

Kelly Brownell:

You're listening to Policy 360. Welcome. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today my guest is Candice Odgers. Candice is a professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy and is Associate Director of The Center for child and Family Policy. She is also a member of the faculty in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience here at Duke.

Candice you've been doing some important work on something that causes many parents great concern, children and technology. 90% of children now have access to a mobile phone and they average more than 60 text messages per day. I couldn't believe that number when I saw it. Is that really true?

Candice Odgers:

That is true and that actually might've gone up since that report.

Kelly Brownell:

That's remarkable. And of course they're on social media, including many sites like Snapchat for example, where many parents don't know what the technology is or wouldn't have an account themselves. So your research has examined a number of areas that cause parents and child development experts concern. Would you explain how you've chosen to address some of these issues in your research?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So we initially started exploring this topic because we were using mobile phones as tools to understand kids' daily lives and how they reacted to experiences they had. And in the process of doing that, we had time with the parents and we heard a lot of concerns from parents of these kids. So, how do I know who my kid is interacting with? How should I limit their exposure? We hear things over the water cooler in terms of kids these days, don't know how to interact anymore. They're kind of glued to their phone. So we switched from using mobile technologies as a tool to thinking about what are the effects of the use of mobile technologies on kids' development. And we really wanted to explore the literature, figure out what do we actually know versus what do we think in this area.

Kelly Brownell:

Do the parents, you said they have several categories of concerns or worries, and one of them that the somehow being attached to the electronic media would stifle their social development. Are there specific things they're worried about? I mean, you hear about cyber bullying, for example. What kind of things most worry the parents?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So what we did is we reviewed parents surveys. So surveys where parents endorsed fears that they had about mobile technologies and also media reports, and then also, what we had heard kind of in everyday speak. And one of the biggest things that comes up is safety. So parents worry a lot that their kids will be victimized or bullied online, that they'll be contacted by strangers. This is evolved quite a bit.

The idea of stranger danger online was something that we initially saw when people started to go online in chat rooms. Technology has really evolved to, it's part of our everyday lives. And when we start to look at who kids are interacting with their online and their offline networks look very similar, in fact, almost identical. And there's very few interactions that are really with strangers.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, that's interesting. So, the parents worry about what children are sharing online. So, what sort of things do parents worry about in that context?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So this is an area that's gotten a lot of attention and there's probably some good reasons for that. So when we first launched our study back in California, a study came out that week that said one in five adolescents have sent or shared a naked picture of themselves or someone else. So we had devices in the field. We immediately stopped the study and figured out how to encrypt this information, how to get some stronger controls over this.

So kids are sharing a lot of information about themselves and other people and sometimes not fully understanding the consequences. So, you can be charged for example, in trafficking child pornography, if you forward on an explicit picture of someone you know, perhaps.

Kelly Brownell:

How old were the children that you're talking about?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So this is where the estimates really vary, and there's been a lot of debate in the public health literature, and you have rates ranging from about 5% of kids who do this in the younger categories to 60% of kids who have done this or endorsed doing this in the past month. But you have to kind of think the tools are there. They're allowing kids to do this, but how much does this differ from kind of what they're doing in the past or sharing it in a public form, but this is a time where kids are developing ideas about sexuality. This is a time where this is not necessarily an atypical thing to be thinking about or engaging in

Kelly Brownell:

And what you just said connects with cyber bullying, doesn't it? Because I was just listening to report on national public radio where some parents were very concerned that children were being bullied into sharing those kinds of pictures of themselves. Is that a problem to worry about?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So I'm not sure about what percentage of kids are kind of forced into sharing this material. What we do find when we look at the cyber bullying literature, is that there's also a tremendous amount of overlap. So kids who are victimized offline kind of in the real world are also the ones that are marked or that are victimized online. And the encouraging part about that is that the interventions that target bullying in general also tend to reduce cyber bullying.

