"I PREFER TO BUILD TRUST" – EXAMINING PARENTAL CONFIDENCE IN CHILDREN'S DIGITAL SKILLS

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Introduction

Digital and social media have become deeply ingrained in youth culture and an inseparable part of daily routines for children growing up throughout the Western world (Robards 2012, Green et.al. 2011). Using digital media to construct and explore the world around them, children develop a broad repository of online practices ranging from media consumption, learning, communication, socialising, exploring identities, and even flirting (Livingstone 2008, boyd 2014). Positioned as "digital natives" (Prensky 2001) young people are often assumed to be experts in using digital and social media. However, while they might be quick in picking up operational aspects of digital skills (Helsper & Eynon 2013), parents express less confidence in children's critical and social digital skills – i.e. their abilities for strategic understanding of risks and opportunities online.

This paper examines three dominant parental approaches to guiding children's engagement with digital and social media and the development of digital skills, where they act as watchdog, chaperon, and/or collaborator. At the core of each of the identified approaches are varying degrees of trust in the child's ability to partake in safe practices online.

Trust at the core of parenting approaches

As previously documented, in Australia and internationally, parental concerns about children's internet activity revolve around the issues of privacy, bullying, contacts with strangers, violent or inappropriate content, etc. (Sorbring 2014, boyd & Hargittai 2013, Green et.al. 2011). These anxieties stem from lack of confidence in the child's ability to navigate online risks (Livingstone & Byrne 2018). While academic research tackled

identifying and measuring digital skills (Helsper & Eynon 2013, van Dijk & van Deursen 2014), less is known how these skills are negotiated in the family.

This project undertook home-based interviews, as a primary location of children's media use, and examines parental approaches to governing children's internet use. The presented discussion draws on interviews with (pre)teen children between 10 and 15 years old and a parent or guardian from 15 families in Melbourne, Australia (n=30).

This paper aims to capture how confidence in children's abilities – or varying degrees of it – affects the parent's success in working with their children on developing safe digital practices. This is considered through three approaches displaying varying levels of trust – from complete distrust to full recognition of the child's abilities.

The boomerang effect – give trust to get trust

> *"Idea that just because you've been using Instagram constantly for two years, it means that you understand everything about the technology is just rubbish; and it doesn't mean you can evaluate the information, it doesn't mean that you understand the impact of what you're doing; they are still 13 years old, you know, I think we are giving them way more credit than they deserve, just because they know a lot about something."*

Across the sample, there is an asymmetrical confidence in the child's digital competence. While parents see children as experts in navigating a platform's affordances, features, and content creation, they doubt the children's abilities to understand the implications and consequences of social media use. This skill discrepancy, whether perceived or real, directly affected parental didactic approaches in developing children's digital skills.

> *"We fight all the time. She doesn't like me snooping around, and I don't understand how she can have that many friends…. So, in the end, you have to be strict. Black or white. Because, they don't understand. So, I have to be tough and say no!"*

The watchdog approach refers to the parental practices attempting to closely control all aspects of the child's social media use. Lack of trust in the child's social and critical digital skills (Helsper & Enyon 2013) often leads parents to reach for restrictive practices. Although rooted in the desire to improve child's safety, the watchdog approach in fact often backfires, inflaming tension and conflict in the family. Children under *watchdog* also are more likely to conceal their activities by creating fake and alternative accounts.

> *"I believe very strongly that kids need to learn how to use social media when they are still willing to accept guidance, rather than turning 13 or 14 and then suddenly they are just all in."*

The chaperon approach presents an alternative tactic, in which parents engage in hands-on and co-use practices with their children starting at early age, thereby

supporting children's acquisition of digital skills. *Chaperon* parents lead the process, while gradually allowing children with more autonomy in social media use as their trust in children's digital skills increases.

> *"They were almost born with technology and I was not. So there's no way that I can be ahead of him in knowing what's there and how to use it. If he wanted to hide things from me, he could. I mean, I'm not completely ignorant but, it's, if it's a hide and seeks game, he would win. So I prefer to build trust."*

Some parents recognised children's expertise in creative and technical aspects of their digital skills. Rather than attempting to outperform the child, they turn to the collaborative dialogic practices – the collaborator approach. Here, the child's expertise is acknowledged and unchallenged, while parents attempt to stay around and build a trust-based relationship so that the child has confidence to turn to them should they require support with their endeavor of developing social and critical digital skills. This dialogic relationship enables both sides to understand and respond to the concerns of the other. Inherently, parents and children work together in meeting the growing challenge to empower children to fully utilise the benefits of their online experience.

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