

Parenting in the Digital Age

How Parents Weigh the Potential Benefits and Harms of Their Children's Technology Use

Research Summary



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This report provides a great deal of detail on parents' feelings about and monitoring of their children's use of technology, which can vary with the age of their child and other factors. It is clear that parents recognize both benefits and harms of technology, and parenting in the digital age involves careful navigation of these elements.

While many parents monitor their children's online activity and are confident in their ability to do so, the degree to which parents actively oversee their children's online activities and their confidence in their ability to do so decreases the older their child is.

- Most parents (64%) are quite confident in their ability to keep track of their child's technology use, but those with younger children (73%) express greater confidence than do parents of teens (58%). Another group of parents who are among the least confident are Hispanic parents for whom Spanish is their preferred language (53%).
- Overall, 61% of parents think they know more than their child does about technology and being online, while 27% think their child knows more. Parents with younger children also are more likely to think that they (the parent) know more about technology and online activities than their child does (80%), whereas just 36% of parents with a child age 14 to 17 think they know more than their child. Spanish-dominant Hispanics are also among those least likely to believe they know more than their child does about technology (38%).

Parents with younger children also are more likely to think that they (the parent) know more about technology and online activities than their child does (80%), whereas just 36% of parents with a child age 14 to 17 think they know more than their child.

- Most parents say (95%) they monitor their child's technology use at least somewhat closely, including 55% who say they monitor it very closely. Parents of teens (41%) are notably less likely than parents of younger children age 6 to 9 (68%) to say they monitor technology usage very closely. On the other hand, Spanish-dominant parents – who are like parents of teens in their lower level of confidence in their ability to manage their child's technology use – are actually among those more likely to say they monitor their children very closely (63%).

42%

Of parents think the potential benefits and potential harms are about equal.

Parents weigh the potential benefits and potential harms of their children's use of technology similarly, regardless of the age of their child. While a slight majority thinks the potential benefits outweigh the potential harms, many are ambivalent – regardless of the age of their child.

- When weighing the potential benefits and potential harms of their children using electronic devices and being online, the majority of parents (53%) feel that, overall, the potential benefits outweigh the potential harms. Many parents are ambivalent, however, feeling that the potential benefits and harms are about equal (42%). Very few feel the potential harms outweigh the benefits (5%). There are not notable differences by the age of child.
 - When considering potential benefits and harms of technology, parents' top-of mind focus tends to be on the positive impacts on children's learning and ability to stay informed. They report a variety of potential harms that come to their minds, with concerns about online stalkers or predators and inappropriate content mentioned most often.
 - Parents also make different calculations on benefits vs. harms, depending on the technology.
- They are most likely to feel the benefits outweigh the harms when it comes to their child's use of apps and their playing mobile and video games offline (51% benefits outweigh) and their child using a cell phone that is NOT a smartphone (50%). They are less likely to feel the benefits trump the harms when it comes to their child using a smartphone (38%) and their playing online games (44% benefits outweigh). They are much less likely to think the benefits of their child's having a social media account outweigh the harms (26% benefits outweigh harms, 43% harms outweigh benefits, 31% about equal).
 - Parents are more positive about the impact of schools' collecting data on their child's academic performance and behavior (53% benefits outweigh harms) than they are about companies' tracking their child's online activities for marketing purposes (16% benefits outweigh harms).
 - Whatever concerns they may have about technologies, 93% of parents believe their child is at least somewhat safe when he/she is online, though just 37% say their child is very safe.

While many parents have talked to their children and done other things to monitor their child's online activity, fewer have used parental-control tools at their disposal. Many of those who have not used them are interested in doing so.

- Nearly all parents (94%) say they have talked to their child about the potential benefits and potential harms of being online and their rules and expectations for their children, and two in three (65%) parents say this is a recurring conversation they have with their child regularly. Most parents have reviewed their child's browsing history and set rules on the amount of time they can spend online.
- Just over half (53%) of parents say they have used parental controls to prevent their child from having access to certain types of online content and nearly as many report using controls to turn off in-app purchases (47%). Fewer parents have used other types of controls, such as GPS apps that show where kids are through their cell phone (31%). Many parents indicate an interest in using them though.

Parents place the greatest trust in their child's teachers and schools (38%) for information about how to maximize the benefits and minimize the harms of their children using technology. Smaller but notable proportions of parents also indicate that they would trust their child/children (29%), parenting websites/magazines (27%), other parents (26%), and pediatricians (22%). They tend to trust these types of people who have children or an expertise in dealing with children more than they trust entities with a direct connection to technology (e.g. technology companies, websites, and retailers).

93%

of parents believe their child is at least somewhat safe when he/she is online.

Methodology

In September and October 2014, Hart Research Associates conducted qualitative and quantitative research among parents on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute.

The first research phase comprised three focus groups conducted in Towson, Maryland on September 4, 2014, among parents whose children access the Internet. One group was among parents of children age six to nine; one group was among parents of children age 10 to 13; and one group was among parents of 14- to 17-year-olds.

The second phase included an online national survey of 584 parents of children age six to 17 who access the Internet. In addition, we interviewed an oversample of 323 Hispanic parents (223 conducted online and 100 reached by telephone). Combining the Hispanic parents in the oversample with those from the main sample yields a total of 407 Hispanic parents of children age six to 17, which allows for detailed analysis of responses among Hispanic parents. To simplify survey administration, parents of multiple children in the age bracket were asked to answer questions about their child who had the most recent birthday. Interviewing was conducted from October 13 to 20, 2014.

The research's objective is to explore how parents weigh the potential benefits and potential harms of their child's using electronic devices and being online, which aspects of their child's being online concern them the most, and how confident they feel in their ability to oversee their child's use of online technology. This report details the research's key findings.

To view the full report, visit:
<https://www.fosi.org/policy-research/>



Family
Online Safety
Institute

Policy & Research