

The “anytime anywhere” connection

The impact of new technologies on families as a megatrend

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This increasing reliance on digital technologies has created intense pressures and opportunities for families. Digitization, for example, presents new threats to the financial security of many families by making them more vulnerable to surveillance and discrimination in the marketplace. At the same time, technologies are providing important connections, as families scattered across the globe stay connected and engage in “remote caregiving.”

Researchers, policymakers, popular pundits, and journalists often note that digital technologies have the power to disrupt personal relationships and deliver uninvited content. This anxiety centers on the impact that new technologies can have on the well-being of children and the strength and social cohesion of families. Child development experts worry that cell phones and personal computer devices—now common fixtures at the dinner table—distract parents from their children (and vice versa) and prevent them from engaging in positive, nurturing conversations.

The “anytime anywhere” access to Internet-enabled technologies has produced a thicket of benefits and dangers that families struggle to navigate. There are also great disparities in how families use technology, whether merely for entertainment or for social and educational betterment. The effects of new technology vary widely across socio-economic and other divides. Children from

Over the past forty years, information and communication technologies have transformed the way we work, the nature of learning and education, and the methods by which we achieve personal and collective goals. Parents, grandparents, children, and the range of loved ones who form part of the modern family today face new and challenging choices about technology use, access, and control. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how much we can depend on the use of technologies and how they can affect our lives.

Consequently, the impact of New Technologies on families has been featured as one of the megatrends suggested by the United Nations for the preparations and celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2024.

Extracted from 'Families and New Technologies' (International Federation for Family Development, 2021).

Available at: <https://familyperspective.org/focus-group-families-and-new-technologies/>

A family megatrend *

Megatrends, including new technologies, demographic shifts, rapid urbanization and migration trends, as well as climate change, have been dramatically shaping our world in recent years, impacting individuals and families. In preparation for the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024 (IYF+30) the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs aims to raise awareness of mega-trends and present research on their impacts on families.

The observances of the International Day of Families, 2021-2024 are to focus on each trend, starting with families and new technologies in 2021. The focus on megatrends is to facilitate the analysis of their impacts on family life and recommend responsive family-oriented policies to harness the positive aspects of those trends and counteract their negative facets.

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of digital technologies for work, education and communication. The pandemic has accelerated technological changes that had already been under way both in society and at work, including the expanded use of digital platforms and related technological innovations like cloud computing and the use of big data and algorithms. As a result, innovative ways of working as well as flexibility for both employees and employers have been on the rise.

On the other hand, concerns have been raised over some negative impacts relating to technology such as 'screen fatigue' and cyber bullying. In addition, school closures and increased demand for working from home, exacerbated already growing concerns over rising levels of parental burnout which can be linked to long-term negative impacts on child well-being. 3 Now, more than ever, parents and caregivers, especially those engaged in full-time employment, need resources to successfully manage their parenting obligations. With the growing field of innovative technologies, new digital technologies have a potential to empower parents to meet such obligations successfully. In exploring the impact of new technologies on families, the observance of the International Day of Families will focus, in particular, on the current state and future potential of digital technologies in advancing parenting education.

* Background note of the United Nations 2021 observance of the International Day of Families.

low-income families, for example, spend more time with TV and videos than children from affluent families. There are also great disparities in how families use technology, whether for entertainment or for social and educational betterment. Parents in low-income families struggle to acquire digital literacy and often do not have easy access to teachers, librarians, mentors, and other educated professionals to help.

These technologies will continue to play an integral role in families' life choices and opportunities. Today, families have no choice but to use digital communication to interact with the many public institutions that no longer accept paper applications or other communications. Public assistance programs have increasingly become "smart," meaning participants are now more likely to interact with an algorithmically trained virtual assistant rather than a human caseworker.

Caregivers must also contend with digital systems in schools and elsewhere, as learning processes become computer-driven. In short, technology is becoming the primary medium through which people gather, do schoolwork, shop, apply for jobs, schedule child care, communicate with teachers, read to their children, share neighborhood news, and spread the word about family celebrations and hardships.

By organizing a focus group about this topic, we wanted to understand better all the different aspects of this topic, so that we can produce recommendations that can be validated by experts and confirmed by families and other global NGOs. To this end, we gathered a group of experts who are active in a variety of fields, so that their opinions could derive the central elements to our advocacy work.

We quote below some of the main inputs by them and the main recommendations that emerged from it.

1. Universal coverage of the internet

Access to the internet is a key driver for both economic and social change; digital tools have changed the way we live, teach, access public services, and do business, and have therefore become a prerequisite to access economic opportunities.

Pierre Verlyck, CEO, POP School, Paris, France.

2. Household's access to new technologies

There is a need for a more nuanced measurement of internet access, rather than simple statistics about access to broadband internet that can be misleading.

Jessica Navarro, Research Assistant, Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina Greensboro, USA.

3. Teleworking and work-family balance

Technology is making work possible for a lot of families, not necessarily that are working from home, but allowing work from anywhere.

Tracey C. Burns, Senior Analyst, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD, Directorate for Education and Skills, Paris, France.

Analyzing work efficiency should be a question of output rather than hours, as studies have shown that when people can work from where and when they want, their output is much greater.

Janice Richardson, Insight – International advisor on Literacy, Rights & Democracy, Luxembourg.

4. Remote learning and education

Character education should be taken very seriously in distance education, because remote learning tends to become more transactional than transformative and transformative elements are what make us human, but it also makes us who the employers want to have to work for them.

