Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, **Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 272 pp., $27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Meryl Alper
Northeastern University, USA

Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross's new book, ***Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives***, arrives at a historical moment at once intensely focused on the future and in which many individuals are struggling to just keep track of the days, especially caregivers. As I write this, our collective hopes are pinned on the eventual delivery of a safe, effective, and widely available coronavirus vaccine, with lives largely put on hold until then. Following the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, schedules were upended and plans were indefinitely delayed. This warped pacing was profoundly felt by parents, newly tasked with overseeing their child's entire daily schedule in addition to their own. Out of necessity, screens became "babysitters" for scores of working parents in the absence of actual childcare services. Though their book was completed prior to the pandemic, Livingstone and Blum-Ross's in-depth study of digital technologies and their role in contemporary parenting offers important and timely insights into how social structures might be reimagined to better support families moving forward in an era of extreme uncertainty.

The authors bring unique perspectives to the topic of media and parenting as academics who have taken active roles in shaping policy debates around young people's rights and agency in a digital age, Livingstone as professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Blum-Ross as public policy lead for kids and families at Google. This experience is evident in the book's sociological and cultural anthropological approach. Livingstone and Blum-Ross situate their discussion within broader discourses of globalization and neoliberalism. There is no shortage of popular books, magazine articles, or websites offering parents advice and tips on how to manage their child's use of digital media. The authors point out though that this private market only exists because public-, institutional-, and community-level funding and services for children and families have been steadily dismantled over the last 50 years.

From 2015 to 2017, Livingstone and Blum-Ross set out to chronicle parenting practices around children's media use through ethnographic research with more than 70 families and a national survey of 2,000 parents in the UK. They spoke with parents of babies through teenagers, looking at commonalities in their experiences as well as concerns specific to a child's age. The authors recruited families from a wide array of racial, ethnic, income, and class backgrounds, including members of the multicultural and multilingual immigrant communities of London. Livingstone and Blum-Ross display a great talent for distilling and connecting the emotionally nuanced experiences of these parents with key concepts and debates about families and technology within the domains of learning, work, and social mobility. Through rich detail, they

capture, for example, how digital media both saves time for parents (e.g., managing family trips and grocery lists) and generates even more work (e.g., responding to text messages from their child's school), particularly for mothers.

The authors present a number of findings that challenge conventional wisdom and existing scholarship on modern parenting. First, they outline in chapter 1 how parent philosophies and strategies for managing their child's digital experiences are actually about much more than technology—they are reflections on their own pasts, presents, and futures. Young people's media use, Livingstone and Blum-Ross write, is a "lightning rod for contemporary contestations over values, identity, and responsibility" (p. 2). Far from being neophytes, today's parents came of age during the rise of personal computing in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, according to the Pew Research Center (2020), they also report that parenting is more challenging now than it was 20 years ago and point to newer technologies like tablets, smartphones, and social media as the primary cause. Parent imaginings of their children's futures are influenced by cultural narratives about technological innovation, both positive and negative. Though there may be countless other differences between their children's childhoods and their own, those are not as salient to parents as the proliferation of digital devices.

Second, the authors identify three modes through which parents conceptualize and enact their child's digital future: resisting (curbing technology use), balancing (weighing risks and rewards of digital participation), and embracing (seeking professional and educational opportunities enabled by digital media). This typology fits into a broader theoretical conversation regarding "parental mediation" to which Livingstone has made several significant contributions over the years. No one family is exclusively or firmly in one genre; strategies shift and change over time and even the course of a given day (the focus of chapter 2). That context shapes digital parenting may come as no surprise to caregivers who threw out their media rules during quarantine considering the limited options to entertain their child at home. No one approach provides a clear resolution to parental anxieties about the future and, in fact, can beget continued doubt over having made the "right" decision.

Third, Livingstone and Blum-Ross find that it is not just upper or middle-class families who seek out "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003) advancement opportunities for their children through digital media, such as extracurricular programs and camps for learning how to code. In chapter 3, they highlight how lower-income parents also pour time and resources, albeit more limited, into these courses. There are key differences though in the likelihood of benefitting from such educational efforts that are beyond any one parent's control, like the amount of government funding a child's school receives. Those who have historically had more or less control over their future trajectories—whether by race, ethnicity, and/or class position—find themselves working even harder to secure a future for their child. The promise of digital media can make those dreams more tangible and less immaterial.

The rest of the book is organized around chapters that focus on parents who are grappling with the future and the digital in varied forms. This includes "geeky" parents and parent bloggers whose personal identities are bound up with technology and social media (chapter 4) and parents of children with disabilities (chapter 5). The authors note that the latter "illustrate more intensely the dilemmas of the digital age felt in varying degrees by many families" (p. 26). In chapter 6, the authors point out a disconnect between

educators' visions for "connected" digital learning and the significant but often invisible labor, investment, and commitment required on the part of parents to facilitate those gains. Lastly, chapter 7 reflects on parents' lack of a collective voice with respect to children's digital and social futures and consolidates the recommendations that participants put forth for stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, educators, journalists).

A major strength of *Parenting for a Digital Future* is its intersectional lens. The authors actively resist homogenizing families and the racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and ableist stereotypes that pervade societal judgements of minoritized parents and children. The authors are at their most pointed when arguing that reducing parent concerns about media to worries about "screen time" undermines the complex ways that families constantly negotiate the value of their children's digital media activities in the short and long term. Fellow social scientists will also appreciate the detailed methods appendix included in the book as a blueprint for future work. One research direction introduced in the book to further unpack are the political stakes regarding childhood, futurity, and digital media. Jenkins (1998) notes how the belief that "children are the future" is in tension with a more conservative view that children should preserve the past (e.g., "family values"). Additional work on parenting and technology might include those who are less invested in the project of what Livingstone and Blum-Ross refer to as "democratic parenting," or the idea that children are active stakeholders and decision makers within the family unit, including where media fits in family routines.

Livingstone and Blum-Ross adeptly interrogate the broader social challenges and cultural values that are interwoven with parents' beliefs and practices around media and technology. They stress the dangers of tasking families with individual responsibility for societal failings to protect and promote their child's growth and development. The authors' message is well positioned during a time in which parents around the world are scrambling to piece together a school year for their children that does not keep them in front of a screen all day (i.e., "Zoom school") but also does not require parents to pay out of pocket for small, private, in-person lessons (i.e., "learning pods"). *Parenting for a Digital Future* draws attention to how parental self-questioning about having made the wrong choices and a culture that places unrealistic demands on atomized households wears parents down and leaves many too drained to organize for a better future, digital or otherwise, for all children.

References

Jenkins, H. (1998). Introduction: Childhood innocence and other modern myths. In H. Jenkins (Ed.), *The children's culture reader* (pp. 1–37). New York: New York University Press.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pew Research Center. (July 2020). *Parenting children in the age of screens*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/parenting-children-in-the-age-of-screens/