuned into the interactions between player and platform, but few pay sufficient attention to the institutional (family, school), economic, and cultural factors that invariably shape these interactions.

Create video games that appeal to kids and parents alike

Producers need to work on creating experiences that appeal to both parents and children, just as the producers of *Sesame Street* intentionally write adult humor into the show to encourage them to watch with their preschoolers.

Foster family teamwork

Digital media are often blamed for displacing the time kids spend in face-to-face conversation — so producers should design experiences that *require* flesh-and-blood partners to play.

Think outside the (X)Box

Producers should use technology to engage children in the very activities — socializing, outdoor exercise, academic pursuits, and imaginative play — that adults fear digital media are displacing from children's lives.

Anytime, anywhere learning

Mobile devices can enhance networked play and learning by allowing kids to take the necessary hardware outside, and from home to school to grandma's house for uninterrupted continuity of experience.

Design the guilt out of digital-age parenting

Producers should imagine and build devices that let parents interactively participate in media activities with their children, whether one room or one thousand miles apart.