Growing digital

Dr Jackie Marsh is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. She conducts research into young children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies and examines the relationship of these interests to their literacy development. Jackie also looks at how these interests can be used in meaningful ways in nurseries and schools and so is currently working with nursery teachers on developing a curriculum which involves film-making and media-related reading and writing activities.

Digital children

Childhood is changing in the twenty-first century, largely as a result of the advances in technology. Children now have access to a wide array of media and electronic games, which some worry are stamping out the more traditional pursuits of playing outside or playing with non-electronic toys. It's difficult for parents and carers to steer a path through this rather confusing mixture of media hype and moral panics.However, haven't things always been this way? The adult world has often looked on the new practices of childhood with some anxiety, each generation thinking that the next one will be corrupted by new pastimes. For example, when talking movies were first introduced, pickets formed outside some cinemas in order to protest about the damaging influence these films would have on youngsters' moral fibre! In this article, I outline how young children's practices are changing due to the advances in technology and share the findings of a survey undertaken with the children and parents who are participants in the *'Child of our Time'* programme. This survey explored the extent to which media, new technologies and popular culture were a feature of the children's daily lives. In this way, the discussion on changing childhoods will offer insights into the real-life experiences of a group of children, in order to address some of the issues and concerns often raised about this digital generation.

What do children like to do?

Popular culture and the media play a large part in young children's lives. Popular culture includes those interests which are shared on a large scale, and includes film and television, toys, computer games and books. The interests of the children in the *Child of our Time* programme were very wide, but media, popular culture and new technologies played a central part, as Figure 1 indicates. This outlines the average time spent on various activities in one day.
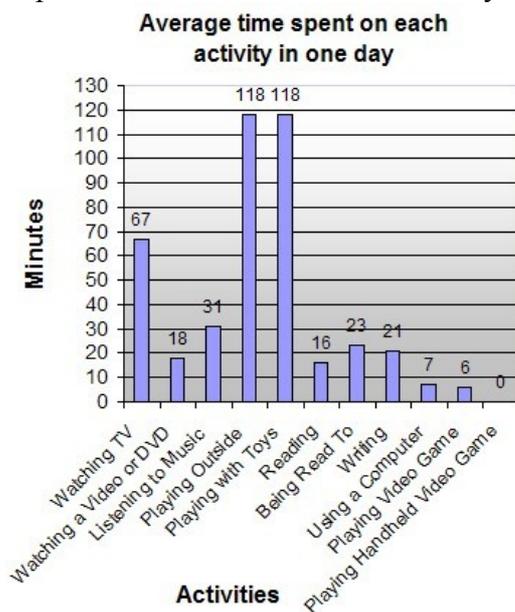

Figure 1: Average time spent by each child on various activities in one day

Overall, Figure 1 would suggest that the children in this study enjoy a balanced social and cultural life, with traditional activities such as playing outside and playing with toys still being central to their daily activities. Indeed, children were asked to take photographs of their favourite things and, as Figure 2 suggests, a number of these activities have been enjoyed by past generations, such as dolls, teddies and scooters.

It is important to note that the survey was completed in the summer months and, therefore, the figure for amount of time spent playing outdoors may have been higher than if the survey had been completed at a different time of the year. This would certainly explain the differences with the data collected in the Open2.net online survey, which revealed that children stated that they liked playing with other children most of all, when in fact they spent the greatest proportion of their time with screen media. In the next section, I move on to look a little more closely at the role of television in children's lives.

