

The Digital Well-Being of Canadian Families



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Research Summary

A nationally representative sample of parents of children from birth to fifteen years old completed an online survey about their digital family life; specifically, the digital technology uses and activities of their children, their parenting style, and the opportunities and challenges that digital technology brings to parenting and family life in Canada. Based on this research, MediaSmarts has focused on two key factors of digital health in families' lives:

Digital well-being is about making the best uses of digital technology and about integrating digital technology into family life in ways that are *meaningful* and promote individual family values.

Meaningful engagement is about striking a healthy balance of digital technology use in family life. Mitigating the risks and embracing the opportunities afforded by digital technology requires that parents cycle between restrictive and enabling mediation strategies depending on the child, context, parenting style, and family values.

Digital access and activities

- **Three out of four** families have a mobile device (laptop, tablet, and/or smartphone) in their home.
- Across all age categories the most frequently reported device that children have their *own* access to is a smartphone (**53%** of all children) followed by a tablet, and computer (desktop or laptop). Children's overall levels of access to their *own* digital devices generally rose with age
- Parents told us that on a typical weekday, over **one third** of all children are using digital technology for schoolwork. Not surprisingly, more time is spent on weekends than during the school week using digital devices for something *other than* schoolwork.
- The number one digital activity for families is watching TV (**65%**), followed by watching YouTube videos (**45%**), and watching subscription video services (such as Netflix) (**40%**). The top digital activities for children are watching TV (**41%**) and watching YouTube videos (**40%**).
- We asked parents a series of questions about their online photo and video sharing. **73%** of parents told us that they sometimes share photos, videos, or blog about their child and when they do, they make sure only their close family and friends can see the content that they are sharing.

Digital skills

- Parents feel most confident about their ability to find exactly the information they are looking for online (**82%**), decide which information they should and should not share (**77%**), manage their friendships online (**73%**), and change their privacy settings (**73%**).
- Parents feel least confident in their ability to read and understand the terms of service and conditions of use (**28%**), post online content that they have created themselves (**28%**), and find out if the information they see online is true (**26%**).
- Parents told us that their children were most confident in finding exactly the information they are looking for online (**46%**), posting online content that they created themselves (photos and videos) (**44%**), deciding which personal information they should and should not share online (**41%**), and managing friendships (**40%**).
- Parents told us that their children are least confident when it comes to checking if the information they see online is true (**40%**) and reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use (**36%**).
- Parents in this study told us resoundingly that **digital literacy skills** (consisting of a variety of ethical, social, and reflective practices) and supports to maintain those skills are essential to finding the right balance in choosing strategies to ensure their families' digital well-being.
- Children with lower digital literacy skill levels are more likely to experience purely restrictive parental mediation, whereas children with higher digital literacy rates are often afforded the enabling mediation necessary to continue to develop their skills. Parents' digital literacy skills have a direct effect on their children's ability to develop their own digital literacy skills and consequentially maintain their digital well-being.

Digital parenting (concerns and rules)

- We clustered parental concerns regarding their children's use of digital technology around the three C's of **content, contact, and conduct**: what media children are consuming on digital devices (**content**), with whom they are engaging with online (**contact**), and how they are interacting with others (**conduct**).
- **Over half** of all parents surveyed felt that the less time their child spends with digital technology the better off they are, while almost two thirds of all parents agree that their child **benefits** from the digital technology they use. These two points show the tension parents highlight between concerns about screen use (and, in particular screen *time*) and the desire to ensure their children have access to the benefits of digital technology.

- Parents were least concerned with gender stereotyping of boys and girls and racial and ethnic stereotyping/racism online.
- Parents told us that the biggest sources of conflict across all age categories are:
 - Excessive use of digital devices (amount of screen time) **43%**
 - Rules on how children use their devices (e.g. when they can and cannot use a digital device) **28%**
 - What children are doing on their devices (e.g. sites they access on the internet) **19%**
- Across all age categories, parents told us that the top two **rules** they set for their children are about how much time they are allowed to spend online or on a digital device (**43%**) and talking to strangers online (**40%**).

Digital parenting (style)

- **43%** of parents agree with the statement: “it’s my job to keep my child safe by enforcing my rules while they use digital technology,” which we identified with an **authoritarian parenting style**.
- Scholars who study parenting have identified four distinct parenting styles, based on parents' views of their relationship with and responsibilities to their children. *Authoritarian* parents consider it most important that their children follow the rules that they have laid out; in a digital context, this means a focus on setting and enforcing rules on online content and behaviour. While MediaSmarts' past research has shown that setting rules is an important part of digital parenting, in the authoritarian style this often comes at the expense of open communication with and trust in children, which our research has shown to be essential as well. While parents may understandably be concerned by media portrayals of online risk, it is clear that they need guidance and support in balancing the roles of rules, ongoing communication, and developing trust in their children's online lives.
- When asked about their child’s engagement with digital technology, the most popular response of parents (**49%**) was “my child needs me to check on what they do online.”
- Interestingly, while the majority of parents in this study identified with the authoritarian parenting style, what parents told us about their concerns and how parents responded to these concerns shows that digital parenting for Canadian parents is not purely restrictive. Rather, parents combine both restrictive and enabling mediation practices in a variety of ways depending on the specific concern or challenge, their digital literacy levels as well as the digital literacy levels of their child, the specific context they are living in, and according to their unique family values.
- Parents told us that their digital parenting involves a continued effort to strike a balance between mitigating the risks associated with digital technology and giving children access to the opportunities it affords.

Implications

- The results of this study are a call to action for parents, educators, and policymakers in supporting the digital well-being of Canadian families.
- Families need greater digital literacy supports.
- Parenting supports, curriculum, policy, and future research must emphasize that there is *not a one-size-fits-all prescription* or solution for digital well-being.
- Parents and digital mentors require supports that promote a balanced approach to digital health and well-being.
- Parenting resources on digital well-being and digital media ought to be rooted in an understanding that parenting rules and strategies will be context-specific and, therefore, frequently changing.
- Parenting resources and supports need to help parents and guardians with a greater self-awareness when it comes to their own digital technology uses and habits.
- Technology companies and online services, as well as social networking platforms, have a responsibility to create parent-and child-friendly terms of service and conditions of use (especially if these services and platforms are used by youth).
- The digital skill levels of both parents and children impact directly on their digital well-being, therefore, policy and education interventions should focus on bolstering the digital literacy skills of both parents and children.



Definitions

In this report when we refer to:

- **Parents** we mean a person who brings up and cares for another, providing and supporting the physical, emotional, social, financial, and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood. This includes but is not limited to biological and custodial parents.
- **Digital Devices** we mean TVs, computers, laptops, tablets, mobile/cell phones (for talking and texting only), smartphones (internet connected), gaming consoles, smart TVs (internet connected), e-readers, iPod Touch (or similar device), internet connected toys, voice-activated virtual devices (Google Home, Amazon Echo) etc.
- **Internet** we mean going online to search websites, seek out information, use social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.), and use apps for entertainment, shopping, etc.
- **Digital Activities** we mean those in which youth or parents watch, listen to, read, and interact with others *on any device(s)*, such as:
 - watching TV
 - watching subscription videos
 - watching videos online
 - posting on social media
 - playing games (video, computer, mobile, apps,)
 - listening to music
 - reading
 - completing school work
 - video chatting
 - online shopping
- **Digital Literacy** we mean a combination of technological capacities, intellectual competencies, and ethical, social, and behavioural practices. Digital literacy rests upon three building blocks: *the skills and ability to use* digital tools and applications, *the capacity to critically understand* digital media tools and content, and the *knowledge and expertise to create and communicate* with digital technology.
- **Digital Technology** we mean devices, the internet, and digital media.

Introduction

While today's parents face a multitude of parenting challenges, the impacts of digital technology have become a predominant concern. This may not be surprising, given the widespread integration of digital devices in all of our everyday lives: for example, **three out of four** of the Canadian families that we surveyed had a mobile device (laptop, tablet, or smartphone) and high-speed internet access in their home. Moreover, parents may be overwhelmed with alarmist headlines about technology overload¹ and technology addiction² or even more measured warnings about the excessive use of digital technology.³ Concerns for their children aside, it's hard for parents to ignore what Illinois State Professor Brandon McDaniel calls 'technofence'⁴ or the everyday distractions and interruptions to family life caused by digital devices.

A majority of the research, guidelines, and supports available to parents today focus on the ambiguous concept of screen time⁵ which is used to encompass behaviours as diverse as watching video content, interactive play (such as video gaming), communicating on social media, reading, researching, and completing homework. Certainly excessive use of digital technology by children is a valid concern: for example, the Canadian Paediatric Society⁶ recommends **no screen time for children under two** and minimizing screen time for children five and under. However, the common convention of taking a purely negative or protectionist view of digital technology means

¹Cox, S. (2017). "The Solution to Technology Overload is so Incredibly Simple." *Big Think*. <https://bigthink.com/stefani-cox/family-driving-you-crazy-how-about-a-walk-around-the-block>.

² Bosker, B. (2016). "Addicted to your iPhone, You're Not Alone." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/the-binge-breaker/501122/>. November.

Baer, D. (2017). "What if You're Phone Stopped Controlling Your Life?" *Thrive Global*. <https://medium.com/thrive-global/what-if-instead-of-controlling-your-life-your-phone-helped-you-live-it-f20a979c2767>. April. Rob, M. (2018). "Are your Kids Addicted to Technology? Here's What You Need to Know." *Today's Parent*. <https://www.todayparent.com/family/family-life/are-your-kids-addicted-to-technology-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>. March.

³ Royal, C., Home, R., Wasik, S., Dames, L., and Newsome, G. (2017). "Chapter 6: Digital Wellness: Integrating Wellness in Everyday Life with Digital Content and Learning Technologies." In Keengwe, J., and P, Bull (EDs). *Handbook of Research on Transformative Digital Content and Learning Technologies*:103-117

⁴ McDaniel, B. in (2018). "How well do we know the tech habits of parents?" *The Atlantic—Rethink Original*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/morgan-stanley-2018/how-well-do-we-understand-the-tech-habits-of-parents/1775/>.

⁵ Common Sense Media. (2017). "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight." <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-kids-age-zero-to-eight-2017>

Lee, K. (2018). "Kids and Technology: When to Limit it and how." *Verywell Family*. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/kids-and-technology-when-to-limit-it-and-how-621145>. February.

Mavoa, J. (2018). "Advising on screen time in Australia: Is the evidence up to the task?" *Parenting for a Digital Future-London School of Economics*. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2018/04/18/advising-on-screen-time-in-australia/> April.

⁶ Canadian Paediatric Society. (2017). "Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world." *Paediatric Child Health*. 22(8): 461-468.

that the resulting policy interventions and parental supports promote a primarily restrictive model⁷ of mediation for family and children’s digital activities.

Extensive evidence suggests, however, that while restrictive forms of parental mediation—such as strictly limiting children’s access to and time on digital devices—may be associated with fewer online risks, this comes at the cost of opportunities⁸. There is, as well, evidence that in at least some contexts a highly restrictive approach does not significantly reduce risk⁹. These opportunities, moreover, include experiences that are essential for today’s families: engaging in creative and educational play, talking about family values and how to uphold them online, working together (depending on the age and skills of the child) to set family rules and boundaries, and developing the critical digital literacy skills that both parents and children need for good digital citizenship and digital well-being.

Digital well-being

Screen time has become a catch-all phrase for both the opportunities and risks of children’s online activities. Digital well-being involves much more than a simple question of how much time children and families spend viewing screens. There is no direct relationship between the time that children spend using digital technology and their mental or physical well-being;¹⁰ instead, as Royal et al. (2017)¹¹ explain, “problematic behavior with technology depends on the quality or content of the activities involving technology, not on the quantity of time spent using technology.”

Digital well-being, then, can be defined as the optimal state of health and well-being that an individual using digital technology is capable of achieving¹²: in a family context, it is about making the best uses of digital technology and about integrating digital technology

⁷ For more on the drawbacks of purely restrictive parental mediation models see: Livingstone, S., and Helsper, E.J. (2008). “Parental mediation of children’s internet use.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 52(4): 581-599.

Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Helsper, E.J., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Veltri, G.A., Folkvord, F. (2017). “Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: the role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation.” *Journal of Communication*: 82-105.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Przybylski, A. K., & Nash, V. (2018). Internet Filtering and Adolescent Exposure to Online Sexual Material. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. 21(7), 405-410.

¹⁰ Kardefelt-Winther, D. (2017). “How does the time children spend using digital technology impact their mental well-being, social relationships and physical activity? An evidence-focused literature review.” *Innocenti Discussion Paper*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence.

¹¹ Royal, C., Home, R., Wasik, S., Dames, L., and Newsome, G. (2017). “Chapter 6: Digital Wellness: Integrating Wellness in Everyday Life with Digital Content and Learning Technologies.” In Keengwe, J., and P, Bull (EDs). *Handbook of Research on Transformative Digital Content and Learning Technologies*: 103-117.

¹² *ibid.*

into our family lives in ways that are meaningful and promote our particular family values. The challenge with digital well-being is that as with problematic behaviour, digital well-being can be different for different people. The spectrum of digital well-being is particularly noticeable across various social and cultural understandings of what constitutes a family but also within various families themselves. For example, in this current research on Canadian families, **digital well-being varies for different children** depending on the child's age, personality, social environment, access to technology, level of supervision, guidance, and/or role models, and their digital skillset.

Digital wellness model

Several studies have developed conceptual models for digital wellness¹³. Worth noting is Royal et al.'s (2017) adaptation of Sweeney and Witmer's (1991) 'wheel of wellness'.



*Reproduced from the Handbook of Research on Transformative Digital Content and Learning Technologies (106)¹⁴

¹³ See: Royal, C., Home, R., Wasik, S., Dames, L., and Newsome, G. (2017). "Chapter 6: Digital Wellness: Integrating Wellness in Everyday Life with Digital Content and Learning Technologies." In Keengwe, J., and P, Bull (EDs). *Handbook of Research on Transformative Digital Content and Learning Technologies*: 103-117.

In their model Royal et al. highlight six factors (in the inner circle) that affect our digital well-being:

- 1) **Sense of worth**
- 2) **Sense of control**
- 3) **Relationships**
- 4) **Emotions, emotional awareness, coping with emotions**
- 5) **Physical health and self-care**
- 6) **Stress Levels and stress management**

These factors of digital well-being come together in dynamic ways depending on how we interact (see the **outer hexagons**) with different digital technology for:

- 1) **Communication**
- 2) **Socializing and relationships**
- 3) **Recreation**
- 4) **Entertainment**
- 5) **Intellectual or learning purposes**
- 6) **Work and job-related tasks (or, in the case of children, school work and homework)**

All of our interactions with digital technology will impact the factors of digital wellness which in turn affect our overall sense of digital well-being. By this analysis the key to digital well-being, and a major theme which we explore in depth in this current research, is achieving a **healthy balance** when it comes to digital technology use. This is no easy task and becomes more complicated within the context of family life where all of our different abilities, personalities, social environments, and family values come into play. In other words, **digital well-being is unique** not just for different families but also *within* families, with each family member's balance depending on factors such as age, cognitive and emotional development, and digital literacy skills. Bearing in mind international research¹⁵ on the push and pull of restrictive and enabling mediation

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ For examples see:

DeDios, E., Van Oosten, J., and Igartua, J. (2018). "Study of the relationship between parental mediation and adolescents' digital skills, online risks and online opportunities." *Computers in Human Behavior*: 186-198.

Gee, E., Takeuchi, L.M., Wartella, E., (EDs) (2018). *Children and Families in the Digital Age*. Routledge. New York, New York: 1-123.

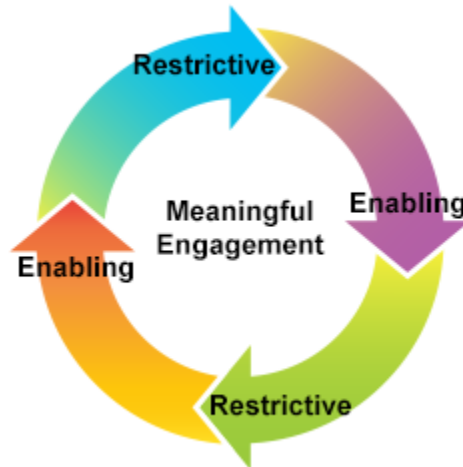
Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Helsper, E.J., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Veltri, G.A., Folkvord, F. (2017). "Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: the role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation." *Journal of Communication*: 82-105.

Livingstone, S., and Blum-Ross, A. (2018) "Imagining the future through the lens of the digital: parents' narratives of generational change." In: Papacharissi, Zizi, (ED.) *A networked self: birth, life, death*. Routledge, New York, 50-68.

Nikken, P., and Schols, M. (2015). "How and why parents' guide the media use of young children." *Journal of Child Family Studies*. (24): 3423-3435.

strategies for digital technology, we wish to help families tip the scales in favour of what we are calling **meaningful engagement with digital technology**.

