

Alloparenting or Digital Parenting: The Child-rearing Exigency!

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"The thing about parenting rules is there aren't any. That's what makes it so difficult."—Mc Gregor

Embracing the overwhelming occasion given to me to pen down a guest editorial of the current issue for the prestigious journal of my *alma mater*, while the subject means "nourishing or bountiful mother" in Latin. I decided to leverage the opportunity to explore the flimsiness of "classic" parenting styles lately to the "contemporary" parenting practices implemented in the current era of digitization.

"Screen time" has gone from sin to a survival tool,¹ swiftly popped a headline, from an American daily newspaper, post the pandemic era justifying the parenting norms of working parents from nuclear families. It sent an unsettling smack on my understanding as a pediatric healthcare professional. Pronouncing my stirring thoughts upon the serious affair of parenting skills, rerouted the perception to reflect upon the "community parenting" practices since the good old conventional days, relevantly put in an African cliché dictum—"it really does take a village to raise a child." So important are the parenting skills that the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with the government of various countries, launched its UNICEF parenting on June 2022, which states the first 1,000 days of life of a child are without question the most important as it works toward providing the best start in life.

Being a strong advocate of maintaining an emotionally protective environment in the dental operator,² despite an inordinate run into the recent pandemic, my understanding concurs with the above mentioned UNICEF's parenting initiative. "Oral health behavior" is the complex effect on a child's oral health due to oral hygiene habits, nutritional preferences, and the pattern of a child's utilization of dental services. These behavioral patterns are of pressing importance as they exist in the fabric of the lifestyle of a child and depend on not only such direct parameters but also indirect influences, such as parenting styles on a child's oral health needs.³

Discouraging the millennial parenting practices of a digital intrusion in the homes of our children, which restrain the child's well-being of general and oral health behavior. In the following commentary, I would, therefore, pivot the understudied parenting practices—alloparenting and digital parenting.

ALLOPARENTING—VILLAGE FOR NESTLING TO FLEDGLING

The best parents get promoted to grandparents, and for everything in life the parents say we can't, all one had to do was call an uncle or an aunt.—Anonymous

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Such was the tenderness that my childhood days were brimming with, as I gathered my thoughts on the parenting nuances throughout the historical household days. They included much larger and extended family members and sometimes paid help. The first hero and a shero in the life of a child were this slew of people from an extended family—the grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. They formed the nurturers, mentors, and teachers, and they also played a crucial part in modeling a good lifestyle for the child. "Alloparental care" is care provided by an individual (an alloparent) toward the dependent young that are not their own offspring.⁴ The care provided by nonparents or individuals other than biological parents is a universal behavior among human societies. Such parenting by proxy or substitute parenting affords substantial fitness benefits to the young and also to those who alloparent them and is almost certainly an adaptive form of behavior. They are the most authentic, nonjudgemental substitute parents one can think of.

DIGITAL PARENTING: THE REIGNING—SURVIVING SIN

Children these days are digital natives, very well versed with technology and internet usage, while most parents are digital migrants,⁵ born before the age of the internet. Millennial parents are turning to the internet for every parenting advice, thereby a tremendous demand and immense popularity for virtual nannies! Aghast, these online babysitters or zoom babysitters are the so-called online child caregivers employed by the parents for an agreed period of time. They play with the children, teach them their native language, and encourage them, unfortunately so, all completely online! They engage children only virtually! Additionally,

there is then the robot nanny, a nanny cam, for enabling the virtual visitation of parents promoting proxy parenting. Nevertheless, some parental efforts are involved and required for comprehending, supporting, and regulating children's activities in digital environments.

CHILDREN'S DIGITAL BEHAVIORS IMPACTING ORAL HEALTH BEHAVIOR

The two detrimental behavioral effects impacting children, owing to immense media exposure, are neurodevelopmental and eating behavioral patterns.

The impact of digitization on the neurodevelopmental growth of children is disconnectedness and isolation from their surroundings, as the screens hijack attention spans, curtail their ability to control impulses (gaming disorder), and reduce empathy.⁴ The distractions relevant to oral health professionals are the two negative aspects of eating disorders—eating less and chewing less. Disharmonious and distracted eating behavior, as opposed to mindful or attentive eating, contributes to the incidence of early childhood caries (ECC) in children. It can be seen that the factors that influence the incidence of ECC in children include food responsiveness, food fussiness, and enjoyment of food. Ensuring mealtime as a family bonding occasion is a very important aspect of positive parenting. With distractions by screen and digital media, there is a probability the child is also not even listening to his/her stomach nor is enjoying the sensory understanding of taste, texture, or motor skills of chewing enabled. The consequence thus leads to—pocketing food, food packing, or food pouching,⁶ contributing to dental neglect, unsupervised teeth brushing, and frequent snacking.

