

From a specialist's viewpoint

Enjoy conversations between parents and children through the use of new media

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The result of this survey has shown that smartphones have become common in households with children in a short period of time above expectations. We have carried out careful research as to whether smartphones have deeply penetrated into children's lives causing symptoms of addiction as feared by the public. However, results have proven otherwise; only few households let their children use it for a long period of time, while the time for outdoor play or reading picture books has not decreased indicating that parents are paying attention to incorporating media into daily lives in a balanced way. Most households care about the contents seen and rules of viewing as well; an outcome indicating that the public need not to be excessively concerned regarding children's media use.

In this survey, it has been observed that children mostly make use of videos and music but in the future, we hope it brings about an even richer parent-child relationship where they can spend more time to enjoy conversations by looking at potentials and issues of new media carefully and exploring ways to make good use of them within each household. Meanwhile, I must emphasize that without saying, firsthand experience is important as well as gaining information indirectly through the media. It is crucial to feel things in reality using one's senses to truly understand the knowledge gained through media. Linking secondhand information from videos, picture books, and so on to affluent firsthand experience in the mind engraves knowledge into the body which then allows children to acquire intelligence, a pathway to wisdom.

Utilising media as an act of parenting

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It has become clear from preceding studies that just as reading picture books, when utilising digital media contents with children, having conversations by asking questions such as "Why is...happy?" and "Where was it?" helps learning more words and understanding better stories. This survey result shows that mothers who are involved and talk with children regularly and frequently have conversations with children about the content of media as well. It is no longer a realistic option to exclude smartphones from children's lives completely. From now on, literacy to make good use of various media including digital media devices as tools for children's play, learning, and parent-child communication will become essential.

It is interesting that children's use of digital media mainly consists of watching pictures and videos recorded by a family member or by children. Children who take photos by themselves were not unusual either. These results revealed the current situation different from the public concern in general of passive viewing. Now that we can see the world that children are attracted to through their eyes, by looking at the photos they have taken, sharing it within the family may lead to deeper communication between parents and children. Further research may be essential to study how children's expressive activities using digital media affect their developmental growth.

From TV to "Smartphones"

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Just four years from the first survey conducted in 2013, a great ongoing change among the situation of media use in childrearing households seems to be taking place; this was the first impression I got when I looked at this survey result. The household ownership of smartphones has increased by 1.5 times from 60% 4 years ago to around 93% now. This is almost closing in on the household ownership of TVs at 98.3%. Children's exposure to smartphones has also surged from 50% to 70%.

These changes might appear as a big threat for those who are worried about the use of smartphones in a childrearing environment. However, it seems to be a needless fear when you see how they are being used. When looking at the usage, smartphones and tablets are mainly used in situations where parents and children are together such as "Show pictures," "Show videos," "Let them take pictures," and "Dance together." Respondents who let their child use it alone such as "Play games" are minorities.

The American Academy of Pediatrics also acknowledges the advantages of using digital media as a tool to communicate with others. In Japanese households, smartphones are used as a tool to communicate between parents and children.

The only concern in the result of this survey is that the ownership and use of tablet devices are relatively low compared to smartphones. I worry because tablets have more potential than smartphones in terms of screen size and usability, for viewing digital picture books for example.

Proposing parent-child smartphone use based on media features

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From this survey, the spread of smartphones is remarkable, and as parents use smartphones for a long time, children's use of smartphones at a younger age, frequency of use, and time spent are increasing. On the other hand, it was observed that children were balancing their activities with real experiences in their daily lives. There were also cases where family dialogue was expected, such as children taking and showing photos and videos.

Smartphones have multi-functional media features, such as video viewing, application use, photography, videophone, etc., and they can be used anytime and anywhere. In addition, the screen is small and it is easy for the child to own one. In the future, instead of determining whether it is good or bad to use a smartphone, you will need to check in detail the risk or benefit of using a smartphone.

In addition, in this survey, the percentage of parents who set viewing rules for smartphones decreased. The following can be considered as the reason: Smartphones used by children are well-controlled as they are parent-owned. Apps are equipped with alarm functions. However, restricting the use of smartphones from early infancy, and giving parental guidance will be useful for children in the future.

Children in early childhood targeted in this survey learn a lot from observing their parents. It is thought that the way parents use smartphones has a great influence on their children. I hope parents and children will take full advantage of the features of smartphones and other digital media so they can benefit from them.

Looking back at the survey

The survey result has shown that smartphones are used in various situation of childrearing of children aged between 6 months and 6 years old. This trend has become stronger compared to the first survey in 2013 indicating how smartphones have become familiar items in addition to TVs to bridge the interaction between parents and children in their spare time. Parents seem to care for the duration of usage and the environment when children come into contact with various media devices.

In the future, by establishing certain rules and keeping manners in mind, it may be inevitable to consider how to incorporate media as a tool to deepen parent-child communication.