MediaSmarts' meaningful engagement model



Following the work of Livingstone et al.,¹⁶ *enabling* mediation (e.g. talking about and explaining the media and/or sharing the activity) is associated with increased online opportunities but also risks whereas *restrictive* mediation (e.g. rules, time limits, or bans on particular activities and/or content) is associated with fewer online risks but at the cost of opportunities. Rather than a one or the other equation, our current research exploring the digital lives of Canadian families has informed our model of meaningful engagement which acknowledges that parents will more than likely cycle (as illustrated above) between restrictive and enabling mediation to help their children and families achieve digital wellness.

Achieving a healthy, balanced integration of digital technology in family life, therefore, does not *necessarily* mean tipping the scales to an even position. For a particular child, of a particular age, in a specific context, parents may favour more restrictive strategies while choosing enabling strategies at other times and in other contexts. The parents in this study told us resoundingly that **digital literacy skills (a variety of ethical, social, and reflective practices) and supports to maintain those skills** are essential to finding the right balance in choosing strategies to ensure their families' digital well-being.

¹⁶ Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Helsper, E.J., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Veltri, G.A., Folkvord, F. (2017). "Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: the role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation." *Journal of Communication*: 82-105.

Research aims

Existing research on the digital lives and digital well-being of families comes mainly from the United States,¹⁷ United Kingdom,¹⁸ and Netherlands¹⁹. There is a lack of Canadian data on digital parenting and even less on young children's (under five years old) interactions with digital media. In fact, this study provides some of the first insights into the digital technology uses and activities of Canadian children in the zero (birth) to four years old age demographic. Building on previous MediaSmarts research, this study aims to explore the digital lives of Canadian families in order to better understand:

- the types of digital devices used by parents and their children
- the types of digital activities parents and children engage in (together and separately)
- the types of non-digital activities parents and children engage in (together and separately)
- the digital skill levels of both parents and children
- parents' concerns for their children's digital engagement
- rules and strategies for their children's digital well-being
- parents' overall views of their child's online activity

Guiding questions that informed the conceptualization of this study included:²⁰

- What opportunities or challenges do parents think digital technology brings to parenting (practices and style)?
- How is digital technology and digital literacy integrated into family life and parenting in Canada, and do parents find this integration beneficial?
- How are parents balancing the risks and opportunities they see accompanying digital technology?
- What strategies do parents employ for mitigating risks and actualizing opportunities for their children, and where do they turn for advice/resources?

¹⁷ See: Lauricella, A. R., Cingel, D. P., Beaudoin-Ryan, L., Robb, M. B., Saphir, M., & Wartella, E. A. (2016). *The Common Sense census: Plugged-in parents of tweens and teens*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

¹⁸ See: London School of Economics. (2018). "Preparing for a Digital Future." <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/preparing-for-a-digital-future>

¹⁹ Nikken, P., and Schols, M. (2015). "How and why parent's guide the media use of young children." *Journal of Child Family Studies*. (24): 3423-3435.

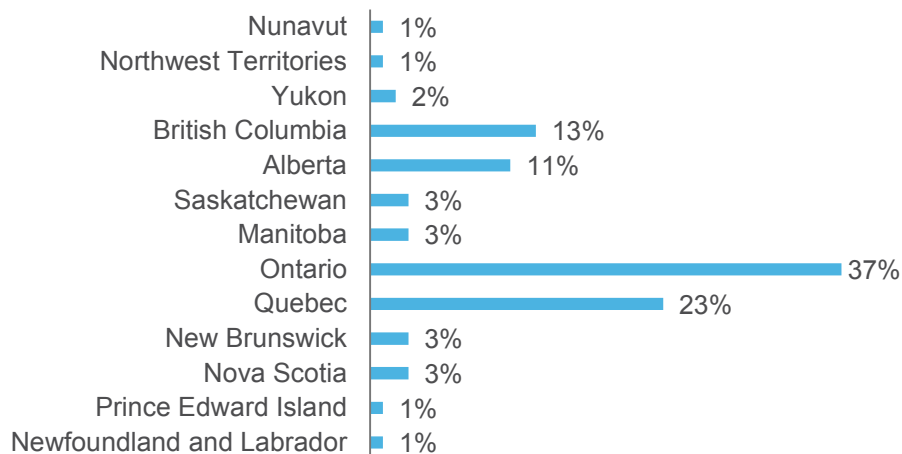
²⁰ Adapted from Livingstone, S. Blum-Ross, A., Pavlick, J., and K. Olafsson. (2018). "In the digital home how do parents support their children and who supports them?" *London School of Economics Department of Media and Communications: 1-13*.

Research Methodology and Demographics

In March 2018, MediaSmarts hired Environics Research Group to conduct an anonymous, online survey with 825 Canadian parents or guardians of children birth to 15 years old across Canada. Participants in the sample were provided information about the study and informed that their responses would remain anonymous. Environics managed the recruitment of participants and the distribution of the online survey. Individual identifiers were not collected or tied to individual entries. Survey participants had the option to withdraw from the survey at any time. Data was collected between May 4 and May 28, 2018.

Parents were chosen from within the general population, across all provinces and territories (nationally representative), they were both English and French speaking, and of a 50/50 gender split between male and female parents. A range of economic, educational, employment, and ethnic backgrounds were included in the parent population for both a diverse and random sample.

Participant Region



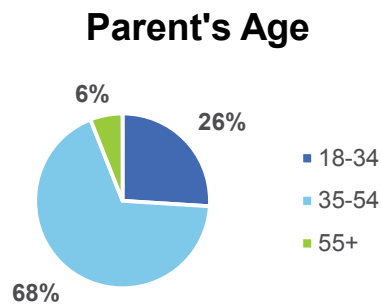
The questionnaire asked parents a range of topics on the impacts of digital technology on their family life with a focus on four areas of analysis:

- **Digital access:** the types of devices that parents and children use, or devices in the family home.
- **Digital activities:** the things that parents and children do while using digital technology.
- **Digital skills:** the fluency with which parents and children engage with digital technology (digital literacy levels for parents and children).

- **Digital parenting:** the concerns parents have, rules and strategies parents employ, and their self-assessment of their parenting style when it comes to their family's/ child's use of digital technology.

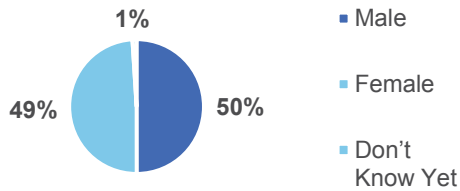
While there were on average 1.7 children in each household, parents were instructed to complete the survey for only one child in their home. We asked parents to complete the survey for their child with the earliest birthday month in the calendar year in order to get as close to an equal representation across the four age categories as possible. We divided the ages of children across four categories: 0 to 4 years, 5 to 9 years, 10 to 13 years, and 14 to 15 years. We divided the ages of parents into three categories: 18 to 34 years, 35 to 44 years, and 55 years and over. The average age of parents was 41 years old.

Children Age Categories Total 827	
Birth to four years old	17% (142)
Five to nine years old	26% (214)
Ten to thirteen years old	27% (226)
Fourteen to Fifteen years old	30% (245)

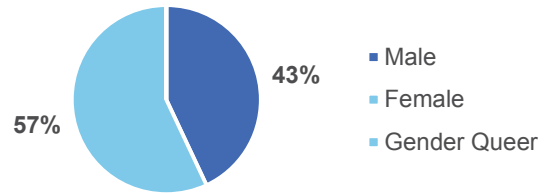


- Parents' identified 50.2% of children as male, 49.8% as female, 1% indicated they did not yet know their child's gender (because the child was too young to self-disclose), and four respondents (less than 1%) indicated their child was gender queer.
- Parents' identified as 57% female, 43% male, and 2 respondents (less than 1%) identified as gender queer.

Child's Gender

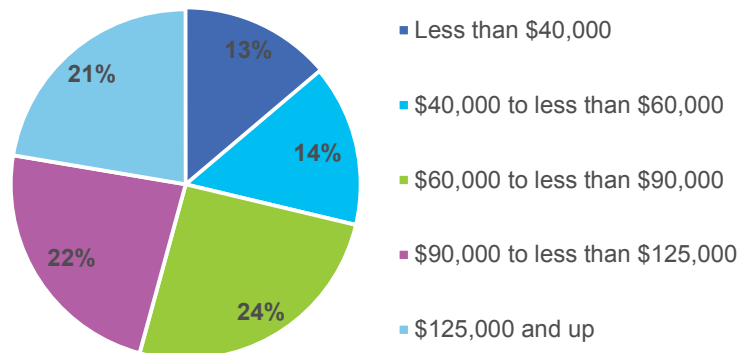


Parent's Gender

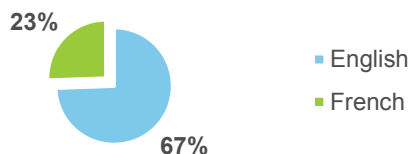


- The majority of parents (81%) indicated that they were married or living common-law.
- 86% of parents were born in Canada, and of the 14% that were born in another country the average number of years lived in Canada was 14.5 years.
- Parents spoke primarily English (67%) followed by French (23%)
- 68% of parents completed post-secondary education

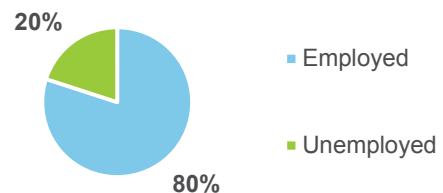
Household Income



Parent's Language



Parent's Employment Status



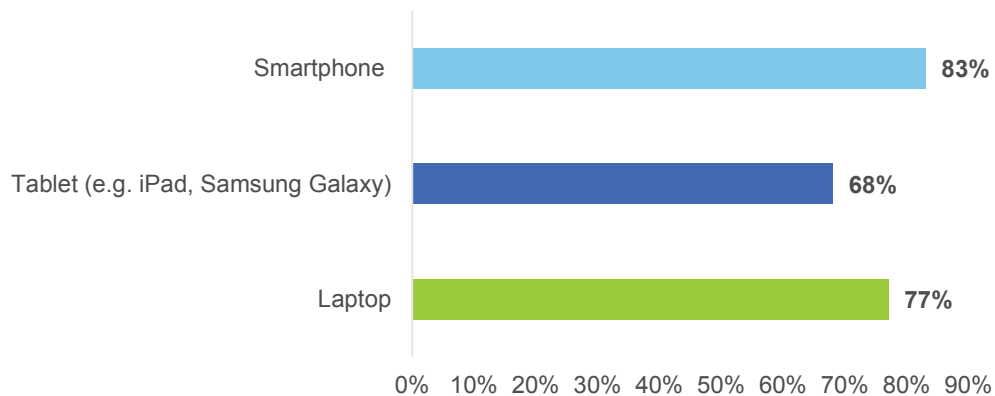
- 66% of parents were full-time employed, and the annual household income for 2017 was \$83,540, which is slightly higher than the national average of \$75,000. 80% of parents indicated that they were employed, 20% unemployed

Digital Access

We asked parents about the types of devices in their homes and their children's access to those devices. We were interested in knowing whether children had their own digital devices or if they shared 'family' or parent devices.

There is no doubt that family life today is deeply entwined with digital technology and digital devices: *none* of the families surveyed reported that they had *no digital devices in their home*. **76%** of families have a mobile device (laptop, tablet, and/or smartphone) in their home and more than **two thirds of families** have high speed internet access.

Mobile devices in the home



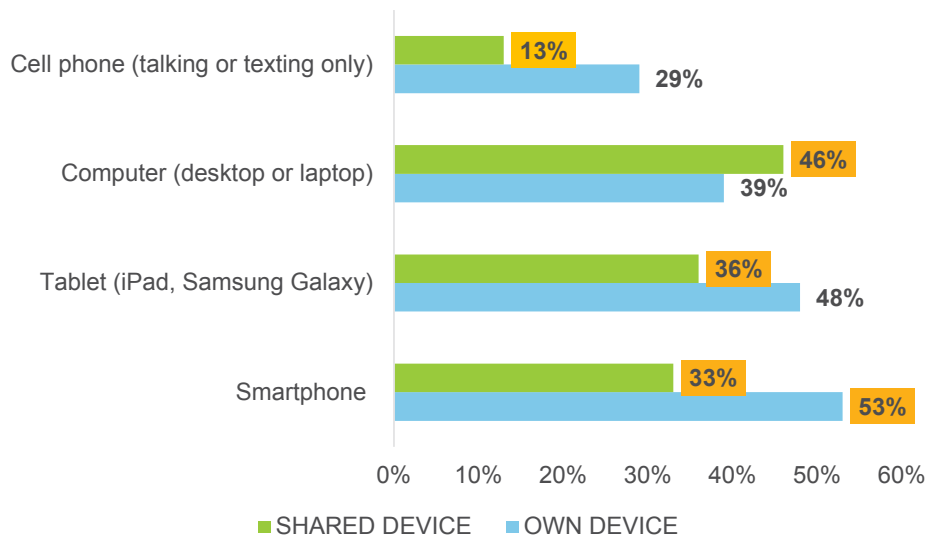
Smartphones were the number one reported device, with **83%** of parents indicating that they have one in their home. Over half of all families surveyed reported a TV (not internet connected), Smart TV (internet connected), cable TV subscription, and subscription video streaming service (such as Netflix).

Devices in the family home	
High-speed internet access	74%
Desktop Computer	52%
Laptop	77%
Tablet (e.g. iPad, Samsung Galaxy)	68%
Smartphone (with a data plan)	72%
Smartphone (without a data plan) ²¹	23%
Cell phone (for talking and texting only)	17%
TV (not internet connected)	60%
Cable TV subscription	57%
HD Antenna	7%
Smart TV (internet connected)	50%
Subscription video streaming service (e.g. Netflix)	51%
Video game console (e.g. Xbox, PlayStation)	59%
Handheld gaming device (e.g. Nintendo 3DS)	26%
iPod (e.g. iPod Touch)	31%
E-Reader (e.g. Kindle, Kobo)	17%
Educational gaming device (e.g. Leap Pad)	11%
Internet connected toys (e.g. Cogni Toys Dino, Hello Barbie)	6%
Voice activated device (e.g. Google Home, Amazon Echo)	13%
Virtual Reality Headset	10%

Children's access to digital devices

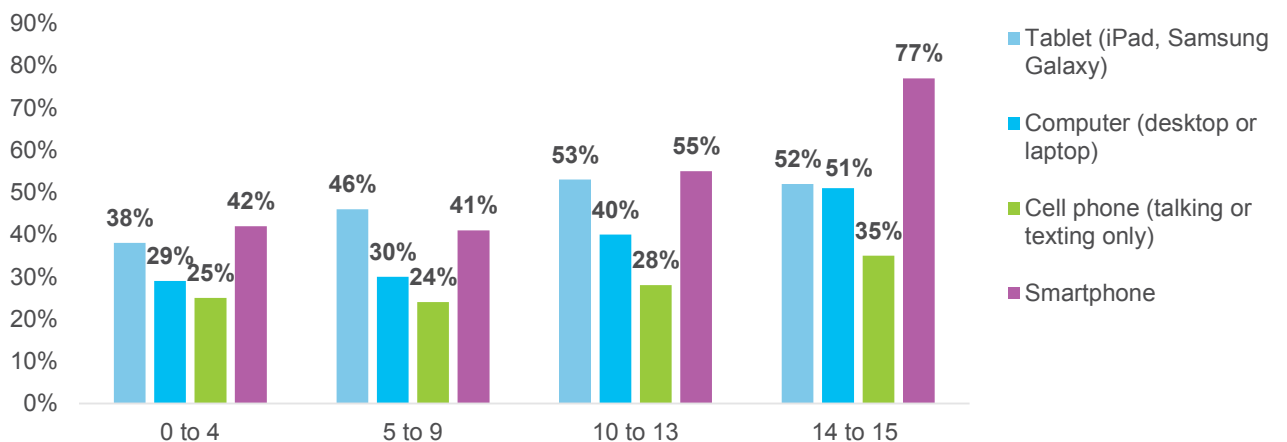
Across all age categories the most frequently reported device that children have their *own* access to is a smartphone (**53%** of all children) followed by a tablet, computer (desktop or laptop), and cell phone. By contrast, the most frequently reported *shared* device for children across all age categories is a computer (desktop or laptop) (**46%** of all children), followed by tablet, smartphone, and cell phone.

²¹ We made the distinction between smartphones with and without a data plan because some parents have told us (in previous research) that they choose to start their (younger) children with a cell phone for talking and texting only or a smartphone without a data plan (Wi-Fi access only) as a way to introduce them to mobile technology before they graduate to a smartphone with a data plan.



We also asked parents about handheld or console gaming devices, educational gaming devices, e-readers, internet connected toys, and virtual reality headsets, and found that children have greater access to their own versions of these devices rather than shared access. Interestingly, **16%** of parents (across all age categories) told us that their child does not have access to **their own** digital devices and **20%** of parents told us that their child does not have access to **shared** digital devices.

Child's own device



While children’s overall levels of access to their *own* digital devices generally rose with age, patterns also generally remained the same across all age categories: the most

frequently reported devices were smartphones (with the exception of five to nine year olds where tablets were the most frequently reported device), followed by tablets, computers and cell phones.