So it's really, for a lot of this, the medium is a little bit different, but all of the things that we know about what are risks for kids, what interventions might work for kids, a lot of those lessons translate because kids aren't becoming a completely different person online. It's really just a medium through which they express their identities, to which they communicate with their friends. They kind of engage in the tasks of daily life.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, some people say that people, and I don't know if this applies to young people as well, feel freer or will express themselves in ways electronically that they wouldn't do in person. Do you think that's true?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. There's been some interesting work in the Netherlands around this exact idea that often kids will report disclosing information that they wouldn't necessarily disclose in kind of real life online because they are kind of freer to do that. And I think honestly, that's why we've had such a good response with our surveys of kids in the field.

When we first started the study, people thought we were crazy, that kids would respond three or four times a day to our text messages and our surveys, that they would report on behaviors around substance use, around risky sexual behavior, but they do and they tell us quite a bit. In some ways they're maybe more disclosive, although you'd need to do the controlled study to figure that out.

Kelly Brownell:

With children spending so much time with these digital forms of interaction, what does it do to their social development?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So I think this is an open question. So the most recent statistics from Common Sense Media tell us that kids are spending on average eight hours a day in front of their screen. So that's a tremendous amount of time. Right now, what they're doing on those screens during that time, that varies in terms of what the effects are, but what's being displaced, what's being cut out? Is it physical activity? Is it time in peer-to-peer interactions?

We've looked mostly at the social parts of things, and so the worry often is, and this is something Sherry Turkle, a wonderful professor at MIT has explored a lot, our kids alone together. When you see a group of kids and they're all staring at their devices, are they being able to practice the kind of communication skills they need? Develop the social skills they'll need later in life? And the immediate reaction from adults to see that as no.

They're losing out on all these opportunities for positive social development, but when you look at the longitudinal research, what you find is that kids who are kind of socially skilled early on, tend to have more online communication, higher frequency, and that in turn predicts better quality relationships later on. So it's not clear. There's kind of a rich get richer idea along this chain. It's not clear that there's an actual negative effect yet. That's not saying there isn't, but when we reviewed the study, we were actually surprised at the amount of kind of positive effects of the results.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, let me ask about that. I mean, could an argument be made that there are some positive effects on social development?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah, and that seems to be kind of, what's emerging from a lot of these studies. So it reduces these barriers in terms of distance. So we have a lot of families in our different configurations of parents who don't see their children every day, so enhancing those types of communication. We find in parent child research that time online does displace the amount of time of in-person contact, but if the relationship is healthy, offline, it tends to strengthen the evidence that there's strengthening of the relationship. So I

think there's a lot of opportunities for kind of improving relationships, improving healthy social relationships, but it's like most stories and kind of social science and development. It's not a one size fits all. For some kids, there really are elevated risks in the online world.

Kelly Brownell:

So you hear the term digital divide a lot, but the usual context is, one country may not have much internet access and another country does, or poor people may have poor access and things, but is there a digital divide between parents and children?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So the term that's used is digital natives versus digital immigrants. So if you were born after 1980, you're a digital native, so you don't remember a time when there wasn't an internet, when you didn't have an email account. And then the digital natives are the ones who are fretting and kind of worrying about what these digital natives are doing with their time and kind of ways to bridge that. And what you're seeing in some contexts is that upward transfer of knowledge. So you have kids getting their parents and their grandparents online, where kids become the knowledge experts, right and are kind of transferring skills and communication up the chain.

Kelly Brownell:

So what about multitasking? So the constant nature of being pinged by technology, should parents be concerned about that?

Candice Odgers:

So I think in our review, we identified three areas where we thought there really was cause for concern. So in the cyberbullying, we said, "Yeah, there's overlap between the kids off and online who are bullied, but this is a new tool and it can be more pervasive and more harmful. We flag multitasking for the reason that the experimental work and the work that comes out with it mostly adults that shows our performance has really degraded when we try and multitask. And that's essentially what kids are doing when you watch.

