Connections

Parenting Infants in a Digital World

2018
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

It is now widely recognised that the early years of a child's life represent a unique opportunity in the life cycle for brain development. The first three years of life mark the fastest growth in brain development for humans and as such is a crucial time for social, emotional and cognitive development. Parents are central to their child's development as a warm responsive caregiver facilitates an infant's sense of safety and builds good infant mental health. Decades of research have found that interferences to building a secure attachment such as parental mental health problems, domestic violence, substance misuse, neglect and experience of trauma can disrupt infant brain development and lead to long term health and emotional problems (Burke Harris, 2018; Perry, 2002).

More recently, technology has introduced a new dimension to childhood and family life. As research has not kept pace with the rapid growth of infants' use of digital technology, the implications of infants' interactions with technology on cognitive, social and emotional development are largely unknown. This lack of empirical evidence makes it difficult for parents to have a clear understanding of the benefits and risks digital technology may pose at this stage of development. As digital technology has become embedded in all aspects of society, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the nature and extent that digital technology is used every day at home and how this may influence interactions between parents and infants.

Purpose of Research

The aim of the Connections: Parenting Infants in a Digital World project was to provide greater insight into how digital technology may influence interactions between parents and infants aged 0 – 3 years old at home. The study considers the relatively new phenomenon of 'technoference' by exploring the extent to which parental use of digital technology in the home may interfere with activities or time spent with infants. Specifically the main objectives of the research were to:

1. Gain an understanding of parents' and infants' use of digital technology in everyday home life and how this may impact on parent-infant interactions;

2. Explore parents' awareness of infant mental health with specific reference to the 'Five to Thrive' approach and the parenting styles used with infants;

3. Identify the areas parents of infants could benefit from additional support in order to improve service delivery.

Definitions

Please note for the purposes of clarity and brevity, the term 'infants' is used throughout the full report to refer to children aged 0 – 3 years old only while 'children' is used to describe children in other age groups which may also include those aged 0 – 3 years old.

The use of 'digital technology' throughout the report is an all-encompassing term that includes both the *types* of digital devices used such as tablets and smartphones and the *activities* that infants and parents engage in using these devices such as watching videos online or playing games.

Burke Harris, N. (2018) The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity. London: Bluebird Books for Life

Perry, B. D. (2002) Childhood Experience and the Expression of Genetic Potential: What Childhood Neglect Tells Us About Nature and Nurture Brain and Mind 3: 79–100 Available at: http://centerforchildwelfare.org/kb/ChronicNeglect/ChildExperience.pdf

Respondents

Participants for this study were identified through seven Barnardo's NI services related to parenting in the early years including three Sure Start services. Potential participants must have satisfied all three of the following criteria before taking part in the survey:

1. have a child or children aged 0 – 3 years old;

2. currently live with a child or children aged 0 – 3 years old;

3. accessed a Barnardo's NI service in the past six months.

This resulted in a total of 199 completed questionnaires drawn from every county in NI with the exception of County Fermanagh. These respondents reported a total of 369 children between them. As a qualifying criteria was to have a child aged 0 – 3 years old, all participants reported having at least one child within this age group resulting in a total of 246 infants.

Measure

This research was quantitative in nature and data was captured through an anonymous questionnaire completed by parents. Both online and paper versions of the questionnaire were available during March 2018. The survey was divided into four main sections relating to the aims and objectives of the research:

■ **Section 1:** Parenting Styles including awareness of the Five to Thrive approach

■ **Section 2:** Parental Digital Use at Home

■ **Section 3:** Children's Digital Use at Home

■ **Section 4:** Support for Parents

Data collected by the survey was systematically analysed using SPSS with qualitative comments thematically coded. It is important to note that the results presented in the full report rely on parents' ability to recall their own behaviour and that of their child. As with any self-reported survey, there is likely to be some degree of under and over-reporting.

