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Young children’s home technology use

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YOUNG CHILDREN’S HOME TECHNOLOGY USE

Responsive qualitative methods for a sensitive topic

Joanne Orlando

Introduction

Young children have become prolific users of technology. Approximately 75% of children aged 3 to 8 years now access technology such as a tablet and/or a mobile phone on a daily basis (Ofcom, 2017). Children are also increasingly using technology at a younger age, with a recent rise in usage by children under 3 years of age (O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016; Palaiologou 2016). Numerous studies are emerging to understand this new phenomenon of ‘digitised children’ (O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016; Radesky et al., 2016), however common and dominating perspectives underpinning these studies is assessing of the appropriateness of technology for young children. Of particular focus is the benefits and dangers of young children’s technology use for their development and learning.

Firstly, a consistent theme in the literature is a comparison of children’s technology use against a benchmark of what is perceived as expected and appropriate activity for children in the early childhood stage of development. These activities are often described in terms of the importance of traditional approaches to play and learning for young children’s (McLean et al., 2014) and include children’s social and emotional development (Radesky et al., 2016) and language development (Duch et al., 2013). Drawing mainly on surveys and small case studies, young children’s technology use has been measured against these characteristics to evaluate whether or not engagement with technology is conducive to their development. For the vast majority of studies that conclude that technology use is not suitable, the literature indicates that this is due to technology impacting on a child’s opportunity for physical development such handwriting skills, children’s physical, social and emotional well-being (Louv, 2010; Palmer, 2007).

It is evident from these studies that children’s technology use has challenged traditional notions of play and learning. A continued framing of this as potential harm however, closes off understanding children’s technology use more fully (Palaiologou, 2016; Stephens, 2016). It is important to recognise the non-traditional forms of play occurring from children’s technology use and the different contributions they make to their learning and development (Wood, 2009).

Researchers (Chaudron et al., 2015; Plowman & McPake, 2013; Stephens, 2016) have also noted that a consistent emphasis on the potential harm of technology has resulted in a judgemental stance regarding technology use for young children. This, they note, is evident in empirical
studies and also more widely in the media. A consistent message is that technology of harm to children and point to the irresponsibility of adults who allow young children to use these devices. Recent ‘popular’ research (Chang, 2016) has indicated high levels of ‘tech-shaming’ among parents, with 59% saying they feel judged by other parents over their kids’ screen time. While some parents have embraced the potential learning, technology offers children, for others, however, technology represents a threat to childhood development. A common tension for parents is fear of missing out on educational benefits vs concerns about negative effects on thinking and imagination (Chaudron et al., 2015; Radesky et al., 2016). This stance is an important ‘state of play’ to consider when reading this body of research, as well as undertaking research into young children’s use of technology in the home.

Secondly, a common position evident in studies is assessing young children’s use of technology from a distanced stance. These studies rely on data collected from adults who care for young children to explain what children ‘do’ on a device (Sharkins et al., 2016, Ernest et al., 2014). While this data is useful, adults cannot give a first-hand account of use. Reliance on adults to speak on behalf of the user – the child – decontextualises the decisions children are making in their technology use. These studies also focus on children’s ‘access’ or ‘exposure’ to a device (Sharkins et al., 2016), rather than understanding children’s engagement with a device. While these studies are able to capture important data such as frequency and length of use, they are unable to gain a nuanced complexities of technology use.

Debates relating to technology use, play and learning

While overall the literature indicates that young children are increasingly using technology and that their use is contributing to changes in traditional play and learning (and generally not for the better), it cannot be assumed that this change is necessarily unfavourable. Over-reliance on traditional conceptualisations, research methodologies and expectations has possibly resulted in an overlooking of the complexity of young children’s use of technology, what informs and shapes their engagement with technology and the range of implications and opportunities it opens for play, learning and development.

