

Research Brief

Parenting Today in Victoria:

Parental use of technology



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Key insights

- Just over half of parents thought they used their devices too much when they were with their children, and a substantial proportion were not comfortable about this. This was particularly true of parents of younger children
- Parents of teens were more likely than parents of younger children to say it was easy to focus on their child and put the device away
- Parents who were more likely to report challenges with their device use also:
 - Reported lower levels of parenting confidence
 - Were more likely to find parenting hard-going
 - Had higher levels of psychological distress and tiredness
 - Reported less positive ways of interacting with their child
- About a third had mixed feelings, or thought their child was concerned about the parent's device use. Parents of primary school aged children were more likely to say this
- Relatively few said they were annoyed when their child interrupted them when they were using their devices. But parents of younger children were more likely to feel annoyed when interrupted.

How do parents feel about their own technology use and how does this relate to other approaches to parenting?

This Research Brief reports findings from the 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria Survey, conducted by the Parenting Research Centre and funded by the Victorian Government.



Context

The majority of Australians own a mobile, laptop or tablet.^{1,2} Our devices help connect us to family and friends, but more than half of adults also think they use their mobile devices too much.¹

'Technoference'³ happens when device use – for example, using a mobile phone, laptop or tablet – interferes with face-to-face social interactions. Concerns have been expressed by a number of social commentators about the impact of parental technology use on patterns of parent-child interaction, yet research on the issue is relatively scarce.

We do know that sensitive and responsive relationships are crucial to child outcomes as shown in the development of infant language.⁴ So it is concerning that a small but growing number of studies have found that parents' use of technology in the presence of children is associated with reduced parental attention and responsiveness.^{5,6,7,8,9}

In addition, reduced responsiveness caused by technology use has been found to be associated with negative mental and behavioural outcomes in children – for example, in adolescents.^{10,11} Frequent technoference was associated with adolescents' decreased perceptions of parental warmth, which was associated with increased adolescent anxiety and depression and decreased prosocial behaviour.¹¹

Other studies have shown that children are experiencing and are conscious of technoference.³ Children have reported that their parents are distracted by their phones during their conversations,¹² that they wished their parents would spend less time on a device,¹³ and even that their parents were addicted to a device.¹³

Despite this negative picture, research findings on parental use of technologies are mixed, and it is too early to make generalisations about family risk.¹⁴ It's highly likely that what parents are doing with the technology when they are with their children, and the extent to which it interferes with family time is what matters. We saw an opportunity here to extend research on this issue by exploring parental perceptions of their technology use and its impact on them and their families as part of the 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria survey. A better understanding of parental views and experiences could help inform future research as well as be useful in starting a broader community conversation about parental technology use.



Findings

How do parents feel about how they use their devices?

In line with the Australian population,¹ just over half the parents we surveyed 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' they used their mobile phone or device too much (see Figure 1).

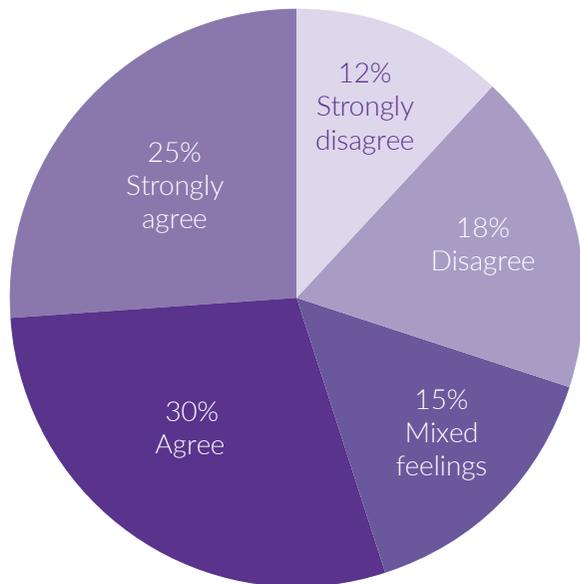


Figure 1. Parents' agreement with 'I feel like I use my mobile phone or device too much' (%) (2019 data)

When we asked parents how they felt about their device use when spending time with their children specifically, nearly 40% of parents reported not feeling comfortable with their use of technology (see Figure 2).