Key Findings

Parenting Styles:
Participants primarily identified with an authoritative parenting style across all five areas of:

(i)   behaviour;
(ii)   daily routine;
(iii) discipline;
(iv)   limit setting; and
(v)   parenting style.

No parents identified with either an authoritarian, permissive or uninvolved parenting style across all five areas.

Five to Thrive Approach:
Since attending a Barnardo's NI service, the majority of parents were aware of the Five to Thrive approach and agreed it had raised their awareness regarding child development in the following areas:

98.9% agreed they had better understanding that early years interactions between infants and parents have a long term impact on their child's development;

97.7% agreed they had a better understanding that they are the main influence on their infant's emotional development;

94.9% agreed they had a better understanding of child brain development.

Digital Technology in the Home Environment:
Households had an average of 8.5 devices each with 97.5% having access to the internet. The socioeconomic status of the household did not restrict the range of devices at home but reduced the average number of devices in households of average or below average weekly income. Across all income categories, the most common two devices at home were televisions and tablets.

Parental Use of Digital Technology:
Most participants felt that they used their phone too much at home (61.3%) with over fifty five percent (56.9%) reporting that they could not resist checking their device when they received an alert or notification. Forty percent of parents agreed that their use of devices can interfere with activities with their child. Parental use of digital technology impacted on their parenting in a number of ways:

■ Participants with high levels of use at home were more likely to permit their child to use devices to access a range of content alone for longer periods of time.

■ The greater parents' own interaction with devices and the internet at home, the less likely they were to feel they were being a good role model to their child in terms of how they used digital technology.

■ Parents with high use of digital technology at home were more likely to have no rules limiting infants' use of digital technology compared to those with medium or low levels of use.

Infants' Use of Digital Technology:
Infants spent most time on non-digital activities. Infants also spent time on activities involving digital technology on a typical day. The television was predominate with infants watching TV for up to one hour with a parent (61.5%) and watching TV for up to one hour alone (48.6%). It is worthwhile noting that some infants are using digital technology alone regularly to access games, mobile applications (apps) and videos. Restriction of infants' use of digital technology by parents related to:
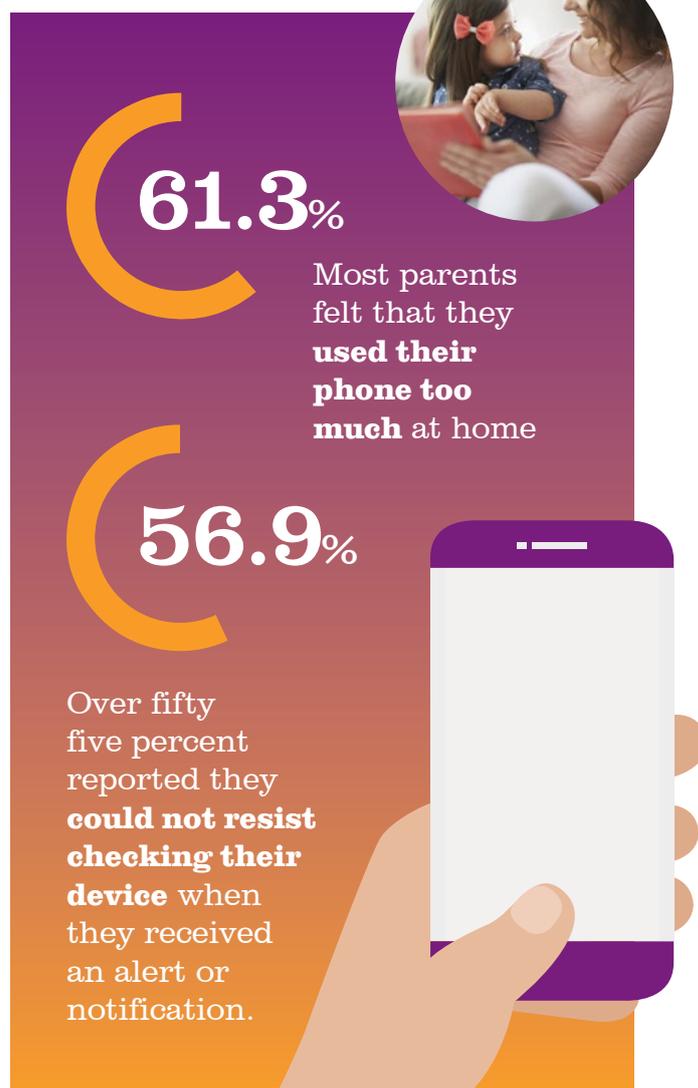
■ time spent on devices (68.8%);

