

Digital Parenting in South Africa



Information Booklet



CHILDREN SPENDING *too much time online*

What is digital parenting?

Most young people regularly use communication devices, and the amount of time that children spend online is increasing. This raises important questions and concerns about how children are affected by their exposure to the internet.

One such important concern is the role played by parents in deciding how their children use the internet. Parents are often the people who provide children with their first device or decide at what age a child is allowed to start using the internet. This means that, sometimes without even realising it, parents are the most important people in determining the nature of their children's early experiences of the internet and the kinds of activities they engage in online.

Digital parenting is the term that describes how parents manage their children's internet use once they start using the internet. **While many people think that digital parenting is about having technical knowledge and teaching their children how to use technology, good digital parenting is often more about ensuring that the rules for good behaviour that many parents put in place offline, are also applied to life online.** Some parents may have the knowledge to help their children with technical problems and some don't, but all parents have the ability to teach their children how to navigate danger and be ethical, responsible citizens.

Digital Parenting in South Africa

Currently, little is known about how the internet is being used by children in South Africa, or how parents interact with their children about such things, making it difficult to determine whether these technologies are being used in the best and safest ways. The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) recently completed two research studies looking at these issues in order to gain more information and understanding about the topic. These two studies showed us that parents face many challenges when trying to manage their children's internet use in South Africa. This new information has helped uncover these problems, and has made it possible to find solutions specific to South African parents' and children's needs.

Risks or opportunities?

Parents provide for and allow their children use of technology because they see how it can benefit them. At the same time, parents are also aware of a number of disadvantages and potential harms which can result from this use. Balancing these risks and opportunities is often the best way to ensure that children can benefit from the internet. However, it can be difficult to know what is dangerous for children online, and risky situations can also come with



Posting too much PERSONAL INFORMATION

opportunities. In our research we asked some parents what they like about the internet for their children and what they worry about, and in some cases these were the same things. This shows that a risk is often an opportunity from another perspective, and this highlights how difficult it can be for parents to make sure that their children use the internet in a way that does not harm them. For this reason, it is also important for parents to remember that risks are different to actual harm. Children exposed to a risk, like meeting a stranger or seeing violent videos, are not always harmed by the experience. It is very difficult to measure harms, but research from countries in the global North where internet use is very widespread suggests that very few child internet users are actually harmed by the risks they are exposed to online.

Digital parenting IN SOUTH AFRICA

Children
have the
chance to
MEET NEW PEERS





Risks parents worry about when their children use the internet

Their children meeting dangerous strangers.

Children spending too much time online.

Neglecting their schoolwork because of the internet.

Posting too much personal information.



Opportunities parents are happy the internet gives their children

Their children having the chance to meet new people.

The internet keeping children busy and occupied.

The internet helping children with their schoolwork.

Helping children share their lives and express themselves.

What is the goal of digital parenting?

The goal of digital parenting is to make sure that children are using the internet in a way that minimises the harms they experience and maximises the benefits the internet gives to them.

Part of this is to teach children to be skilled and resilient internet users and good digital citizens. What this means is that parents help their children to learn how to navigate the dangers on the internet, so that every time they use the internet, they have the knowledge and experience they need to avoid experiencing harm. Being a good digital citizen is also vital because it means children won't harm other people online. That is, parents have a role to play in teaching children to be empathetic and thoughtful internet users, the kind of people who won't cyberbully or say something online that damages their reputation permanently. Teaching children to be resilient and empathetic depends on parents creating the type of relationship with their children that allows for open communication, where children feel

free to approach their parents for help if they experience something online which bothers them or have done something that bothers others.

How can I parent digitally?

Parental mediation refers to ways in which parents try to manage their children's use of technology. Research has found that parents parent digitally in a number of ways, including:

- Watching and checking what their children do online (monitoring);
- Using technical tools to block, filter or monitor what children do online (technical mediation);
- Setting rules that limit their children's internet use, usually without taking into account the children's wishes (restrictive mediation); and
- Having conversations with children about their online activities and about online safety (active mediation).

Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages and some are better at making sure children are safe while others help children access more opportunities. For this reason, it is important that a balance is found between monitoring and managing

young people's online behaviour, while also allowing them the freedom to handle their internet use responsibly. Parents need to be careful when navigating this - allowing their children independent online exploration, while still providing appropriate parental support. However, many parents do not feel certain about how best to do this, and a number of factors - such as lack of time, resources and knowledge - may make it even more difficult to find this balance.

One specific challenge faced by many parents is that their children are more technically knowledgeable and skilled on the internet than they are, making managing children's online activity especially difficult. Although the solution here might appear to be increasing the digital skills of parents (and this would certainly help), this may not always be possible. Instead, online parenting should be approached in the same way that offline parenting should be done - by developing safe, stable, open and nurturing relationships between parents and their children, focusing on bringing up confident, responsible, empathetic and resilient young members of society, whether on- or off-line.

Tips for parents

Many parents face daily battles trying to manage their children's internet use and the idea of being a successful digital parent can seem totally unachievable. However, there are many resources available to help parents with this daunting task, starting with the tips below.

