**Adult-child interactions while using touchscreen apps - transcript**

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast.

In this series, we explore the latest research from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and discuss the real world implications for teachers, parents and policymakers.

Each podcast is accompanied by a Deanery Digest, a short, plain language summary of the research, which can be downloaded from our website.

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast. I'm Hamish Chalmers and I'm here with my colleague, Doctor Sandra Mathers.

Sandra Mathers is part of the Child Development and Learning Research Group. Her main research interests focus on the quality of adult child interactions in the early years.

Recently, Sandra has been involved in the Learning in Families Through Technology Project or, more Pithily, the LiFT project. The LiFT project aims to develop and evaluate the educational potential of app based, interactive activities for children and families. The LiFT project is multifaceted and has resulted in a number of publications related to its work, and today we're discussing the first of two research studies that Sandra has led on. This was a survey study that aimed to understand family digital media use.

Welcome to the podcast, Sandra. Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me.

Good to be here. Most welcome.

I wondered if we could start by you telling us a little bit about what the project was about, and what you're hoping to learn from it.

Yeah. Of course.

So our work in the LiFT project is broadly about trying to make sure that young children screen time is really beneficial for their development.

And particularly my work is about supporting families to use digital media together, as you were saying.

And I guess in these days children are using media all the time, every day, often at a very young age.

So Ofcom run a survey of media use every year, and they say that almost 90% of three and four year olds, um, are using online digital activities.

Um, so there's a lot of media use about and a lot of parents are really worrying about children's screen time, you know, is it doing my child harm?

And I think there is evidence that a lot of screen time is linked with some negative outcomes.

So for example, poorer language development maybe because that screen time is displacing, if you like, other activities that might be more beneficial for children.

So things like reading or chatting with families, having conversations with adults, for example, um, or being active or sleeping quite important.

Um, but I think it's really important to say that screen time isn't necessarily all bad.

So there can be a lot of benefits, but the quality of that screen time is what really matters.

And all works about trying to help families to make their children screen time better quality and more enriching for their development.

It's feels very familiar. I'm a parent and often wrestle with the idea about screen time, and I sometimes feel quite guilty about it, but I also recognise that the world runs on screens.

Yeah, and I think it's really important that parents don't feel guilty, right?

I mean, parenting is a hard enough job as it is. Um, so I think that actually it's, you know, every family will use screen time, perhaps to occupy their child while they're getting on with something else. You know, that happens in every family. That's very normal. Um, but I think the way that we like to think about it is it's a bit like having a nutritious diet, and it's a bit like the messages on having your five a day fruit and veg.

Um, you know, say some junk food is absolutely fine. But overall, you really want to be thinking about making sure that your child's got a nutritious digital diet.

So something that's going to be nutritious for their brains and their development.

And there's a lot of different ways that families can do that. Choosing good quality apps is a really great starting point.

That could be another podcast conversation maybe.

Um, but what my work focuses on is, is the idea of adults joining their children in that media use because we know when children are really young. So I'm focussed on their early years. So pre-school children and children of that age, they learn through social interaction and research is really clear that actually, you know, children do learn from digital media and they use it by themselves, or at least they can, but they're going to learn a lot more when they're supported by an adult who can, um, really talk with them and help them to make sense of what they're seeing and what they're playing, and help them maybe to learn and to use the words that they have that are related or that they need for whatever activity it is that they're doing.

So we've been researching, as you were saying, how to encourage families to really use media together, and also the best way to design apps and digital games so that they really support co play and help families to have really great interactions.

And so that's what I was planning to talk to you about today. One of our research studies.

There's a sort of the assumption that for some I suppose that the that the iPad or the phone is, is kind of like a digital babysitter or something like that. And it may not feel sort of intuitive to parents that it is something that can be done collaboratively.

Yeah exactly that. So and I think, you know, as I said, some of that's absolutely fine. No problem. Definitely don't want to make parents feel guilty.

