

The Data Driven Parent

The role of Digital Monitoring Technologies in Family Life

Ekaterina Hertog (Oxford University)

Victoria Nash (Oxford University)

Netta Weinstein (Reading University)

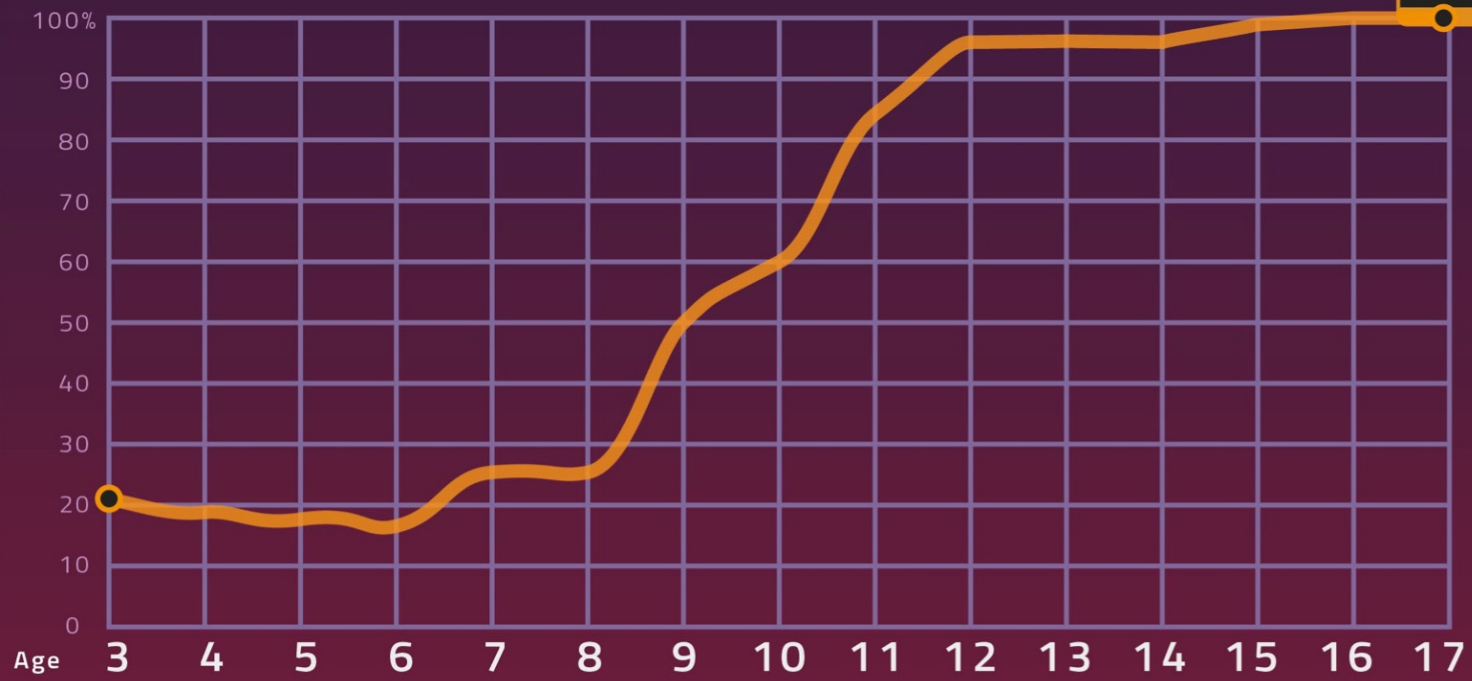
Childcare



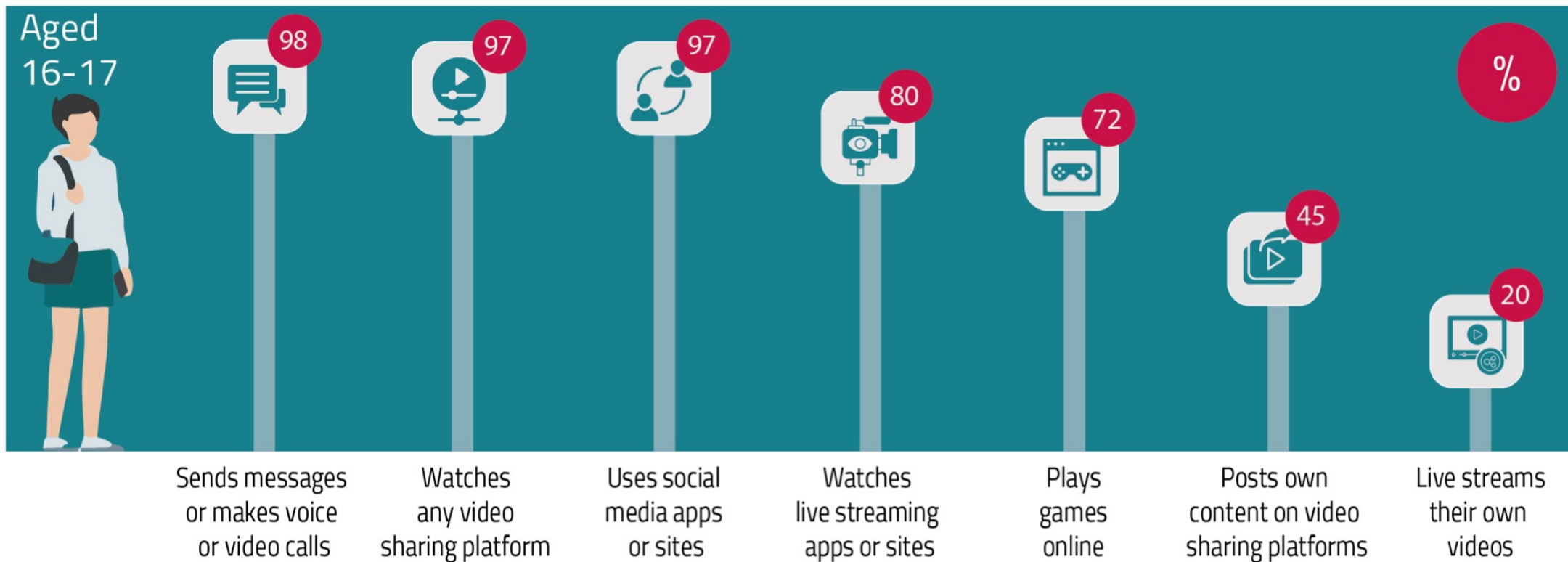
- Childcare work is critical to health and well-being of children
- It is also very time consuming and shared unequally within households
 - Caregiver penalty
- Across the Global North, time spent on caring for children has been increasing continuously from at least 1960ies.

Children's lives are increasingly moving online

Mobile phone ownership by age



Online activities of 16-17-year-olds



What is a “parental control app”?

- Broad category of apps used by parents/guardians to collect information and/or restrict behaviors of children
- Multiple Functionalities :
 - Tracking online activities
 - Limiting time on OR Blocking apps or websites
 - Imposing or promoting schedules
 - Tracking young people’s location offline
 - Etc
- The rise of AI

Digital monitoring: a solution?

- In the UK:
 - **70% of parents** with children ages 3-17 use technology to control their child's access to online content. (Ofcom 2023)
- In the US:
 - **86% of parents** with children aged 5-11 years report restricting when and for how long kids can use screens,
 - **75%** mention they check the websites and apps their children use
(Pew Report 2020)
- Around **40-50% of parents** in the UK and the US use location tracking to monitor their children's whereabouts
- About **four-in-ten parents and teens** report regularly regular arguments. (Pew Report 2024)

How do young people experience these technologies?