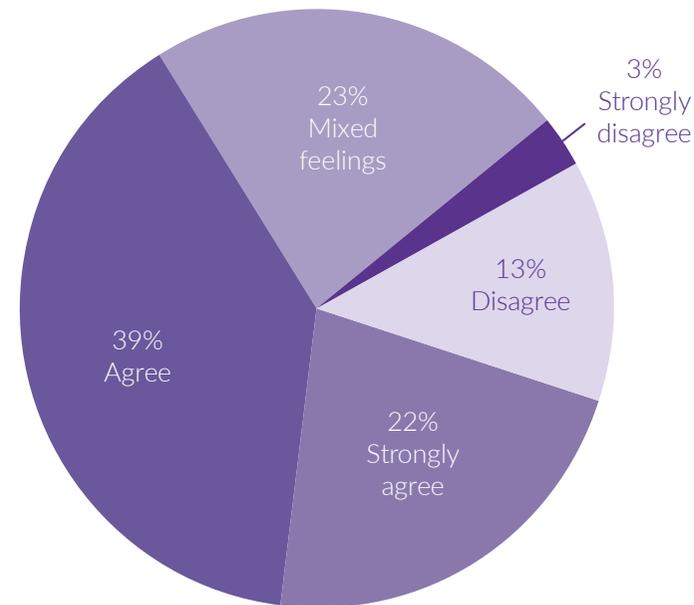


Figure 2. Parents' agreement with 'I am comfortable with how I am using my technology when I am spending time with my children' (%) (2019 data)

We also asked parents what they thought their children felt about their parents' device use. 63% percent said their child was not at all concerned, 18% said they were a little concerned, 15% had mixed feelings and 4% said their child was quite or very concerned. So, over 20% of parents thought their child was at least a little concerned about the parent's use of technology.

Parents' concerns about their own device use and child age

Concern about the amount of time spent using a device was greater among parents of younger children (aged below six years) than parents of older children (see Figure 3). In our survey, the parents of younger children tended to be younger themselves. So in effect, younger parents were also more likely to feel they used their devices too much.

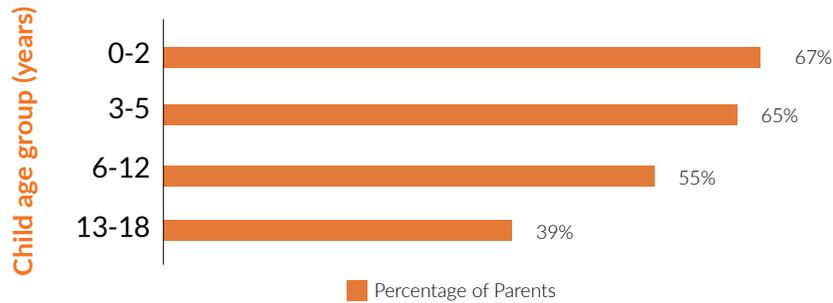


Figure 3. Percentage of parents who agreed or strongly agreed with 'I feel like I use my mobile phone or device too much' by child age (2019 data)

Parents of younger children generally felt less comfortable about how they used the technology when they were around their children. This trend was strongest when comparing parents of babies and toddlers (0-2 years) with parents of adolescents (13-18 years) (see Figure 4).

