Scottish Universities Insight Institute

Knowledge Exchange Programme

Digital Families Across the Lifecourse

Summary Report

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

2016

Main objectives and context

There is increasing interest in the impact of digital technologies on everyday life. The Scottish Government's ambition is to increase the use of broadband and other digital technologies across all communities in Scotland. Programmes to improve the digital health of our population, to promote internet safety, and use technologies to support learning are well established. The main aim of digital families programme was to add to this growing body of knowledge by providing opportunities to explore the increasing presence of digital technologies within family life across the lifecourse, and to debate both the benefits and pressures these technologies bring.

Organised within three groupings – childhoods, family life and older age and caring – the programme set out to address a range of issues, including: the different experiences of rural and urban families; the role of digital communication in the lives of trans-national families; the impact of digital technologies on cross generational relationships within families; the contributions that digital technologies can have in maintaining and developing social networks across the lifecourse; the effect of digital technologies on education, work/life balance, lifelong learning and wellbeing; the social and economic inequalities that arise from different access to, and adoption and use of, technologies across the lifecourse and the differential experiences of 'digital natives' vs 'digital immigrants'

The specific aims of the programme were to:

1. Understand how digital technologies are impacting on family life and personal relationships in Scotland.
2. Identify the issues that families are grappling with in relation to digital advances, and stimulate new ways of addressing these.
3. Foster innovative collaborations between academics and non-academics with the potential to both raise new questions and inform policy and practice.
4. Establish a 'digital families' research network.

Three seminars were held, each covering a different stage in the lifecourse.

Seminar 1 focussed on 'Children and digital technology'. Seminar 2 'Digital families are here to stay' covered a wide range of issues including parenting and the use of technology by children and young people. Seminar 3 'Digital technologies, older age and caring' covered the use of both mainstream technology and assistive technology by older people, their families and carers.

Some creative methods were used to stimulate discussion, including an infographic and a specially commissioned film.

The resources from each of the seminar have been uploaded to the Digital Families Across the Lifecourse project page, hosted by the CRFR website.

Insights resulting from the programme

Key points from Seminar 1

- Technology is now embedded in the lives of most children and young people.
- There are many concerns about increased access to and use of technology, but also a growing awareness of the 'affordances' of digital technology to children's lives.
- For very young children, digital technologies are welcomed as additional resources but are not replacing traditional activities and playthings.
- There is a need to uncover the 'myths and realities' around children's use of technologies.

Seminar participants identified the following topics as key areas for discussion.

1. What are the implications of varying levels of access to technology for equalities and inclusion issues?
2. Educational opportunities and challenges – what are the implications for teachers, practitioners, policy, funding, parental involvement?
3. Everyday relationships – what is the impact of technology on everyday relationships between family members and between friends?
4. What is the impact of technology on children's social, emotional and cognitive development and emotional literacy?
5. State of current knowledge – what evidence is already available on the above issues? How do we get messages out to practitioners, families and policy? What are the gaps?
6. How can we research digital life? What are the methods and challenges? How can we overcome them?
7. Growing up on-line: who controls information and images about children and young people as they grow up? How should we support and inform young people to manage an on-line identity.

Key points from Seminar 2

- As the title of the seminar suggests, 'Digital families are here to stay'.
- Inequality of access to and knowledge of the online world is an issue for particular groups in Scotland. Peer support is crucial in communities for developing digital skills.
- There is a need to move away from the binary discourse about digital technology being 'good' or 'bad' towards re-thinking the normative framings of the relationships between technology, work and family in ways that may be more helpful and productive.
- Family rituals in the digital age are evolving as a result of changing technologies but digital contact can never entirely replace face to face 'togetherness'.

- Developments in digital technologies have had implications for many of the voluntary sector organisations supporting children, families and relationships in Scotland.
- There may be an opportunity to promote a 'Scottish approach' to the internet – an approach that could be more person-centred and respectful.

Seminar participants identified the following topics as key areas for discussion.

1. Does digital technology lead to less independence, deskilling & disempowering of children?
2. Is there a gendered use of technologies? Is digital technology leading to more intensive emotional labour especially for women/ mothers?
3. Are there generational differences in use & knowledge of digital technology? Does digital technology bring together generations?
4. Is digital technology leading to intensification of attention on the family and on parenting practices? Or is this happening anyway?
5. What are the gaps in research? How can we make more effective links to policy & practice?

