

# Philly parents worry about kids' digital media use but see some benefits, too

November 28 2023, by Denise E. Agosto

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A group of U.S. senators recently called on tech giant Meta—which owns Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger—to [hand over documents](#) related to the mental and physical harms its

products cause to young people. The demand follows a lawsuit [filed by 33 states](#) in October 2023 that alleges that Meta, in order to maximize profits, knowingly designs addictive social media features. The lawsuit states these features are designed "to entice, engage, and ultimately ensnare youth and teens."

While researchers disagree about whether social media and other digital media [can truly be addictive](#), they do agree that excessive smartphone use is a problem. Many [parents](#) express [concern and confusion](#) about how best to manage digital media use for children under the age of 13.

I am a [professor of library and information science](#) at Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics. My colleague [Yuanyuan Feng](#) and I conducted in-depth research interviews in 2019-22 with 17 parents at three branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia. The goal was to study [how parents manage media use](#) within their families. All of the parents—who represented a range of educational, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds—were Philadelphia residents with at least one child aged 5 to 11.

Although we did not set out to study parental concerns about children's media use, all parents expressed worries. Only eight parents discussed any positive aspects of media use.

Our research suggests promoting balance—rather than preventing addiction—is a better goal for managing kids' digital media use.

## **Parents' key concerns**

The most common concern—expressed by 80% of our study participants—was children's exposure to inappropriate content. We have used pseudonyms throughout this article to protect our participants' privacy.

As Eliza, a mother of three kids ages 4, 7, and 13, said, "I wanted to make sure that (my children) just were not watching inappropriate stuff. ... They know that word. They're always like, "It's not appropriate."

Nearly three-quarters of the parents were uncomfortable with how much time their children spend with media. "It's like a battle," said Jordan, a father of three sons, the oldest age 6. "I try to limit the screens as much as I can, although I realize we have pretty much every type of device that he could use or want to use."

Seventy percent of the Philadelphia parents worried about media use displacing potentially healthier activities like reading books, playing outside, socializing in-person with friends, or attending [community events for kids](#).

"There's all kinds of cool things (at the library). There's story time here, and ... (t)hey had a pot-bellied pig outside one day. We got to meet a pot-bellied pig! I mean, how do you get that chance when you live in the city?" said Marla, the mother of a 5-year-old girl.

Evonne, a mother of an 8-year-old boy and two girls aged 11 and 12, cited concern for children's safety and privacy. This was shared by slightly more than half of the parents.

"I just had this conversation with my kids," she said. "'Whatever you put out there on [social media](#) can come back to haunt you ... whether it's a job interview or even a college or high school interview. You have to be very careful how you present yourself. ... It can really damage you.'"

Research suggests that saying digital media damages children's social skills [is an oversimplification](#). Still, about a third of the parents worried that media overuse leads to poor social skills. "Kids (are) losing the ability just to socialize," said Tyler, a father of two boys, ages 4 and 8.

## Benefits for kids

The parents in our study told numerous and often lengthy stories about their concerns. They mentioned the benefits of media use much less often and with far less detail. Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that digital media offer [both risks and opportunities](#) for children.

Parents appreciated how digital media enabled their children to communicate with family and friends who live far away, for example, by video chatting with relatives in other countries. They also believed digital media skills are vital to their kids' future job success. And they appreciate how digital media can support kids' learning by building curiosity and providing access to new information.

Several parents enjoyed playing [online games](#) with their children and texting them messages of support throughout the day. They felt these were examples of how they could use digital media to support healthy family relationships.

Finally, several parents discussed the joy and relaxation their children feel using digital media. Research shows that gaming in particular can be a [healthy form of digital play](#) when done in moderation and with parental awareness of content warnings.

## How to guide kids

[Thoughtful discussions with children](#) are key to helping them benefit from digital media and to reduce potential risks. Toward this end, I suggest parents think about their role in guiding children's media use less as protecting them from harm and more as educating them for long-term healthy habits. Here are a few recommendations to support that approach.

**Rethink time limits:** Time limits focus on the amount of digital media use without considering the [value of different types of use](#). There is no "normal" amount of time children should spend with media. Three hours in one day spent watching cartoons probably isn't great for social or educational development. But one hour watching cartoons plus one hour [video calling with grandparents](#) and one hour working online for a school assignment take up the same amount of time and represent a balance of activities that support entertainment as well as social and educational development.

**Educate kids:** Some online content is [inappropriate or risky for children](#). But simply restricting access leaves them unprepared to make informed decisions on their own when they reach adulthood. Educating kids about the benefits and risks prepares them for a life certain to be spent partly online.

**Encourage building social skills online:** Much of [young people's](#) social activity today takes place online, making online participation an important part of making and keeping friends. Being digitally connected can help children [practice social interactions](#). Popular cooperative games like [Minecraft](#) and [Animal Crossing: New Horizons](#), for example, can help children learn how to solve problems together.

**Model good media habits:** When parents use media in moderation to interact with others and not just for passive use like watching videos, kids are likely to [pick up these behaviors](#). If you decide to set rules for family media use, you should follow them, too. If children are not allowed to use their phones at mealtimes, for example, parents should consider doing the same. The same is true for modeling respectful communication—set a good example by avoiding arguments online.

**Avoid fear tactics:** Most young people find positive discussions more motivating than scare tactics, which are [generally ineffective](#). Rather

than telling children that the internet is a scary place where dangerous strangers hang out, for example, teach them to leave online conversations when anyone asks them to share personal information or when they begin to feel uncomfortable. It sends the same message without suggesting that all online conversations are dangerous. It also encourages children to build judgment skills.

At its core, a balanced parenting approach requires talking honestly with [children](#) about both the risks and benefits of [digital media](#) and helping them to learn to make good media use decisions.

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