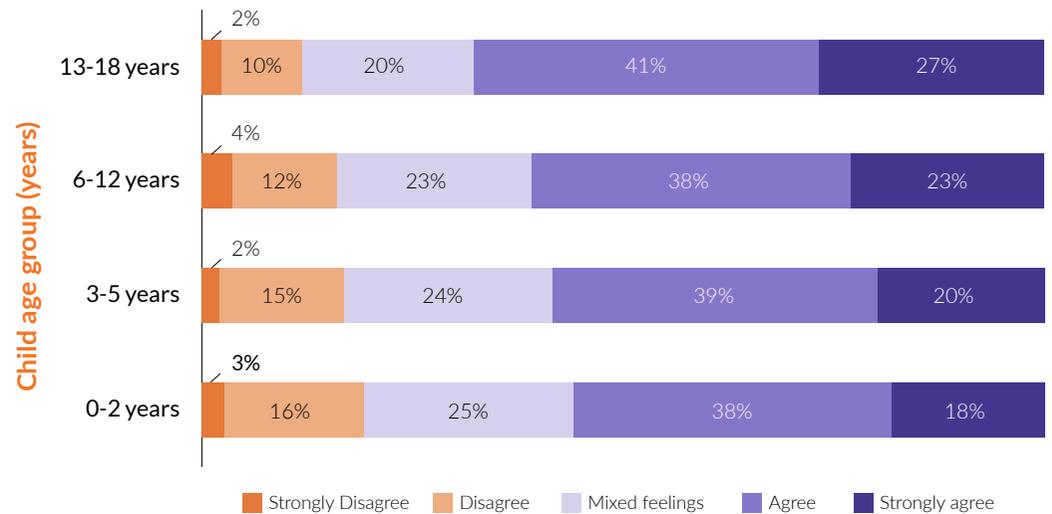


Figure 4. Child age and parents' agreement with 'I am comfortable with how I am using my technology when I am spending time with my children' (2019 data)

We also explored parents' perceptions of their reactions to child interruptions to their device use. A relatively small number (less than 10%) acknowledged feeling annoyed when their children interrupted them while they were using a device. There were, however, child age-related differences. Parents of kindergarten and primary school-aged children were most likely to find interruptions annoying (see Figure 5).

There were also child age-related differences in how parents thought their children felt about their technology use. A greater proportion of parents of primary school-aged children (6-12 years) thought their child was concerned about their parent's mobile/device use, or had mixed feelings (see Figure 6) – this was particularly so when compared with parents of teenagers, 71% of whom did not think their children were concerned.

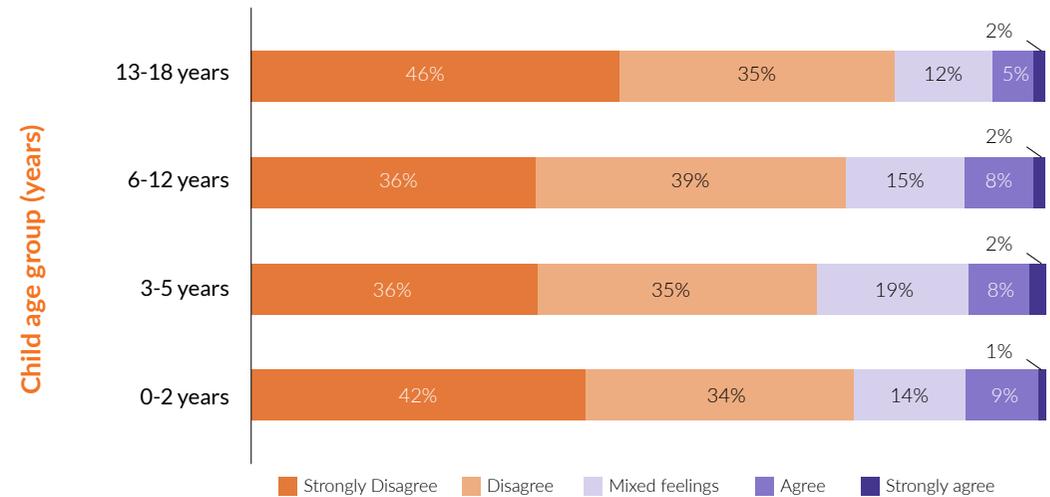


Figure 5. Child age and parents' agreement with 'I feel annoyed when my child interrupts me while I am using my mobile phone or other device' (2019 data)