Bigum (2002) acknowledges that using technology in education or in any other field of human endeavour changes things. He states, however, that rather than necessarily improving an existing set of circumstances, we might expect that circumstance to be changed with the deployment of technology, and to be changed in unpredictable ways. For example, a study undertaken by Verenikina and Kervin (2011), signalled the positive impact of technology use for young children’s creativity. While data from this research was collected from the perspectives of caregivers (parents and educators), it presented some positive experiences and potential for digitally mediated imaginative play with an iPad. Similarly, other studies indicate that young children’s engagement with technology can support the development of early literacy (Gonzalez, 2016), arts (Terreni, 2011) and numeracy learning (Jowett et al., 2012). Greater understandings in these areas may alleviate the anxiety regarding any perceived harm of children’s use. This importantly can facilitate enhanced understanding of how children can use technology in ways which enhance their learning.

Need to look beyond adult-only interpretations

Contemporary approaches to childhood suggest that if we are to understand children’s play and learning there is a need to look beyond how adults observe, interpret and assess it. Developments in early childhood studies have seen a paradigmatic shift from constructions of children
and childhood framed in terms of vulnerability, dependency and immaturity, to perspectives that highlight competence and agency, leading to increased emphasis on children’s perspectives about their own play (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2012). A study by Plowman and McPake (2013) of young children’s (aged 3–4 years) uses of technology in their home illustrated the value of young children’s perspectives. While the methodology initially focused on parents rather than directly on the children, researchers shifted their methodology to also include data collected from the children. In their justification of this shift, the researchers stated that even though children’s interactions were strongly mediated by their parents, it was clear that, even at the ages of 3 and 4 years, children are able to exercise their own preferences to some extent. Plowman (2015, p.8) stated,

"Engaging directly with participating children and finding ways for them to articulate or demonstrate their choices enabled us to gain insights that were not available by other means and to have more confidence in piecing together an ecocultural understanding of their lives."

**Acknowledging context affects use**

A number of commentators have also observed that the context in which children engage with technology is significant to their preferences and engagement. A study by Edwards et al. (2017) found children’s home technology experiences to be potentially richer than those experienced in early childhood education settings. While data from this research was collected from the perspectives of adults and not children, the study importantly indicated the differing perspectives the adults caring for children had of the suitability of technology for children, and this was a key factor for the differing home technology experiences children were engaging in. Similarly, many studies (Palaiologou, 2016; Edwards et al., 2017) have identified the limited use of technology by children in early childhood settings was due to attitudes of educators and other staff.

Simplistic notions by adults that children use technology in the same way wherever they are and whoever they are with (adult or child), hinders understanding why particular technologies and content are chosen, and why children engage with it in the ways they do. Understanding the child’s use within what is often described as a digitally rich home technology environment, is valuable. It can provide insight into how children play with technology individually, with siblings, parents or others in the home. This can provide a fruitful basis for understanding how children’s use can be built on and enhanced in other settings such as early childhood education settings, to guide their learning.

**Moving the focus from the perceived dangers of technology to capitalising on the value**

While not discarding the research on young children’s use of technology completely, if we are to properly study the implications of their technology use on their learning, there is a need to shift away from assessing the dangers of technology to focus on lines of enquiry that are presenting alternate and fruitful understandings. These include: to more fully understand the online content children engage with and why, the opportunities for learning provided by their interaction with technology, how the people around the child inform their use of a device (Plowman & McPake, 2013), their range of experiences with technology and how children make meaning from and build on their technology activity (Davidson et al., 2014).

This chapter reports on a study which responds to the needs identified in the literature. The research questions informing this study are:
Young children’s home technology use

1. How do young children engage with technology at home?
2. What factors influence their use?
   a. What learning experiences do they engage in when using technology, and how do children and parents interpret them?
   b. How can children’s home technology use be capitalised on in early childhood education?

The home was selected as the site for the research as the bulk of children’s technology use occurs there (Edwards et al., 2017). The qualitative design of this study is characterised by observations and discussions with child(ren), parents and siblings in the home environment about the young child’s use of technology. Using qualitative methods provides the opportunity for the child to express and demonstrate their uses, and also for parents to provide more in-depth explanations of their child’s technology use.