But I think really our work is about, um, giving parents a positive alternative and just saying, actually, did you know what a difference you can make? You can have some really great family time. It doesn't have to be, um, a kind of battle between the screen time or the family time.

Actually, there are lots of really brilliant opportunities for engaging with your child if you're harnessing that screen time, if you like, um, to have really great family moments.

So the purpose of the survey, then. What was what were you trying to find out by conducting that survey?

So what we were really interested in was how families use media.

So first of all, the children's media habits, and specifically we were interested in touchscreens.

So devices like smartphones and iPads, because they're so commonly used in families these days, and also really especially interested in how often adults do join their children in using the media together. So is that a thing that happens often? Um, and what kind of factors influence whether or not that adults are joining the children in their meet you use?

So we surveyed families with young children so between 3 and 7 years old, and they were all families who were using the early years app a play do.

So uh, work in lift is funded by Kinder, who created the Applaydu app together with the game developers Game Loft.

Um, and so it was an online survey of families access the survey through the app.

Um, and we ran that in, um, actually in lots of different countries.

But the work that I'll talk about today was, um, the survey that we ran in six Western English speaking countries.

So we ran that in the UK and Ireland, in the US and Canada and then Australia and New Zealand.

And we had a really good response. So around 1250 responses.

So quite a nice big sample. Lots of different families that responded and with families, um, only English speaking families.

So did you have a multilingual element in there as well? Yeah, we absolutely did.

I mean, the survey was in English, actually, and so the families would have needed to access that in English.

But actually we did have a real variety within the sample of, um, families who spoke to three even more languages.

Tell us sort of then what were your main findings from the survey?

What we found, first of all, was that the children and the families, they were pretty regular and pretty confident media users.

So it's probably not that surprising. I mean, we, um, access those parents through an early years app.

They were all using a play, but, um, two thirds, for example, if the children spent more than an hour a day on digital devices.

And the main thing I guess to say is that we found families were doing a really great job in supporting their children, lots of those families.

So we asked, when your child uses a touchscreen device, how often does an adult join them?

And almost half of the people who responded said that they joined their child, either often or always, and families were supporting their children in lots of different ways.

So families told us that they were, for example, keeping children safe through supervision or, you know, choosing the apps that their children used.

They, um, would maybe give technical support.

So maybe helping them to use that device or figure out, you know, how to use the menus or different bits of app or the game.

And then families were also, um, doing things to support children's learning.

So that might be, may be, you know, naming the objects on the screen or having a conversation about the content, something like that.

Um, so lots of things that parents were doing. Um, one thing I thought was interesting was that we had some quite tech savvy grandparents.

Um, so, uh, about 5% of our respondents were grandparents rather than parents.

And one of the things that we noticed was that grandparents were actually more of more likely to join the children than mothers say, so maybe because they had more time. But yet that's very different to my grandparents that, you know, really showed me how far things have moved on.

And I think that reminded me that when we're giving messages to families, we have to remember it's not just the parents that we're speaking to.

Actually, a lot of those, um, adults, um, using media with children might be grandparents or other family members.

Two quite counter-intuitive findings. And I suppose that number one, that there is a sort of active involvement of the parents and grandparents or the important adults in those children's lives, in contrast to the idea that I just expressed about being a sort of digital babysitter. Um, but also that the grandparents are getting involved as well in something that we might not necessarily think is would be in their comfort zone, I suppose.

Yeah, definitely. And I think, you know, I guess, um, the confidence of those parents and grandparents may be a little bit higher than average again, because it was app users that we were surveying. But I think the important thing is, while that was true for a lot of the families, it wasn't true for all.

So actually, there were quite a good proportion of children who mostly use media by themselves within that as well. So one third of the families said that actually they either rarely or they never joined their child in touchscreen use. So while there was a lot of really great stuff going on, then actually there were still quite a lot of families who perhaps were using technology as a as a kind of a babysitter or maybe just not seeing the potential.