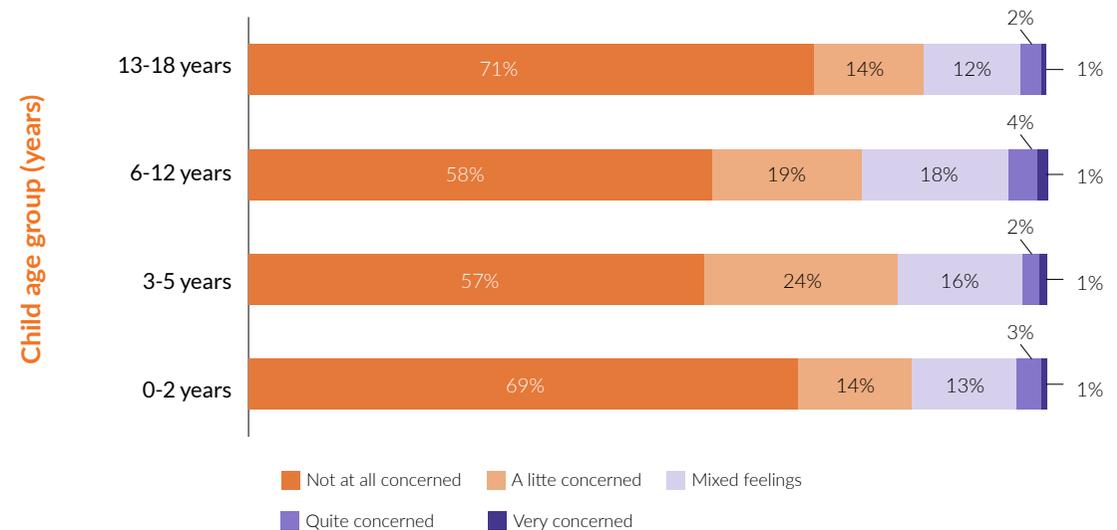


Figure 6. Child age and parents' estimate of the child's concern about parents' use of electronic devices (2019 data)

Parents of teens were more likely to tell us that it was easy for them to put their device away and focus on their child. Overall, 80% of parents agreed or strongly agreed it was easy to put their device away, but parents of teens were more likely to agree or strongly agree this was an easier thing to do than parents of younger children (see Figure 7).

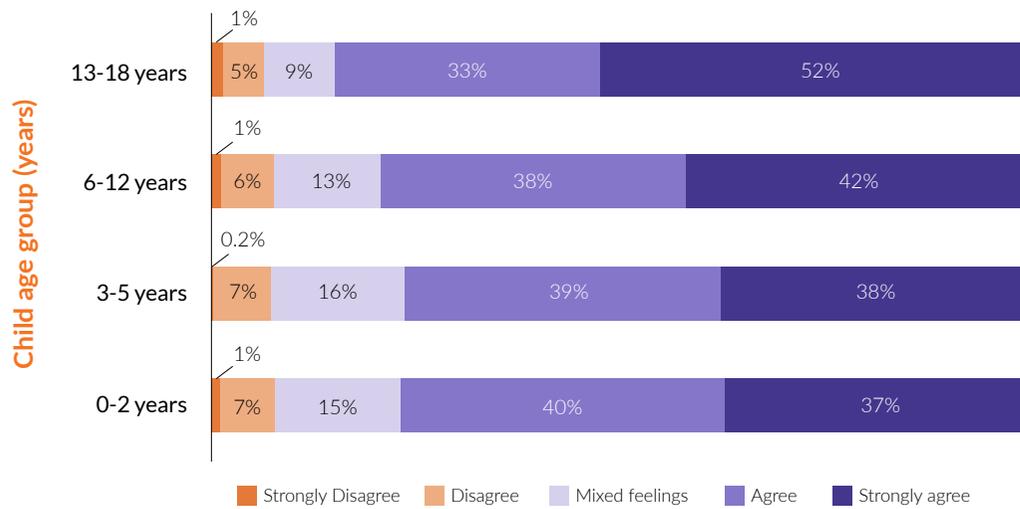


Figure 7. Child age and parents' agreement with 'It's easy for me to put my mobile phone or other device away and focus fully on my child/ren when I am spending time with them' (2019 data)



