

Technology not taking over children's lives despite screen-time increase

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With children spending increasing amounts of time on screen-based devices, there is a common perception that technology is taking over their lives, to the detriment and exclusion of other activities. However,

new Oxford University research has revealed that as digital past-times have become intertwined with daily life, children have adapted their behaviours to include their devices.

Much like adults, they are able to multi-task and also do all the things that they would do anyway.

The study also reveals key gender differences in how children use [technology](#). Although boys and girls spend similar amounts of [time](#) using devices, boys spend significantly more time playing videogames compared to girls', spending 50 mins per day, compared girls' 9. The bulk of girls time is spent engaging in other activities such as study and socialising.

Conducted by Killian Mullan, a Senior Research Associate, at Oxford's Centre for Time Use Research in the Department of Sociology, the study combines data from two national UK Time Use Surveys 2000-01 and 2014-15, to study changes in screen-based activities and to build a detailed picture of the time children spend using technology.

The work represents a first of its kind assessment of how the time children aged 8-18 spend daily on screen-based activities (TV, videogames and computers) has changed since 2000, together with an analysis of how children are incorporating the use of devices such as smartphones and tablets into their daily activities.

Previous studies have focused on how much time children spend doing certain screen-based activities per day, but have not included any context of other activities (such as homework, dinner etc.), making it difficult to fully appreciate how children incorporate the use of technology into their daily lives. Published in *Child Indicators Research*, the research uses high-quality time-diary data. Children fill out a diary, recording the sequence of activities they engage in throughout the day, and include

when they are using a digital device (smartphone, tablet, computer) throughout the day.

The study reveals that children spent 10 minutes less time watching TV between 2000 and 2015. However their time playing videogames and using computers, (when this was the primary focus of their [activity](#)), increased by 40 minutes, giving an overall increase of 30 minutes in the time children spent on traditional screen-based activities.

The work considers the increased availability of portable devices (smart phones and tablets) and reinforces reports from other data sources, such as Ofcom, that in 2015 children spent on average 2hr 46 mins using a [device](#) (approximately 20 hours per week).

Killian said: 'While this is undeniably a considerable amount of time, taken with context it suggests less cause for alarm. In fact, the study reveals that rather than allowing their devices to take over their lives, as some research suggests, children are combining the use of new technology with other activities. 'Around half of this time is when a screen-based activity is the child's primary focus (1 hr 30 min). While they report using computers as their main activity for 30 minutes, there is also an activity overlap of approximately an hour, where devices were used while watching TV or playing videogames. The increasing use of devices while watching TV coincides with a decrease in the pastime as a primary activity, suggesting that children may be watching TV on their phones and tablets instead of traditional platforms.'

For the remaining time that children are using devices, (a total of 1hr 16 min), they report engaging in a wide range of different activities including when at school (14 mins), socialising (13 min), travelling (12 mins), studying (9 min), eating (6 min), and playing sports (3 min). This raises important questions about the extent to which mobile devices are altering the nature of children's experiences. However, the overall

amount of time spent on these activities did not change noticeably between 2000 and 2015, indicating that the amount of time that children use technology may be increasing, but is not reducing time spent on other activities.

Killian explains: 'Our findings show that technology is being used with and in some cases perhaps to support other activities, like homework for instance, and not pushing them out. Just like we adults do, children spread their digital tech use throughout the day, while doing other things.'

When time spent using devices is added to the measure of total screen-based activities (TV, videogames, computer), the increase in screen time between 2000 and 2015 jumps substantially from 30 minutes to 1 hr 46 min. However, the study highlights how children's increasing use of technology is spread throughout the day while they are engaging in many other activities.

Whether this ability to multi-task is effective, proving a distraction, or even affecting their mental health, is not clear and needs further investigation. However, what is clear is that technology is not consuming children's time and attention, as is commonly perceived.

Killian added: 'People think that children are addicted to technology and in front of these screens 24/7, to the exclusion of other activities - and we now know that is not the case. The bigger point is that, as for adults, children are incorporating technology into daily life. They are taking the tech with them and they are doing all the things that they would do anyway - but now with devices. On paper, the total time children spend using digital devices sounds huge. But, when you break it down the picture that emerges shows how children have embedded tech in their daily activities - just like we have.'

Of the importance of the behavioural gender differences observed, Killian said: 'Gender differences in the way in which children use technology are well known, but the substantial widening of the gender difference in time playing videogames is surprising. Much is written about the negative effects of videogames, but there are possible benefits as well. Boys, to a greater extent than girls, may be exposed to digital cultures surrounding video gaming that improve programming skills and jobs in technology, that may well shape expectations and help form critical pathways into careers in technology. Girls are not technophobes. They use technology as much as boys, but do so in markedly different ways. More research is needed to understand how to leverage all the different ways boys and girls use technology in their daily lives to help promote more gender balance in careers in technology'.

To expand the picture of [children](#)'s technology use further, Killian is also studying how use of screen-based technology relates to 'family time' and activities with their parents - results are expected in late 2018.

More information: Killian Mullan. Technology and Children's Screen-Based Activities in the UK: The Story of the Millennium So Far, *Child Indicators Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s12187-017-9509-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-017-9509-0)

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