



Full length article

'Easier to isolate yourself...there's no need to leave the house' – A qualitative study on the paradoxes of online communication for parents with young children[☆]

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of literature identifying the benefits for families from accessing information and communicating online. What is less investigated and reported is the potential downside of online information, support and networks for parents of young children.

Parents with at least one child 0–5 years of age ($n = 487$) were asked if they felt online communication helped to support families with young children (3 options – yes, no, yes and no), and to provide a supporting statement. Respondents were also asked to indicate the reasons they used Facebook and parenting websites, blogs and forums. A descriptive and content analysis was undertaken.

The proposition that online communication helped to support parents of young children was upheld by the majority ($n = 302$) while 12 responded 'no', 173 responded 'yes and no', and 337 parents provided a statement in support of their answer. The proposition responses illustrated three themes: *ready access to information and advice*; *reduces isolation*; and, *staying in touch with family and friends*. Cautionary responses described three themes: *information but conflicting and judgemental*; *connection but potential for isolation*; and, *in touch but negative social comparison*. Online information, support and networks can represent a paradox for parents of young children.

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1. Introduction

The ability to communicate and access information online has enhanced the lives of people who have limited opportunities to leave their residence (Obst & Stafurik, 2010). Parenting infants and young children can restrict opportunities to leave the home due to sleeping and care needs, weather and illness (Valtchanov, Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2014). Online support and networks through social media and parenting websites, blogs and forums, can help parents to keep connected to family, friends and parent support groups, and also access resources that can provide parenting

information and reassurance (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, & Sullivan, 2012; McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012; Valtchanov et al., 2014). Recent reviews of the evidence (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Niela-Vilén, Axelin, Salanterä, & Melender, 2014) found parents received social support online through the provision of information, emotional support and membership to groups that were valuable and accessible for both mothers and fathers. Although Niela-Vilén et al. (2014) concluded there were no harmful effects reported, Doty and Dworkin (2014) discussed briefly drawbacks that included a lack of face-to-face communication, and concerns about misinformation and 'toxic' communication. There is a dearth of studies on the potential negative outcomes from these online resources for families with young children.

2. Background

Changes in the Australian social landscape through migration, mobility, more one-parent families and changing work

[☆] The work was undertaken in the School of Population and Global Health at The University of Western Australia www.sph.uwa.edu.au.

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environments have increased the potential for social isolation of families (Fegan & Bowes, 2009). Similar social change has been experienced in other developed countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011). Modern urban environments can also impact on social isolation for parents of young children, as has been observed in newer residential areas where there is a lag in parks and shopping hubs that provide places to meet for social interaction (Strange, Fisher, Howat, & Wood, 2014; Strange, Fisher, Howat, & Wood, 2015). Australians are less connected with fewer close friends and less contact with neighbours than previous generations (Leigh, 2010), increasingly so since 2010, when a General Social Survey in 2014 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2015) found that weekly face-to-face contact with family or friends outside the home had dropped to 76% compared to 79% while weekly non face-to-face contact (for example, phone, text messaging, online) remained high at 92%. Furthermore, loneliness in Australia has grown and couples with children are reported to be lonelier than couples without children (Baker, 2012). A reduction in face-to-face contact and increased loneliness for parents of young children is concerning as starting a family is a significant transition requiring a good supportive network (Strange et al., 2014). Perceived social isolation and loneliness has been linked to physiological changes that impact negatively on our mental and physical well-being (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). Social isolation for migrant mothers (Eastwood et al., 2013) and low social support for new mothers generally (Leahy-Warren, McCarthy, & Corcoran, 2011; Dennis, Heaman, & Vigod, 2012) are associated with an increased risk of postnatal depression (PND). Moreover, poor maternal mental health is linked to poorer outcomes for children (Kingston & Tough, 2014). It is inherent that all parents with young children are supported and isolation factors mitigated.

Online social media and parenting websites are effective means of reducing isolation and providing support for parents with young children (Doty & Dworkin, 2014; Haslam, Tee, & Baker, 2017; Niela-Vilén et al., 2014; Valtchanov et al., 2014). Parents who value online support are more likely to view social media positively and use it more (Haslam et al., 2017). Parenting websites are principally used for parenting information and used by parents with younger children than families with older children (Baker, Sanders, & Morawska, 2017). Importantly, Baker et al. (2017) found that parents with risk factors such as low education, low income and high family stressors were as likely to access online parent information sources as those with less risk factors which suggests the reach of online information to most parents is possible.

However, there is emerging evidence to suggest that online communication may be a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction. A small experimental study by Sacco and Ismail (2014 p 359) with university students found that face-to-face interaction was more positively associated with 'social needs satisfaction and positive mood' compared to online (virtual) interaction. Another exploratory study with university students by Knop et al. (2016) compared sharing personal information (self-disclosure) via mobile messaging applications (online) with face-to-face (offline) interactions and found that quality time was more positively associated with offline than online communication. However, the authors (Knop et al., 2016) found that online self-disclosure was more positively 'valenced' than off-line interaction. Positive valence refers to self-disclosure that communicates emotions such as happiness and contentment (Knop et al., 2016). These studies (Knop et al., 2016; Sacco & Ismail, 2014) suggest that online communication provides a less satisfying, a less supportive and a less 'real world' environment than that generated through face-to-face communication.

Supportive networks underpin positive outcomes for parents

with young children. Therefore, our study explored both the positive and cautionary perspectives of online support, information and networks for parents of young children. The results are part of a larger mixed methods study, which investigated how families with young children build social capital and social support in their local communities (Strange, Bremner, Fisher, Howat, & Wood et al., 2016).

3. Methods

A cross-sectional survey of parents ($n = 487$ [mothers = 465, fathers = 22]) with at least one child 0–5 years of age was undertaken in Perth, Western Australia, between March 2013 and January 2014. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Western Australia.

Recruitment targeted parents living in newer residential areas in the urban sprawl, to garner a representative sample of families with young children who commonly populate such areas. Starting a family often coincides with moving house (Clark & Huang, 2003; Clark, 2013) – commonly to a larger home in affordable urban sprawl and further from old support networks (Andrews, Rich, Stockdale, & Shelley, 2014). Perth, like many cities experiencing rapid population growth, has had an expansion of affordable residential areas on the urban fringe. It was hoped we would recruit participants who had lived in their local community less than three years and therefore, likely to be developing new social networks.

3.1. Measures

Survey questions specific to the reported findings are presented in Table 1. Participants were principally recruited (93%) through online sources such as Facebook, parenting websites and email snowballing. The Remainder 7% were recruited through family events in parks and community centres by the first author. The potential reasons for using Facebook and parenting websites were garnered from the literature and qualitative research by the authors with parents of young children.

Demographic variables included gender, age groups, number of children in family, relationship status, place of birth, education level attained, and employment status. Residential variables included age of residential area, suburb postcode, distance from city centre, and length of residence in current suburb.

3.2. Analysis

Analyses of the parent responses were undertaken using SPSS version 21 (IBM, 2012) for the empirical responses and NVivo8 for data management of the qualitative responses. Descriptive and Chi-square analyses were used to investigate associations between the participant responses to (Q1) and demographic variables. Descriptive analysis was applied to (Q3) and (Q4) to show frequencies of reasons reported. Question 2 (parent statements) was analysed using an inductive content analysis: a process of coding and interpreting data to create groups/themes that categorises new knowledge and meanings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Data were coded to detect contextual factors, patterns and consistencies within the statements provided by the parents. A systematic process for qualitative coding was undertaken by the first author and reviewed by the second author. Rigor is strengthened by the quantitative and qualitative data analysis that provides triangulated contextual factors.

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