Among children ages birth to four **42%** have their own smartphone, compared to **41%** of five to nine year olds, **55%** of 10 to 13 year olds, and **77%** of 14 to 15 year olds. These findings are in line with MediaSmarts' previous research²² on young Canadians' access to networked devices, which has highlighted how children's access to mobile devices has been on the rise for the past 13 years. In 2005, only **6%** of children 9 to 10 years old had access to their own phone, by 2014 one quarter (**24%**) of kids 9 to 10 years old had their own phone, and in this current study (2018) **over half** of kids 10 to 13 have their own smart phone.

The older the child, the greater the likelihood that they will have their own digital device. For example, **over half** of children 10 to 15 years old have their own tablet. Younger children are more likely to not have any access to digital devices, or access to only *shared* "family" devices. For example, parents reported that of children birth to four years old **31%** did not have access to their own devices whereas only **5%** of children 14-15 years old did not have access to their own devices.

Affluence continues to play a role in children's access to digital devices where children from high affluence homes (over \$90,000) have greater access to digital devices than those from lower affluence homes (under \$40,000)—especially devices that are their own. For example, higher numbers of high affluence families have greater access to laptops (**82%** compared to **65%** of lower affluence families), tablets (**78%** compared to **61%** of lower affluence families), smartphones with a data plan (**81%** compared to **58%**), smart TVs (**61%** compared to **37%**), video gaming consoles (**66%** compared to **53%**), and voice activated devices (**24%** compared to **10%**).

Parents' education level also plays a role in children's access to digital devices: those with the post-secondary education have higher access to digital devices than did parents with high school or less. For example, parents with post-secondary education have greater access to laptops (**80%** compared to **62%** of parents with high school or less), tablets (**70%** compared to **54%** of parents with high school or less), smartphones with a data plan (**73%** compared to **63%**), smart TVs (**51%** compared to **44%**), and voice activated devices (**14%** compared to **9%**). Parents' gender, however, made little to no difference, with male and female parents reporting similar rates of access to digital devices for both their children and their household.

²² Steeves, V. (2015). "Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Trends and Recommendations." *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa: 1-35.

Time spent using digital devices

Parents told us that on a typical weekday, over **one third** of all children (birth to 15 years old) are using digital technology for school work. The chance that children use digital technology for school work increases with age: **30%** of children birth to four years old, **34%** of children five to nine years old, **47%** of 10 to 13 year olds, and **60%** of 14 to 15 year olds. As well, **one quarter** of children spend one to two hours a day (Monday through Friday) doing something *other than* school work on a digital device, including **29%** of children birth to four years old.

Not surprisingly, more time is spent on weekends than during the school week using digital devices for something other than school work. **32%** of children birth to 15 years old spend three or more hours on weekends with digital devices doing something *other than* school work. The time children spend with digital devices increases with age. For example, on weekends (Saturday and Sunday), **36%** of children ages 10 to 13 years old and **44%** of teens ages 14 to 15 spend three or more hours a day doing something *other than* school work on a digital device.

However, (**43%**) of parents reported that their children *never* use digital technology during family meals, which confirms that maintaining device-free family time is an important priority for parents. This was seen as especially important among parents of younger children: **49%** of children birth to four years old never use digital technology during mealtimes.

More concerning, however, were parents' indications of the rates in which children are using digital technology in the hour before bedtime and after they have gone to bed for the night. Using digital technology in the hour before bedtime, or after children have gone to bed for the night, is concerning because screen use before bedtime is associated with both less and lower-quality sleep, an especially important issue for children.²³ Similarly, the presence of a digital device in a child's bedroom is associated with fewer minutes of sleep per night particularly if children are tempted to check their device for messages and updates for fear of 'missing out'.²⁴

On a typical weekday **47%** of children (birth to 15 years) are using digital technology in the hour before bedtime. These rates are consistently higher among each older age group:

²³ Lebourgeois, M. K., Hale, L., Chang, A., Akacem, L. D., Montgomery-Downs, H. E., & Buxton, O. M. (2017). Digital Media and Sleep in *Childhood and Adolescence*. *Pediatrics*, 140(Supplement 2).

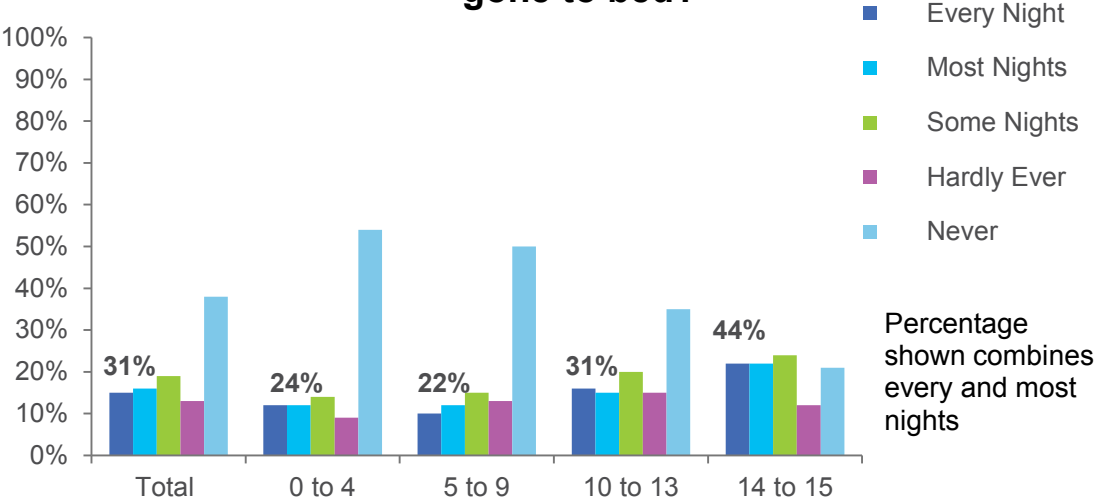
²⁴ Due to study limitations, we were not able to inquire about the types of devices children are using in their rooms and how these devices are being used.

Children's use of digital technology in the hour before bed "every night + most nights"	
0 to 4 years	33%
5 to 9 years	40%
10 to 13 years	48%
14 to 15 years	62%

On a typical weekday **30%** of children (birth to fifteen years) are using digital technology after they have gone to bed for the night. These rates are (with one minor exception) consistently higher among each older age group:

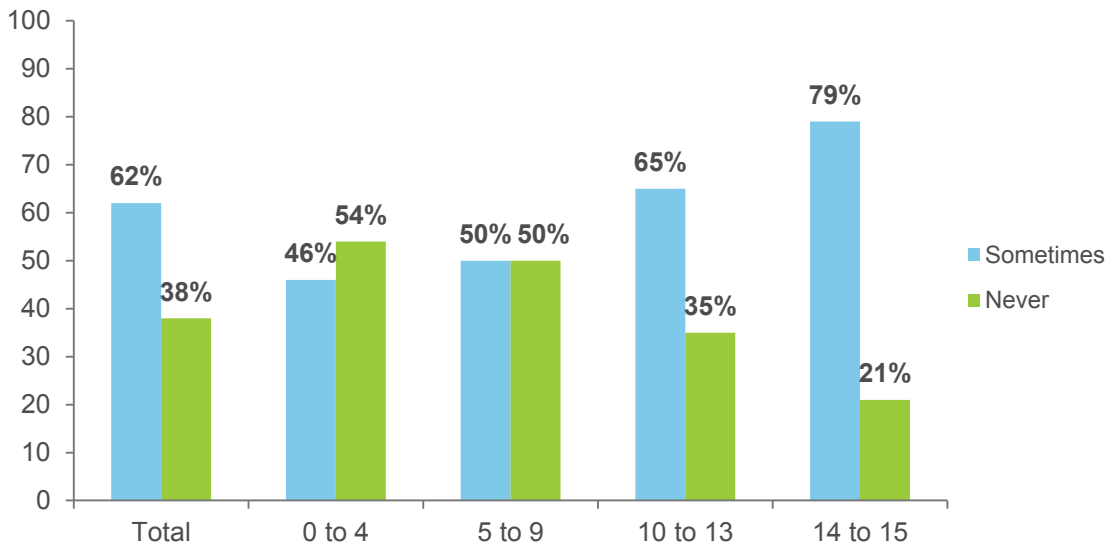
Children's use of digital technology after they have gone to bed for the night "every night + most nights"	
0 to 4 years	24%
5 to 9 years	22%
10 to 13 years	31%
14 to 15 years	44%

On a typical weekday, how often does your child use digital technology in their room after they've gone to bed?



Taking a closer look at children’s use of digital technology after they’ve gone to bed for the night, **62%** of parents told us that their children sometimes²⁵ use digital technology in their room after they’ve gone to bed compared with **38%** of parents who responded never. While rates of using digital technology after children have gone to bed are high (across all age categories) they increase with age: **46%** of children birth to four years old, **50%** of children five to nine years old, **65%** of 10 to 13 year olds, and **79%** of teens 14 to 15 years old.

On a typical weekday, does your child use digital technology in their room after they've gone to bed?



²⁵ As the graph below depicts, 'sometimes' is the aggregate category of all other categories except 'never'.

Digital Activities

To better understand the impacts of digital technology on family life in Canada we asked parents about how their families use digital technology together—the types of digital activities they engage in—as well as the kinds of non-digital activities parents integrate into their family life. We also asked parents about the ways in which parents’ and children’s digital activities may differ—the types of digital activities children engage in on their own. How parents manage (restrict and/or enable) their families’ viewing, playing, and interaction with digital technology is a central part of the cycle of meaningful engagement needed for digital well-being.

Family activities

We asked parents about the digital activities their families engage in together during a typical week and parents told us that the number one digital activity for families was watching TV (65%), followed by watching YouTube videos (45%), and watching subscription video services (such as Netflix) (40%).

Top Digital Activities for Canadian Families (in the past week)	
Watching TV	65%
Watching YouTube videos	45%
Watching Subscription video services (e.g. Netflix)	40%
Contacting family or friends using the internet (e.g. Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp)	30%
Playing computer and/or video games	27%
Using apps or games on a mobile device	27%
Interacting on social media together	17%
Reading using a digital device	14%
Using digital technology to create original content	14%

The top two digital activities for families (watching TV and watching YouTube videos) are also the same top two digital activities for children (which we will see momentarily), suggesting that parents are regularly engaging, or co-viewing, with their children when they are using digital devices to watch TV or YouTube videos²⁶. Co-viewing can ensure

²⁶ Watching YouTube videos was one of the *least* popular digital activities for parents (56%). This disparity may be due to parents co-viewing with their children, and as a result, being less likely to do so on their own accord; alternatively, it may also put in question the finding that parents are actively co-viewing YouTube videos with their children. Further research on the question will be performed in our upcoming qualitative parent study.

children are watching digital media sources that their parents have selected and approved. Educational media is most effective when co-viewed with parents who can help to extend and reinforce the learning content for their children²⁷. It is important to point out, though, that there is more to co-viewing than merely consuming media together: it involves active parental participation and mediation to reinforce and extend positive content as well as to engage with and discuss problematic content²⁸.

While co-viewing is primarily an enabling strategy to promote children’s and family’s digital literacy and overall digital wellness, digital well-being also requires a balance of restrictive strategies that work to provide the balance necessary to ensure children and families are incorporating offline or intentionally non-digital activities into their families lives. We asked parents a series of questions about the types of non-digital activities they integrate into their family life. For **three quarters of all families**, the number one response (across all age categories) was eating family meals together without any ‘technoference’ (or digital devices). **Over two thirds** of parents indicated that their families talk together about things that are important to them, their families, and their children.

Top Non-Digital Activities for Families (in the past week)	
Eating meals	76%
Talking about things that are important to you (parents), your child, and your family	68%
Outdoor recreational sporting activities (e.g. walks, swimming, going to the park, etc.)	60%
Visiting with friends and/or family	59%
Playing with toys or games (not on a digital device)	45%
Reading books or magazines (in print)	40%
Creative play (e.g. music, crafts, drama)	34%

While parents told us that their families are engaging in a wide variety of non-digital activities, these activities did vary somewhat across age categories. For all age categories, except the youngest (birth to four year olds) the top two non-digital activities are eating meals together and talking about important family matters. However, for the

²⁷ See for example Warren, R. (2003) Parental mediation of preschool children’s television viewing. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47(3); Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E.J. (2008). Parental mediation of children’s Internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 524, 581-599.

²⁸ Takeuchi, L., & Stephens, R. (2011). *The New Coviewing: Designing for learning through joint media engagement*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.

youngest children (birth to four years old), outdoor recreational activities were in the top two non-digital activities (67%). For the majority of all children (birth to 13 years old) parents told us that the least popular non-digital shared activity was creative play (e.g. music, crafts, drama). However, for teens 14 to 15 years old parents told us that the least popular non-digital shared activity was reading books or magazines in print.

Children's and parents' digital activities

We asked parents to tell us about their children's digital activities, how children are using digital devices and what they are using them for. Parents answered a series of questions about how often their children use digital devices for the following activities: watching TV, watching YouTube videos, playing games, social networking, watching subscription video (e.g. Netflix), listening to streaming or downloaded music and/or podcasts, using educational apps or games for school, video-chatting (e.g. Facetime), using educational apps or games *not* assigned for school (self-directed or directed by parents), reading on a digital device, or creating their own videos.

As already mentioned, **the top two digital activities for children across all age categories (birth to 14 years old) are watching TV (41%) and watching YouTube videos (40%)**. Top digital activities for children did change somewhat across the age categories: for children birth to nine years old the top two digital activities remain watching TV (38%) and watching YouTube videos (33%). For children 10 to 13 years old, the top two digital activities are the reverse: watching YouTube videos (44%) and watching TV (42%). For teens 14 to 15 years old the top two digital activities are social networking and watching YouTube videos (tied at 51%) and playing games (48%).

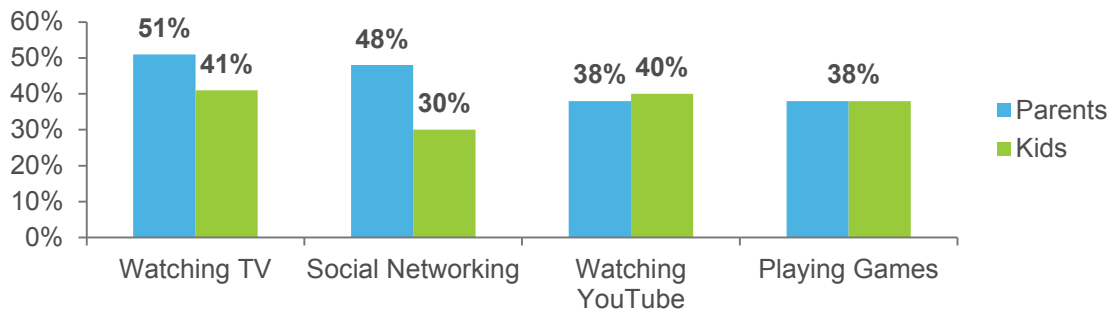
The least popular digital activities for all children are creating their own videos and reading on a digital device. The least popular digital activities remained the same across all age categories with the exception of children five to nine years old in which the bottom two digital activities are creating their own videos and video-chatting.

There are two important caveats to these findings. First, this study measured parents' reports of their children's digital activities, so answers may not be exactly what children themselves would report. For example, MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wired World* research has explored the various ways that youth creatively use digital devices to create unique online personas²⁹ for themselves. As well, as noted later in this study, parents also indicated that creating unique online content (photos and videos) was one of the top two digital *competencies* for their children, suggesting that digital or online creative play is still a significant part of children's digital activity.

²⁹ Steeves, V. (2015). "Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Trends and Recommendations." *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa: 1-35.

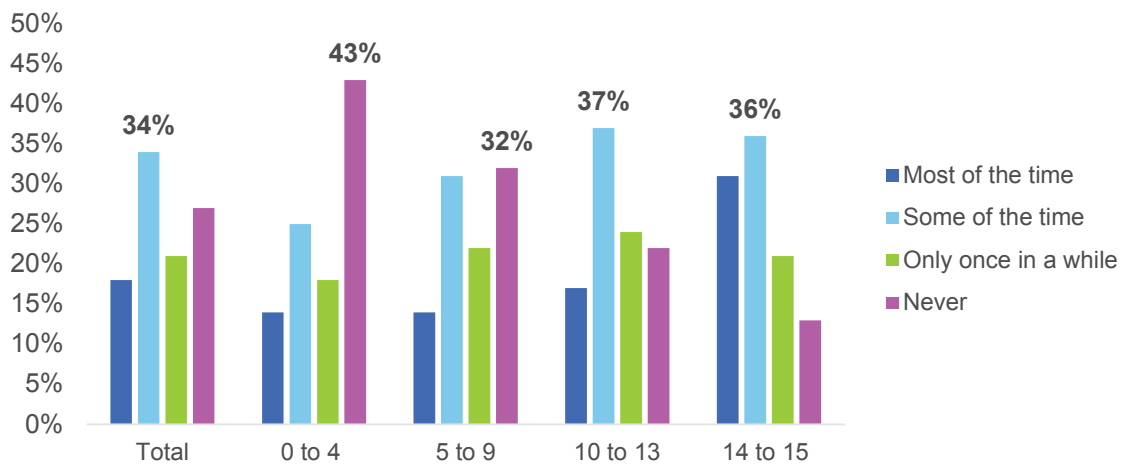
We asked parents the same series of questions about their own digital activities, with the exclusion of questions about educational apps and games. **The top two activities that parents reported for themselves are watching TV (51%) and social networking (48%).** 15 % of parents also included personal banking, email, and paying bills as germane to their digital routine. Parents’ gender, age, education, employment status, income, and country of origin made no difference in these rates.