Um, and so we felt that for those families, it was really important to understand why and what the barriers might be so that we could try and support and encourage them to join their children in media use.

So we also looked at the kind of factors that, um, influenced whether or not the adults were likely to join the child.

Was that sort of something about adults attitudes towards technology in general, that that was associated with differences in the way that they interacted with their children?

Yeah, that's absolutely spot on. And actually, that was really the overriding thing that we found.

We found that actually there were a lot of factors. So who the families were didn't really make that much difference.

So you were mentioning earlier that the different kinds of languages that families spoke.

So there were lots of characteristics of those families that didn't make a lot of difference.

The patterns were very similar in families of different kinds. They were speaking different languages in different countries with, you know, different kind of parent characteristics. But really the strongest factor was the adults’ attitudes.

So partly attitudes to children using technology or if they, um, if those adults were more likely to see technology as a babysitter, then perhaps not surprisingly, they were less likely to join their child.

But really, the strongest factor was that the adults who saw the benefits of shared media use tended to join their children more often and crucially, to support their children's learning more often. So those were the respondents who were maybe more likely to agree, for example, with a statement that said, um, when I joined my child in their touchscreen activities, it can help their learning, or it's good for me to join my child in their me to use to spend quality time with my child.

So I think that's really important because that really highlights the importance of raising awareness of the benefits of families joining and supporting their children's screen time.

So just making sure parents really understand how important their role is, and that they are seeing and understanding the benefits and giving some maybe encouragement and support on how to do that.

So it seems that there's going to be some really important takeaway from this research, but for different groups of people. So there's some important implications for parents. There's some important implications for teachers. And I guess there's also implications for the people who develop these apps in the first place.

So in terms of what it all means when you bring this research together and consider the findings of the, of the body of work as a whole, what are those main messages?

Yeah, I think that's a really good question. And that's I mean, that's what's important, right? That's why we do the research. So to make the difference. So I guess for parents main message is join your child as often as you can. But I think just to say again, I really don't want to put a guilt trip on parents. You know, it's completely fine to use technology sometimes to as that babysitter if you like, while you get on with something else. But, um, the more often you can join your child, then the better that your child's digital diet will be, essentially.

And I think you don't necessarily need to be confident or very techie yourself. You know, if actually you're not, um, very confident with the app, then get your child to show you how to use it, you know,

Or your grandmother

Or your grandmother. Exactly. Yeah. Really. The important thing is that if you are having a conversation about what your child is doing and what you're doing on the app, then your child's going to be learning, um, and learning more than they would do if they were using the app or that game by themselves.

Then I guess for, um, educators. So maybe schools and years settings. I think really the message there is to get that message out to parents and, and really let them know what a difference they can make and give some strategies and tips on how to do that.

So I think that we often avoid saying anything about digital media to parents because maybe we're worried about being seen to encourage screen time. But I think it's really, really important to encourage families to think about using screen time in that really positive way, you know, give a really positive and practical message, not setting it against the family time, seeing it as part of family time, if you can.

Yeah. So it's not the it's not the technology itself is what you do with it.

It's absolutely what you do with it that counts. Yeah. That's a really good message.

And for developers. So the people out there developing apps, I think my main message there would be really to design for families and not just for children, you know, to really be thinking, in their development and in the design, about trying to encourage that and social interaction and be designing for good play and thinking about how your app could be used together rather than by children on their own. You know how you could design your app to really encourage and support that.

And, um, actually, that's something we can maybe pick up a little bit in the next podcast. Um, because the second piece of our work was really moving on to look at that a little bit. So thinking about how we can best design apps and digital games to support that social interaction.

Excellent. Well, that sounds like a great place to leave this one for now. Thank you ever so much for coming on. We will look forward to seeing you again here to talk about the next stages of the research, and to give that our understanding of what it's going to make for a really good, um, app experience for both children and parents and how we can promote learning and play and maybe a little bit of babysitting as well.

Yeah, absolutely. Looking forward to it very much. Thanks for having me.

Thanks very much.

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