Talk for the LSE launch of Digital Media Use in Early Childhood: Birth to Six

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Thank you, Beeban for introducing me, and thanks to the 5Rights Foundation and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) for jointly supporting the Digital Futures for Children research centre, which is hosting this book launch.

Ladies and gentlemen, parents, grandparents, educators, and others, thank you for coming today. My name is Lelia Green from Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Australia.

We're proud of this book, Digital media use in early childhood: Birth to six, which is published on 11 July. It charts critical and practical research with 22 families and 29 children in the UK and Australia.

This book has six co-authors. With Dr Donell Holloway, retired ECU Senior Research Fellow, Sonia, Brian and I won an Australian Research Council grant for this research, based at ECU.

The remaining coauthors are Dr Kylie J Stevenson, at that time at ECU and now at Murdoch University in Perth, and Dr Leslie Haddon, a Visiting Fellow and Guest Lecturer at LSE. They coordinated the field work in Australia and the UK respectively, and Leslie also contributed the deep dive literature reviews for the book.

We used ethnographic interviews, observation, and play based research with children to investigate their developing sense of agency, and their passionate engagement in self-directed use of digital media.

We engaged parents, educators and other caregivers in interviews and focus groups and interrogated existing literature to understand young children's everyday practices with touchscreens.

This research area began with the mass take up of touchscreen technologies in about 2010. For the very first time, younger children could touch and swipe their way to digital content. Donell, Sonia and I wrote a report for EU Kids Online in 20 13, looking at digital media use in under-eights. It has since been downloaded from the LSE website more than 50,000 times.

But studies of young children's digital media use in family settings remain vanishingly rare. This book responds to that gap.

In the book we ask a range of key questions:

- What does good look like for young children's digital lives?
- What factors do parents consider when enabling digital media use in early childhood?
- How do parents perceive young children's use of digital media as creating or constraining possibilities for the future?
- Does early years digital engagement support the development of social and emotional skills?

In addressing these questions, we found parents who were hopeful but confused, confident but concerned, cross that screen time guidelines ignore the everyday realities of family life. They were anxious about media coverage that positions their nuanced strategies and compromises as harmful. This was not their experience. And we hope this book captures some of the benefits they see, as well as the risks they manage.

Let's move to the book's contents now. We identified that parents adopt one or more of three dominant genres of parenting when they mediate young children's technology use: Resisting, balancing and or embracing.

We found the mix changes according to child, context and family experience, with parents often practising different parenting genres with children in the same family. Digital parenting is a complex and nuanced activity.

The same is true of being an early years digital child. Our child participants fall within three broad categories:

- Infants are roughly birth to almost two years old;
- Toddlers are defined by us as being two to almost four;
- Preschoolers are from four to nearly six.

In general terms, relating to their digital media use:

- Infants are developing movement touch and fine motor skills;
- Toddlers focus on language development and concepts; while
- Preschoolers hone and express their sense of self, and are learning about other people.

Let's take the infants first. There were nine infants in the study. Parents we spoke to were hyperaware of the 'prehistoric' guidance from back in 2010, when infants' access to interactive media was just beginning. The guidance was updated by the American Pediatrics Association in 2016, but it's the 2010 message that's remembered: "No screens under two".

“Which I don’t think is possible for most people” says Angie, mum to four-month-old Eliza. “She will be on the internet by the time she’s three because it’s just part of our life.” (p. 102, provisional pagination).

14-month-old Finn needs help to open an app but “once he’s actually in there he’s got it all sussed out” says mum, Sherryl (p. 104).

By 19 months, Owen Kramer knows how to hold a phone, “how to talk [on Facetime] and how to turn it off,” (p. 106). This contrasts with 12-month-old Julia. Julia cries when a video call with dad ends, and she points at the screen. It’s like, “Where'd he go?’ says mum, Jenna.

Even though children learn these conventions, parents sometimes describe kids’ touchscreen use as ‘intuitive’. Rohan, dad to 23-month Sergei says “I don’t understand how they know, but they do know,” (p. 115).

A video of Sergei’s app use makes clear how much dad Rohan helps him. When Sergei is stuck, he hands the tablet to Rohan who fixes the problem.

Parents were concerned about tech’s mesmerizing and addictive qualities, it's displacement of physical and social activity, and the possibility of shortened attention spans.

Notably they blamed themselves and felt guilty that they didn't have all the answers. None of them suggested that big tech, or app designers, should be more actively regulated or held in any way responsible.

Moving on to the nine Toddlers, five have siblings: one younger, four older. Toddlers’ parents are increasingly focused on the learning benefits – or costs – of touchscreens.

Two-year-old Leopoldo actively chooses what he watches on YouTube. He browses videos on one part of his screen while watching his chosen content on the other. But mum Mirabella got concerned when Leopoldo could do jigsaws on an iPad, but couldn't handle the physical pieces in real life (p. 122).