Research methods that respond to the sensitive nature of this topic for parents

This chapter presents the methods used in this study to respond to how sensitive this topic can be for parents. Even though children are prolific users of technology the appropriateness of their use is openly questioned and judged (Freeman, 2017). This paradox may lead parents to allowing or encouraging their child to use technology at home, yet to conceal how much their child uses technology or whether they use it at all, when speaking with others. Researchers undertaking qualitative research, and particularly qualitative research on sensitive topics, need to be able to make an assessment of how the sensitivity potentially impacts upon the participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This includes being alert to the possible issues that participating in the research at home may raise for the participants and the researcher, and the design of the study.

My argument is that the design of this qualitative methodology responded to issues raised in the literature, and enhanced the possibility of gathering data that facilitated further understanding of the complexity of young children’s uses of technology, why they use technology in the ways they do and the opportunities for play and learning they enable, to be explored. Table 14.1 summarises how this research design addresses the limitations identified in the research literature.

Research design

This qualitative study took place in Sydney, Australia, and focused on the home technology practices of 13 children, from a total of 9 families. Data collection extended over a 12-month period and centred on family home visits, and included observing children’s technology use and talking with children, parents and siblings in family group interviews and in one-on-one discussions. The research process was approved by Western Sydney University Ethics committee, and consistent with standard ethical protocols, participants were assigned pseudonyms.

To respond to the sensitive context, an important feature of the research design was building rapport with the participants that would allow the access to the child and family’s ‘technology’ story (Cegłowski, 2000; Goodwin et al., 2003). I was asking parents to talk in detail about an area parents can lack confidence, and the potential to feel judged by me, a researcher and perceived expert in this field, was high for parents. To address this, self-disclosure, narratives and informal organisational structures were incorporated into the discussions with the parents, and with the children to build trust.
It is important to acknowledge that there are potentially many ethical issues that arise from involving young children in family group interviews and in one-on-one discussions. A primary ethical issue is that of consent (Graham et al., 2015), and this has direct implications for building rapport with the child and parents. While parents have provided consent for the child to participate in the study, this does not mean they have consented. The first stage of every home visit included explaining in accessible terms for all participants, the purpose of the study and my home visit. I also explained this at the beginning of one-on-one time talks with the children, where appropriate. This could not be done with very young children. Due to the very young age of the children I also used the concept of assent (Cock, 2006) as an appropriate option for the children. This included consistently assessing the child’s attentiveness and behaviour and responses towards me, as signs of consent. While no child became upset, children did at times during my visit demonstrate boredom, and the desire to change activity. I responded to this by shifting questioning to the parent or observing the child in their new activity if it was technology-related. I would then shift my focus back to the child when their actions indicated they were ready. This included coming up to show me something, joining the parent and me talking or smiling at me.

Table 14.1 Comparison between research designs employed in the research literature and the design of this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified limitations in the literature</th>
<th>This research design focus</th>
<th>Methods used in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s ‘access’ or ‘exposure’ to technology</td>
<td>Children’s ‘engagement’ with technology. Specifically, how and why they interact with the device and the content.</td>
<td>1 Trust building recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults interpretations of children’s technology use</td>
<td>Qualitative design to facilitate children’s perspectives on their technology use. Observations of children’s technology use. Caregivers and siblings’ perspectives on children’s technology use for a more holistic understanding.</td>
<td>2 Home visits that included family group interviews, one-to-one interviews with parents, one on one discussions; particular emphasis on rapport building using narratives, self-disclosure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Benchmarking children’s technology activity against traditional play and learning approaches | Focus is not to compare against a benchmark but to explore technology uses. | 3 Organisational strategies for home visits that emphasised rapport building:  
• Extended time in home  
• Iterative home visit structure |
| Seeking out the potential harm of young children’s technology use | Examining the range of play and learning opportunities emerging from children’s technology engagement. Responding to the biased stance regarding the suitability of technology for children. | 4 Observations of children’s technology use in conjunction with the above strategies |
| Young children’s technology use homogenised | Focus on child’s technology use in the home and family environment where the bulk of children’s use takes place. | |

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Young children’s home technology use

Recruitment of participants

The children and their families were recruited using a snowballing methodology (Cohen et al., 2007) through my professional and personal contacts. My contacts provided interested parents with an initial information sheet about the study, which was followed up by a phone call with me as Co-Investigator (CI) that provided more information. This method supported inclusion of a diverse range of children and their families. Participants were recruited if the child(ren) were in the required age group (6 years and younger) and used technology at home. Children were not selected in terms of what device they used, their skills in using technology or in their frequency of use. The focus of the study instead was the repertoire of experiences and approaches children used in their technology-based activity.