Parent confidence and device use

For the parents in this study, parenting confidence — or sense of parenting self-efficacy — was strongly linked to almost all the aspects of parents' use of and concerns around device use we examined.¹⁵

Parents who reported lower self-efficacy were less likely to be comfortable with how they used their devices around their children, and found it harder to put them away. They were also more likely to feel they used their device too much and to feel annoyed when their children interrupted them. These parents were also more likely to share that they thought their children were concerned about their use of these devices. These associations could be interpreted in different ways. Parents' difficulties with their device use may contribute to feeling less efficacious, or, perceptions of low self-efficacy may hamper their attempts to manage challenges they face with device use when they are with their children.

Parenting experience and device use

We examined parental perceptions of their technology use in the context of their broader experience of being a parent. We noticed a common thread in this analysis. In general, parents who seemed to be having a harder time of it – finding

things tougher emotionally, judging themselves harshly – also viewed their device use as problematic in one way or another.

For example, parents who thought parenting was demanding were more likely to feel they used their device too much, but also found it harder to put the phone or other device away; those who thought parenting was frustrating were annoyed when their child interrupted. Parents experiencing current psychological distress¹⁶ or who felt that tiredness got in the way of their parenting were also more likely to feel annoyed with their child when they interrupted them on their device. But parents who had a trusted person to turn to for advice were more likely to say it was easy for them to put their phone or other device away.

The parents who were comfortable with how they used their phone or other device around their children and could put it away easily were also the ones who found parenting enjoyable and were satisfied with the amount of time they could give their child.



Parents' approach to parenting and their perceptions of their technology use

Finally, we looked at parental perceptions of their technology use in relationship to their approaches to parenting more generally. Parents who reported they were more likely to talk to their children about problems found it easier to put their phones or other device away. But those who said they yelled or argued with their child, were also more likely to be concerned about the amount of time they spent on devices, found it harder to put the phone or other device down, were annoyed by interruptions, and were not comfortable with their technology use around their children.

Parents who smacked their children for misbehaviour and were annoyed by interruptions while on a device also wished they were more consistent with their parenting and thought their children worried about their parents' device use.



