



Community playgroup social media and parental learning about young children's play



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ABSTRACT

Although parents are active in social media the use of social media as a collaborative tool for parental learning about play is yet to be fully realised. Models for parental education including those that use social media, predominantly use top-down, deficit-based approaches to involving parents in learning about children's play. Increasing social media use by parents aligned with their participation in community playgroups suggests a powerful social situation for parental learning about play that is both collaborative and more connected to parents' life-worlds than traditional approaches. As an important first step to realising the pedagogical potential of social media for contributing to parental learning about play, this paper uses the socio-cultural concept of 'learning activity' to identify the nature of what parents are thinking about their children's play in community playgroup social media. The findings indicated that parents (N = 16) did have content knowledge of children's play-types and how these relate to learning. Importantly, the findings point to a transformational role for social media in parental education initiatives, which utilises the collaborative functionality of social media and situates parents positively as holding valuable knowledge that can be shared and extended upon with others via social media.

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1. Introduction

Social media use in contemporary society is a commonly accepted social practice across all areas of the population (Boulianne, 2015). Increases in social media use are reported in the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2015), United States (Perrin, 2015), Australia (Sensis, 2015) and China (Huang, 2014). Social media is ubiquitous for making and maintaining social connections and sharing information with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Parents as a sub-group of the population are known to be highly active users of social media (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, & Sullivan, 2012; Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015) and have embraced the ubiquitous platform that social media provides to connect, communicate and share information about their parenting experiences with others (Jang & Dworkin, 2014; Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013). Increasingly parents who attend community playgroups are using organic forms of social media such as Facebook aligned with their group to connect and share their understandings about their children's play with each other. However, little is known about parents' participation in these social media sites for

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parental learning about play. This lack of knowledge is a missed opportunity for capitalising on parents' knowledge about play given research consistently shows that parent knowledge about play influences the quality of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) provided to children (Campbell et al., 2012; Evangelou & Wild, 2014; Nievar, Jacobson, Chen, Johnson, & Dier, 2011). HLE is a known predictor of children's later developmental and educational outcomes (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003; Melhuish & Phan, 2008; Sammons et al., 2015).

Reflecting the broader societal context, research into parents' social media use has shown that parents use social media to establish and maintain social connections with friends, family and social networks. Parents' use of social media in the transition to parenthood provides social and peer support (Bartholomew et al., 2012) through connecting with parents who have similar needs and interests (Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2014). Parents are highly active in social media particularly during the period of transition to parenthood through the sharing of photographs with Facebook friends and family (Bartholomew et al., 2012). Parent activity in social media has given rise to a range of parenting social networking sites including Babyzone (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) and Momstown (Valtchanov et al., 2014). A shift in focus is identified in parents of adolescents who are reported to use social media to connect and communicate with their adolescents and friends and parents of their adolescents (Doty & Dworkin, 2013). The research suggests that social media use throughout the various stages of parenthood can strengthen offline relationships (Doty & Dworkin, 2013) and provide enabling parental support social networks (Bartholomew et al., 2012; Parry et al., 2013). This makes social media aligned to community playgroups of interest for parental learning about play as the interactions in these organic sites are usually initiated offline in the community playgroup through a shared interest in children's play and continue in community playgroup social media.

Research has further established that parents use social media to give and receive information about parenting (Duggan et al., 2015). Parents give and receive information through sharing their thoughts and ideas in status updates, replies, comments and links to online resources with their online social networks. This can include sharing information in sites such as Facebook (Bartholomew et al., 2012), parenting social networking sites (Jang & Dworkin, 2012) and video sharing websites such as You Tube (Nansen & Jayemanne, 2016). An identified area of need is the facilitation of parents' access to the myriad of parenting resources and information available through social media (Bartholomew et al., 2012). The facilitation of parenting information would enable parents to readily gain access to appropriate resources and share parenting information relevant to their needs (Bartholomew et al., 2012). In this paper, we contend that the social situation created by social media aligned to community playgroups (referred to in this paper as community playgroup social media) may provide a facilitative role in parental learning about play. This is because parents in these groups draw on existing offline relationships to support their interactions about play in community playgroup social media. Hence, the information that parents share with each other about play in community playgroup social media is informed by the shared needs and interests of the collective group enabled through participation in their community playgroup.

It has been established that parental learning about children's play is important because parental knowledge about play influences the quality of play in the home learning environment (Campbell et al., 2012; Evangelou & Wild, 2014; Nievar et al., 2011). The quality of play in the HLE is associated with increased learning and developmental outcomes for young children (Melhuish & Phan, 2008; Sammons et al., 2015). Despite widespread use of social media by parents in contemporary society there is very little reported research on the pedagogical application of social media in parental education initiatives – particularly as this applies to parents' knowledge of children's play. Given parents' increasing social media use (Duggan et al., 2015) this seems to be a missed opportunity to connect with the digital life-world comprising contemporary parenting. In parental education initiatives that have used social media this use has tended to retain an auxiliary function such as information exchange or meeting organisation, which is also reported in education generally (Kimmerle, Moskaliu, Oeberst & Crest, 2015, p. 123). For example, social media is used for sending push notifications to parents of play-activities that can be done in the home in an early childhood parental education initiative from the United Kingdom (Jelley, Sylva, & Karemaker, 2016). Social media use in parental education also tends to be embedded in highly structured and top-down approaches with some reported success such as *Triple P Online* (Love et al., 2016). Still, more needs to be known about the nature of parents sharing about play in organic forms of social media as a social situation for parents increasing and self-motivated involvement.

In this paper, we suggest that community playgroup social media may provide a powerful social situation for parental learning about young children's play. Community playgroups in Australia are parent-led groups that come together on a regular basis to socialise and engage in play activities with children. These volunteer-led groups operate throughout Australia in rural, regional and metropolitan communities (Playgroup Australia, 2013) and attract a diverse range of members including parents, grandparents, carers and kinship members. Similar groups operate internationally. For example, in the United Kingdom these groups are referred to as parent-toddler groups (Statham & Brophy, 2006) and similar variations such as mother's groups are reported in Canada (Mulcahy, Parry & Glover, 2010), the United States (Mize & Pettit, 2010) and China (Nyland, Nyland, Gao, Ng, & Zeng, 2016). Reflecting the increasing use of digital media in contemporary society (World Economic Forum, 2016) social media such as Facebook is increasingly aligned with community playgroups and is used by playgroup members to communicate with each other about play as the primary activity of the playgroup. The collaborative, digital and voluntary nature of parents' involvement in community playgroup social media suggests a social situation for parental learning about play that is more strongly connected to parents' life-worlds than traditional top-down approaches which advocate 'teaching' parents about play and the implementation of expert designed play 'activities' by parents in the home (e.g. Abecedarian Approach Australia Learning Games – Sparling, Ramey, & Tayler, 2015). The research reported here aimed to identify the nature of 'what' parents are thinking about their children's play in community playgroup social media.

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