Comparing children’s and parent’s digital activities



The least popular digital activities that parents reported for themselves are watching YouTube videos and video-chatting. Parents’ gender, country of origin, employment status, income, and education made no difference in these rates. However, while parents ages 18-54 also indicated the same bottom two activities, for parents 55+ their least popular digital activities are watching YouTube, watching subscription videos, and reading on a digital device (tied at 51%) and playing games (47%).

Child's Use of Multipule Devices



We asked parents how often (if ever) their child uses more than one digital device at a time—for example, using a smartphone or tablet while watching TV. (Use of multiple screens at once has been linked to negative effects³⁰.) Parents told us that **34% of all children (birth to 14 years old) use multiple devices some of the time**. Perhaps not surprisingly, these rates did change based on the child's age with older children being more prone to use multiple devices. In fact, parents told us that **43% of children birth to four years old never use more than one device at a time**. For children five to nine years old never was also the highest response category (at **32%**). For children 10 to 15 years old, by contrast, the most frequent chosen response category for multiple device use chosen by their parents was some of the time.

Parents' sharing activities

We asked parents a series of questions about their online photo and video sharing specifically in cases where they are sharing what experts are calling 'childhood content'³¹—photos or videos of their families and/or children. 'Sharenting'³² is a term used to describe parents who actively shape their kids' digital identities online; one recent study found 92% children under two in the United States already had some form of a digital presence,³³ while another³⁴ found that the average child had 1,500 pictures of themselves posted online by time they're five years old.

While these activities may be largely for innocuous purposes, such as sharing moments in children's lives with friends and family or serving as the digital equivalent of a family photo album, parents need to be mindful of the ways in which their sharing practices will follow their children into adulthood.

Moreover, parenting and child development experts are still trying to determine best practices regarding the sharing of 'childhood content'. One report³⁵ explains that parents' sharing practices can establish a child's digital identity at an early age (typically without their consent), potentially subjecting children to the risks of identity theft, unauthorized re-sharing, and revealing potentially embarrassing information that could be misused by

³⁰ Becker, M. W., Alzahabi, R., & Hopwood, C. J. (2013). Media Multitasking Is Associated with Symptoms of Depression and Social Anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(2), 132-135. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0291

³¹ Lenz, L. (2016). "Is creating Mommy blog content the new child labour?" *The Daily Dot*. <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/mom-blogging-child-labor/>. September.

³² See: Stadtmiller, M. (2017). "Kids don't have parents anymore—They have 'sharents'." *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/kids-dont-have-parents-anymorethey-have-sharents>

Stadtmiller, M. (2017). "Sharenting: Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media." *66 Emory L.J.* (839). 1-47.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *Share With Care* (Rep.) (2106) Nominet.

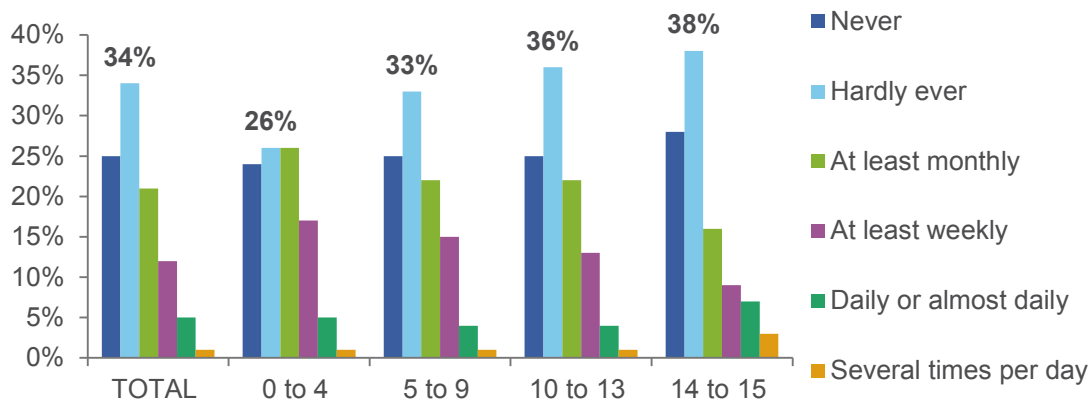
³⁵ Steinberg, S. (2017). "Sharenting": Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media." *66 Emory L.J.* (839): 1-47.

others. Simply telling parents to ‘share nothing’, though, may cut them off from their communities of support and much needed resources, not to mention having an unequal emotional impact on those whose relatives and peer networks live abroad.

While there is a significant amount of data on parents’ sharing practices in the United States, UK, Austria, and France, until this study data on Canadian parents’ sharing practices has been significantly lacking. We asked parents a series of questions about with whom they share family/ childhood content, how often, and whether or not they sought the consent of their child before doing so.

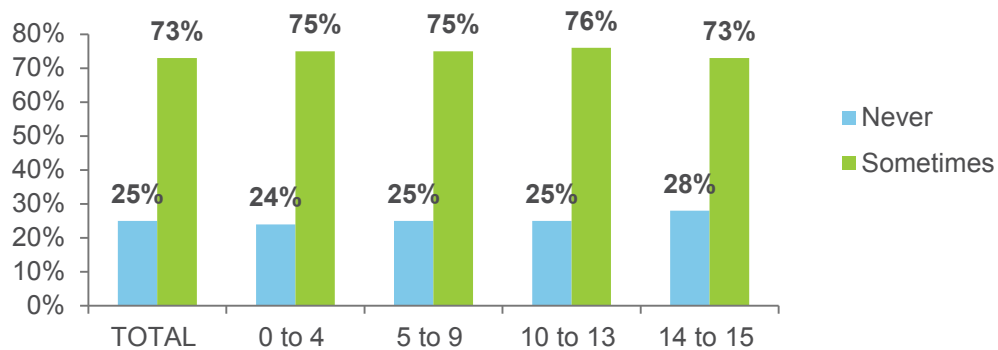
Most parents (34%) told us that they ‘hardly ever’ share, post, and/or blog photos or videos of their child online (across all of the age categories).

How often do you share/post/blog photos or videos of your child online?



However, if we look at these response categories together as a ‘sometimes’ vs. ‘never’ comparison, more parents share sometimes than never:

How often do you share/post/blog photos or videos of your child online?



73% of parents told us that they sometimes share photos, videos, or blog about their child which is in line with international trends indicating that parents are sharing childhood content more often than not. Perhaps more important is the question of with whom parents are sharing this information with and for what purposes: the largest group of parents (**43%**) told us that they make sure only their close family and friends can see the family/childhood content that they are sharing. These responses remained fairly consistent across all age categories: **43%** for children ages birth to four years old, **41%** for children five to nine years old, **44%** for 10 to 13 year olds, and **47%** for 14 to 15 year olds. The second most popular response of parents across all of the age categories (**39%**) is that they make sure only people they have accepted as friends on their social media networks can see the family/ childhood content they are sharing.

Three out of five parents told us that when they share photos or videos of their child online they do it to keep in touch with family and friends. Many parents who do share childhood or family content are seeking consent before posting any photos or videos online. **17%** of parents said that they asked their child in advance before sharing content that included them (photo or video). Perhaps not surprisingly, the concept of asking for their child's consent was lowest amongst parents of the youngest children with only **11%** of parents asking their child birth to four years old for consent, whereas for older children (14 to 15 years old) **20%** of parents indicated that they asked for consent.

We also asked those parents who had indicated that they have shared childhood content if they regretted anything that they shared about their child: only **11%** of all parents surveyed indicated that this was true for them. Interestingly, this presents similar findings to MediaSmarts' study of young Canadians' photo-sharing practices, which identified

elaborate curation strategies by which youth carefully select the audience, platform, and accounts in which they share their online identities³⁶. Similarly, parents told us that regardless of whether or not they directly ask for their children's consent, they work to manage their sharing practices and subsequently their family's and children's online privacy by intentionally selecting specific audiences (of known family and friends) and controlling privacy settings or who sees the content they are sharing.



³⁶ Johnson, M., Steeves, V., Regan Shade, L., Foran, G. (2017). "To Share or Not to Share: How Teens Make Privacy Decisions about Photos on Social Media." *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa: 1-47.

Digital Skills

We asked parents a series of questions about their confidence in using digital technology, then asked parents a similar series of questions about their perception of their child's skill levels in order to explore differences in the digital literacy of parents and children, as well as the effects of parents' digital literacy levels on their child's.

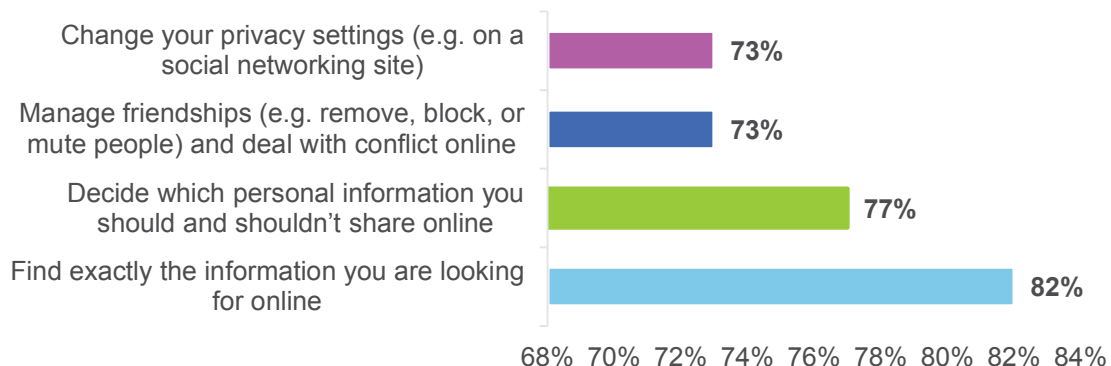
Parents' digital skills

Using a scale of very confident to not confident, we asked parents how confident they were with:

- **Changing their privacy settings (e.g. on a social media networking site)**
- **Reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use (e.g. for a device or online service)**
- **Finding exactly the information they are looking for online**
- **Finding out if the information they see online is true**
- **Deciding which personal information they should and should not share online**
- **Managing friendships (e.g. removing, blocking, or muting other users) and dealing with conflict online**
- **Posting online content (photos or videos) that they have created themselves**

Parents feel most confident about their ability to find exactly the information they are looking for online (**82%**), decide which information they should and should not share (**77%**), manage their friendships online (**73%**), and change their privacy settings (**73%**).

Tasks parents are most confident with:



Parents' education levels made very little difference on the tasks they felt most confident with. Parents with post-secondary education indicated they were slightly more confident

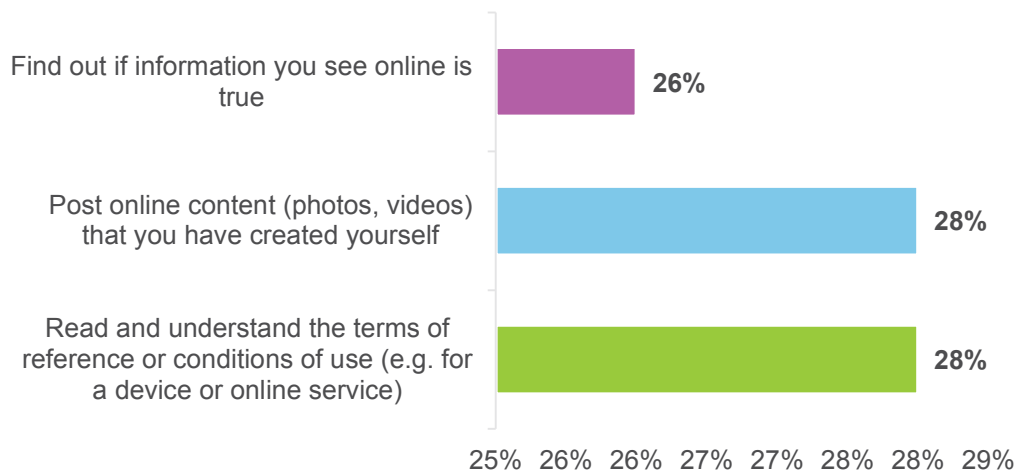
(one or two percentage points greater) than parents with high school or less. For example, **82%** of post-secondary educated parents are confident with finding exactly the information they are looking for online compared with **80%** of parents with high school or less.

Age also made little difference in parents' confidence levels: parent's ages 18 to 35 years were most confident with the top two tasks of finding exactly the information they are looking for (**84%**) and deciding which information to share or not to share (**81%**).

Female parents (mothers) ranked slightly higher than male parents (fathers) with these top two tasks: **83%** of mothers were confident in finding exactly the information they are looking for online compared with **80%** of fathers and **81%** of mothers were confident with deciding which information to share or not share compared with **73%** of fathers.

Parents feel least confident in their ability to read and understand the terms of service and conditions of use (**28%**), post online content that they have created themselves (**28%**), and find out if the information they see online is true (**26%**).

Tasks parents are least confident with:



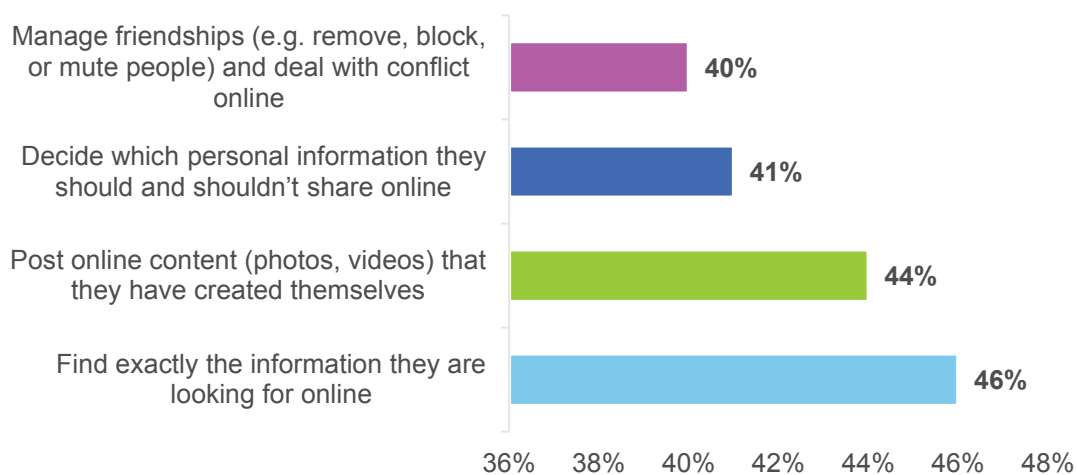
Parents' education levels had some impact on their confidence levels when it came to tasks that parents were **less** confident with. For example, parents with post-secondary education were slightly more confident for both understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use and posting original content compared to parents with high school or less. Parents' age also impacted their confidence levels. Younger parents, ages 18 to 34, were slightly more confident in their understanding of terms of reference and conditions of use and for posting original content, whereas, older parents (ages 55+) were the least confident in understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use and posting original content. Male parents ranked slightly less confident than female parents for both understanding terms of reference and conditions of use and for posting original content.

Children's digital skills

Using a scale of very confident to not confident we asked parents to complete the same list of digital competencies for their children, based on their estimate of their child's abilities. While parents indicated that their children shared some of their competencies, they were less confident in their children's digital skills than their own.

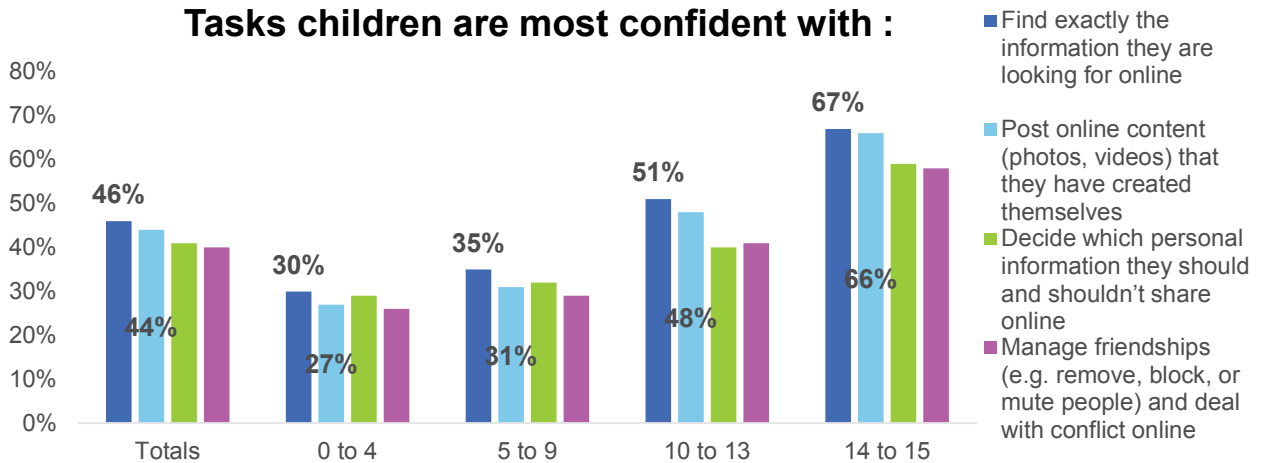
Parents told us that their children were most confident in finding exactly the information they are looking for online (46%), posting online content that they created themselves (photos and videos) (44%), deciding which personal information they should and should not share online (41%), and managing friendships (40%).