- **Talk to your children!**
Make digital life part of the everyday conversations you have with your children. Encourage them to speak to you about what they do online and do your best to avoid appearing judgemental. This will make it easier for your children to talk to you if they are harmed in some way online.
- **Learn more about the technology being used by your children**
- learn with them and allow them to teach you and help you understand what they are doing online.
- Teach your children that while they have the right to use the internet, to benefit from it and to be safe in doing so, they also have the **responsibility** to do so in ways that do **not harm others**.
- **Teach your children to be critical thinkers online**, in terms of recognising advertising,
- **Realise that you are going to have to use different strategies for each of your children depending on their age**. Younger children may benefit from you explaining how to use different tools safely, for example, while older children may already know such things. A one size fits all approach may prevent older children from learning skills and accessing opportunities, and allow younger children to be exposed to risks they do not yet know how to navigate.
- **Research and use the tools available on different sites, where appropriate**, to make your child's internet use safer. Different devices and platforms have settings and tools available that allow you to filter out certain content, report offensive content or protect your children's privacy. Teach your children about these settings and tools too and encourage them to use them.
- **Find the balance in monitoring your children's**

biased or false information and gossip when they see it. Remind your children that they should not believe everything they see on the internet and guide them around what websites they can trust and what websites they can't.

online behaviour while also allowing them to handle their online life responsibly.

Encourage your children to take on this responsibility as much as possible (where appropriate and with the necessary support), helping to empower them, encouraging responsible behaviour.

- **Talk to other parents and family members about their digital parenting practices**. The chances are that you can get a lot of support and guidance from the people around you, and that there are people around you who would benefit from support and guidance from you.
- **Be a good digital role model**. If your child sees you making hurtful comments on a social networking site or using your device during family time, they will be less inclined to listen to your guidance about how they should use the internet. Model good behaviour so that they know what such behaviour looks like.

There is much more advice and guidance available for parents online that gets into the specifics of how to technically monitor and manage your children's internet use in a way that benefits them. We have some suggestions of where to start on the next page.



Important issues for parents to think about

The internet has complicated our lives in many ways and some of these are only just coming to our attention. Below we highlight some of the issues that we believe are relevant to South African parents.

Your child's online reputation.

One of the best and worst things about the internet is its ability to allow us to search for content, make content permanently available and allow for that content to be shared and saved millions of times. This means that any embarrassing picture or video, thoughtless comment or even content shared without permission, can become part of someone's permanent online record. This can affect how your child is seen long into the future, potentially even affecting their employment opportunities, and there are many real life examples of this. This is why encouraging thoughtful and responsible internet use from a young age is very important, as this may prevent your child from experiencing scandal and humiliation.

However, it is important for parents to remember that they also play a role in shaping their child's online reputation when they share pictures of their children online. This is especially the case with very young children and babies, who often have a social media presence long before they can consent to it, or can even understand what

social media is. This phenomenon is called 'sharenting' and some have argued that children have a right to join social media with a clean slate, without a mountain of pictures of them as babies, so that they can define their own social media identity. While many parents may find it very hard not to share cute snaps of their children, the issue of online reputation highlights that parents should also think carefully about what they share about their child's life online and be aware that what they do may affect their child's online reputation for years to come.

The South African legal context has many laws that regulate children's and adults' internet use and criminalise certain behaviours. This can be a good and bad thing, as it means that if your child experiences something negative like bullying or harassment online, you may be able to seek out legal support to address this problem. However, this can also be used against children and potentially mean they face criminal consequences for something silly they did online.

One big concern in relation to South African law is the practice of 'sexting'.² Although this is often considered a normal expression of human sexuality in the digital era, and potentially safer than physical sexual contact among teens, the sending of intimate pictures between teens is criminalised in South African law because this falls within

the definition of the distribution of child sexual abuse materials (child pornography). Although this activity is clearly not the same as adults distributing child pornography for financial gain or self-gratification, and often forms part of a romantic relationship, children can face serious legal consequences for engaging in this behaviour. It is therefore very important for children and parents to be aware of this and for children to consider how and with whom they share intimate information. South African law is generally not very up to date when it comes to the complexities of the internet and law makers and civil society are working on making sure that our laws are revised in line with these complexities. Until laws are updated so that they can distinguish between consensual sexting and distribution of child sexual abuse materials, children may face severe consequences for engaging in this behaviour.



Where can I get information and support?

As a parent it is up to you to educate yourself about how you can make sure your child is safe and happy online. Unfortunately there is not a lot of support available for parents in South Africa yet. However, there are some great international resources available that can be very useful to parents in any context.

- Parenting for a digital future blog
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/>
- Family Online Safety Institute
<https://www.fosi.org/>
- Legal responses to cyber bullying and sexting in South Africa
http://www.cjcp.org.za/uploads/2/7/8/4/27845461/issue_paper_10.pdf
- Childnet
www.childnet.com
- InSafe and InHope
<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/>
- The Parent Zone
<https://parentzone.org.uk/advice/digital-world>
- Common Sense Media
<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns#>
- It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens, by Dana Boyd
<http://www.danah.org/books/ItsComplicated.pdf>

Find out more about our research!

Read our "Digital Parenting in South Africa: Understanding parental mediation in the digital age", "South African Kids Online", as well as our "Connected Dot Com" studies, by visiting our website www.cjcp.org.za

Find more information and tips on our online safety website www.cyberbullying.org.za

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1 'Sharenting' is a combination of the words 'over-sharing' and 'parenting.

2 'Sexting' is a combination of the words 'sex' and 'texting', and refers to sexual interactions that take place via the internet.



1st floor, Forrest House. Belmont Office Park.
14 Belmont Road. Rondebosch, Cape Town