

# Give your one-year-old the iPad, it might be good for them after all

A leading US academy says iPads can help under-twos. So what are parents to do in an age of 'sharenting' and Snapchat streaks?

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**Jennifer O'Connell**



Silicon future: Tina McDaid with her children, Jack, Aidan and Evelyn; she says her time in California has made her favour technology much more. Photograph: Declan Doherty

In 1977 a 15-year-old went on trial in Florida for shooting his 82-year-old neighbour in a botched robbery. His lawyers argued that if he was indeed guilty then his television had been an accessory. The boy, they explained, watched six to eight hours of TV every day, including Kojak, which “had so inured him to violence that he had lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong”.

The prosecution called the argument hogwash, and the jury seemed to agree: the teenager was found guilty. The case nonetheless gave rise to a number of others in which lawyers tried to claim diminished responsibility due to the influence of television.

Nearly 40 years later we have come to terms with the idea that most viewers are capable of distinguishing between real life and the events depicted on the screen in the corner. It is our relationship with the screens in our pockets that worries us.

“Parents need to respect their children’s privacy online, experts say.”

“TVs and iPads aren’t babysitters, experts warn.”

“My son overcame his anxiety: parents on how screentime isn’t all bad.”

“Digital devices okay even for toddlers, doctors say.”

“Parents’ social-media use may harm kids, researchers warn.”

On and on it goes: for every headline warning of the brain-atrophying effects of YouTube, or the dire results of sharing your kids’ pictures on Facebook, there’s another one lauding the benefits of Minecraft or Sesame Street.

The debate about screen time is increasingly redundant, as smart toys are designed for children as young as newborns. There are smart rubber ducks that can lull your children to sleep and robots that can read them bedtime stories. In the near future there will be digital personal assistants to remind them to bring their gumshields to school on sports day.

Worldwide sales of smart toys are expected to be worth more than €10 billion a year by 2020, up from about €2.5 billion last year.

## **Steve Jobs’s limits**

The digital landscape seems to be changing faster than anyone can make sense of it – and there’s no point turning to those who helped create this world for help navigating it.

Steve Jobs, the late founder of Apple, once told an interviewer that his children had never used an iPad and that he severely restricted their access to technology. Jonathan Ive, the designer of the iPad, has admitted limiting how much his own children use it. Twitter’s former chief executive Dick Costolo has said he allowed unlimited gadget time as long as his teenagers were in the same room.

There’s not much more consensus among scientists. Some studies have shown that exposure to social media and the internet introduces new ideas and experiences. Early exposure to certain well-designed apps can increase literacy skills, promote vocabulary and help reading comprehension. But for every conclusion like that there’s another study warning of a link to obesity or sleep deprivation.

In 1990 the American Academy of Pediatrics insisted that under-tuos be allowed no screen time at all. It recently revised its guidelines to allow that some screen time is okay, especially FaceTiming with grandparents. But it also halved its recommended limit for two- to five-year-olds, from two hours to one.

The academy is also considering asking paediatricians to warn parents against sharing photographs of their children online, a phenomenon with its own dire, headline-friendly name: “sharenting”.

I am the parent of three children, aged between 10 and two. I am both parent and publisher; the self-appointed, unofficial digital chronicler of their lives. I have been sharing photographs of them online since the oldest was a toddler – starting with Flickr, then graduating first to Facebook and next to Instagram.

In common with one in three babies in the US, my youngest made her Facebook debut within hours of her birth: a pink, scrunched-up face with indigo eyes staring accusingly out from the distinctive blanket wrap of a Sydney hospital.

As we moved to Australia and then the United States I used social media as a way to ensure friends and family at home kept up with her progress and that of her older siblings. I wasn’t alone in this: 92 per cent of two-year-olds in the US have an online presence. I do draw the line at some things: I have never shared a photo of a pregnancy scan or published a child’s name or photo on Twitter.

Recently, though, I have begun to question whether I should have drawn the line sooner, and more emphatically.