- 6 focus groups with 16-17 year olds in the UK
- Sample with the help of schools
 - State school from a mid-sized town
 - 2 private schools from 2 different mid-sized towns
 - State inner London school with 34% of children on FSM. Very ethnically diverse. Ethnically white children were a small minority in the group.
 - State inner London, all girls, 32% FSM, ethnically diverse.
 - State rural, 80% white, low FSM
- Participating children tend to be academically strong achievers within their schools

Making sense of parental controls

- Location tracking is generally seen as more acceptable and more necessary for girls
 - G: “Yeah, I feel like if I go out like clubbing then I might actually give my parent my location, being a girl, you understand everything that can happen, you are taught that at a very young age” (FG 1)
- Boys get tracked too
 - “I set it [location tracking] up because I would be out and I’d get messages every hour “where are you?”, so I set it up on my phone for her [my mother] and did it for my siblings ’cause they got annoyed with the messages” (FG 1)

Digital activities controls are less welcome

- B: “It is preventing socialization though isn’t it... because parents go: “ok well back in my day I would have gone out with my friend” well, it's not as easy as that, because if I could suggest to my friends “oh how about we go out and play football or something?” but then if all of my friends go: “oh no, I'd rather go and play this game or my Xbox” and my parents have said you're not allowed, then I’m missing out being with my friends ...” (FG 1)

Adversarial use

- G: “I do have like a friend who, his mother is like really strict and has like a lot of like restrictions on it. He knows the password for the screen time, so he just unlocks it. But sometimes he does put on for himself if he's like studying and all that. And also, she like, she would have his location on at all times. If he wanted to hang out with like his friends, like us, like only for like 5-10 minutes or go hang out for like half an hour because his mom was very strict, he would just like power off his phone so she couldn't track him. And then when he's back in the location like where his mom lets him be he just turns it on and recently she like changed it so he couldn't undo the location. So, like one time he came to Stratford to hang out with us for like only half an hour but because his mom wouldn't have let him, he just let his phone die ... Like, I mean, it's useful if you have like that trust, I think. But between him and his mom, like there's no trust.” (FG 3)

Self-regulation

- B: Yeah, cos like, you're going to learn not to spend 20 hours on phone, but if you never get to learn it because there's someone saying you can't spend two hours on your phone then you're never gonna learn, you have to experience it. (FG 5)
 - G: I actually think the screen time is really useful, because I set my own limits – I don't like wasting time, and I like seeing – like it shows me when I've spent a long time on my phone, so I know to get off it.(FG 5)
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- B: That's why I think it's better you self-regulate, when my parents tell me to do something it makes me want to do it less. I'd rather do things on my own terms than have them forced upon me. We're young adults we want to be independent (FG 1).

Demographic differences?

- Limited differences between young men and women in their perceptions of these technologies
- Variations based on age and depending on family resources are much more visible
- Concerted cultivation vs natural growth
- Children from private schools were the most tracked of all

Concluding remarks

- Young people feel very differently about parental control apps depending on how they experience and make sense of their use.
- Themes of trust, autonomy, growing up, need for independence and self-regulation feature prominently
- A lot of diversity by SES, cultural background, natal family make-up etc in the experiences and also perceived needs.

Parental control apps and parental roles?

- It does not change much about the gendered division of childcare labour within families
- Dads are more often mentioned as setting up the apps
- “I still have app controls now, it was when I first got my phone my dad just put it on the device just make sure that he could monitor us.”

Mums are doing the day to day caring

- Whether with the help of monitoring tech or not
- “I think makes them feel less anxious, cause like with my mom I tell her where I’m going but then sometimes I’ll just be like oh she has my location so she can see where I am, so I don’t lie she knows where I’m going and she knows that me and my siblings travel around, we do go out so she can see where we are, so if we’re not home she’ll probably stay up to make sure we come home safe and then she’s fine.”
- “My mom is more strict with me and my brother compared to my dad, my dad just has a curfew you need to get back at this certain time. My mom will like text me every one or two hours, where are you, who are you with, give me your friends number, their parents number things like that, my dad doesn’t care.”