I began rapport building strategies with my first encounter with the parent. In explaining the purposes of the study during the initial phone call, I explained the commonality of young children using technology by referring to statistics. I also explained my role at University to teach pre-service teachers in using technology to enhance young children’s learning. This purpose and positioning of myself and technology use supported the parents’ sense of acceptance, and all parents I contacted about the study joined as participants.

This approach proved to be important for recruiting a range of young children from various family contexts. The children were from families of varying sizes situated in a range of communities, including an inner-city multicultural community, an outer metropolitan area with a high proportion of refugee families and a low-socio-economic area close to a prison. The parents varied widely in their professions and included university qualified professions, tradespersons and unskilled positions. The participating parents had varying levels of technology expertise and experience, and no two children used technology in exactly the same ways at home. Each child and family discussed and justified the child’s use in different and distinctive ways. Table 14.2 details the 12 child participants, family participants and the children’s technology resources.

The framing of the study for potential participants and the recruitment method proved to be very effective for contributing to the depth of data and the development of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) required for carefully studying children’s practices with technology. As a group, the children all lived in technology-rich home environments where technology was considered to be part of the family home and children had access to and used one or more devices. Furthermore, each of the homes had technology that was new, with most devices less than two years old, and all children had a regular stream of new apps (paid and free) to use. All family members used technology which also meant that children had expertise available to them from adults and other children, when needed.

Family visits

The family visits were approached as an iterative shift between family group discussions, one-on-one interviews with parents, one-on-one talks and observations with children. The focus of data collection was children’s frequent technology activities, the content children engaged with, device/content design features that children engaged with, changes in children’s technology uses, reasoning for children’s use and factors that influenced children’s technology engagement.

All home visits began with a family interview. This method was selected to help capture interactional data or shared meanings (Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001), regarding why a child uses technology in the ways they do. Such methods ‘can reveal the tone and personality of a family in a way that interviewing individual family members cannot’ (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007, p. 209). I began all family group interviews with questions which facilitated a ‘settling-in phase’
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child(ren)</th>
<th>Family 1</th>
<th>Family 2</th>
<th>Family 3</th>
<th>Family 4</th>
<th>Family 5</th>
<th>Family 6</th>
<th>Family 7</th>
<th>Family 8</th>
<th>Family 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boy 5</td>
<td>months</td>
<td>Boy 18</td>
<td>Boy 5</td>
<td>Boy 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents participating</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older siblings</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Boy 8</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Boy 10</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Boy 8</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Boy 15</td>
<td>Girl 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Device child used (6 yrs and younger)</td>
<td>Children share a mini-iPad and used parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Child used parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Children used Mum’s iPad, Dad’s tablet and parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Child owned own iPad and used parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Each child owned an iPad and parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Each child owned a mini-iPad and parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Children used family iPad and parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Child used family iPad and used parents’ mobile</td>
<td>Child owned own iPad and used parents’ mobile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for the child and parents (Cameron, 2005, p. 601). I presented less difficult questions first (Wood Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997), often beginning by asking questions regarding the technology the child uses, what they like to do with it and the logistics for using technology. The method provided the opportunity to grasp the communication styles and concerns of the child and parent. It also captured introductory understandings of how parents mediate their child’s technology use, the rules and boundaries around their child’s technology activity and family interactions that occur in relation to the child’s technology activity. This was then followed up in one-on-one interviews and observations.