MySpace and LinkedIn launched in 2003; Facebook and Flickr came about the following year. In other words social media is now entering its teens. And so, too, is the first generation, those children whose digital footprint was created on their behalf by well-intentioned parents before they could ever give consent. Despite all the predictions about our entering a postprivacy age, some of the digital natives at the centre of their parents’ online worlds are none too pleased.

“I have always shared photos of both my children on Facebook – from their first day of school to their Halloween costumes, Christmas, birthdays. My privacy settings are high, so I’ve never felt uncomfortable about it,” says Helen Toal Browne, a Dublin psychotherapist.

“But recently my older son, who is now 13, has started to question what I’m putting on Facebook and to ask me, in a fairly benign way, not to post pictures of him.

“I’m fully aware that when I put a picture of him on Facebook it’s not about him. I’m playing the same game we’re all playing. It’s an ego thing: a way of seeking attention.”

Browne says she is “willing to delete any and all online accounts if it makes life easier for him. But he hasn’t asked yet.”

What some see as a harmless bit of affirmation-seeking others perceive as setting your child up for future embarrassment, invasion of privacy or even identity theft.

In a paper on the subject, *Sharenting: Children’s Privacy in the Age of Social Media* (to be published in the *Emory Law Journal* next spring), the law professor Stacey Steinberg cites

the dangers of parents' thoughtlessly posting children's names and dates of birth and potentially putting them at risk of identity theft or "digital kidnapping" (when someone takes the photo of your child and passes it off as their own).

## **Stolen digital identities**

Steinberg writes about a blogger who posted photographs of her twins while they were potty training.

"She later learned that strangers accessed the photos, downloaded them, altered them, and shared them on a website commonly used by paedophiles," she writes. "The child might one day want to have some privacy and control over his or her digital identity. Untangling the parent's right to share his or her own story and the child's right to enter adulthood free to create his or her own digital footprint is a daunting task."

Brian O'Connell, a journalist, author and father of two boys, aged 18 and two, says he has occasionally shared images of both online but always ensures he has the permission of his older son before posting. He recently individually checked the privacy settings of every photo on his Facebook, and was unnerved to find that many were visible to a wider circle than he had appreciated.

"The default setting on Facebook is that you just share everything. It's not in their interest for you not to. You almost have to lock down each photo separately. When I started looking through my friends list I had so many people that I really didn't know – so I spent a bit of time tying my settings down more."

I posed the sharenting question to my own Facebook friends. A few replied to say that they're happy to share photographs of their children, and that, like me, they're satisfied with their privacy settings. But more messaged me privately to say that they have never posted a photo of any of their children online.

One pointed me to news coverage of the case of the man convicted of murdering April Jones, a five-year-old, in 2012. The reports reveal that Mark Bridger had been "harvesting" images of April, her sisters and other little girls in their Welsh village, accessing them on Facebook as a "friend of a friend".

Three days before April vanished he looked at images of her half-sister, and 25 images of another local young girl, on Facebook while simultaneously viewing child pornography. On the day of the abduction he viewed 32 images of local girls on Facebook.

That evening I went through Facebook and removed all of the photographs of my children from my timeline.

To sharent or not to sharent is just one of the questions parents in the digital age must ask themselves. The other questions are ones that have been debated in various forms since the earliest days of screens: how much time in front of them should children be allowed? Are screens okay in the bedroom? At what age should kids be allowed unsupervised access? And what is a Snapchat streak anyway? (That last question might be a more recent one.)

Elizabeth Collins, a clinical psychologist and mother of three, points out that we live in a digital age and that, “with the right boundaries, technology can be really positive. We have access to a whole world of information that we previously would not have had access to. And it’s there at the touch of a button. My daughters use the internet for everything from researching a history project to learning to plait their hair.”