Rather than letting children grow alluring the mother nature, other earthy inhabitants, admiring the animals, birds, trees, and skies, and encouraging children to wonder, imagine, and explore; I find it very unsettling to encounter parents who let their child's eyes glue to the screen even in outdoors with iSeats while traveling around in the natural environment. The marketing world is introducing the more estranged—Apptivity bouncy seat and iPotty, which are causing such a stir. To add to the list are—"Newborn to Toddler Apptivity Seat"—iPad with baby seater, iPotty with activity seat, and Digital iRocking Play Seat for iPad with Feeding Tray. Fairplay, previously known as Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, of United States, founded by Susan Linn, is a coalition that raised concerns on marketing such detrimental products.

PARENTING IN THE AGE OF SCREENS—NOT A CHILD'S PLAY

Much to my dismay, the research cited by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, London, United Kingdom, suggests screen time itself is not a bad thing, so long as it's under control with proper set guidelines and protocols. Moderate engagement of a grown-up child with media, however, has the potential of "Goldilocks effect," which might actually be beneficial in terms of subjective mental well-being and adolescent connectedness, justifies another study defending digital parenting norms. However, UNICEF's Screen-free Week—detoxing from digital world—a pledge to replace screen-based entertainment with offline activities and downtime should be often implemented. It's important to stop and think about the child's need for screen time or even the parental need for their child to have the screen. Responsibly digital UNICEF

program launch guides in using digital media in a constructive manner, implementing parental control apps to monitor and limit a child's online activity *via* platforms like Kidlogger, Stayfocused, Qustodio, etc.

VALUE OF PHYSICAL PLAY AND PHYSICAL TOYS

As children fashion their creativity and imagination and gravitate themselves like a moth to flames and pick what is needed for them when left in the open, away from screens, a child's brain learns best through play! Textures, shapes, using the hands/eyes, building, and creating. Pretend play, symbolic play, and holding grasping, trains them to develop their sensory and motor skills, letting them improvise their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. This in turn, helps them carry out their self-help skills like bathing, clothing, and toothbrushing in a more articulating and emotionally mature way. There is an alarming increase in global developmental delays, and milestones catch-up when children are deprived of their physical playtime.

"OUTSOURCING PARENTING DUTIES"—GUILTLESS WAY OUT OF PARENTAL BURNOUT

Humans are not meant to parent alone, so caring without support often leads to what is known as parental burnout. A human child is born very demanding and stays very demanding and dependent for a very long time, unlike those of other species. Children have many unfilled lacunae; the more people they grow up with, the more experiences and memories they gather and learn, which fill up their empty lacunae. It is important to prioritize and embrace the shared care from alloparents over virtual nannies or digital screen substitutes! The importance of parenting stress as a risk factor or mediator in the natural history of children's diseases like ECC⁸ has been reported by pediatricians and oral health researchers. Distributing care leads to more responsiveness, and alloparenting helps in building secure attachments, empathy, and trust buildup in children with their emotions being validated. It is okay to relinquish control over parenting duties occasionally, without guilt in leaning on extended family members and "outsourcing parenting duties." The retrieval of more communal parenting is the need of the hour. Hillary Clinton reiterating in her book, *It Takes a Village*, is undoubtedly relevant as a simple yet strong message that we are in this together!

TECH NANNY VS THE HUMAN NANNY—POWER OF PARENTING!

The very moment a child is born, there happens the birth of the parents as well.

Parenting is a daunting task but not insurmountable. To wrap up my reflecting thoughts on this tussle of the zoom mommies vs allomommies, my personal preferences would be of alloparents!

A popular anecdote from Mrs Nancy Matthews Elliott, Thomas Edison's mother, whereby Thomas Edison was described by educators as "addled" and spent only a few months in a formal classroom before being taken out of school and being educated by his mother, who was a teacher by training. To me, this inspirational reminisce only emphasizes the "power of parenting." After the recently encountered pandemic, I am afraid if we do not practice stable parenting, we may land up in the mental health pandemic in anticipation! The pressure and concerns entailed by parenthood could be eased out



by relying on alloparenting, leading to a more relaxed and overall healthy upbringing of a child, much away from the harmful digital impacts. Alloparents can serve as charismatic adults to the children, assuming the role by understanding and fortifying in children the different characteristics of a resilient mindset, by believing in them, by conveying unconditional love, and by providing them with opportunities that reinforce their islands of competence and feelings of self-worth and dignity. Having access to alloparents is not a nice-to-have, but it is a have to have entity! As anthropologist David Lancy told us, we need allies in the enterprise of raising children because "alloparenting is "normal" not exceptional."

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