■ only watching children's programmes (67.3%);

■ only using devices with adult supervision (64.3%);

■ not allowing digital technology at family mealtimes (60.3%).

Digital Technology as a Parenting Tool:
Findings show that parents used digital technology in many situations as a way to divert or entertain their infants. The three most common situations in which participants used digital technology as a parenting tool were when they were busy with tasks in the home, to reward their child for good behaviour and to calm their child when they are upset.

Support for Parents:
Participants expressed the need for guidance around digital technology with most parents indicating that they would benefit from guidance around screen time for infants (58.3%) and information about online safety for young children (51.3%).

61.3%
Most parents felt that they **used their phone too much** at home

56.9%
Over fifty five percent reported they **could not resist checking their device** when they received an alert or notification.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of the Connections: Parenting Infants in a Digital World research, a number of key areas have been identified as requiring further consideration:

Recommendation 1

The Public Health Agency's Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland is well placed to further explore how digital technology may impact infant mental health across its three existing areas of work:

(i) Evidence and policy:
Additional research is needed to explore how digital technology impacts on the lives of infants, their relationships to others and their social, emotional and cognitive development. It is particularly crucial that a range of methods are used to gather evidence and that the voices of young children including those with disabilities and linguistic diversity are sought. This evidence should be the basis for policy development and consistent and accessible messages to parents to support infant mental health.

(ii) Workforce development:
Training for practitioners across all relevant disciplines should be developed to raise awareness amongst the workforce of the benefits and risks associated with the use of digital technology by both parents and infants relating to infant mental health. This training should be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure that it remains relevant.

(iii) Service development:
Consideration should be given to revising and updating service delivery to reflect the ways in which digital technology has changed the home environment and may impact on interactions between parents and children. This may include both universal programmes and the development of targeted interventions for parents who find their use of digital technology is adversely impacting on their interactions with their child.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Education should introduce evidence based guidance for Sure Start services and DE funded pre-school settings regarding how digital technology should be used in these settings and at home to facilitate the maximum educational benefits for infants and preschool children.

Recommendation 3

A cross – departmental campaign and dissemination plan should be developed to raise awareness amongst parents around the specific benefits and risks digital technology offers infants. Messages should focus on:

- Promoting the importance of face to face engagement and consistent parental responses to enhance infants' cognitive, social and emotional development.

- Raising awareness of how parents' use of digital technology at home can interrupt their interactions or reduce the time spent with infants which may have consequences for secure attachment and good infant mental health.

- Widening parents' understanding of 'screen time' to shift the focus from quantity of time spent with digital technology to the quality of time spent with specific reference to the context of use, high quality content and connections with others during use.

- Identifying ways in which parents can use digital technology to benefit their child in terms of learning, play and developing skills including ways parents can assess the educational benefits of apps and programmes.

Dissemination should be at key points during the perinatal period and at the 3+ Health Review. Engagement with a wide range of parents should be sought to ascertain the most effective ways in which to promote messages focused on infant mental health and digital technology.

A copy of the full report *'Connections: Parenting Infants in a Digital World'* is available from Barnardo's NI Regional Office, 542-544 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast BT4 3HE. It can also be accessed online from the Barnardo's NI website at www.barnardos.org.uk.