Parents moderate their rules according to their priorities. Rita Chen, who migrated to Australia from China, won’t allow toddler Lavinia to play video games because they are ‘addictive’. Watching Peppa Pig is different:

“They teach what Christmas is about,” says Rita, adding that when Lavinia gets to kindy, and other kids talk about Peppa Pig, “she knows about it too. I don’t want, you know, [that] she feel, you know, lonely and then there’s no socializing with the other kids,” (p. 125).

Three-year-old Penny Ross sings along with her favorite movie songs but she’s not allowed to watch commercial music videos. She’s only allowed the audio: “That’s someone’s daughter on

the screen," says dad Ron, "twerking and that – and I've got my three-year-old trying to copy," (pp. 127-8). Mum Sandra has activated safety settings on the tablet she lets Penny play with. She thinks it's pretty much safe "until I read something later and find out that it's not. And then I'll have to redo it all again," (p. 128).

Louisa, mum to 3 ½ year old Jasper talks about his tech tantrums when she takes the iPad away. "So it's a kind of self-preservation decision to say 'No'", she tells us. And when Jasper plays the good/ bad/ neutral game with our researcher, he puts the picture of the iPad in the 'neutral' pile. The researcher asks him "It doesn't make you happy?" "... Maybe sometimes," says Jasper, mirroring his mum's ambivalence (p. 129).

Some two- and three-year-olds have sufficient skills to support self-directed play. Lorenzo Tosetti worries that he may allow 'too much' screen access to Leopoldo in the evenings, when both Leopoldo's parents are tired after work (p. 133). But Sandra Ross justifies her position by saying, about Penny, "It does make sense sometimes to go, 'You know what, you're going to be happy for five minutes; I'm going to be happy for five minutes. Yeah, why not?'" (p. 133).

Given the skills they develop as toddlers, the four- and five-year-olds increasingly use digital media to explore and express their identity, and their sense of self (and others). There are 11 preschoolers in the study, and all have siblings: six have younger siblings included in this research, five have older siblings. Throughout this project siblings are generally associated with more sophisticated digital media skills, but this is especially true among Preschoolers with older siblings.

For example, take Freya Peterson (5) and big sister Elsa (9). Their mum Claire has an digital marketplace that sells vintage goods, and the girls like playing at being video bloggers or 'vloggers'. Freya pretends to offer things for sale while Elsa operates the hand-me-down iPhone 4. It's not connected to any phone service, and they can't post their content online without their parents' permission. Dad Jeff won't allow his girls to go to the local park by themselves because of possible risks around public places, but he sees the digital as "one of the spaces that they can have a degree of independence in" (p. 63).

Kate, who is mother to three boys including Preschooler Liam (nearly 5) and Ben (8) says her sons "get very upset if we've had a busy afternoon and they haven't had a chance to have their screen time!" (p. 150). This vignette demonstrates children's growing sense, as they get older, of negotiating around 'rights'. It shows how children learn far more than just tech skills and raw information through digital media use.

Preschooler Leela Palmer (4 ½) lives in an all female household with her mum Linda, and her big sister Merissa (15). Mum Linda has chosen a male voice for Siri, the iPad's digital assistant. Leela likes talking to Siri, but her mum tells the researcher Leela knows "It's the iPad". "No, it's a person,"

protests Leela. They listen together to Siri, and mum Linda checks again, “Is that your friend that talks to you?” “Yeah” says Leela, adding “He has an iPad” (p. 148).

Michael Lim-Park, aged four, is trilingual in Mandarin (his dad’s, and cousins’ language), Korean (his mother tongue), and English (which is spoken at home) (p. 220). Michael uses his language skills and voice activation to search for videos online. Mum Mi Na says, “I didn’t even know there was such a function” (p. 146).

But this kind of voice activated access can have risks, as does Leela’s imaginary friend, waiting for her to log into her mum’s iPad. On the cusp of their compulsory school years, these young children delight in their digital skills unaware of the potential risks they may be running.

our book acknowledges those risks as well as benefits, while taking seriously the rights that children have in relation to the digital environment. These rights are outlined in United Nations General Comment #25 (2021) (General comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment | OHCHR), which elaborates upon the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

This book amplifies the voices and perspectives of very young children from four months to almost six years old, along with the voices of those who love and care for and educate them. But this brief overview of a 250-page book barely scratches its surface.

I haven’t talked about the young children we interviewed who have special needs.

I haven’t discussed the huge contribution of early years educators, or of young children's extended families.

I haven’t addressed the book’s call for better, more nuanced, policy settings.

We attend to all these issues in the book, and they will also be covered by our panel of distinguished speakers, to whom we will shortly turn.

Before we do that, we offer our thanks to Mark Richardson, Bloomsbury's Publisher, Education; and to our two most recent Editorial Assistants, Elissa Burns and her predecessor, Anna Ellis.

Two other people made an immeasurable contribution to this book, and to this launch. Linda Jaunzems herded cats in managing the author team and helped us deliver a polished, almost-compliant, manuscript. And Dr Mariya Stoilova, Manager, Digital Futures for Children research centre, masterminded this launch. Thank you both!

And thank you too, to everyone, for coming today: we hope you love this book. And now, to the panel.