Family Engagement in the Digital Age: Early Childhood Educators as Media Mentors

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Family Engagement in the Digital Age

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Help parents be aware of their own tech use

Because parent media use is a strong predictor of child media habits, reducing parental media use and enhancing parent–child interactions may be an important area of behavior change.

*Media and Young Minds, AAP 2016*

When there’s an elephant in the room introduce him. Randy Pausch

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Adults need to put their masks on first

- Parent media use strongly predicts child media habits
- Children are suffering from... and learning from:
  - Parenting without presence
  - Plugged-in, interrupted and distracted parenting
  - Parental load limits and minimal parenting
- Children need digital tour guides and media mentors
- Adults need messages that affirm, encourage, empower, nudge
- Provide more description and less prescription / describe what to do instead of telling them what not to do

*Today, the digital temptation sits in our handbags, or in our pockets vying and sometimes hijacking our attention. Dr. Kristy Goodwin*
Goal – Living well with media

What we owe our kids is a rich and diverse experience... Our focus should be on living well with media rather than opposing or restricting it.

Screenworried or screenwise?

- The “how much is too much” screentime debate
- Inappropriate content and commercial messages
- Negative impact on social-emotional development
- Increased sleep disruptions, lack of restorative sleep and fatigue
Screenworried or screenwise?
- Decreased outdoor time
- Increased sedentary time / Less physical activity
- Increased childhood obesity
- Displacement/replacement of developmentally-valuable activities
- Pressure to introduce technology early vs. being judged as a “bad parent” when you allow screens

Goal – Help parents be the “first responders”
Children need their adults to be:
- Aware – *Do as I say & do as I do*
- Engaged digital tour guides
- Mindful media users
- Media literacy role models
- Media mentors who help them safely navigate the digital age
Active digital-age parenting matters

Parents are actively involved in... “navigating the rapidly evolving media landscape, seeking information, resources, and support while trying to align new media practices with their values, parenting approaches, and the perceived needs of their children and families.”

Children and Families in the Digital Age: Learning Together in a Media Saturated Culture

Emerging consensus on what matters most

Beneficial screen time/tech use includes

• Child development theory
• Early childhood “essentials”
• 3Cs – Content, Context, Child
• Creating media and storytelling
• Relationships
• Family engagement
• Media mentors
Relationships matter most

- Young children learn best in the context of interactions and relationships with attentive, responsive, caring adults
- Use tech to promote healthy social and emotional development
  - Invite interactions
  - Strengthen relationships with adults and peers
  - Encourage pro-social behaviors
- Using media together leads to more learning
  - Interactional quality matters
  - Socially contingent interactions matter
  - Adjacent viewing, co-viewing and joint engagement matter
  - Playing, exploring, discovering and learning together matter

Thoughts on family engagement

*Technology has tremendous potential to strengthen communication and connection between families and early educators to the benefit of children.*

Department of Education & Department of Health and Human Services
Thoughts on family engagement

Effective engagement depends on respectful relationships with families and valuing the diverse ways in which they promote their children’s outcomes.

Digital media can be used not only to provide families with information, but also, to increase their understanding to use that information effectively and creatively. By doing so, families take on the roles as lifelong educators and learners: they become powerful teachers for their own children who also gain new skills themselves.

Elena Lopez, Margaret Caspe & Heather Weiss
Logging In To Family Engagement in the Digital Age

Goal – Enhance family engagement

- Improve communication
- Strengthen the home school connection
- Build community / connect with communities
- Increase parent involvement
- Encourage parent-to-parent sharing
- Enhance family engagement
- Empower parents and families
- Promote family well-being
Goal – Use effective family engagement strategies

• Ongoing and 2-way – *something you do with parents not too parents*
• For ALL families
• In the context of language, culture and community
• Strengths-based
• Relationship-based – parent-child & parent-teacher
• Focused on family well-being
• Empowering to parents and engaging to families

Thoughts on family engagement

*When family engagement really works, it goes well beyond inviting families to attend school events. True engagement is found in authentic, individual, mutually beneficial relationships between members of the school community and the members of each child’s family.*

*The time has come to shift thinking from attempting to reach some families to taking responsibility to find a way to reach each and every child and family.*

Amaya Garcia & Karen Nemeth

*Family Engagement Strategies for All Languages and Cultures*
Goal – Meet the parents where they are

- Be aware of barriers to access and participation
- Provide multiple pathways
- Understand the power of “nudges”
- Be media mentors to parents so they can be media mentors to their children


Goal – Build relationships and share simple messages that affirm, encourage, empower, engage

- Acknowledge their primary role as media mentors
- Are easy to understand
- Are actionable
- Nudge them toward what to do, instead of telling them what not to do – description not prescription
- “Catch them being good”

_Spend less time monitoring and more time mentoring._ Devorah Heitner

_Your child is lucky to have a parent like you._ Fred Rogers
Promising practices that push and pull