Conclusions and implications

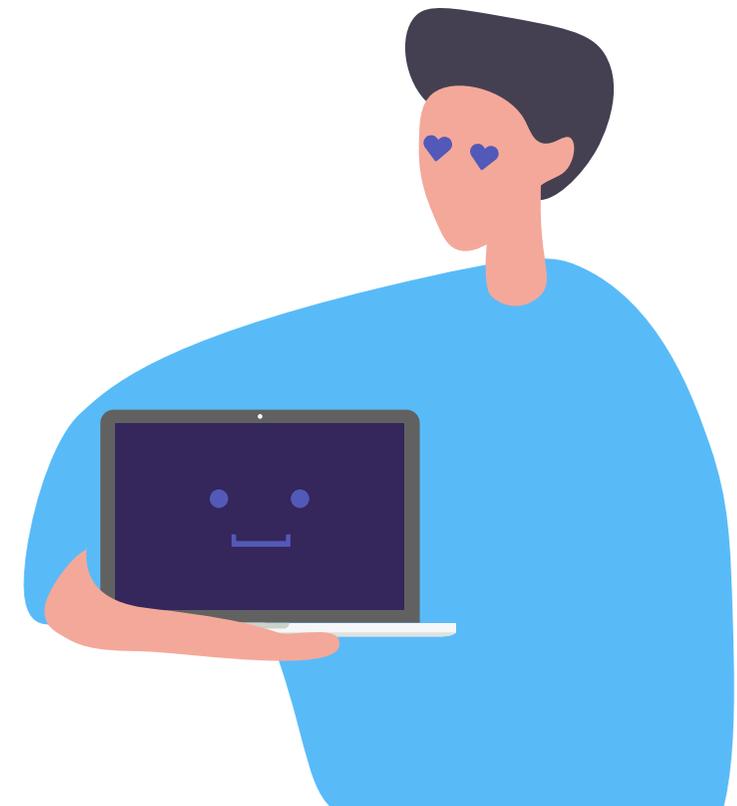
The use of electronic devices is ubiquitous, and many Australian adults are concerned about their use of technology. Our study shows that in addition to widespread community unease about the potential for negative impacts of mobile technologies, a substantial number of parents are aware of and concerned about their technology use and its impact on their children. However, younger parents and parents of younger children are the most concerned, suggesting this issue represents a unique generational challenge for parents who have grown up with technology and are now facing the task of aligning their technology use with their parental aspirations and goals. The concordance between parental misgivings and concerns expressed by experts in child development suggests parental concerns are well-founded if technology use is substantially eroding either the frequency or quality of parent-child interactions. Given that even small but stable changes in patterns of parent-child interaction could have cumulative effects on the quality of early childhood experience, technofence may indeed have broader and more significant implications for child development.⁷⁸⁹

However, given the mixed nature of much existing research, and even findings of positive associations between device use and parenting, there is clearly a need to build a more nuanced and functional understanding of technology use in the context of parent-child interaction.

To date, community attention has focussed almost exclusively on the impact of children's use of technology on their development. Our findings — that many parents are uncomfortable with their use of technology — suggest the time may be right for a broader conversation that includes a focus on parental use of technology. Indeed, a whole-of-family approach to the challenge of managing our technologies might be a more constructive and productive approach to one focussed solely on children or parents. Our data also supports an association between parental wellbeing, parenting self-efficacy and positive parenting practices with lower levels of concern about parental technology use, which suggests that general parenting support is likely to be effective in supporting families experiencing challenges. However, the quality of support available to parents would improve if it was informed by a program of research that developed evidence-based approaches to engaging parents in establishing healthy technology use in their families. Given the novel nature of the challenge, it is also highly likely that a research program with a strong co-design approach and even crowd-sourcing solutions holds the greatest potential. After all, it is highly likely the newest generation of parents is best placed to develop workable solutions for integrating technology into family life in positive ways.

Footnotes

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- 15 We measured how confident and effective parents felt in their role as parents with the 'Me as a Parent scale' (MaaPs). Ref: Hamilton, V. E., Matthews, J. M., & Crawford, S. B. (2014). Development and preliminary validation of a parenting self-regulation scale: "Me as a Parent". *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24, 2853-2864. In 2019 we used a 4-item short form version of the full 16-item MaaPs; ref: Matthews, J., Millward, C., Hayes, L., & Wade, C. (in preparation). Development and validation of a 4-item short-form parenting efficacy scale: The Me as a Parent Scale (MaaPs-SF)'
- 16 We used the K6 as a measure of parents' current psychological distress, including the extent to which they felt depressed, hopeless and restless. Ref: Kessler, R., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S.-L. T., ... Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959-976.





Study details

The 2016 and 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria surveys used computer assisted telephone interviewing to randomly survey 2600 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0-18 years in each year. In each family, one parent was interviewed in their preferred language and asked questions about one child (the focus child). Each sample was weighted to match Victorian parents in the Australian Census (using the 2011 Census for the 2016 survey, and the 2016 Census for the 2019 survey), with key characteristics of our samples adjusted in 2016 and 2019 for education level (sample education was lowered) and residential location (sample was adjusted towards more metro/city dwellers), and also for parent age in 2016 (sample age was adjusted upwards).

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