One-on-one interviews were undertaken with all parent and child participants to focus on issues that are meaningful to participants and support a diversity of perceptions, rather than being inhibited by expected response categories (Barbour, 2000). When both parents participated in the research they were interviewed together. This grouping highlighted a greater depth of understanding of the sensitivities of this topic for parents. What became apparent when talking to both parents is that often parents disagreed on how they approached their child’s technology use. These disagreements were in every joint-parent interview and generally included the frequency and length of child’s use and the value of the child using technology. One parent always expressed concern that technology may harm their child. Many parents expressed surprise at some points that their partner expressed. What the parents disagreed on was important data, as was the revelation that many parents stated that they rarely discussed their parenting views on their child using technology.

Building a sense of trust and rapport was highly important in this study. Home visits involve entering the lives of a family (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) and supporting children and parents to feel at ease and interested in participating in the study. There was a need for logistical awareness that I was a visitor in a busy home of a young family and the requirement of parents to care for their children (for example, toileting, getting them something to eat), while I was in the home. This was in addition to the sensitive nature of the topic this study focused on. What follows is an explanation of three methods that were effectively incorporated into the home visits to address rapport and trust.

**Strategies to build rapport and trust and the findings they facilitated**

Three methods – Narratives, Self-disclosure and Flexible Home Visit Organisation – were incorporated into data collection and proved to be highly effective for building rapport with parents and children in ways that supported gaining insight into children’s technology use. The next section explains how each method was used and the data and findings it facilitated. The aim of this section is to support an insiders’ perspective into how I conducted the home visits as a researcher, and insight into decisions in that process.

1. **Narratives: parents and child**

A well-documented benefit of narratives is that they facilitate nuance in the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and this was an intention in this study. Some stories occurred naturally in conversations (Riessman, 2008). For children, these stories related to topics such as when they received their iPad as a present, explanation of an activity they did on their device, how technology plays out in the home, purchase of a new app, how someone helped them with their device use and how they selected a new app or device activity. One narrative was by a mother of 6-year-old girl who told me about her daughter’s play with Minecraft. The mother explained that to encourage the child’s love of architecture the parents would record architecture documentaries
on TV and also took their children to visit a new building in the city designed by a famous architect. The mother said of her daughter,

_she builds these amazing things on Minecraft . . . Its design gives a way to express what she’s thinking . . . technology can be easier than sitting in front of a piece of paper and say ‘I’m going to draw the layout of a building,’ which can be quite tiresome. You might not start it if it’s going to be a big job like that. Where she can come back to it._

(Mother of girl aged 6 years)

The mother also added that her daughter does not play with blocks or building materials in real life, but was more interested in craft type activities. She explained she had put that interest aside when she went to school, because she kept saying that everything wasn’t good enough. In relation to the ease of use the mother added, ‘I think technology gives her confidence in herself.’

The child’s preference for using Minecraft gave important insight into how technology play is combined with traditional play to enhance the understanding and interest in a topic, how this is driven by the child and how adults can capitalise on it to enhance learning. From a research design perspective, encouraging narratives enhanced a sense of trust for the parent in disclosing this story as part of the research process.

A highly effective line of narrative I initiated with all parents was asking them whether their child had achieved anything on their device that surprised them. This line of questioning was aimed at identifying activities that the child engaged in that stood out to parents as sophisticated activities, or that parents were proud of. Many parents answered ‘yes.’

Table 14.3 briefly lists affirmative responses given by parents. The actions the parents were surprised at can be categorised into one or more of the following categories codes:

1. child’s independence in technically manoeuvring the device;
2. content the child was creating with their device;
3. dispositions the child demonstrated when using the device (using their device to create content).

One surprise scenario occurred at the time of my family visit. The 18-month-old child from Family 3 (see Table 14.2) used a device for the first time while I was undertaking my family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Family 1</th>
<th>Family 3</th>
<th>Family 4</th>
<th>Family 5</th>
<th>Family 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surprise activity by child</td>
<td>3-year-old uses Google voice command independently to search the internet.</td>
<td>18-month-old baby crawled over to the iPad and started swiping. This was the first time he used a device.</td>
<td>6-year-old using YouTube to teach herself how to draw.</td>
<td>6-year-old uses design elements from local architecture to create her own buildings in Minecraft.</td>
<td>2-year-old takes artistic photos and enjoys the beauty she captures in her images.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Category code 1, 3 1 3 2, 3 2, 3
visit. Up until that point the parents had told me that their 18-month-old son had never used any device. The father stated that he considered the boy was too young to do anything constructive on iPad, and ‘would probably just destroy it.’