Tasks Children are most confident with:



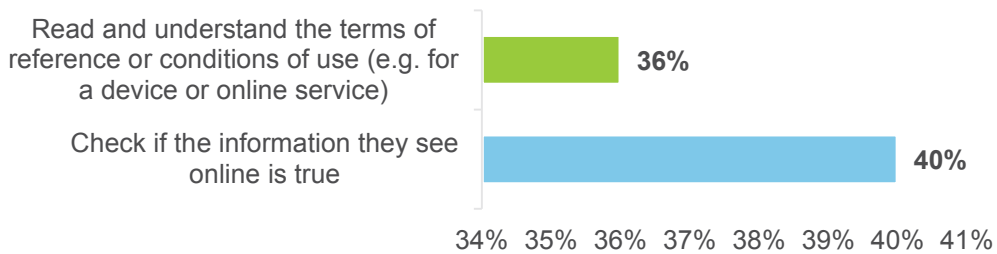
For the most part, parents' perception of their children's top digital competencies remained relatively consistent across the age categories, although it's worth noting that for children ages birth to nine years old parents ranked "decide which personal information they should and should not share online" slightly higher than posting original online content. Perhaps not surprisingly, children's digital skill levels are seen as increasing significantly with age: only 30% of parents of children birth to four years old indicated they were confident in their child's ability to find exactly the information they were looking for online, compared with 35% of five to nine year olds, 51% of 10 to 13 year olds, and 67% of 14 to 15 year olds. Similarly, for posting original content only 27% of parents of children birth to four years old were confident in their child's ability compared to 66% of parents of children 14 to 15 years old.

Tasks children are most confident with :



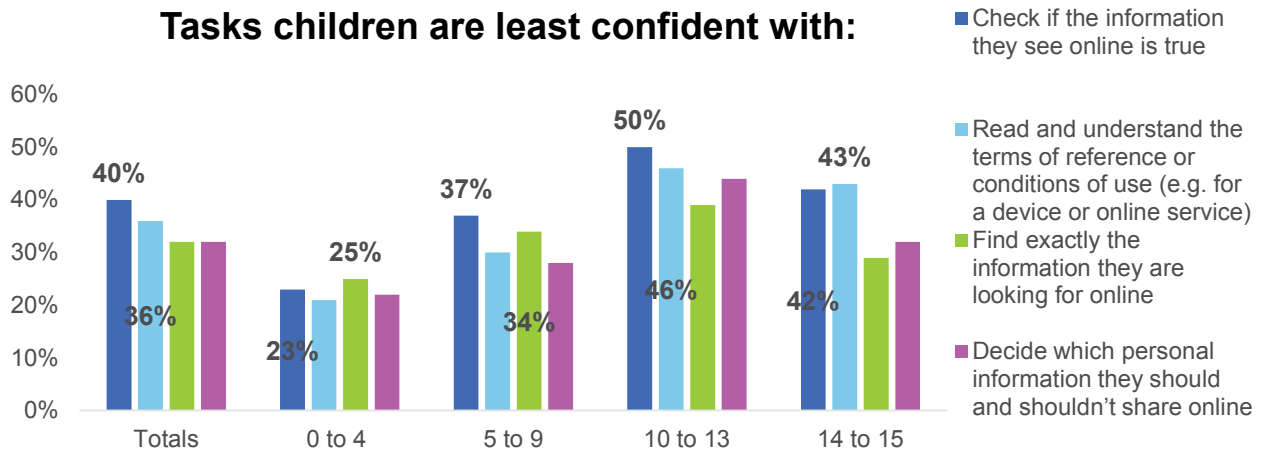
Parents told us that their children are least confident when it comes to checking if the information they see online is true (40%) and reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use (36%).

Tasks children are least confident with:



However, the tasks children are least confident with did change with children's age:

Tasks children are least confident with:



Parents of children birth to four years old told us that their children are least confident with finding exactly what they are looking for online (25%) and checking to see if the information they see online is true (23%). Parents of children five to nine years old told us that their children are also least confident with checking to see if the information they post online is true (37%) and finding exactly what they are looking for online (34%). Parents of children 10 to 13 told us that their children are least confident with checking if the information they see online is true (50%) and reading and understanding the terms of reference (46%). Parents of teens 14 to 15 years old told us that their children are least confident with reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use (43%) and checking to see if the information they post online is true (42%).

Comparing parents' and children's digital skills

The **top two** tasks that **parents** are *most confident* with are:

- **Finding exactly the information they are looking for online (82%)**
- **Deciding which personal information to share or not to share (77%)**

The **top two** tasks that parents feel their **children** are *most confident* with are:

- **Finding exactly the information they are looking for online (46%)**
- **Posting original online content (photos and videos) (44%)**

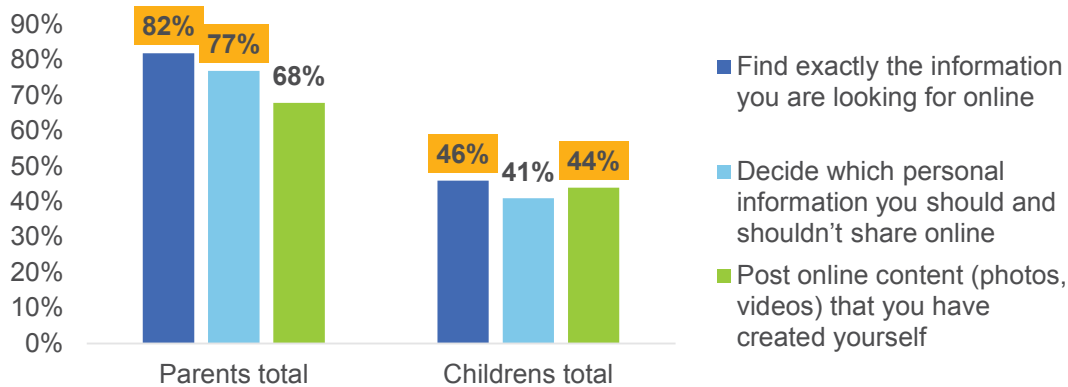
The bottom two tasks that parents are *least confident* with are:

- **Read and understand the terms of service and conditions of use (28%)**
- **Post online content that they have created themselves (28%)**

The **bottom two** tasks that parents feel their **children** are *least confident* with are:

- **Checking if the information they see online is true (40%)**
- **Reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use (36%)**

Comparing parent's and children's digital skills (most confident tasks)



For the most part, therefore, parents see themselves and their children as sharing similar digital abilities and inabilities. Further, the tasks parents indicated that they and their children are most and/or least confident with are aligned with international trends regarding families' digital skills.³⁷ For example, reading and understanding the terms of reference and conditions of use is recognizably one of the most challenging tasks for parents and especially children globally.³⁸

The overlap we are seeing between parents' and children's digital competencies suggests an element of digital skill transfer, or perhaps shared 'family skill sets'. Much of the discourse on digital activity and skills presents children as 'digital natives'—meaning children are born or brought up with digital devices and therefore are more familiar with digital technology than their 'immigrant' parents.³⁹ While most children today are certainly digital natives in the sense that they are 'growing up digital'⁴⁰ our findings align

³⁷ British Children's Commissioner (2017). "Growing up digital—a report of the growing up digital taskforce." *Children's Commissioner for England*. 1-24. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Growing-Up-Digital-Taskforce-Report-January-2017_0.pdf

Common Sense Media. (2017). "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight."

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-kids-age-zero-to-eight-2017>

Nikken, P., and Schols, M. (2015). "How and why parents' guide the media use of young children." *Journal of Child Family Studies*. (24): 3423-3435.

³⁸ In fact, the British Children's commissioner had Schillings law firm re-write the terms of reference and conditions of use for Instagram in language that teens could understand after their research showed that every teen that had read the original terms and conditions either gave up, exasperated with content they could not understand, or indicated zero comprehension of the document.

³⁹ Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.

⁴⁰ British Children's Commissioner (2017). "Growing up digital—a report of the growing up digital taskforce." *Children's Commissioner for England*. 1-24. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Growing-Up-Digital-Taskforce-Report-January-2017_0.pdf

with a growing body of contemporary research which recognizes that parents themselves are gaining valuable digital skills and interests.⁴¹ In fact, parents report in almost all instances higher levels of confidence in their own skills as compared to their perception of their children's:

COMPARING PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE (most confident)	Parents	Children
Find exactly the information you are looking for online	82%	46%
Decide which personal information you should and shouldn't share online	77%	41%
Manage friendships (e.g. remove, block, or mute people) and deal with conflict online	73%	40%
Change your privacy settings (e.g. on a social networking site)	73%	39%
Find out if information you see online is true	71%	35%
Read and understand the terms of reference or conditions of use (e.g. for a device or online service)	69%	35%
Post online content (photos, videos) that you have created yourself	68%	44%

PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S CONFIDENCE (least confident)	Parents	Children
Check if the information they see online is true	26%	40%
Read and understand the terms of reference or conditions of use (e.g. for a device or online service)	28%	36%
Find exactly the information they are looking for online	17%	32%
Decide which personal information they should and shouldn't share online	21%	32%
Manage friendships (e.g. remove, block, or mute people) and deal with conflict online	23%	31%
Change their privacy settings (e.g. on a social networking site)	25%	29%

⁴¹ Livingstone, S., Blum-Ross, A., and Pavlick, J. (2018). "In the digital home, how do parents support their children and who supports them?" *London School of Economics—Preparing for a Digital Future*. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2018/02/08/in-the-digital-home-how-do-parents-support-their-children-and-who-supports-them/> February.

Post online content (photos, videos) that they have created themselves	28%	27%
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However, while parents said that they were *least* confident with posting online content (28%) they also said that posting original online content was one of the top two tasks their children were *most* confident with (44%) suggesting that children have greater competency than their parents in this regard.

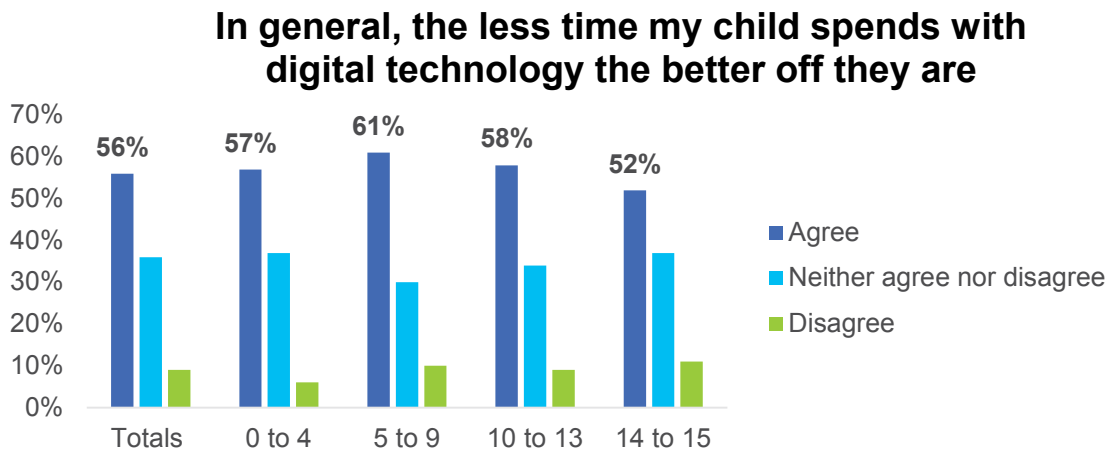
Research by Livingstone et al. (2017)⁴² shows that parents' confidence levels with digital technology is directly related to their children's digital access and digital opportunity: in other words, parents' digital literacy has a direct effect on their children's ability to develop their own digital literacy skills and consequentially maintain their digital well-being. We will return to this point in the next section on digital parenting, which will examine the intersection of digital literacy and digital parenting styles and how these styles impact how parents mediate their family's meaningful engagement with digital technology and subsequently their family's digital wellness.

⁴² Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., Helsper, E.J., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., Veltri, G.A., Folkvord, F. (2017). "Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: the role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation." *Journal of Communication*: 82-105.

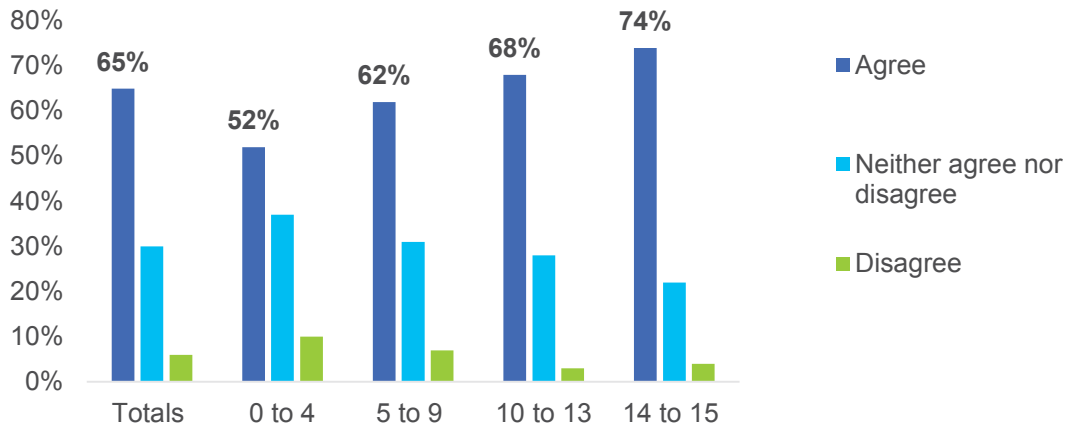
Digital Parenting

As with so much of our lives, much parenting today takes place within a digital landscape; as a result, it makes little sense to distinguish between ‘digital parenting’ and ‘traditional parenting’ since so much of our family lives are lived online. Despite this, many parents lack supports for dealing with digital aspects of their families’ lives, as well as tools for raising ethical digital citizens. This section examines some of the concerns and challenges parents’ face, the strategies and rules they implement in managing their family’s digital well-being, and their own digital habits and practices and parenting style. These findings were of particular importance in the development of our meaningful engagement model since they clearly speak to how parents oscillate between restrictive and enabling mediation with digital technology.

Over half of all parents surveyed felt that the less time their child spends with digital technology the better off they are. While this response suggests parents have embraced a general philosophy of restrictive mediation when it comes to their child’s use of digital technology, almost two thirds of all parents (**65%**) agree that their child **benefits** from the digital technology they use.



My child benefits from the digital technology they use



These two points clearly show the tension between concerns about screen use (and, in particular screen *time*) and the desire to ensure their children have access to the benefits of digital technology.

In this section we begin by unpacking what parents consider to be their primary concerns regarding their child's use of digital technology.

Parental concerns

Parental concerns are clustered around the three C's of **content, contact, and conduct**:⁴³ what media children are consuming on digital devices (**content**), with whom they are engaging with online (**contact**) and how they are interacting with others (**conduct**).

⁴³ Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., & Staksrud, E. (2015). *Developing a Framework for Researching Children's Online Risks and Opportunities in Europe*(Rep.). London: EU Kids Online.

We asked parents how concerned they were with each of the following:

Parental concerns	Totals (across all age categories)
Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true	80%
The amount of sexual content they could see	79%
The amount of violent content they could see	78%
Cyberbullying and online harassment	78%
Corporations or others collecting my child's personal information	76%
The amount of time they spend online or using a digital device	76%
Talking to people they don't know	75%
Posting personal information or photos online	73%
Sexting	71%
The amount of advertising they see	66%
Racial and ethnic stereotyping/racism	64%
Gender stereotyping of girls and boys	61%
None of the above	5%

The top parental concerns regarding children's use of digital technology across all age categories are:

- **Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true (80%)**
- **The amount of sexual content children see (79%)**
- **The amount of violent content children see (79%)**
- **Cyberbullying and online harassment (79%)**

The high ranking of misinformation as a concern has little precedent in research on parents' concerns about the internet – for instance, it went unmentioned in MediaSmarts' 2012 parent focus groups⁴⁴ – and may reflect a broader societal concern with the so-called "fake news" issue. This topic has, however, been identified as a concern among

⁴⁴ Steeves, V. (2012). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Talking to Youth and Parents about Life Online*(Rep.). Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

youth: previous research by MediaSmarts has identified “how to tell if online information is true” as the subject that young Canadians would most like to learn about in school⁴⁵.