- Home visiting, video coaching, video chats
- Social media, email campaigns, e-news
- Websites and links to online resources, OERs
- ePortfolios that are two-way, shareable
- Apps, text messages, on-demand video clips
  - Parenting tips and digital skill building
  - Customized tips (age, stage, culture, language...)
  - “Nudges” that change ideas, opinions, behaviors

Strengthen a parent...and you strengthen a child. Fred Rogers

More promising practices

- **Bright by Three**, Rocky Mountain Public Media/PBS and Bright by Text
- **Parents as Teachers** home visiting & USC’s Telehealth Platform
- **Baby 411** parenting advice from pediatricians
- **Research from Yale, University of Virginia, and Boston University** – text and emails messages increase adherence to safe sleep practices for infants
- **Family Creative Learning** workshops for parents & children
- **PBS Family Creative Learning** multi-generational ScratchJr

How much information does a parent want? How often?
Research-based recommendations

• Adults are differently prepared to engage with children around media – we need to mentor the mentors
• Give parents time and space to play with technology first
• Help parents select high-quality and engaging content
• Provide parents with models of how to interact with their children when viewing videos, playing games or engaging with screen media
• Give parents examples of language to use when asking children questions that will extend and deepen the conversation

Encourage parents to:
• Play games to model play for kids and to create opportunities for joint engagement
• Make connections between on-screen and off-screen experiences
• Set aside time each day to focus on learning
• Integrate learning throughout the day
• Make learning fun and positive
What parents talk about when they talk about learning

- 99% of parents want to be involved in their child’s education
- 85% of parents say their children will not learn everything they need to know in school
- Nearly all parents, regardless of income or education level, think it is important to help their young children learn, especially social skills, literacy, and mathematics.
- 70% of parents say they are confident about their ability to teach their young children literacy, math, and social skills, but fewer parents are confident about science learning.

Educators can help families make better use of tech

1. Share how you are using technology and what digital media you are using in the classroom.
2. Recommend educational apps and programs that children can use at home to complement what is being done in the classroom.
3. Partner with other teachers in your school or across your school district to host a parent-teacher learning exchange on the use of technology with young children.
4. Avoid only using messages that “scare” parents on the harmful effects of technology use with young children.
5. Connect parents to the local library.

“If my child’s teacher told me an app/program was educational, I would trust her.”

Lost Connections in a World of Connectivity, Silicon Valley Community Foundation 2018
Research-based recommendations

Insights on parents’ needs, motivators, barriers, and use of technology

- Most parents first ask a friend or family member first if they have a question on their child’s development, and then use Google to find the answer to their question if they need additional information.
- Parents have a preference for learning from other parents rather than parenting experts.
- Parents are looking for “their own path” for parenting their child and actively seek information and guidance from many different sources.
- Parents want their children to be happy and successful, suggesting messaging about social-emotional development could be most effective.
- Parents find existing parent support services helpful, though the majority are not aware of local organizations that offer services.

Family engagement matters

Educators should do what educators do best: rely on their knowledge of curriculum goals and of their students in order to select tools that will best support learning and development.

The early childhood educator is in a unique position to become a true media mentor, integrating conscious training in effective media use as part of twenty-first-century education.

Michael Rich and Kristelle Lavallee
The Mediatrician’s Advice for Today’s Media Mentors
A provocation

• Every child needs a media mentor

• Every parent/family needs a media mentor

• Every educator needs to be a media mentor

• Who mentors the mentors?

...as much as media mentors are needed for families, they are also needed for teachers. Lisa Guernsey & Michael Levine, 2016

Top 10 tips for media mentors

1. Remember that relationships matter most – Tech use with young children begins with low tech, high-touch opportunities for interactions, shared experiences, discoveries, and joint-engagement with media

2. Trust your instincts – Focus less on how many minutes a child engages with screen media and more on the quality of the content, the context for using media and the child’s level of engagement

3. Integrate technology use into social and emotional learning
Top 10 tips for media mentors

4. Use tech as another tool for exploring, learning, creating, storytelling, showing what I know

5. Empower children to use technology as tools for 21st century learning

6. Provide beneficial technology experiences that are engaging and interactive, include positive interactions with others, give the child control, and invite co-viewing and joint engagement

7. Make media use a language-rich experience – Narrate your own tech use and when children are using screen media talk about what they’re doing, ask questions, make comments and offer suggestions about what you can do together after the screen is turned off

8. Help children progress from just consuming media to creating it – Digital camera are powerful media creation tools when paired with the curiosity and creativity of a child
Top 10 tips for media mentors

9. Pay attention to your own technology use in front of children – Children learn lifelong media habits by observing how and when you use media

10. Be a media mentor – Young children need trusted adults who are mindful and intentional media mentors and role models to keep them safe and help them navigate the digital age – make it push & pull / teacher and learner

A Provocation
Are you ready to be a media mentor?

Where are you on the “readiness ruler?”
How do we empower parents to be media mentors for their children?
A final provocation
What is essential is invisible to the eye

...Let’s not get so fascinated by what the technology can do that we forget what it can’t do...It’s through relationships that we grow best and learn best. Fred Rogers

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Chip Donohue, PhD

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