At the time of the boy’s first use, the 3-year-old sister had been showing me an animated game with fictional characters that she enjoys playing on her mum’s iPad. After her explanation, she left the iPad on the floor of the lounge room and my conversation with the parents and sister continued. The 18-month-old son crawled over to the unoccupied iPad and deliberately swiped an image that had remained on the screen from the sister’s game. He looked at us, paused, and then he purposefully swiped another image. The dynamic elements of the game meant that other objects were appearing and music was playing in response to his actions. When this happened, both parents stopped talking to me. After approximately 20 seconds of what appeared to be stunned silence watching their young son, the father stated ‘Wow’ and looked genuinely surprised by the young boy’s actions. The mother appeared to be equally surprised. The deliberate physical actions (swiping and tapping) of the boy when engaging with the device suggest that he had some understanding of the physical actions associated with using that device. He may have simply been copying his sister’s actions, however he did not try to perform the same actions on anything apart from the device. To his parents’ knowledge, he hadn’t replicated these actions previously. It is also possible to suggest at that moment in time, when the parents were not focused on restricting the child’s use, the boy felt comfortable to apply his knowledge.

This ‘surprise’ scenario initiated a shift in the parents’ tone of conversation. Until this point the parents’ main line of discussion can be described as defensive and the parents repeatedly stated that the only reason they gave their 3-year-old a daughter an iPad was so that they could have quiet time at home while the younger child had an afternoon nap. While they assured me that the apps or movies she watched on the iPad were suitable for a 3-year-old, they justified the quiet time as being important for the family. After the surprise scenario, the parents became more reflective of the decisions they made with their children and their uses of technology. They were less adamant that the only value of technology for their child was to keep her quiet and occupied, and there was opportunity for my questioning to reach a deeper, more reflective state of why they made the decisions they did and what informed them.

While the ‘surprise’ narrative did not play out in this way in all families, it was present in families that answered ‘yes,’ suggesting a tone of positivity and pride in the parents and the child. It supported the shift away from a judgemental stance and supported the collection of outstanding data regarding non-traditional play that children are engaging with on their device, and the learning value of it.

2. Self-disclosure

In order to break down hierarchies between myself and the children and parents, I included a reciprocal sharing of personal stories (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Although many researchers undertake some level of disclosure in research interviews, the intensity and frequency of disclosure may be different in research on sensitive topics (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). A strategy of self-disclosure was initiated more by accident, however it proved to be effective in helping parents feel at ease, and was developed as a conscious part of the rapport building process with parents early in the study. The level of disclosure was one I felt comfortable with and included talking about children’s uses of technology that I have observed, shared understanding of my own experiences as a parent and concerns I observe in parents generally. All self-disclosure expressed a positive and empathic attitude to parenting, children and technology.
This strategy was conducive to parents feel comfortable with me, and at times providing raw accounts of their uncertainty as parents in relation to children’s technology use. For example,

‘I hate being a parent. I really hate it . . . Technology makes it so hard’ (Parent of 6, 12 and 15-year-old)

‘I always feel so guilty when they are on their iPads. Like I’m a bad parent’ (Parent of 2 and 4-year-old).

As the strategy of self-disclosure proved to be very effective in building rapport with parents, I extend this strategy to my discussions with children. This included talking about myself as a mum, talking about my children (and other children I have met) and what they do on their device or are trying to learn to do on their device. I also disclosed aspects of my own technology use. For example, in speaking about how I broke my phone, one child told me how she dropped her iPad on the road. The importance of this disclosure was not the breaking of the iPad, but with further questioning, her explanation of where she was taking her iPad and what she was going to do with it. Self-disclosure created a shared space where the child and I shared our technology experiences. Importantly it supported a child feeling more relaxed, and soon after they often became enthusiastic about showing and telling me about what they do on their device.

