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An Online Parenting Program Grows Digital Parenting Skills and Parent–School Connection

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Abstract

The eParenting: High-Tech Kids program addresses the positive role technology can play in parenting 9- to 14-year-olds. Delivered via middle schools' parent email lists, the program comprises 56 "posts" (articles) related to positive uses of digital media/technology in parenting preteens and teens. In 2016 alone, nearly 35,000 Wisconsin families, representing 24 counties and 77 schools, were reached. Self-report parent feedback, collected over 3 years, indicated increased understanding of how to use digital media as a parenting tool, more positive views on using digital media in parenting, and increased conversations with children about digital media. Schools also valued the resulting improved connection with parents.

Keywords: [adolescent](#), [parenting education](#), [digital](#), [technology](#), [schools](#)

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Introduction

Technology plays an ever-increasing role in children's lives (Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2014). Today, three in four teens have access to a smartphone, and 92% of teens go online daily (Lenhart, 2015). At the same time, one third of parents report concerns over their children's technology use (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). Parents today may sometimes feel left behind and want to learn more about the emerging digital world in which their children are growing up. Currently, many educational programs that are about digital media and designed for parents focus on potential negative effects of technology use (e.g., cyberbullying, online predators) and ways parents can protect their children. Although these programs are valuable, they ignore many positive aspects of digital media, such as its ability to contribute to child development, enhance the parent–adolescent relationship, and provide tools for strengthening parenting skills.

After conducting a survey of parents (University of Wisconsin–River Falls Survey Research Center, 2010) and a comprehensive literature review, a group of University of Wisconsin–Extension (UWEX) family living educators and state specialists, with which we are involved, developed the program eParenting: High-Tech Kids

(eParenting). The purpose of the program is to assist parents of youths aged 9–14 in understanding the role digital media can play in supporting their adolescents' growth and development. The program also offers strategies for using digital media that can enhance parenting skills.

eParenting is available as a 2-hr traditional workshop and in an online blog-based delivery format (<http://fyi.uwex.edu/eParenting/>). This social media delivery method was intentionally incorporated to help expand program outreach (Brinkman, Kinsey, & Henneman, 2017; Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, & Taylor, 2014). With the online format, the workshop content is divided into weekly posts, or short articles, that can be read in any order and are organized by parenting functions, child development topics, and types of technology. In the study discussed here, our team collaborated with middle schools throughout the state to send parents weekly email links to the eParenting posts and then evaluated parents' responses to aspects of the program. The emails included article titles and short, creative descriptions of the articles.

Methods

Participants

From 2014 to 2016, eParenting was presented during 18-week semesters and reached more than 48,000 families in Wisconsin school districts. Table 1 lists the participation totals for eParenting by year. Participants for our evaluation of the program over those 3 years were recruited from parents and/or caregivers of fifth to eighth graders who had received links to the eParenting posts from their children's schools. At the end of each semester, schools sent parents a link to our Qualtrics questionnaire so that parents could voluntarily provide feedback about the program. Across the 3 years of our study, most participants (84.3%) were women, and most (81.2%) were between the ages of 36 and 50. As expected due to the primarily White demographics of the participating schools, most participants (96.7%) reported their race/ethnicity as White.

Table 1.

eParenting: High-Tech Kids Wisconsin
Participant Totals, 2014–2016

Entity	2014	2015	2016
Counties	3	18	24
Schools	4	38	77
Families	2,000+	12,000+	34,000+

Delivery Effectiveness

In the 2014 pilot year of our study, we evaluated the ease of use and frequency of delivery of eParenting and found the delivery system to be effective. Over four fifths of the responding parents (89.5%) reported that the weekly delivery of the blog posts was "about right." Nearly three quarters of the respondents (71.0%) found the eParenting blog "easy" or "very easy" to use, with approximately another quarter (24.4%) reporting that they were "neutral" about the ease of use. Similar results occurred the subsequent year, leading us to eliminate process questions the final year.