The high levels of concern relating to **content** parallels findings in other research that youth are most concerned with avoiding unwanted exposure to pornography and violent content⁴⁶. In these respects, at least, youth and parents’ concerns may be more alike than previously believed.

Whether children were male or female made little to no difference in parental concerns. However, parental concerns did vary somewhat across the age groups:

Top parental concerns across the age groups			
0 to 4 year olds	5 to 9 year olds	10 to 13 year olds	14 to 15 year olds
The amount of time they spend online (74%)	The amount of violent content they see (82%)	The amount of sexual content that they see (84%)	Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true (83%)
Cyberbullying and online harassment (73%)	The amount of sexual content they see (80%)	Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true (81%)	The amount of sexual content they see (82%)
The amount of violent content they see (73%)	Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true (80%)		

Parents’ education levels had some minor impacts on parental concerns with parents who had high school or less being slightly more concerned about:

- **Cyberbullying and online harassment**
- **Corporations or others collecting their child’s personal information**
- **Talking to people they don’t know**

Parents who had post-secondary education were slightly more concerned about:

- **Misinformation and the need to prove online information is true**
- **The amount of sexual content children see**

⁴⁵ Steeves, V. (2014) *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Experts or Amateurs? Gauging Young Canadians’ Digital Literacy Skills*. (Rep.) Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

⁴⁶ Livingstone, S., Kirwil, L., Ponte, C., & Staksrud, E. (2013). *In Their Own Words: What Bothers Children Online?*(Rep.). EU Kids Online.

- **The amount of violent content children see**
- **The amount of time children spend online or using a digital device**
- **Posting personal information or photos online**
- **The amount of advertising they see**
- **Racial and ethnic stereotyping**
- **Gender stereotyping of boys and girls**

Whereas **sexting** was of equal concern to parents of all education levels.

The least of parents concerns across age categories are:

- **Gender stereotyping of boys and girls (61%)**
- **Racial and ethnic stereotyping/racism (64%)**

The exception was parents of children birth to four years old, who indicated that along with gender stereotyping the least of their concerns was the amount of advertising that their children see.

Overall, parents indicated that digital technology had a negative effect on their child's **physical activity (43%) and ability to focus (26%)**. Parental views of the negative effects of digital technology on their child's physical activity, ability to focus, behaviour, social skills, creativity, and learning changed slightly across the age categories. For children birth to nine years old parents told us they thought digital technology had the most significant negative effects on their child's **physical activity** and **behaviour**, whereas, for children ages 10 to 15 years old parents told us they thought digital technology had the most significant negative effects on their child's **physical activity** and **ability to focus**.

The gender of the child made very little impact on parents' perceptions of the negative effects of digital technology use with parents reporting slightly higher negative effects across all response categories for male children than for female children. Similarly, parents with post-secondary education ranked the negative effects of digital technology (on their child's physical activity, ability to focus, behaviour, social skills, creativity, and learning) slightly higher than those parents who had a high school education or less.

Parents of lower socio-economic status (SES) generally ranked the negative effects of digital technology somewhat lower than those with higher SES.

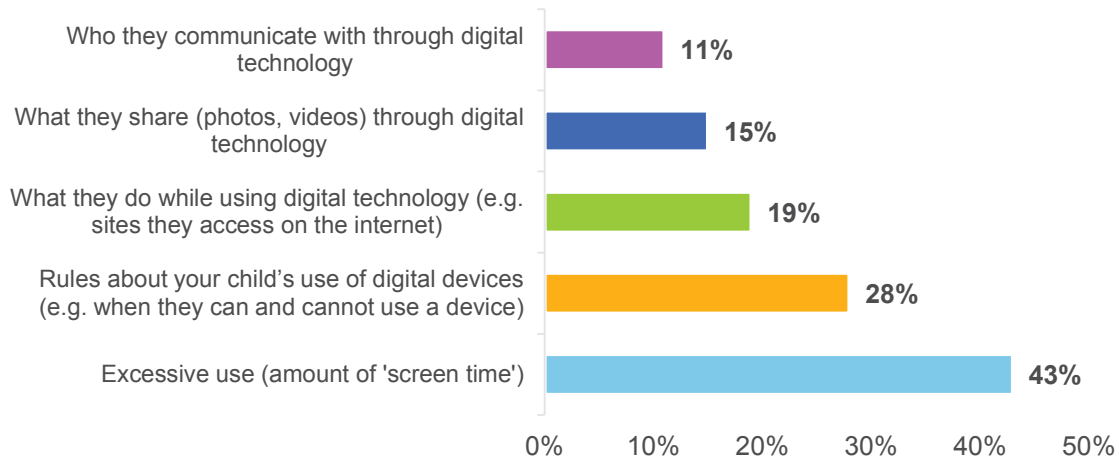
Lower SES Parents (less than \$40K / YR)	Higher SES Parents (More than \$125K/YR)
Physical activity 44%	Physical activity 52%
Ability to focus 24%	Ability to focus 29%
Behaviour 23%	Behaviour 22%
Social skills 18%	Social skills 24%
Creativity 12%	Creativity 11%
Learning 5%	Learning 10%

Studies⁴⁷ have shown that families of lower SES experience a ‘digital gap’ where they often cannot afford to purchase personal or family digital devices. Therefore, parents of lower SES typically view the high costs of digital device ownership as the primary negative effect of digital technology rather than some of these other behavioural effects. For lower SES families (or parents), not having regular access to digital technology is a major parenting concern since they worry that their children will get left behind, won’t be able to communicate with peer groups, or will struggle to demonstrate comparable digital literacy skills to those of their peers⁴⁸.

We also asked parents about the potential sources of *conflict* between themselves and their children when it came to digital technology. Parents told us that the biggest sources of conflict across all age categories are:

- **Excessive use of digital devices 43%**
(amount of screen time)
- **Rules on how they use their devices 28%**
(e.g. when they can and cannot use a digital device)
- **What they are doing on their devices 19%**
(e.g. sites they access on the internet)

Conflicts between parents and children



Children’s gender made a slight difference in the conflicts between parents and children with parents of male children indicating higher levels of conflict regarding excessive use (**44%** for parents of male children compared with **40%** for parents of female children)

⁴⁷ Gee, E., Takeuchi, L.M., Wartella, E., (EDs) (2018). “Introduction” in *Children and Families in the Digital Age*. Routledge. New York, New York: 1-123.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

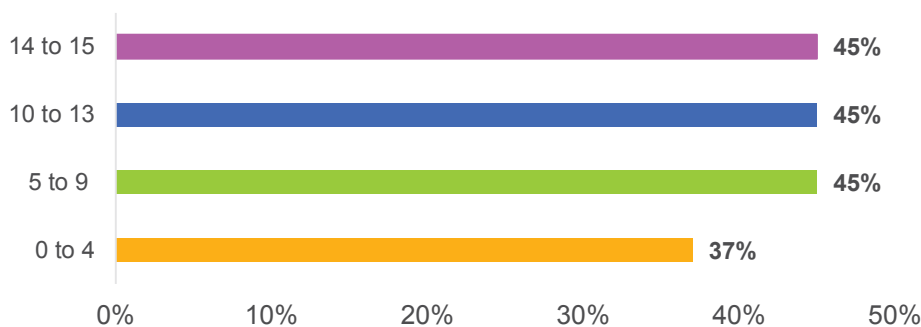
and what they do while using digital technology (21% for male children compared with 18% for parents of female children). Parents' education levels did have some impact on conflicts between parents and children with parents who had post-secondary education reporting higher levels of conflict in all categories: in particular, those with post-secondary education are much more likely to report conflict over excessive use.

Parents with high school or less	Parents with post-secondary education
Excessive use 29%	Excessive use 46%
Rules about child's use of device 19%	Rules about child's use of device 29%
What child does while using device 10%	What child does while using device 21%
What child shares (photos, videos) 12%	What child shares (photos, videos) 15%
Who the child communicates with 10%	Who the child communicates with 12%

Parents' country of origin made a slight impact, with parents born in Canada reporting higher rates of conflict for excessive use of digital technology (44% of parents born in Canada compared with 38% of parents born outside of Canada) and rules about their child's use of digital technology (28% of parents born in Canada compared with 26% of parents born outside of Canada). Parents born outside of Canada, by contrast, reported higher rates of conflict for what their child does while using digital technology (24% for parents born outside of Canada compared with 18% of parents born in Canada).

Conflicts remained relatively consistent across all of the age categories. However, conflicts over excessive use were slightly less for parents of children birth to four years old (37%) and higher for parents of children five to 15 years old (45%). Conflicts over excessive use are likely lowest amongst the youngest children since for the most part their parents have direct control over the amount of time they spend using digital devices, whereas older youth have more autonomy.

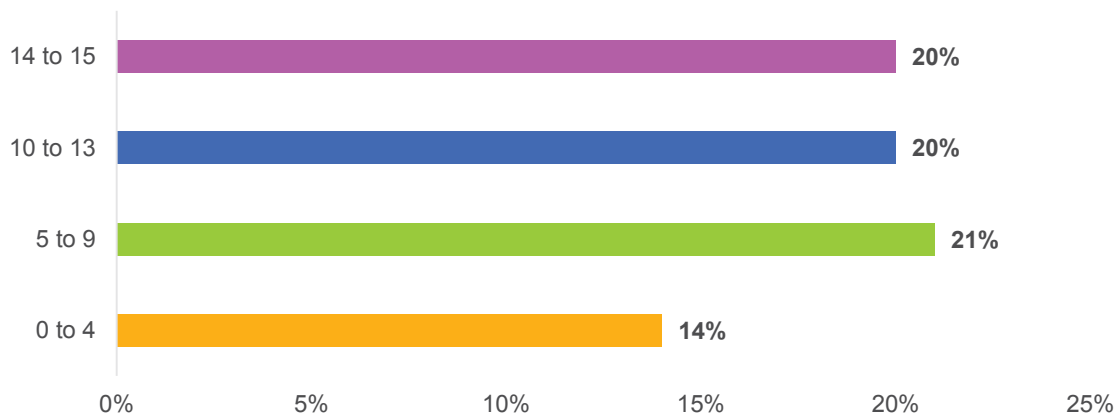
Excessive use (amount of screen time)



Conflicts over what children are doing while using digital technology remained fairly consistent across the age categories, albeit slightly lower for parents of children birth to four years old.

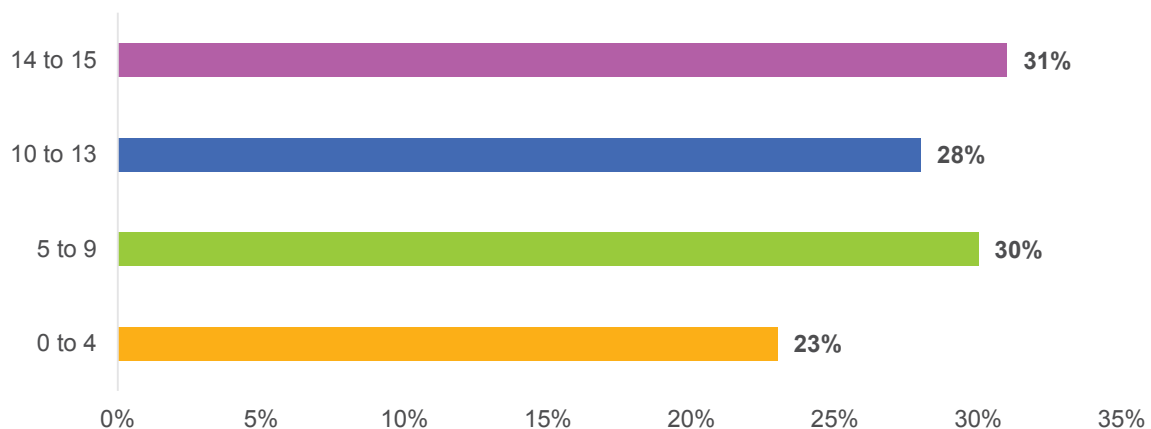
four years old (14%)—again suggesting that parents of younger children have more control over their child’s use of digital technology.

What they do while using digital technology (e.g. sites they access on the internet)



Conflicts over rules generally increase with age: lowest amongst parents of children birth to four years old (23%) and highest amongst parents of teens 14 to 15 years old (31%) but also high amongst parents of children five to nine years old (30%).

Rules about your child’s use of digital devices (e.g. when they can and cannot use a device)

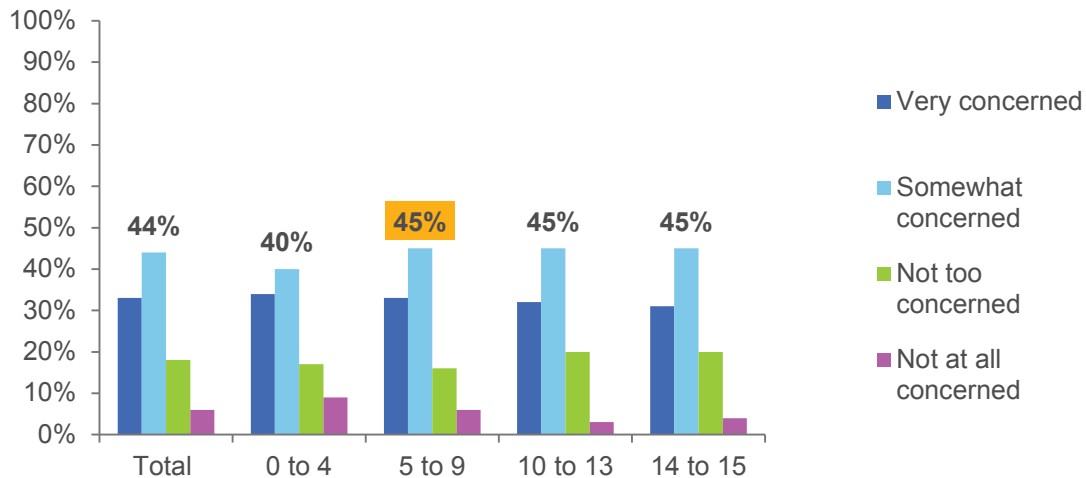


This is consistent with studies in Australia, the UK, and U.S.⁴⁹ showing that for parents of older children—who are perhaps allowed more unsupervised time with digital technology—rules become a primary means through which parents manage and promote their children’s healthy, meaningful engagement with digital technology. Interestingly, the increase in conflicts over rules for parents of children ages five to nine may indicate that this is the age group for which parents begin to implement rules for their child’s use of digital technology.

Similarly, it’s worth noting that numerous parents in the survey indicated that their child is too young to have particular competencies with digital technology (such as creating original content) or to need rules on its use (instead requiring constant supervision). This tells us something interesting about parental concerns and rules and how and when these rules are implemented in families: for example, concerns about excessive use of digital technology, while relatively consistent across the age categories, increases for parents of children five to nine years old, the same age at which parents told us that conflicts over *how much* use or screen time increases. This suggests that parents may move to a rules-based approach because of increased conflict, or conversely that a change from direct supervision and control may produce more conflict (or possibly both); in either case, the transition generally seems to begin when children are in the five-to-nine-years age bracket.

⁴⁹ Livingstone, S. Blum-Ross, A., Pavlick, J., and K. Olafsson. (2018). “In the digital home how do parents support their children and who supports them?” *London School of Economics Department of Media and Communications: 1-13*. Common Sense Media. (2017). “The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight.” <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-kids-age-zero-to-eight-2017> Samuel, A. (2015) “Parents reject technology shame.” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/why-parents-shouldnt-feel-technology-shame/414163/> November. Office of the E safety Commissioner of Australia (2018) “Managing time online.” <https://www.esafety.gov.au/education-resources/iparent/staying-safe/balancing-time-online/managing-online-time>

How concerned are you about the amount of time your child spends using digital devices?



We also asked parents about whether their child has ever talked with them about any of the following:⁵⁰

- Cyberbullying
- Sexting
- Pornography
- Racist content
- Violent content
- Sexist content
- Something they saw or did online that they did not intend to

Across all age categories the most frequent subject of difficult conversation among parents and their children are cyberbullying (22%), violent content (19%), and racist content (16%). For parents of children birth to four years old top subjects of conversation with their children are cyberbullying, violent content, and sexist content. For parents of children five to 13 years old top subjects of conversation are cyberbullying, violent content, and racist content. For parents of teens 14 to 15 years old the top subjects of conversation are cyberbullying, violent, racist, and sexist content. Parents told us that they speak about cyberbullying and racist content more often with female children and violent content and pornography more often with male children. Interestingly, parents

⁵⁰ Parents age, gender, education and income had little to no effect on the frequencies with which they spoke with their child about these difficult subjects.