Tom Harrison, Reader and Programme Director at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, Director of Education at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, United Kingdom.

We now have more evidence that ICT tools do not automatically lead to better learning and underlined the importance that such tools be embedded in a relevant pedagogical approach and also about the importance of doing implementation research.

Matt Brossard, Chief, READ (Research on Education and Development) Unit, UNICEF, Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, Italy

5. Policies to bridge intergenerational divide

Professionals across the board should develop digital skills and digital confidence as a content area for teaching, not just teachers and those working the children, but also those working with other ages.

Susan Walker, Associate Professor in Family Social Science, Founder of the Parentopia Project, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA.

6. Coding as a classroom subject

Human language is for human communication, thus coding does not qualify as a language and, although it is a good subject to study, we should rather prioritize teaching internet safety.

Luci Pfeiffer, Pediatrician, Doctor in Child and Adolescent Health, Psychoanalyst, Member of the SBP Working Group on Health in the Digital Age, Coordinator of DEDICA Program, Curitiba, Brazil.

7. Online child abuse prevention

Algorithms that promote interaction between kids and potential threats could be promoted by policymakers in coordination with industry, so that the onus is not left to the parents only but also the providers.

Amina Fazlullah, Equity Policy Counsel, Common Sense Media, Washington DC, USA.

A timely selection *

Recognizing that digital technology has transformed family life, the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) identifies technological change for the family as one of four megatrends. Worldwide families continue to face challenges that threaten their food security, income, housing and safety, and by extension the growth and development of children in their care; challenges that today intersect and often depend on access to the internet. New technologies have become a necessity, yet present new challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly brought attention to the influence of technology on family life, as it has meant for many the continuation of work, school and personal relationships when isolated. And it also exposed more violations to privacy and safety, enriched societal and political divisions, and widened inequalities.

Digital technology has embraced the attention of professionals who work with families as both a means for the delivery of service (such as family therapy or parenting education) and as a content focus (e.g., aiding parents in understanding children's privacy online or decision making on smart phone ownership). Yet can we assume that professionals are able to fully support families as they too navigate new devices and a virtual landscape?

The selection of New Technologies and Families as one of the themes guiding the preparations for the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024 and the 2021 observance of the International Day of Families could not be more timely. Now is the time to understand these impacts and support families in ways that prepare them for a digital future. To do so will only further achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Quoting the former UN Secretary General from 2018, "the achievement of [the sustainable] development goals depends on how well families are empowered to contribute to the achievement of those goals. Thus, policies focusing on the wellbeing of families are certain to benefit development" (p.5).

* Susan K. Walker, 'Technology Use and Families: Implications for Work-Family Balance and Parenting Education', background paper of the United Nations 2021 observance of the International Day of Families.

Recommendations

1. Access to the internet should be a human right and the appropriate instruments should be implemented for it. States should work towards universal access through developing an underlying infrastructure, as well as helping citizens to gain access to appropriate devices, skills and protections, and encouraging everyone, particularly the most vulnerable or least privileged to partake in digital citizenship.
2. There is a consensus on the need for more qualitative measurement of access, rather than broad general figures that can be misleading. Policymakers must understand the gaps in connectivity, infrastructure, but also other gaps in training for families, students, teachers. For a better understanding, figures on access to the internet should be broken down as follows:
 - The proportion of households with functional internet access and the underlying infrastructure.
 - The proportion of households with a computer.
 - The number of devices per person in the family.
 - Family composition and demographics (number of children and parents, age, type of work, caregivers...).
 - The type of skills and attitudes family members hold.
 - The kind of technology children and teenagers use, and the corollary threats.
3. Policymakers should support login / log-out digital workplace policies to encourage a healthy work/family balance and promote clear schedules in telework environments.
4. Policymakers should encourage all employers to provide recommendations and resources on the benefits and the risks of teleworking.
5. Policymakers should develop and encourage a right to teleworking solutions for people who would not be able to work otherwise.
6. Policymakers should adopt a holistic approach when considering the experience and needs of all the various partakers in education, like children, parents, caregivers, teachers, institutions.
7. Policymakers should initiate the process of a holistic transformation of school teachings into an online environment, including the development of different pedagogies, and build education systems that enable children to learn both in schools and online equally.
8. In online learning settings, educational professionals should both help children to be able to develop interpersonal skills, innovate ways of assessing their students' socioemotional health, and promote access to mental health and counseling services when necessary.
9. Policymakers and educational professionals should work together to build digital learning platforms working that can operate in low connectivity contexts to reduce the exacerbation of disparities across and within countries, and to think strategically about how to leverage internet access and technology to address issues of poverty and inequality.
10. Policymakers and educational professionals should promote digital technology as an opportunity for traditionally disenfranchised audiences (e.g., school dropouts and unemployed adults) to find meaningful work. Besides, they should work to develop training and support for the least digitally literate students and parents as a means to improve equity.
11. Policymakers should support digital training for all generations, and build mentorship schemes between young people, parents and older adults.
12. Policymakers should make it compulsory for digital platforms and websites to include protections and software to reduce bullying, blackmailing, and illegal content.
13. Educational professionals should incorporate developmentally appropriate content about digital skills (including content creation) and digital citizenship for children and adolescents of all ages.
14. Education and child-related professionals should promote open communication between parents and children about digital technology, including discussions about online risks and benefits. Further, they should encourage parents to engage with the platforms and media their children utilize as a means of understanding their children's digital lives.