Measures

We gathered data primarily via the previously mentioned online self-report questionnaire. Using a retrospective evaluation design, we addressed six indicators of participants' understanding, behaviors, and attitudes regarding the use of digital media in parenting before and after their reading of the eParenting blog. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale (1 [*none*] to 5 [*great deal*]) to respond to items such as "Your understanding of how to use digital media to help you parent" and "How often you use digital media to support your parenting." Participants reported on their learning and their intention to apply information they learned via two additional questions: "As a result of reading the eParenting blog posts, did you learn at least one new way to use digital media and technology in your parenting?" and "As a result of reading the eParenting blog, did you use at least one new parenting skill or idea that was highlighted in a blog post?" Participants responded yes or no to these items. Space also was provided for participants to describe what they learned or what skill(s) they used.

Procedure

At the end of each 18-week intervention, recipients were invited via email to complete the online questionnaire. Interested parties followed a link to complete an informed consent form followed by the Qualtrics questionnaire. Each year, upon completing the evaluation, all respondents were given the opportunity to enter a giveaway for a tablet computer. The average response rate across the 3 years of our study was 0.7%. Research on online health social networks has shown that approximately 1% of users regularly create or comment on the relevant online content, 10% regularly read the content, and the remaining 89% occasionally view the content (van Mierlo, 2014). Therefore, although our response rate may seem low, it aligns with an expected proportion of online users active in creating or commenting on content.

In addition to obtaining participant data, we collected feedback from school contacts via in-person or phone interviews after program completion each year.

The procedure for our study was the same across all 3 years. Our study was approved by the University of Wisconsin–Extension Institutional Review Board.

Outcomes

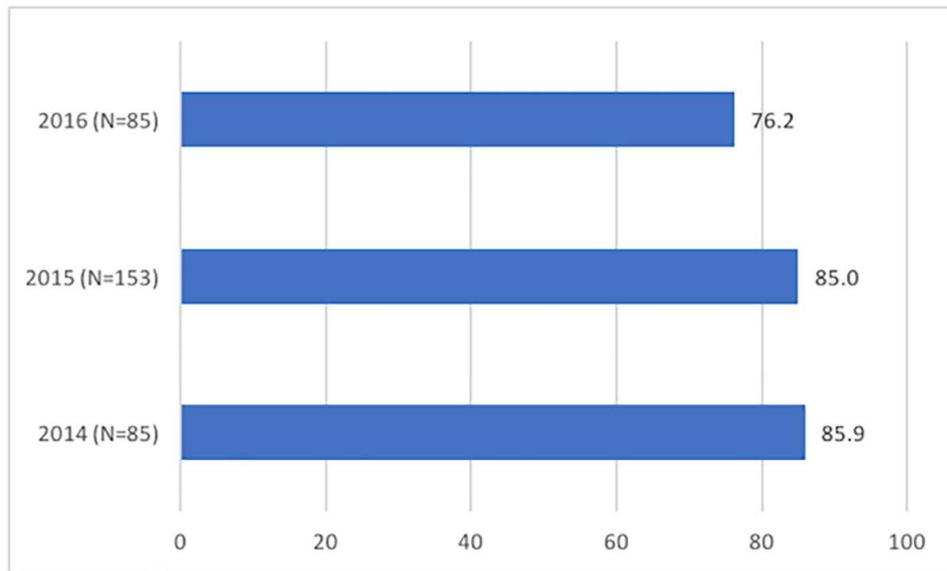
Across all 3 evaluation years (2014–2016), parents reported experiencing positive changes in their understanding, behaviors, and attitudes related to the use of digital media in parenting after reading the eParenting blog. They also indicated valuing the connections they felt to their children's schools and to Extension through participation in the program.