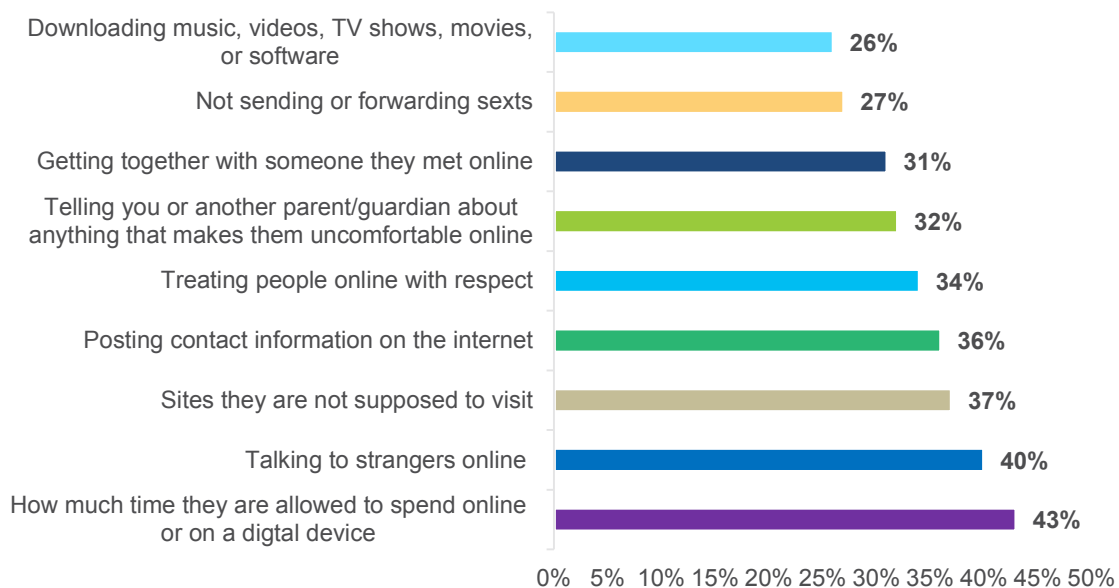
indicated that racist *content* is one of the top subjects of conversation with their children but that racist *stereotyping* is one of the least of their concerns.

Digital parenting rules and strategies

In order to better understand parents' strategies for managing their child's/families' meaningful engagement with digital technology we asked parents about the specific types of rules they implement regarding their child's use of digital technology. We asked if parents have ever set rules for their child regarding:

- How much time their child is allowed to spend online or on a mobile device
- Talking to strangers online
- Sites they are not supposed to visit
- Posting contact information on the internet
- Treating people online with respect
- Telling you or another parent/guardian about anything that makes them uncomfortable online
- Getting together with someone they met online
- Not sending or forwarding sexts
- Downloading music, videos, TV shows, movies, or software.

Rules for child's use of digital technology



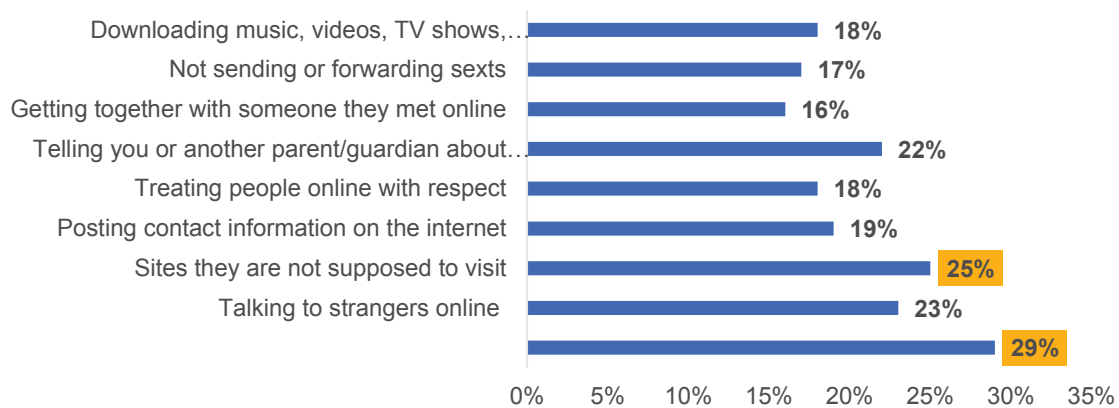
Rules, like parental concerns, can be organized around the categories of **content**, **contact**, and **conduct**. Across all age categories, parents told us that the top two rules they set for their children are about how much time they are allowed to spend online or on a digital device (**43%**) and talking to strangers online (**40%**). Rules were generally

consistent for both male and female children, but rules about **conduct and content** (such as how much time they are allowed to spend online or on a digital device, telling a parent about something that made them uncomfortable, and downloading content) were slightly higher for male children while rules about **contact** (such as talking to strangers, posting contact information, and getting together with someone they met online) were slightly higher for female children. The latter finding is consistent with MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wired World* research which has found that girls are consistently subjected to a higher number of rules designed to protect them from harm⁵¹.

For each of the rules, across all three types (**content, contact, and conduct**), female parents (or mothers) reported higher rates of rule implementation than male parents (or fathers). Parents' education levels have very little impact on rates of rule implementation with parents who have post-secondary education reporting slightly higher rates for rules about how much time children spend online or on a digital device and talking to a parent about something that makes the child uncomfortable online.

The top rules for using digital technology did change across the age categories. For parents of children birth to four years old the top two rules are how much time the child spends online or on a digital device (**29%**) and sites they are not supposed to visit (**25%**).

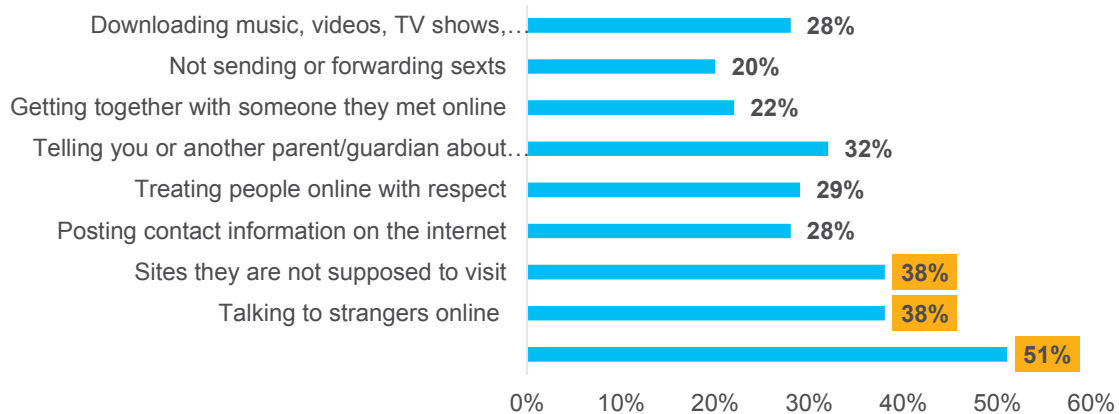
Rules for children birth to four years



For parents of children five to nine years old the top two rules relate to how much time the child spends online or on a digital device (**51%**) and talking to strangers and sites they are not supposed to visit (tied at **38%**).

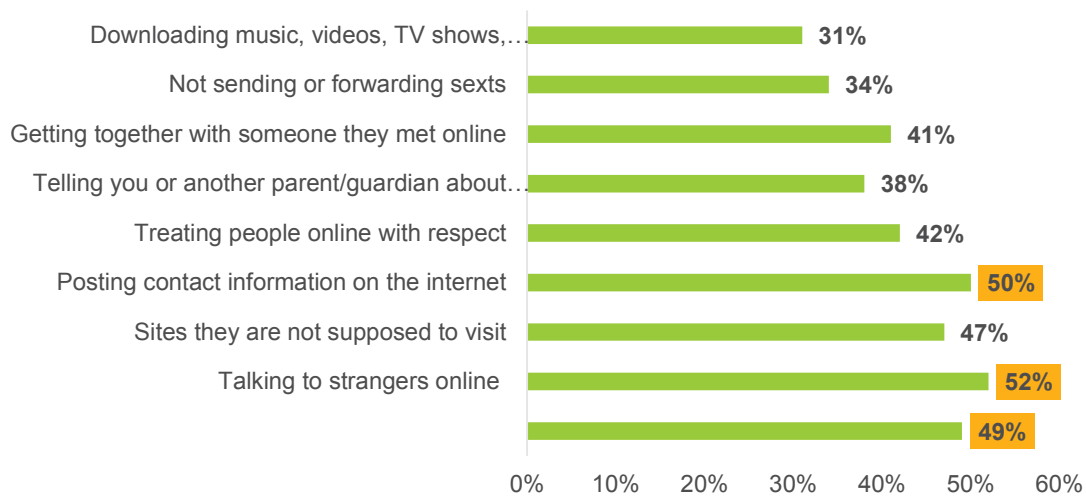
⁵¹ Steeves, V. (2015). "Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Trends and Recommendations." *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa: 1-35.

Rules for children five to nine years old



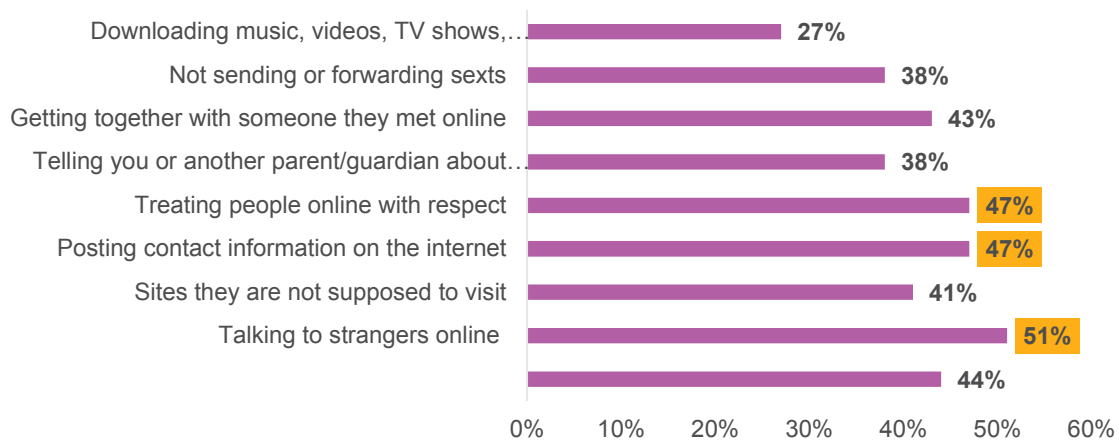
For parents of children 10 to 13 years old the top two rules relate to talking to strangers (52%) and posting contact information (50%), followed closely by how much time they spend online or with a digital device (49%).

Rules for children 10 to 13 years old



For parents of children 14 to 15 years old the top two rules are talking to strangers (51%), posting contact information online and treating people online with respect (tied at 47%).

Rules for children 14 to 15 years old



We also allowed parents to comment on whether they felt their child was too young for rules, whether their child always uses a device in their presence, or if they do not set any rules for their child's use of digital technology. Across all age categories almost *no* parents indicated that their child was too young for rules or always used a device in their presence. In fact, *no* parents of children 14 to 15 years old selected either of these responses. For parents of children birth to 13 years old only one in ten parents told us that their child was too young for rules and even fewer parents told us that their child (birth to 13 years old) used a digital device with constant supervision. While a similarly small group of parents indicated that they do not set rules for their children (only **17%** of parents) this was one of the *top two* responses for parents of children birth to four years old (at **26%**).

Perhaps not surprisingly, parents' digital competencies or skill levels are related to their rule-setting, with parents who indicated they have strong digital skills being more likely to implement rules. Similarly, the perceived digital skill levels of children influence their parents' rules: parents who saw their children as being less proficient are more likely to implement rules, and vice versa. These findings suggest that parents view digital proficiency as a protective factor, making rules less necessary, which echoes MediaSmarts' previous findings that older youth were less likely to report having household rules about online concerns⁵². However, as those older youth were more likely to engage in risky behaviour, research on online risk has found that it is closely tied to the increased opportunities associated with these higher skill levels.⁵³ There exists a

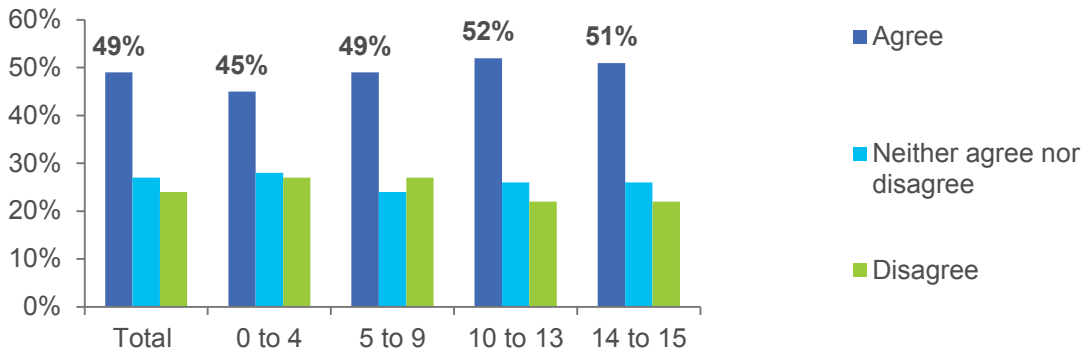
⁵² Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Life Online*(Rep.). MediaSmarts.

⁵³ Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2009). Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the internet: The role of online skills and internet self-efficacy. *New Media & Society*, 12(2), 309-329.

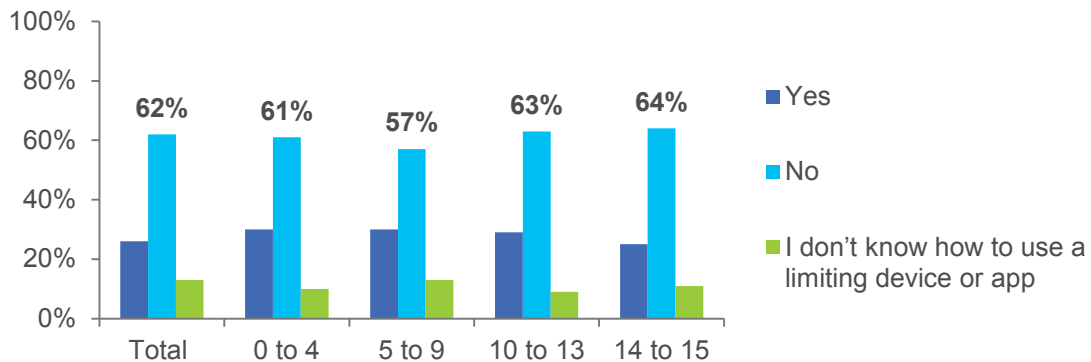
clear need, therefore, to educate parents about the continuing importance of setting rules as their children grow and gain greater proficiency, as these rules retain their association with lower levels of risky behaviour even among teens.⁵⁴

Nearly *half* of all parents said it was difficult to get their child to stop using digital technology when they asked them to; despite this, significantly more than half of all parents reported that they do *not* use a device or app to limit their child’s screen time.

It is difficult to get my child to stop using digital technology when I ask them to



Do you ever use a device or app to limit your child's screen time?



⁵⁴ Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Life Online*(Rep.). MediaSmarts.

The same was true when we asked parents about using devices to monitor what their children do with digital devices. *Over half (67%)* of all parents said that they do *not* use a device to monitor their children’s online activities. When we asked parents if they used a device or parental controls to limit or restrict their child’s access to the internet again, *over half* of all parents (*59%*) responded that they do *not* use parental controls to restrict their child’s access to the internet. The age of the child had no impact on parents’ responses to these questions. Parents’ responses were also unaffected by parents age, gender, education, income, and country of birth.

Despite the elaborate suite of digital tech controls available to parents for dealing with content and screen time issues, parents preferred non-digital or non-tech strategies and rules for managing these concerns. These findings are interesting, given MediaSmarts’ previous research which found that young Canadians saw an inverse relationship between trust and surveillance—in short, the more surveillance parents enforced, the less their children trusted them and the *less likely* kids were to *talk* to their parents when they found themselves in a difficult situation online⁵⁵—but also that parents felt an obligation to constantly monitor their children’s online activities.⁵⁶

What has changed in parents’ attitudes? One factor may be an increasing awareness of the limitations of these technical tools. A 2018 study found that parents’ expectations of digital controls were high and unmet: they found the controls to be difficult to use, didn’t always work as anticipated and were hard to understand; the tools did not offer the level of protection parents wanted; children could deliberately bypass them; they only protected children in the home; and they were generally too restrictive for parents.⁵⁷

Despite the recent push within the tech sector to provide parents with greater digital control for managing and restricting their family’s use of digital technology⁵⁸ even experts in the tech field are skeptical of the success of these controls. The rise of digital well-being in the tech sector is “a way to re-brand tech as something that’s good for you

⁵⁵ Steeves, V. (2015). “Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Trends and Recommendations.” *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa: 1-35.

⁵⁶ Steeves, V. (2012). “Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Talking to Youth and Parents about Life Online”. *MediaSmarts*. Ottawa

⁵⁷ internet matters. org (2018) “Parenting Digital Natives Concerns and Solutions.” *Internet matters.org*. https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Internet_Matters_-_Parenting_Digital_Natives_Report_2018.pdf

⁵⁸ Just this year (2018), many of the largest global tech companies (including Google and Apple) introduced their version of online “digital well-being” features: from notifications reminding users to take breaks; to sleep modes shutting down certain apps; to family use trackers that allow parents to power down an entire family’s suite of mobile devices during ‘family times’ such as mealtimes.

but it only treats the symptoms not the underlying causes.”⁵⁹ Rather, researchers and experts emphasize the importance of joint-media engagement, of families using digital technology together weaving relationships, values, and ethics into conversations about when, for how long, and for what purposes we are engaging with digital technology.⁶⁰ The next section elaborates on the idea of joint-media engagement through an exploration of how different digital parenting styles impact parents’ mediation strategies and their child’s/family’s meaningful engagement with digital technology.

