MIND THE GAP – INCOME DIVIDE IN CHILDREN’S USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES

Study shows young children from lower-income families are spending more unsupervised time than higher-income ones on such devices. Their parents need help to bridge this digital gap.

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COVID-19 has highlighted the indispensability of digital devices in our everyday lives. From mundane tasks such as coordinating daily routines and ordering meals, to working and online learning, as well as keeping in touch with loved ones, these devices have been riding through this pandemic much more unvariable.

In families with children, there is a constant struggle to strike a healthy balance between access and excess in their digital device usage.

The vast majority of young families in Singapore are blessed with a plethora of devices, including smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers, e-readers and digital screen-based toys, for young children. The challenge lies in managing young children’s use of these devices so they derive maximum benefit while experiencing minimal harm.

Excessive device use is a definite concern, with research showing that pre-schoolers can be more prone to showing tantrums when asked to stop using them, or even become less interested in non-digital toys. There is also evidence that too much screen time for toddlers reduces their interaction with people around them and this is an important consideration.

Despite these potential risks, with increased access, devices can offer a wealth of enjoyable and educational content for pre-schoolers. An extensive range of smartphone- and tablet-based apps has been developed to cater to this age group, including many that teach language skills, numeracy, art and music. Given their portability, interactivity and multimedia capabilities, touch-screen devices such as smartphones and tablets enable appealing audiovisual content that is accessible and engaging for young children.

PARENTS’ CRITICAL ROLE

Toddlers can quickly grasp how to turn on and manage these devices and run the content they like. However, parents still play a critical role in ensuring that these everyday devices are used safely and responsibly.

A study shows that children aged three to six in rural flats spend four hours and 28 minutes a week on electronic devices – almost four times the one hour and 12 minutes for those in condom and landed property. ST PHOTO GIN TAY

PRE-SCHOOLERS CAN BE MORE PRONE TO SHOWING TANTRUMS WHEN ASKED TO STOP USING THEM, OR EVEN BECOME LESS INTERESTED IN NON-DIGITAL TOYS.

Beyond ownership, figures on the extent and content of device use in households of different socio-economic status (SES) is even more revealing. Children’s socio-economic status (SES) is not only a factor in their development, but also in the quality of their family environment. This can be observed in how much time they spend online.

In families with children aged three to six in rural flats, access to digital devices was far greater than in those in condominiums and landed property. For example, children aged three to six in rural flats spent four hours and 28 minutes a week on electronic devices – almost four times the one hour and 12 minutes for those in condom and landed property.

Children aged three to six in rural flats have access to digital devices, with 27 per cent for games daily, compared with 10.3 per cent and 7.1 per cent respectively for children in condominiums and landed property. The heavier device use and more intense use for games rather than for learning by children in rural flats is striking.

Children from lower-SES families are markedly less well-resourced and have fewer alternative diversions as reflected in data on the number of books in their homes. Over half of the children living in private condominiums or landed property have at least 10 books, compared with only one in 10 of children in rural flats.

How parents spend their time with their children is another key difference. Half of the parents living in private condominiums and landed homes read to their children every day, while only 4 per cent of the children living in rural flats do so.

SUPPORT FOR LOWER- INCOME PARENTS

Arguably, digital devices can help bridge the learning gap for children in lower-SES families if they are used in conjunction with educational content. For example, consider a parent who is not fluent in English but whose children can access nursery theme videos, alphabet and spelling apps, or online storybooks with audio narration. The child could potentially exposed to a great deal of English from such content.

However, there are prerequisites that the parent has to be aware of. They need to download these apps and access such content so the child begins before the age of three. Even then, children need to be interested in books and engaged in learning.

Children in lower-SES families lack such natural and additional advantages. Support for lower-SES families should, therefore, extend beyond parents’ digital literacy to those who are able to distinguish between high- and low-quality device use, and understand the types of online content that are beneficial for children, as well as knowing how to access the content and guide their children’s usage.

We should consider establishing more comprehensive device loan programmes where lower-SES families are loaned tablets that are pre-loaded with specially curated selections of apps with educational and cognitively stimulating content. Corporate sponsors can be tapped for such support.

We should also make access to educational online materials through the public libraries easier for parents. Such programmes can help to make up for the resource paucity in such households and the parents’ lower levels of digital literacy.

Fundamentally, with device use at home, parental guidance is indeed key. Previous research has established that when parents use digital media together with their children and interact with them in the process, they can boost their children’s learning.

NUS parents possess both the latitude of time and means. However, the lack of digital devices and internet connectivity places on children, the inability to access the content and guidance that they regard as superior.

Of children whose mothers have secondary education and below, 47.2 per cent used digital devices for TV shows, movies and music, and 26.8 per cent for games every day, compared with 22.4 per cent and 11.2 per cent respectively for children whose mothers have university education and above.

SCHOOL-TO-DIGITAL GAP

These stark distinctions in families from different SES backgrounds on the socio-economic ladder are further exacerbated by the fact that digital devices and internet connectivity are further disadvantaged when their use may not be ideal in terms of content and context.

SG Leads data shows that 85 per cent of children aged three to six spent more than 6 hours a week on electronic devices, including TV shows, movies and music. Among this group, 64 per cent of the time spent on such devices was unsupervised.

Unsupervised and engaging content that is less educational in nature, their device use could undermine their cognitive development. Notably, SG Leads data shows that children aged three to six spent more than 6 hours a week on electronic devices with links to lower scores in applied problems and letter-word identification tests. Furthermore, using these devices without parental or adult for more of the time intensifies this negative relationship.

Clearly more can and must be done to leverage the playing field in this regard. In a country like Singapore that is technologically, intensively, digital literate and access of parents and children across the socio-economic spectrum has become so universal that parents and children can fully exploit the benefits and not be left behind.

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