Flexible home visit organisational strategies

Time allocated to the home visit proved to be pivotal to building rapport. Sixty-minute home visits were originally planned, however by the second home visit it became evident that 120-minutes was needed to elicit the experiences and understandings of the child and family. None of the families had participated in research prior to this study. For the majority of visits the first 30 minutes of my visit was often formalised by the parents. For example, in all visits, parents had gathered the whole family either at the kitchen table or in the lounge room, to await my arrival. Parents and children were often expecting formal questioning, and parents tried to keep children still, attentive and well-behaved. Families did not start to feel comfortable with the research process until approximately 30 minutes into my visit. Extending visits to 120 minutes was significant for creating comfort, and establishing a degree of trust with parents and children in interviews/observations.

In spending time developing rapport with the child, parents and siblings, I also felt an obligation to stay on for a while after the interview and spend some time with the family (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). This often included having another cup of tea, spending time playing a game with the child or providing advice on technology issues they were dealing with. While these courtesies are important for rapport maintenance, it also communicated respect for the family’s hospitality. For both reasons, home visits of subsequent families spanned 120 minutes, and this is the timeframe families were prepared for.

Other organisational strategies were also used to further build rapport with parents. These strategies acknowledged an understanding of a busy home of a young family, and included:

- Telling parents not to ‘clean up’ before my visit, which helped communicate that I was not there to ‘judge.’
- Explaining I was happy to talk to parents while they were undertaking any family activity, for example, cooking dinner. This often happened during the home visit and conversations when parents were cooking and organising the family were very natural, developed trust and led to some important disclosures by parents.
I always accepted an offer for a cup of tea or drink. This helped to lessen the formal family set-up awaiting my arrival.

Visits were audio-recorded using my mobile phone. While video-recording the visits would have allowed me to capture additional aspects including the home, technology organisation, how parents and children interact when together on a device or when a child is on a device, and the child’s engagement with technology, this process may have altered their actions and/or impacted on their level of comfort with the research process.

Implications for designing research regarding young children’s uses of technology

The design of this research facilitated a greater understanding of how young children use technology at home, factors that influence it and the learning that can develop from technology use. The discussion in this chapter focuses on how some data collection methods were used in home visits to support building rapport and trust and to elicit useful data for the purposes of this study in an area parents can feel uncertainty and/or judged. I found the combination of methods to be highly effective. The step by step design of this study that led to these methods is as follows:

Step 1: Review of the current research and of public debate in the field and identification of knowledge gaps and how these gaps are impairing understanding. The design of a research methodology that respond to these gaps.

Step 2: The identification and acknowledgement of three core factors that may impact upon the collection of data: children were directly involved in talking about and showing me their technology activity; the study took place inside the homes of families; and parents can often feel judged by other adults regarding the extent to which they permit their young child to use technology. These factors emerged from a critical reading of the body of literature available for this field, as well as public debate that surrounds this issue.

Step 3: Combined, these three factors required a research design that acknowledged and was responsive to these factors. While other topics may be regarded as more sensitive and upsetting for participants and researchers, this does not discount the sentiments parents may experiences in regards to this topic. Being a good parent and ensuring that their child has every opportunity in life is a core priority to many parents, and their uncertainty in this area may create a sense of anxiety that must be acknowledged if undertaking research around this topic.

Step 4: Developing recruitment and data collection methods that facilitate a depth of data in relation to this sensitive issue. Building trust and rapport was key to the design of this research. Developing rapport with parents influenced the rapport I developed with their child(ren) and vice versa. For example, if a child saw that I was happily talking to their parent, this contributed to a sense of trust in me.

Issues are often experienced with researchers in this field gaining access to families who are willing to participate. A strength of this study was the snowballing methodology and my genuine positive positioning of technology during recruitment. My commitment to finding the ‘good’ in children’s technology use was complementary to the strategies developed to build rapport and trust with parents and children.

This study was framed to identify the positive learning experiences young children are having with technology in the home and how these can be extended in early childhood education.
and in the home environment. The approach taken, however, could be modified to examining other topics (including other sensitive topics) involving young children in the home environment. The study also supported greater understanding of the combination of stress, uncertainty and pride that parents experience in relation to their young child’s use of technology.

References


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