That's essentially what we're doing, right? So some of these issues, people are pointing to kids as it being a problem, but you could move the age grade up and see this among adults as well. Texting and driving is a good example. More adults and adolescents text and drive, right. And the other place that we've flagged was sleep, and there's really compelling evidence that you should get your devices out of your kids' rooms.

Kelly Brownell:

You know, it's amazing how much people are on these and you gave some statistics about those. I was walking from one place at Duke to another, the other day and we passed a bus stop. There must've been 15 students waiting for a bus and it seemed to me that everyone was sitting there on their phone and you kind of wonder what they would have been doing in the older days. They might've been at least interacting with one another, looking at the birds in the trees or doing something like that. It was very interesting.

Then I came out of another building shortly after that, and there were a group of students. I had to wait to go onto the sidewalk because there were about 10 students in a row that walked by and they

were all on their cell phones. So they didn't even notice that I was trying to get in. That was really pretty amazing. So it's stunning how much time people spend on these sort of things.

So one of the issues that I know parents worry about is sleep with the children, because if they're always with their cell phone or their computer is nearby, the sleep could be interfered with. So is that a realistic concern?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. This is one of the areas after I wrote the section in the review, I got all of the devices out of every bedroom in my house. So this is actually a place where we have some pretty compelling evidence from randomized controlled trials, where you bring people into sleep lab and you get them to read information on paper versus on a screen. And we find just that changing of how you deliver the information, there's disruption in the circadian rhythm, there's disruption in sleep in terms of the amount of time in deep sleep, right? So that's just in terms of baring whether it's on a device or not.

We know with kids that there's some displacement of time sleeping. When you log the time they start sending the majority of their text messages, it's late at night, right? So we have some aspect of affective arousal that might be happening there in terms of the content of the information around sleep time. And then interestingly, in some followup studies that have looked at kids having their phone in their bedroom, about 25% of a mobile phone owners sleep with their phone under their pillow, not to miss a text or a message at night.

Kelly Brownell:

Wow. So would you recommend parents just set an hour and then the phone comes out of the room?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So I think, this varies and varies based on the age of the kid, but it makes sense to have the device out of the room. The most common excuse we hear is, "Well that's my alarm clock." You should probably buy another alarm clock. So yeah, this was pretty compelling when you see, in terms of the amount of time that's displaced by sleep and also the sleep quality, which for kids is so important in terms of consolidation, of learning, of memory, in terms of their growing bodies, brains. So getting those hours, those quality hours in is crucial and sort of seems to be pretty clear evidence that this is disruptive.

Kelly Brownell:

So what would you say is the biggest takeaway for parents with this work?

Candice Odgers:

So I think the biggest takeaway is we really do have to move from this kind of fear-based approach to mobile technology. And one of the most interesting things when we started this project, was reviewing historically fears that adults had about the ways kids were spending their time. And you saw it with comic books, you saw it with the radio, you saw it with the romance novel, that adults have a tendency to view things that kids are doing or spending a lot of time on, is negative towards their development.

So we need to pause. We need to think about what the data might say about whether or not there are negative consequences. We need to look at the opportunities for embracing technology as a tool for kind of minimizing the digital device, kind of following kids where they might lead us. And I think the other thing not to forget is, we know a tremendous amount of kids, of what's good for kids, what

leads to risky behavior, what leads to negative consequences. And it's not that those rules suddenly don't apply. This isn't an entirely new world. This is a new tool that those same types of stories and things are playing out on.

Kelly Brownell:

You can imagine parents struggle with the issue about the age at which they might get their child a cell phone, and you could just imagine those conversations. "Well mommy, everybody else has one. Why don't I?" What would you advise parents to think about it in that context?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So I think that's a complicated question for the family. I recently kind of told the story about my five-year-old asked for a cell phone and he wanted one so that his friends could text him, but he can't actually read yet. So it was a very high status thing. Some parents make a decision early on to get their child a limited device for safety reasons, right? So you can track your child. You can be in constant contact and that's comforting for a lot of parents in a complex world. Others will kind of go with what the peer group is doing, and it really is an important tool if monitored properly to be engaged in your peer group and connected with peers. So I think what we're seeing in national trends is the age of first device is lowering pretty rapidly as norms change around that and each family is going to have to figure out kind of their own comfort zone when that ownership is appropriate.

