Aspirations and Anxiety: Learning and Home Technology and Media Use by Low-Income Families

Abstract
This poster addresses parent attitudes regarding the potential and pitfalls of home media and technology use. We describe how and why parents set limits on media and technology, how they navigate media selection, and how they interact with their children around media and technology. We present findings from three studies of parents and children from low-income households, in which data were collected from paper surveys, focus groups, and in-home interviews. We find that, while parents see great potential in technology as a learning tool, demands on their time and lack of information make it difficult to manage children’s experiences. This research was sponsored by the US Department of Education’s Ready To Learn initiative, which seeks to support early learning and school readiness for traditionally underserved children, ages 2-8.

Objectives
• To learn about children’s technology use on their own and with their parents
• To learn about parents’ views of the value of technology for learning

Theoretical Framework
Recent research has described the prevalence of media engagement and how more new devices are being adopted in contemporary family life (Rideout, 2013; Levine, Steyer, & Henry, 2008; Rideout, Saphir, & Rotschek, 2011; Rideout, 2014). Given the media-rich environment, how is technology used in the home and how are decisions about it made? Our research complements and builds on others’ prior work in this area (Levine et al., 2008; Tachiwaki, 2011; and Chiong, 2009). We provide further context on home technology use, the reasoning behind parents’ decisions around media use, and the emerging literature on learning in particular, parents’ perceptions of the potential benefits and risks of media and technology use.

Methods
This poster draws from three evaluation-research studies in which the samples were ethnically diverse and had children enrolled in Head Start or other programs serving predominantly low-income populations.

Home Study 2012
• Fourteen families, seven in NY and seven in CA
• Families were provided with a laptop, iPod, iTunes credits, Internet/wireless access, and suggestions for use of PBS KIDS resources
• Parents completed 2 at-home interviews, 2-6 phone interviews and an activity checklist

Parent Study 2012
• Survey of parents whose children were enrolled in preschool centers participating in a larger preschool-based study focused on early math
• 38 surveys were returned from 16 different preschools; 234 were used in data analysis

Parent Study 2013
• Survey distributed to parents of randomly selected preschool children from 92 classrooms participating in the randomized control trial
• 925 surveys were returned (96% response rate)

Joint Engagement
Children often use technology with others, primarily parents (74%) and siblings (56%), but also other children (21%), grandparents (16%), or other adult relatives (19%).

Study limitations
Parent Study 2012 and Parent Study 2013
• Relied on self-report via paper-and-pencil surveys and focus groups
• Limited to parents whose children attended centers participating in our pilot and RCT efforts

Home Study
• Does not show how families use technology “in the wild” since we provided materials
• Small sample of English- and Spanish-speaking families

Conclusion
Our mixed method studies of parents of children attending Head Start or other preschools serving predominantly low-income families allow us to better understand the beliefs and attitudes of this group of parents towards media and technology in general, and particularly toward their young children’s use of technology for learning. On the whole, our survey findings concur with other large-scale surveys of parents (e.g., Fox et al. 2010; Levine et al. 2009;), that children have access to, and use, a variety of technologies. Our focus groups and in-home study add a qualitative look into families’ decision-making processes, goals, and practices.

We found that children use technology primarily for entertainment, but also for educational purposes. Parents believe in technology’s potential for learning both content such as math or reading skills, as well as technological literacy which they believe their children will need for success. However, parents are also concerned that their children may overuse technology or encounter age-inappropriate content. They want their children to lead balanced lives that include outdoor play, play with physical and social toys, and spend quality family time. As such, parents limit their children’s total time with technology and the content they may watch or play. Often, these filters are based on in response to both parent and child needs and desires. Parents and other adults frequently use technology with their children, often asking and answering questions about content.

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Access to technology
Parents’ aspirations for their children’s media and technology use: and
Parents’ limiting and or fears related to media and technology use; and
Examples of joint-engagement of parent-child media and technology use.

Children’s technology use at least once a week (Parent Study 2013)

Aspirations
Across our studies, we saw that parents believed in technology’s potential for learning and wanted to harness it for their children’s benefit. More than 90% of parents believe technology can help their child’s learning, both generally and more specifically for math and reading skills. Three-quarters of parents felt technology was as important for learning math, reading, and writing skills as activities such as reading books or doing homework (Parent Study 2012).

Children’s technology use during the week (Parent Study 2013)

Limits and Fears
Parents across all three studies expressed common fears and worries about media and technology.

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