Television and Film

For the children in the Child of Our Time programme, television viewing was not excessive, as can be seen in Figure 3:
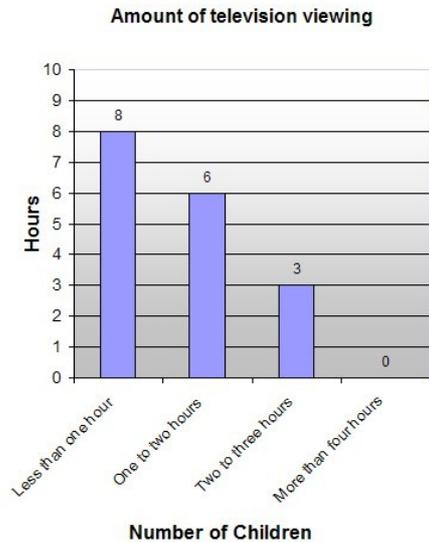

Figure 3: Amount of television viewing

These figures contrast with the viewing figures identified by BBC Daily Life (2004), which cites that four year olds spend 3 hours and 56 minutes in front of the television. Of course, time spent in front of the television does not equate to viewing time for young children; according to the same report, only by the age of seven to eight do children begin to spend longer periods of time actually viewing television. In addition, young children are far from passive when watching television. Figure 4 indicates that the children in this study, although they sat quietly for some of the time, also engaged in a range of other activities when watching television.
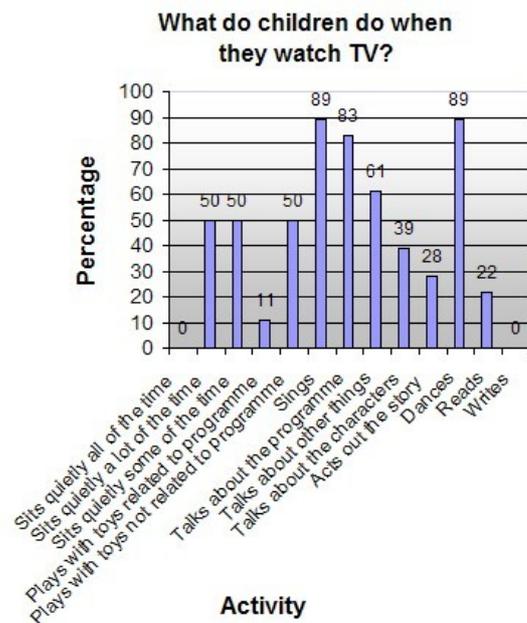
What do children do when they watch TV?

Figure 4: Children's activities during television viewing

This graph would suggest that the children are not simply passive viewers of television, as presented by some analysts of the media age. Interviews with the parents confirmed this: *...the other film they love is 'George of the Jungle'. They went through a whole phase about a year ago just...any time their friends came they just...and they would all end up stripping down to their underpants and in the front room just jumping from one... and being Tarzan...they would do it the whole time, so I think there are lots of things like that where they do get physical.*

As this interview indicates, many children engage in imaginative play based on their favourite television and film characters and programmes, which is important in promoting language and creative expression. In this and other studies, parents outlined a range of knowledge, skills and understanding they felt children had gained from watching television, including songs, words, social skills and knowledge about other cultures. However, although watching television does enhance children's lives in many ways, parents and carers do need to monitor the amount their children are watching. There are no firm guidelines on this as each situation is different, but children should be encouraged to engage in a wide range of activities in one day, rather than focusing on one.

Computers

Many young children are now competent in the use of computers from a young age, including console games such as PlayStation or XBox. Some parents worry about the effects on their children, but studies have shown that computer games, including console games, can develop a range of skills such as hand-eye co-ordination, parallel processing skills (the ability to take in information from a number of sources at once), problem-solving skills and visual skills. Again, moderation is advised, but appropriate use of computers should be encouraged, given how important new technology is going to be in the lives of the current young generation. As they get older, society will rely increasingly on technologies and so the more skills and experience they have with computers from a young age, the better they will be able to navigate these worlds.

Conclusion

The children in the BBC Child of Our Time series undertook a wide range of technological practices, including using websites, chat rooms, watching parents send text messages, playing with electronic toys and using interactive television. Children's interests in popular culture and media also promoted interest in reading and writing. The children often wanted to read books based on their favourite characters or programmes and used lots of computer games related to these interests, which can enhance learning. Therefore, instead of being viewed in a largely negative light, these findings suggest that children's media

interests can be harnessed in a positive way to foster early language and literacy development and to develop the skills needed for the twenty first century.