CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

GOOD RELATIONSHIPS ARE VITAL FOR WELL-BEING

Relationships have a significant impact on one's life and well-being. Simply put, good relationships are good for people.

Families play a huge role in development, especially at the youngest ages. Friends and peers also play an important role in cognitive, physical, social and emotional development, especially from middle childhood through adolescence.

Early childhood
Strong parent-child attachment associated with positive physical, social and emotional development

Middle childhood
Increasing importance of peers; family still central

Adolescence
Peers key; family still important

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21ST CENTURY FAMILIES

Families are changing. The last two decades have seen declining fertility rates, decreasing rates of marriage, increasing rates of divorce and a rise in single parent households and blended families. First-time parents also tend to be older and have fewer children.

Consistent, responsive parenting is associated with many positive outcomes in life, such as healthy relationships and good cognitive development. Secure attachment to parents supports positive emotional development, even through middle childhood and adolescence as children grow to become more independent and focused on their friends.

Difficult family relationships, distress, disruptions and conflict can have lasting impacts. In early childhood, family dysfunction and distress is associated with poorer child development and well-being. In adolescence this is linked to depression and low self-esteem. These outcomes can persist later in life.

THE EVOLUTION OF PARENTING STYLES

While there are various proposed parenting typologies in the literature, the most researched uses two dimensions:

- Demandingness refers to high expectations for child behaviour and obedience as well as firm enforcement of family rules.
- Responsiveness refers to the degree to which parents express warmth, acceptance and respect for the child's developmental needs.

These two dimensions yield four different styles:

	Responsive	Non-Responsive
Demanding	Authoritative	Authoritarian
Non-Demanding	Permissive	Neglectful

- **Non-responsive** parenting has been associated with negative outcomes for children including poor mental health and lower academic achievement.
- N**on-demanding** styles also tend to be associated with lower academic achievement.
- **Authoritative parenting** is associated with positive outcomes such as greater academic achievement and lower levels of bullying (as the victim and perpetrator).
- The impact of parenting styles can differ across both **cultures** and **contexts**. For example, in some cultures children of permissive parents exhibit higher self-esteem.

In addition to these traditional parenting styles, a large number of "new" trends are purported to help children be more successful in school, work or life. These include tiger, snowplough, helicopter and unconditional parenting. Many of the claims (pro and con) are not supported by scientific research.

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MAKING FRIENDS

Children make friends in a number of different contexts. The digital environment allows children to make new friends and consolidate traditional friendships.

Four factors driving friendship formation:

Similarity
Like attracts like (background, demographic factors, interests)

Proximity
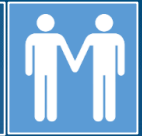Being nearby allows for hanging out and shared activities

Status
Children are more likely to befriend more popular children

Social Attraction
Children befriend those who they feel socially attracted to

FRIENDSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The majority of children's friendships now include both traditional face-to-face and digital interaction.

- Online friendships tend to supplement rather than replace traditional face to face friendships.
- They can lead to more mixed social networks as physical proximity and demographic characteristics become less important.

Research suggests that:
- It is often easier to talk about personal or sensitive issues online than face-to-face.
- Friendship quality tends to improve over time as the friendship develops, whether face to face or in the digital sphere.
- Digital communication is positively linked to spending time with friends and improved quality of existing friendships, which is predictive of higher well-being.
- Children who communicate with others digitally feel more connected to their school environment because their friendships are more cohesive.

Whether relationships originate online or offline, high levels of mutual caring, companionship and intimacy indicate a high quality friendship.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES
AND RELATIONSHIPS

Digital technologies allow us to connect with distant relatives and friends, widen our social circles and find common ground with strangers from around the world. Despite the benefits, there are some pitfalls. Some behaviours to watch out for include:

Phubbing: Phone + Snubbing
When technology use interrupts communication between people together "IRL" (in real life). When this happens between parents and children, it can lead to unresponsive parenting that can distress children.

Sharenting: Share + Parenting
Parents sharing information about their kids on social media, often without the consent of the child. This can lead to frustration with parents oversharing and concerns about children's right to privacy, as well as the "datafication" of childhood.

Although digital tools have changed communication, physical touch is still important. It is crucial to creating and strengthening close relationships and is also important in resolving conflicts.

Receiving a hug emoji is not the same as a hug! 🤗

RESEARCH GAPS
AND POLICY ISSUES

The rapid pace of digital change makes it difficult for research to keep up. Despite this, the use of digital technologies remains an important field to investigate, especially as we are heading for a future where 'being offline' is increasingly becoming unthinkable.

Important questions about how relationships evolve in the digital world include:

- How do "modern" parenting behaviours affect child development?

- What is the best way to capture the lived social experiences of children in all their complexity (i.e., moving away from old notions of simply "online" vs "offline" friendships)?

- What is the impact of a parent-created "digital footprint" on children's identity formation as well as their right to consent?

- What are the ethical implications of digital engagement, on privacy, security, commodifying children's data, etc.?

- How do other social changes (e.g. changing demographics and families, increased inequality, rising individualism) affect child and adolescent relationship formation?

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