Supporting parents to create a nurturing learning environment for pre-school children, including on-line.

The intention of this short study is to look at parents’ attitudes and manner about the role of digital technology plays in young children’s development. To consider whether there was a preference to play and tasks to exercise the child’s psycho-motor skills vs different digital technologies. I found examples of good practice hard to come by for this particular age group but decided to continue researching as a way to inform my own practice for future developmental projects. I decided to keep the CLD Standards Inclusion – valuing equality of both opportunity and outcome and challenging discriminatory practice and Promotion of learning as a lifelong activity – ensuring that individuals are aware of a range of learning opportunities and can access relevant options at any stage of their life. When putting together my final thoughts.

It is well known that early education and intervention are key roles in children’s early development and family wellbeing. Before lockdown 68% of parents of 2-4-year old’s, reported accessing formal early education or childcare. However, with covid restrictions this changed radically with only 7% of those children continuing to attend through the pandemic. Over half of these children have been unable to return to their original provider.

At Family Learning we have had reports from parents feeling that the last year has had a negative impact on their child’s social and emotional development and wellbeing. In early learning we look at the child in terms of ‘self-regulation, managing self, and building relationships.’ Looking at self-regulation as an essential life skill in the 21st century, strengthening all other aspects of learning with a significant impact on a child’s long-term life chances. Research strongly suggests these life skills are embedded during the early years in the family and preschool. Children’s early development of self-regulation is highly dependent on the quality of their early social interactions, which the majority have now missed a year.

When it comes to life skills there is no level playing field, any more than there is for more academic skills. The Department of Education’s Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education Project study identifies a link between socio economic background and self-regulation in the early years and social inequalities in confidence later in adolescence. Moreover, some of the difficult effects of poverty are moderated by self-regulatory skills: Low-income children with better self-regulatory skills are more resistant to adverse psychological outcomes.

I have found a lack of research on the subject of learning on-line that looks at the development of these skills, however it is commonly believed that the best therapy for a child is often being with another child. The gap in school readiness which was already exists before March 2020 will most likely widen.

Traditionally, theorists and researchers have debated whether young children should use technology at school. Authors have in the past voiced that computers are not important in a young child’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. However, I struggled to find anything that supports this theory.

Today, it is common to observe toddlers and preschool children watching videos, playing games on tablets, or exploring on the internet and alongside hearing about limiting screen time to improve sleep etc. The events of 2020 certainly challenged this with education and communication of any type coming from a digital source.

From the reading that I did, I understand that around half of parents had viewed child friendly tv such as ceebeebies and videos from you tube such as child yoga, there also seemed to be families linking in with parenting apps for tips and tricks. 65% of parents in the home whose children had not returned to childcare reported that they felt stressed, worried and overwhelmed, with mothers facing the brunt of it.

With such dynamic developments, there is a need to establish a better understanding of the process of engaging ICT in everyday play and learning activities of preschool children.

Several recent research findings pointed out the extraordinary potential of ICT to enhance the learning and other developmental processes of children. According to Kalas, studies have shown that digital technologies can provide children with new opportunities to engage in attractive and relevant play, learning, communication, exploration, and development.

Usually measures of the impact of the home learning environment have been composite measures as they have been used in the field of child development and in terms of explaining child outcomes. Advantages of using these measures over individual measures as predictor variables include that they can be theoretically based upon existing knowledge of what is important and that they can integrate across items that initially appear separate but are functionally similar. In the Growing up in Scotland report they asked various questions to create a fuller picture of what was happening in the Family home in terms of learning, one being how many children’s books are in the home, this question is asked repeatedly in previous studies as being related to children’s cognitive development or educational achievement. The families were not asked about ICT usage until year 3 and then there was no description of what they looked at and if it was child led etc.

Properly integrated digital tools can empower younger children by providing them with a voice, especially with limited literacy capabilities, at their young age (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Digital technologies as digital toys which are properly integrated in learning can empower children by granting them a voice they have never had before.

When speaking about digital technology this way it is exciting to consider the opportunities, we could give families to record their stories. Nevertheless, there are clear challenges in an approach like this, financially, the costs of equipment, wifi etc, supporting the family to use the equipment, encouraging the families and others to see the worth in this kind of learning.

Twenty years ago, it would have been unheard of in Scotland to send preschoolers to outdoor nurseries to play in nature, get mucky and in all weathers, however it is now a growing trend with parents and education beginning to understand how important it is to have contact with nature.

A report managed by the National Trust stressed a shocking deterioration in children’s relationship with the natural world. The report Natural Childhood states less than 10% of children regularly play in wild places compared with 50% a generation ago. Moreover, the distance which children roam from their home has dropped by some 90% over the same period. This dramatic change has been linked to a combination of several factors, mainly parents’ safety factors and children’s increasing interest in technology. According to the National Trust the result is the development of a so-called ‘nature deficit disorder’ which is having a detrimental impact on children’s physical and emotional wellbeing. Calling for guardians of children to make a conscious effort to take children outside and experience playing in nature.

What was once seen as a niche market for the affluent and more socio economically successful is now being carefully followed in every preschool, school, registered childminders, playgroups in all community setting you can think of. Writing this makes me feel like technology is becoming the new niche with those who are already on a back foot becoming even more disadvantaged.

Studies have shown that parents are not spending much quality time with their children while the amount of time spent by them on reading to/with their children is very low. Substantial evidence indicates that parenting and children’s activities in the early years have a powerful influence on cognitive ability. Parenting practices such as reading to children, using complex language, responsiveness, and warmth in interactions, are all associated with better developmental outcomes. Stimulating activities may help children with specific skills (e.g. linking letters to sounds) but also, and perhaps most importantly, by developing the child’s ability and motivation concerned with learning generally.

This partly explains links between social economic status and developmental outcomes, in that higher social economic status parents use more developmentally enhancing activities. A positive nurturing home environment is important a child’s development but is the range of home learning activities that wields a greater and individualistic influence on a child’s development at three years of age.

Parental feedback showed that parent technology use or attitudes toward media to be positively correlated with their children's use of technology. Further analysis indicate that child screen time use appears to be the result of an interaction between child and parent factors and is highly influenced by parental attitudes. Overall, parents showed positive attitudes toward media, to the extent that they believed media exposure to be vital to children’s development, and many disagreed with recommendations from expert sources regarding age-appropriate screen time. How we get families to integrate this way of learning into everyday life rather than use it as a distraction will be key.

To summarise, the intention of this short study was to look at parents’ attitudes and manner about the role of digital technology plays in young children’s development. Covid highlighted the weaknesses in getting it right for the development of children’s psycho-motor skills. Children like all individuals need the connection of other children to develop their life skills, they need to move, run, jump and make a mess. Neither online nor digital technology is at a point where it can compete. However online and digital media can enhance a child’s learning. It should not be the only input. There needs to be continuous cooperation between parents and teachers to ensure prospects of maximizing benefits and alleviating potential risks of using digital technologies in early childhood education.

In terms of my practice, it has made me aware of gaps within my family learning service, looking at the essential life skills that children have missed out on for the last year and what this means for them and their parents at being school ready. I anticipate that we will be getting requests for help in these areas and am currently looking at how we can develop work to support the families whilst adhering to the government covid guidelines.

**References**

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e.g., Lugo-Gill and Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Melhuish et al, 2001; 2008a, b).

(Bradley 2002).

(Hess et al., 1982).

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