Digital parenting styles

When it was not technologically mediated, parents expressed a more positive view of surveillance. When asked about their child’s engagement with digital technology, the most popular response of parents (49%) was “my child needs me to check on what they do online.” Followed by 43% of parents who said “I have a right to see everything my child does online” and 19% of parents who said “my child is old enough to have privacy from me online.” The idea that children were old enough for privacy from their parents was, not surprisingly, least popular for parents of children birth to nine years old (11%) and most popular with teens 14 to 15 years old (35%). Still the idea that children could have privacy from their parents when online ranked the third lowest in popularity amongst parents.

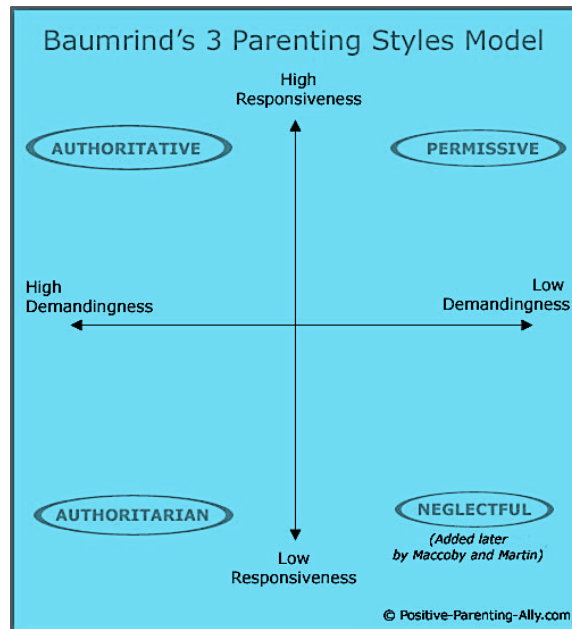
We asked parents to identify their digital parenting style by ranking, in order from what they most to least agree with, the following statements:

Digital parenting styles	
It’s my job to keep my child safe by enforcing my rules while they use digital technology (Authoritarian parents)	43%
It’s my job to set limits for my child while they use digital technology and support them when they run into problems (Authoritative parents)	31%
It’s my job to be a friend my child can learn with and confide in while they use digital technology (Permissive parents)	12%
It’s my job to stay out of my child’s way and let them learn on their own while they use digital technology (Uninvolved parents)	8%
I usually let my child decide what’s best to do while they use digital technology because they know a lot more about it than I do (Digitally challenged parents)	7%

⁵⁹ Pardes, A (2018). “Google and the rise of ‘digital well-being.’” *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/google-and-the-rise-of-digital-wellbeing/> May.

⁶⁰ Gee, E., Takeuchi, L.M., Wartella, E., (Eds) (2018). *Children and Families in the Digital Age*. Routledge. New York, New York: 1-123.

We designed the statements around developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind's (1967) well-known four types of parenting styles⁶¹ in order to better understand how or if these types apply (or change) in the digital context. Baumrind measured both the demandingness (extent to which parents control their child's behaviour) and responsiveness (extent to which parents accept their child's emotional/developmental needs) of parents. As seen in this image, authoritarian parents have high demands and low responsiveness, authoritative parents have high demands and high responsiveness, permissive parents have low demands and high responsiveness, and uninvolved (or neglectful) parents have low demands and low responsiveness. Given the international research (in the U.S., UK, and Dutch contexts) on the intersection of parenting style and parents' mediation strategies for their child's digital technology use, we wanted to explore this relationship in the Canadian context. In our study, we added an additional statement about the child's digital skills to determine how many parents had concluded that their children were better able to determine right and wrong online than they were.



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In our survey **43%** of parents told us “it’s my job to keep my child safe by enforcing my rules while they use digital technology,” which we identified with the authoritarian parenting style. Following the work of technology writer Alexandra Samuel (2015),⁶² this style of parenting is most likely to result in a parent who is a ‘digital limiter’. Digital limiters use primarily restrictive means to manage their child’s digital technology use and err on the side of minimizing their child’s use of technology.

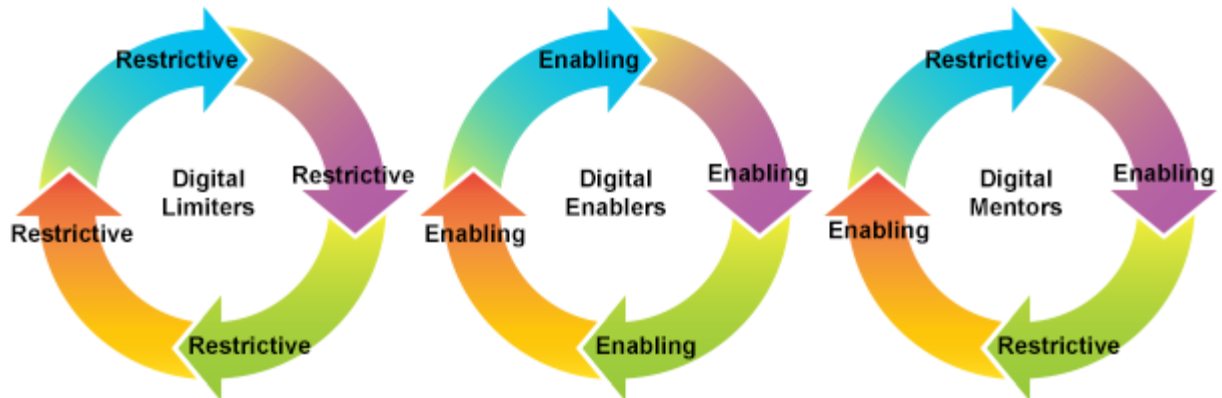
Similarly **31%** of parents agreed most strongly with the statement: “it’s my job to set limits for my child while they use digital technology and support them when they run into problems,” which we identified with Baumrind’s authoritative style. These parents set carefully defined limits for their child that are applied in a fair and consistent manner and

⁶¹ Maccoby and Martin (1983) expanded Baumrind’s model to include the fourth style of uninvolved (or sometimes referred to as neglectful) parenting.

⁶² Samuel, A. (2015) “Parents reject technology shame.” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/why-parents-shouldnt-feel-technology-shame/414163/> November.

act as a good digital role models or what Samuel (2015)⁶³ calls ‘digital mentors’. Digital mentors take an active role in their child’s use of digital technology and are most likely to talk with their child about how to use digital technology responsibly.

The other categories in this question measure the styles of parenting (permissive 12%, uninvolved 8%, and digitally challenged 7%) that are more hands-off and embrace forms of parenting that allow the child to engage with digital technology on their own terms. These types of parents are most likely to be what Samuel (2015) calls ‘digital enablers’ whose kids have plenty of access to and engagement with digital technology.



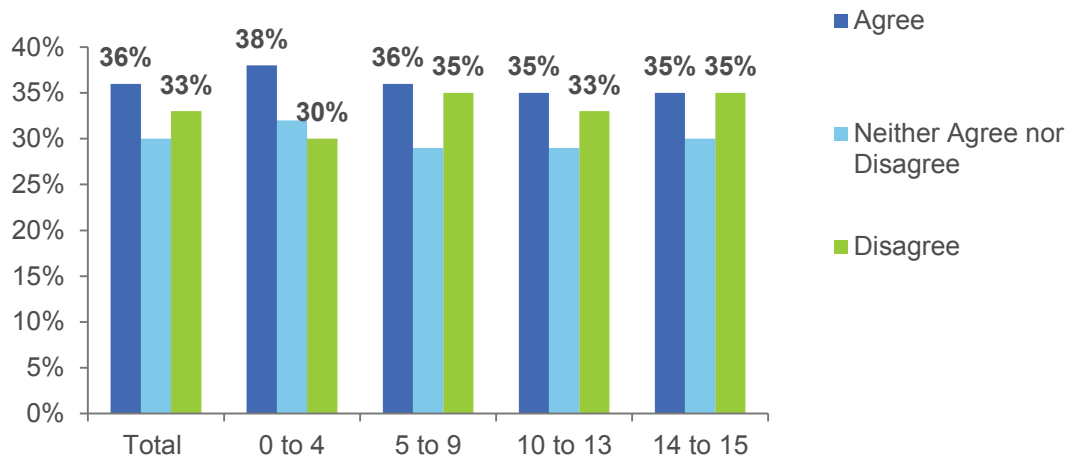
In terms of the cycle of meaningful engagement, **authoritarian digital limiters** are most likely to use solely restrictive mediation practices whereas **permissive digital enablers** (uninvolved and digitally challenged parents) are most likely to use solely enabling mediation practices. **Authoritative digital mentors** are most likely to use a combination of both restrictive and enabling mediation to manage their child’s digital well-being. In our study, parents who identify as digital limiters tend to have more concerns and rules for their child, whereas digital enablers tend to have fewer concerns and rules for their child. Parents who identify as digital mentors, or digital role models, tend to take a more context or situation-specific approach to rule setting; allowing rules to develop organically, from a particular situation, and wherever possible setting rules *with* their child. This style is consistent with MediaSmarts’ Meaningful Engagement Model.

Rules, of course, are not the only way in which parents influence their children’s behaviour; indeed, the messages they send through their own use of technology may be

⁶³ Ibid.

just as important⁶⁴. In light of this, we asked parents about their views of themselves as digital role models.

When it comes to digital technology habits, I am a poor role model for my child



Slightly more parents agreed (36%) than disagreed that they are poor role models when it comes to digital technology habits for their child. This is particularly true for parents of the youngest children (birth to four years old) 38% agreed that they were poor digital role models.

Increasingly, child-development experts have been concerned with ‘*absence presence*’ when people are physically present but inattentive to others (especially children)⁶⁵. For example, Sherry Turkle has written extensively about absence presence in families in her book ‘*Alone Together*’⁶⁶ and Dr. Michael Rich⁶⁷ has stated that distracted parenting—referring to parents distracted by their digital devices—has accounted for an increase in child playground injuries. It’s important to note, though, that no research has

⁶⁴ Canadian Pediatric Society. (2017) Position Statement Screen Time and Young Children: Promoting Health and Development in a Digital World. (Rep.)

⁶⁵ Canada Beyond 150 (2017). “The future of well-being final report.” <http://canadabeyond150.ca/assets/reports/Wellbeing%20EN.pdf>

⁶⁶ Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone Together*. Basic Books. New York. New York. 1-597.

⁶⁷ Dr. Rich, M. (2018). “Digital Well-Being of Families and Children.” *Facebook Live Roundtable*. <https://www.facebook.com/MediaSmarts/videos/1965195710167719/> June.

yet proven that parents' use of mobile devices *causes* behavioural or developmental problems in children.⁶⁸

Purely restrictive strategies tend to be the least successful for: keeping children safe online; encouraging open conversation; and minimizing risks while maximizing the opportunities afforded by digital technology. Using only restrictive strategies also fails to recognize that meaningful engagement is not just for kids it's for parents too. While the majority of parents in this study identified with the authoritarian parenting style, what they told us about their concerns and how they responded to these concerns shows that digital parenting for Canadian parents is *not* purely restrictive. Rather, parents combine both restrictive and enabling mediation practices in a variety of ways depending on: the specific concern or challenge; their digital literacy levels as well as the digital literacy levels of their child; the specific context they are living in; and their unique family values.

One consistent pattern is the importance of *digital literacy* in tipping the scales in favour of the positive effects of digital technology use in Canadian families. Parents see learning (58%) and creativity (49%) as the major benefits or positive effects of digital technology, agreeing that **“it’s important for their child’s future that they understand how to use digital technology” (81%)** and **“it’s important for my child’s future that they think critically about how they use digital technology” (81%)**.

⁶⁸ McDaniel, B. in (2018). “How well do we know the tech habits of parents?” *The Atlantic—Rethink Original*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/morgan-stanley-2018/how-well-do-we-understand-the-tech-habits-of-parents/1775/>.

Key Messages and Implications

The results of this study are a call to action for parents, educators, and policymakers in supporting the digital well-being of Canadian families.

- **Families need greater digital literacy supports.**
- **Parenting supports, curriculum, policy, and future research must emphasize that there is *not a one-size-fits-all prescription or solution for digital wellness*.** Digital well-being is different for different families and different people, across various social and cultural understandings of family but also within various families themselves. Digital well-being varies for different children depending on the child's age, personality, social environment, access to technology, level of supervision, guidance, and/or role models, and their digital skill set. As a result, parents need to have a variety of different strategies to help manage their family's meaningful engagement with digital technology and promote the positive effects of digital technology in the lives of their families and children fostering creativity, learning, growth and development.
- **Parents and digital mentors require supports that promote a balanced approach to digital health and well-being.** While most parents do not make use of technical tools to directly manage or monitor their children's media use, alarmist views of digital technology fuel parental guilt and fear and typically result in purely restrictive models of parental mediation (for example, using monitoring technology or removing access to digital devices as a form of punishment) at the cost of family digital literacy levels and opportunities for children. In particular, the catch-all concept of 'screen-time' must be unpacked, sorting the good from the bad (and identifying contexts where a particular activity might be either positive or negative), and parents should be discouraged from focusing *solely* on the quantitative aspects of their child's engagement with digital technology. While excessive use remains a primary parental concern when it comes to children's digital technology use, meaningful and healthy engagement involves not only minimizing children's use of devices but also encouraging mindful, creative, educational and pro-social uses; actively mediating in children's media lives through co-viewing, co-playing and co-creating; modeling positive use of and attitudes towards media; communicating (and, for older children, negotiating) household rules about media use and communicating their values to their children; and having early and ongoing conversations with their children about key issues.
- **Parents need resources that support the cycle of mediation strategies behind meaningful engagement with digital technology.** Parenting resources ought to be rooted in an understanding that parenting rules and strategies will be context-specific and, therefore, regularly changing. As a starting point, in order

for parents to understand and evaluate the *quality* of digital content that their children engage with they'll need to ask a series of questions about:

- **Who** are children using digital devices with?
(e.g. their friends, a trusted adult, parent, or guardian, on their own)
- **What** are children doing with their digital devices?
(e.g. communicating, socializing, entertainment, learning)
- **When** are children using digital devices?
(e.g. after school, on the weekend, during mealtimes, after bedtime)
- **Where** are children using digital devices?
(e.g. at a friend's house, at home, in their bedrooms, at the kitchen table)
- **Why** are children – and their parents – using digital devices?
(i.e. avoiding habitual or reflexive use in favour of mindful, purposive use)

More research needs to be done to unpack these questions, and others about the specifics of parents' rules and strategies, in order to provide evidence-based parenting supports grounded in the meaningful engagement model of digital well-being. Resources, policy interventions, and technology platforms/tools need to support parents in *supporting each other's* digital parenting. Indeed, 61% of parents told us that they turn to other parents or friends for digital parenting advice, followed by their child's school and teachers (31%), and media resources such as columns, magazines, websites and blogs (23%). Further, given the lack of data on young (birth to six years old) children's engagement with digital technology, more research and interventions need to be directed towards *early childhood digital literacy* and education.

- Given the importance of digital role-modeling in the digital well-being of children and families, **resources and supports need to help parents and guardians with a greater self-awareness when it comes to their own digital technology uses and habits**. Parents need to be equipped with the tools and skills to identify and reduce the 'technoference' in their lives. Helping parents to recognize when their own uses of digital technology may be promoting absence-presence in their family life will go a long way towards digital wellness. Children should be given the opportunity to participate in this process as well.
- **Technology companies and online services, as well as social networking platforms, have a responsibility to create parent-and child-friendly terms of service and conditions of use (especially if these services and platforms are used by youth)**. Parents were especially outspoken about the need to create clear, concise, and *understandable* terms of reference and conditions of use for digital devices, apps, social media platforms, and online services. This includes policies on privacy, data collection, usage, and regulation.
- **Policy and education interventions should focus on bolstering the digital literacy skills of both parents and children** since; the digital skill levels of both

parents and children are directly related to their digital wellness. Parents with strong digital literacy skills are more likely to embrace the variety of rules and strategies associated with meaningful engagement whereas parents with lower digital literacy skills are less likely to implement rules (or at a lower rate) and tend to favour more restrictive digital parenting styles. Similarly, children with lower digital literacy skill levels are more likely to experience purely restrictive parental mediation, whereas children with higher digital literacy rates are often afforded the enabling mediation necessary to continue to develop their skills.

- Parents told us that their digital parenting involves a continued effort to strike a balance between mitigating the risks associated with digital technology and giving children access to the opportunities it affords. Informed by these insights and strategies, **MediaSmarts has designed and recommends the Meaningful Engagement Model** to encourage parents to embrace the challenges of digital parenting and support parents on their journey towards empowered, meaningful engagement with digital technology.