Kelly Brownell:

Do you think there might be some interesting opportunities for the cell phone manufacturers to program cell phones in ways that would be child and parent friendly? So for example, could a manufacturer create an option within the cell phone to turn off all text messaging, as of a certain time at night. Or only allow messages back and forth with the parent. Or turn off the music part of things or whatever would happen to be so that the safety parts of the phone would be maintained, but you'd be able to protect against some of these other problems.

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So people are doing that and there are apps that are developed for that. I think for parents, it really is overwhelming the kind of range of things that you would have to lockdown or control. So, even as researchers who were in the field with kids and their phones, the latest way that kids are communicating with each other, that changes and it's always kind of getting around some type of restriction. So, the thing that we often talk about with parents is, good, strong communication with your kids is always going to win the day, right, because we're never going to be able to monitor every aspect and corner of their lives and in fact, we don't want to, right. We want to have a relationship or build relationships where kids in schools and in families can kind of come forward and signal when things are not right.

Kelly Brownell:

I know Candice in response to the news of your work, getting out there into the public media, and because some of the things you've written had been like inversion about beds and things. You've had lots of responses from parents. What kind of things have you been hearing from them?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So, it's been really interesting. I think that there is a lot of fear around technology, fear around what technology might be doing to kids. And a lot of times, people have not wanted to hear the message that there might be some opportunities with technology and that technology might not have these harmful effects. I think the way that we've tried to come at this is a very data-based approach. So here are the concerns we're hearing.

Let's pause for a second. Do a check of the data against these assumptions, about how harmful this might be, and then figure out what do we need to know. But I think, this is a hard topic for people and when things go wrong in parenting and things go wrong in kids' life, it's terrifying for parents, and technology might be in some cases, a place to look for the source of the problem. And we might want to take a moment and think about whether that's really the source of what might be driving some of kids' problems.

Kelly Brownell:

So some parents are worried some things are happening with their children and they're ascribing some or all of it to the technology, and then just defaulting to the assumption that the technology must be bad overall. I mean, if they're feeling that way, I could see why you'd get angry letters and messages and things like that, because so much is at stake for the parents. Boy, it's interesting to think though, how people are ignoring what you're finding and then the data and just thinking that you're wrong with what you're doing, even despite the science proving otherwise. People do have very strong feelings, don't they?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. To be fair, I think that this is a very new and a very fast moving area. And it often gets split into this binary of technology being a bad thing or a good thing, and kind of nuance points are harder to hear. So technology is probably bad for sleep and bad for multitasking, but for kids social relationships, it seems like there's some real benefits here, and that's not a message that's kind of easy to communicate clearly and we often get polarized in discussions about most things. So it's not surprising that technology falls in this disbelief that, technology is terrible for children or it's going to save children, and it being the next best thing and teaching my kid how to read.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, you certainly have a lifetime of research before you, if you choose to continue working on this, because with the technology changing so fast, you'd almost need to continue to do this research over and over again because of the relationship between children and technology and with their parents will just change so rapidly. It'd be interesting to see where that goes.

Candice Odgers:

Yeah, I'm excited. I think that the tools might change, but the thought is that some of the underlying lessons might be the same.

Kelly Brownell:

Good. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. I appreciate it.

Candice Odgers:

Thank you.

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Kelly Brownell:

So I've been talking today with Candice Odgers, a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I encourage you to sign up for Policy 360 on iTunes. You can find us in the iTunes U section of the service. We are also on SoundCloud. Thank you very much for listening. I am Kelly Brownell.