Key points from Seminar 3

- Digital technology has an important role to play in inter-generational communication within families.
- The use of assistive technology is being mainstreamed in the UK but there has been little consideration of how people with dementia and their carers actually use this technology in the context of their everyday lives.
- People with dementia and their carers should be supported to adapt the technologies available to them to best meet their needs.
- There should be more consideration of the ethical aspects of telecare. Care providers should follow the recommended practices for ethical telecare.
- For many people living with dementia, technology is essential for many aspects of everyday life and for enabling peer support.
- Digital participation is becoming increasingly important for older people to enable them to continue to contribute, participate and engage in society.

Seminar participants identified the following topics as key areas for discussion.

1. What can we do about capacity, consent and control issues – including privacy vs security?
2. How can people be supported to learn new technologies throughout their lives?
3. How can we get players in the care system to work better together around new technologies?
4. What is the role of technology in relationships between the generations?
5. How can we take forward research into the use of technology in older age?

Main outcomes and (expected) impact

For all those who attended the seminars the main impact was a greater understanding of the issues relating to the use and impact of various digital technologies across the lifecourse, affecting people at different ages and stages of their lives.

For practitioners and others not familiar with the academic research around these issues, the main outcomes were an increased awareness of the types of research being carried out, the findings of this research and the ways in which the research findings can be applied in practice.

For academics, a key outcome was insight into the issues faced by those working with children, parents and older people across the public and voluntary sectors. This has been extremely helpful in framing ideas for future research and for helping to develop plans for taking research evidence into policy and practice.

In the evaluation forms received after each seminar, many delegates commented that they welcomed the opportunities to make new contacts and many planned to follow up with people they had met.

The seminars were successful in creating:

- New connections between academics
- New connections between academics and practitioners
- New connections between practitioners working in similar fields
- Recommendations for policy and practice
- Ideas for new potential research

Selected quotes from seminar participants

'The seminar was really useful for building knowledge and networks across disciplines'

'I took away inspiration, contacts and shared knowledge'

'The seminar was very engaging'

'Great opportunities to network and the table discussions were very interesting'

'I will take away a better understanding of the issues facing families in respect of the use of digital technology'

'There is a need for a research programme to explore the issues further'

'This seminar was different to events I have attended before i.e. to hear academic perspectives was really interesting and challenging at times'

'I will take away ideas to take into policy and practice and the importance of the involvement of older people'

'I will make more time for research and hopefully make contact with the people I have met today'

Key recommendations for end user / policy communities

- A broader concept of 'technology' is needed when considering inclusion, participation or access to digital technology. This issues are not just about access to devices but also to broadband and to the skills required to navigate the virtual world successfully for all ages and stages across the lifecourse.
- In relation to online bullying there is a need for greater clarification of the roles of schools, parents and young people. Schools should work more collaboratively with other agencies like Police Scotland, on the issues around on-line safety (some great example of good practice around)
- There should be greater consistency in the delivery of CPD material to teachers on the topic of Digital Education and Learning.
- Parents should not prohibit access to devices but embrace conversation about the positives and negatives of digital technology. Parents should set a better example when it comes to limiting screen-time!
- Future research and knowledge exchange about the impact of digital technology on child health and development should be linked to the Mental Health Strategy for Scotland.
- There should be wider support for the known effective methods of supporting older people in their use of technology – interactions need to be warm, encouraging, compassionate and patient.
- People with dementia and their carers should be supported to adapt the technologies available to them to best meet their needs.
- There should be more consideration of the ethical aspects of telecare. Care providers should follow the recommended practices for ethical telecare.
- Academics and other knowledge producers should do more to engage stakeholders, including policy makers, in their research. More research should be synthesised and made available to wider audiences on the topics identified by Digital Families Across the Lifecourse programme.

Planned follow up activities

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationship will establish a Digital Families Research Network to facilitate collaboration and future research on the impact of digital technologies on our lives. We have applied for Festival of Social Science Funding from the ESRC/ University of Edinburgh to hold a launch of the network in November 2016. A decision will be made in early June.

The academic members of the programme team will continue to build on the contacts they made during this programme to inform the development of future research funding applications.