

The role of digital media in family life during the UK lockdown 2020

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Biographical Note

Eve Bent is a Project Officer for an autism research study at the University of Salford as well as being a PhD student at the University of Salford. Her research focusses on the benefits of digital media to children with autism.

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The role of digital media in family life during the UK lockdown 2020

As COVID-19 swept across China and Italy in the formative months of the year, we watched tentatively from the in the UK with an intense fear of what was coming. On March 23rd 2020, we were told to go home, stay home and school from home. We were told at the time of the first lockdown to close all shops, leisure, entertainment and eating venues. And in contrast to our current lockdown, the first lockdown also included all childcare, schools, colleges, and universities closing – a massive blow to the education of children of our nation.

Our family of six resides in a small three-bedroom terraced house in the suburbs of Manchester, north west England. With two preteen girls, an eight-year-old son with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and a seven-month-old baby, space is tight but manageable in normal circumstances. However, with us all now confined to the house, we had to find new ways of existing together in what was now ‘our new normal’, allowing the children to socialize, learn, and deal with their emotions during this challenging time.

Digital media for socializing

Children are sociable by nature. With COVID-19 restrictions meaning they could no longer see their friends at school, or have play dates or sleepovers, a significant part of their childhood has been lost. Therefore, we ensured all our children got to ‘see’ their friends as much as they needed to. Through video calling, they were able to chat with their favourite people as much as they needed. Our older children enjoyed cub and scout Zoom nights once a week where they could have down time with their friends, taking part in cooking, baking, scavenger hunts and talent shows all online. Regular catch-ups with aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins were a common theme through lockdown and are still on the schedule in preparation for Christmas as restrictions continue.

Digital media for learning

One of our biggest hurdles during lockdown was managing the very different educational needs of each of our children. We were lucky that schools provided a range of learning for our children through online learning platforms, from maths to literacy, times-tables to online libraries. Unfortunately, the children got bored of learning on these platforms very quickly and it soon became a struggle to ask them to sit at a desk and complete their work day-after-day, especially for our son with ASD. Using the same formats each day became monotonous. The older children began to resent the simple question-and-answer repetitiveness of their learning and craved more in-depth, interactive content. For our son, the dichotomy of ‘school-work’ and ‘home-learning’ was much harder to comprehend and accept. His rigid thinking patterns made the transition from classroom-based work to home-based work particularly hard. He has very fixed rules about the way things should be, but the cacophony of mixing traditional school learning with his mother as a teacher and his living space as his classroom was often just too much to handle.

This is where alternative forms of digital media played a vital role, thanks to the imagination of creators and recent technological advances. We did PE lessons with Joe Wicks via ‘YouTube’ on the television, the children bounding around the living room full of energy. We explored museums via live link and used iPads to go into world war two bunkers; both providing interactive opportunities to talk live directly with historians and ask the experts questions. We met animals at the local zoo and learnt about their habitats and activities. And we heard stories read live by the authors through our digital speakers – delving the children into inspirational worlds they had yet to explore. This variance of learning afforded the children an opportunity to move about more within their surroundings: they were able to change their focus from prescriptive website learning to engaging and immersive education that allowed them to explore parts of the world that even with traditional schooling they may never have had the chance to do. This learning was especially beneficial for our son, who

relished the active learning style. In contrast to his usual classroom routine of having to take ‘movement breaks’ after periods of static learning, he was able to incorporate movement and kinaesthetic learning into his day, triggering his often-too-low proprioceptive senses in a more cohesive way. It is worth considering not only the educational benefits of digital learning for children with ASD but the fringe benefits too, such as movement and exercise. Many children with ASD also have cooccurring issues such as sensory processing issues. By incorporating different forms of digital media into education for these children, educators can facilitate their need for input into many different sensory systems. Harrison, Vallina, Couture, Wenhold, and Mooreman’s (2019) ‘sensory curation theory’ explains why screens can help with visual senses, feedback can support auditory senses, and movement can stimulate vestibular, proprioceptive, and tactile senses. Using a wider range of digital media outputs, rather than basic prescriptive screen learning, can make education – and particularly at this time, at-home education – more inclusive for children with ASD.

Digital media to support an ASD child

Being out of routine, away from school, and having many new restrictions placed upon him not only affected our eight-year-old’s learning, but also caused him to struggle immeasurably with his emotional regulation and communication skills. Our son’s favourite thing is digital media, whether in lockdown or not; he is a gamer; he thrives within a digital world. And so, to meet the new challenges we faced with his condition during lockdown, we looked to what we knew he would respond to – a digital world. With a lack of routine that he would normally expect from school, we had to develop our own methods of introducing a varying schedule. We used online timers and digital ‘now-and-next’ applications to shift from one activity to another, allowing him to time to understand what to expect. Doing this digitally allowed us to reprogram the timer throughout the day to accompany his varying needs and changes in routine.

One significant issue our son had was emotional ‘meltdowns’: he would struggle to manage his emotions and had large outbursts that were difficult to keep under control and affected the whole household. One way in which digital media benefitted our son during these times was using meditation applications to instil some calm when there was a storm. In a world where children are immersed in digital media from their formative years, it is unsurprising that it can play such a significant role in regulating their emotions. From my own experience, both personal and professional, I have become acutely aware of the influence digital media can have on children. Thus, I knew that using technology to manage my son’s behaviors rather than traditional methods was likely to have a greater impact on his welfare; and it did.

The benefits of digital media on children with ASD are not yet well researched but, for the families in the ASD community, the anecdotal evidence is compelling. Future research in digital media could (and should) consider the needs of children with ASD and their families. The Autism community – that is, children, parents, and adults with ASD – would no doubt welcome more accessible support and interventions through digital media. Research is only just becoming aware of the ways users with varying requirements may benefit from digital media use (Alper, Katz & Clark, 2016). If research can continue to examine the role of digital media in the lives of those with ASD, more specific, targeted, measurable, and affordable interventions could be developed to help families manage, and this is something my own research aims to contribute to.

Conclusion

2020 has been a tumultuous year, with more downs than ups and more restrictions than freedoms. We have lived, and are living, through a world-wide pandemic. There are no rules, no guidelines, and no right-and-wrong for parenting children through a pandemic; we have all been doing our best to cope in extraordinary circumstances. Yet, despite this, the use of

digital media in its many forms has not only aided us but improved our methods of teaching, learning, socializing, and supporting our children. Our family has embraced our 'new normal' and come to learn of the benefits of a variety of digital media inputs in our children's lives, particularly for our child with ASD. I hope researchers and educators can take what we have learned forward into post-pandemic research to continue to develop the ways in which digital media benefits our children.

References

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