Collins is an advocate of letting children explore the internet and developing their own boundaries – within reason. “I don’t think you can stop them accessing social media, nor should you,” she says. “But you need to help them learn to access it responsibly. At the end of the day we’re all trying to find a middle ground. And that might vary from child to child.” She says that technology, used wisely and within reason, can help children with communication issues. For example, it can have huge benefits for children with a diagnosis of autism. For parents of other children she suggests adopting a proactive strategy, including going through your child’s social-media accounts with them, asking who each of their friends are and how well they really know them.

“I respect their privacy, but I also have a duty as a mother to ensure they are safe. And if that occasionally infringes on their privacy, so be it.”

Tina McDaid is an accountant and parent of three children, aged 10, nine and six months. Now back living in Letterkenny, in Co Donegal, she spent a number of years working in finance in Silicon Valley. As a result, she says, she is much more pro-technology than she might otherwise be.

“It’s part of life, and you can’t ban it,” McDaid says. “There are enormous benefits. But we need to treat technology as we do other aspects of raising kids. When we understand the risk of skin cancer from the sun we don’t stop letting our children outside. We apply sunscreen.” But she has a strict no-iPads-in-the-bedroom rule, and she is holding out against her 10-year-old’s request for access to a messaging app that some of her friends use.

Most of the parents I spoke to took the view that secondary school was the right time for their children to begin to experiment with social media.

Karen Gibney, a GP based in Ballycullen, in south Dublin, is the mother of 14- and 16-year-old daughters. She describes the pressure social media puts teenagers under: from the need to look a certain way in selfies to the need to keep a Snapchat streak – it means a thread –

going, which is seen as a measure of popularity. “I’ve seen cases where, if a child goes off to Irish college, they’ll get their friend to log into their Snapchat and keep these streaks going.” She has very clear rules about screen use at home. “At eight in the evening all phones go on a shelf in the kitchen. If I say, ‘Put the phone down,’ you’ve got 10 seconds to put it down or it’s gone. There’s a short window from overuse of the phone to a ban for a week. My daughters think I’m particularly strict, but I’m not too worried about that.” Gibney reserves the right to check and remove content from her daughters’ phones, and she once took a phone away for a month.

“It certainly had a massive impact on her personality when it was gone,” she says. “She became much more interactive, much more level-headed. I later heard her say to her sister that it was the best thing I’d ever done. She was relieved not to have to deal with the dramas.”

## **Hidden impact**

Aside from the obvious social pressures implied by social media, there may be other hidden effects. And as social media enters its teens those effects may begin to become more apparent.

“There is some evidence of impact on executive function on children who rely heavily on screen time,” Collins says. “However, there are as yet no longitudinal studies on what the impact of numbers of hours of screen time on development might be. And that’s a worry. “You would have to imagine that there is an impact on the developing brains of our children, compared to our grandparents’ generation – and even our parents’ – if they’re spending lots of time on a screen instead of going out to play. Our teenagers are the first generation to grow up in this digital world, so it is only in about 20 years’ time that we can really expect to see the full impact.

“Inevitably, whatever that impact is, it will be mediated by parental attitude and parental behaviour. It is all about balance.”

Collins recently came across the case of a four-year-old girl who was growing up in an isolated environment and for whom English was not her first language.

“She had spent every waking hour of the first 3½ years of her life attached to an iPad,” she says. “She went to bed with the iPad. Her parents were quite isolated and working really long hours. They didn’t realise they needed to play with her. She had very significant delay across the board, from language delay to poor social-interaction skills.

“There may be a number of factors at play here, but we can’t underestimate the impact that the overuse of technology had on this child.”

Just as parents are advised to have alcohol-free days, screen-free days can be hugely beneficial to children. In my own house, moderation means relaxed rules at the weekend, but no screens of any kind from Monday to Friday – although I’ll usually fold and let them have 20 minutes of Minecraft on Thursday.

“If you start off as you mean to go on, and are very clear about the rules, it’s easier on everyone,” Gibney says. “You can occasionally make a concession and allow some extra screen time, and you’ll get credit for that. But if you start off with no ground rules it’s much more difficult to impose them later.”