

# The pressure is real for mothers managing their children's digital use

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Credit: University of South Australia

Parents are spending considerable amounts of energy thinking about and mitigating the risks associated with their kids using mobile phones and the internet.

The impacts of too much screen time on [children's](#) physical and [mental health](#), development and education are common concerns among parents.

New research by the University of South Australia suggests that mothers in particular are experiencing a "relentless and intense" mental load linked to their children's digital use. The work is published in the journal *New Media & Society*.

University of South Australia researcher Dr. Fae Heaselgrave calls this additional burden "digital care work," which involves mothers monitoring their children's digital activity, familiarizing themselves with [social media platforms](#) and coming up with strategies to manage their kids' [media](#) use.

"At a societal level, we already know that the use of mobile phones, laptops, and computers in the home is more prevalent than ever. Families in Australia own on average almost eight digital devices, with children owning up to three devices each," she says.

"What we don't know as much about is the effect children's digital media use has on a mother's role. Digital care work—which is an extension of the wider unpaid care role mothers provide in the home—is more often the domain of women, as mothers tend to be the primary caregiver.

"This means the increased use of [digital devices](#) is having a bigger

impact on mums in terms of demanding more time, energy and mental and cognitive work, which can also affect their career choices and paid work patterns."

In a series of interviews with Adelaide mothers of children aged nine to 16, Dr. Heaselgrave found that digital care work intensifies modern mothering by requiring an additional investment of time and energy to monitor children's digital media use.

Some mothers remarked that digital homework, which requires use of tablets or laptops rather than traditional pens, paper and textbooks, can make it difficult to set rules or guidelines around media use because children need to use a device to complete school-related work.

"The fact that devices also provide many sources of distraction, including those for entertainment and social interactivity, adds another layer of complexity to digital care," Dr. Heaselgrave says.

Using different strategies, such as restricting or monitoring their kids' digital use, or actively engaging in and learning more about it by speaking with children about their use, reflects some of the digital care work mothers engage in.

They also negotiate for greater access to digital media for their children, including mother-of-two Olivia who says her husband, who regularly restricts their daughter's phone use, lacks understanding about the importance of digital media in their children's lives.

"I don't know if he's forgotten what it's like to be a teenager, but friends are everything when you are a teenager and if you are out of touch with them even for five hours that can be disastrous," she says.

Dr. Heaselgrave says the research found the range of digital care work is

intense, constant and unyielding, and can take a physical and emotional toll on mothers.

"Even from the workplace mothers are always 'mothering' as they manage phone messages with children throughout the day, to coordinate school pick-ups and check on their welfare," she says.

"This intensity might explain why some mums encourage children to use [digital media](#), so they themselves can take a break."

As Anita, one of the mothers in the study, put it, "sometimes you take the easy option and let them use the iPad because you just want to sit down and go 'eugh!' for five minutes."

Dr. Heaselgrave says contemporary mothering in a digital home is a complex role.

"We need to know more about how [mothers](#) are affected—socially, mentally and economically—by these changes," she says.

"In the meantime, we can all do more to help our mums feel appreciated and valued for the digital care work they provide."

**More information:** Fae Heaselgrave, Unpaid digital care work: Unmasking the parental mediation practices of contemporary mothers, *New Media & Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448231174420](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231174420)

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