Benefit to Parents

Parents learned from eParenting. Across the 3 years, more than three fourths of parents completing the questionnaire reported learning at least one new way to use digital media and technology in parenting (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Percentages of Parents Who Learned at Least One New Way to Use Digital Media and Technology in Parenting from eParenting



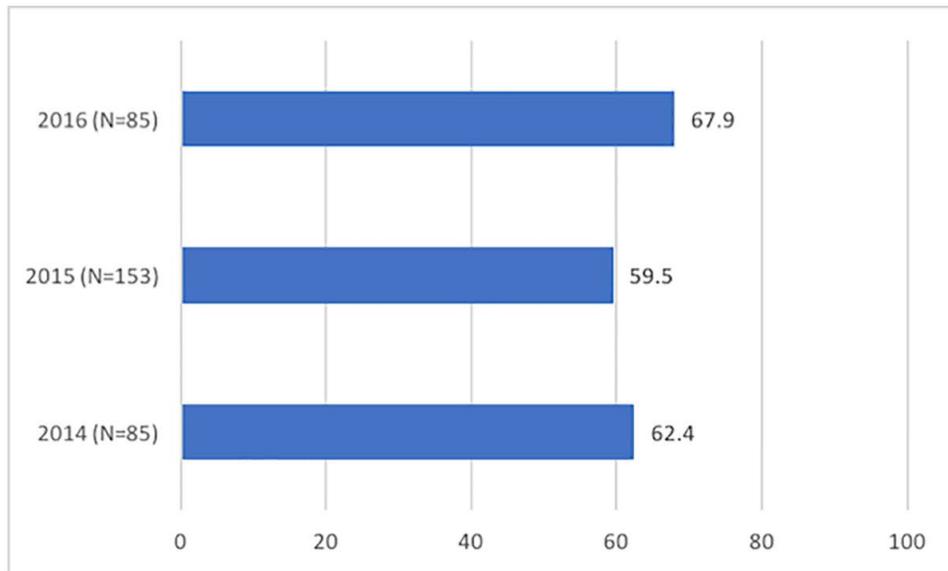
Parents listed specific ways they learned to use digital media and technology in their parenting, as exemplified by the following comments:

- "I learned that I should check in with my child using social media. It actually worked. My child seems more able to communicate with me through technology than in person."
- "[I learned to] let your child be the teacher of technology sometimes. My son loves to do this."
- "I have also learned how to handle ever-changing teenage emotions with one of the eParenting articles. I found it to be very helpful."

Parents also reported using new parenting behaviors related to technology after reading the blog. Over half of the parents across the 3 years reported using at least one new parenting skill or idea that was highlighted in the blog (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Percentages of Parents Who Used at Least One New Parenting Skill or Idea Highlighted in eParenting



New skills learned by the parents are represented by the following statements:

- "I talk with my children about the sites they visit and I review their Internet use."
- "I used a 'teachable moment' to look up a YouTube video for a song that showed lyrics—we had a discussion on the bad message that the song was sending to kids."
- "I have been emailing little notes to my daughter."

Finally, parents' attitudes about using digital media and technology as a parenting tool changed. Parents reported feeling significantly more confident about using digital media in their parenting after reading eParenting than before (Table 2).

Table 2.

Parental Confidence in Using Digital Media in Parenting Before and After Participating in eParenting

Year	Before <i>M (SD)</i>	After <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
2014	3.34 (1.04)	3.79 (0.97)	85	3.112	168	.0022**
2015	3.19 (1.09)	3.72 (0.98)	153	4.473	304	<.0001**
2016	3.39 (1.09)	3.76 (0.98)	85	2.327	168	.0211*

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

School–Parent Connection

Most parents liked receiving the eParenting emails from their children's schools (2014 = 93.0%, 2015 = 91.5%, 2016 = 87.3%). Parents valued the school connection for several reasons. First, confirming what Wartella et al. (2014) found, the parents trusted information provided by their children's schools, as evidenced by the following comments:

- "Was an email that I received from a trusted source."
- "If the Principal thought it was worth my time, then I should read it."

Secondly, the school-based delivery of the information made parents feel that they were supported by and in partnership with the schools. Several parents elaborated on the importance of the school–parent connection, with comments such as these:

- "I guess I like the idea of schools and parents working together to mold our kids into kind, caring, good, responsible kids who will make a positive impact in our community."
- "It made me feel more connected to the school and other parents who were receiving the same information as me."
- "Nice reminder about sticking together with parenting/teaching to make a difference in your child's life. Feels like the school wants to help us help our children."

Schools also valued the opportunity to use eParenting to communicate with parents and leverage more resources to support students and families. One colleague reported, "I . . . heard from a school counselor indicating she wants to continue the program next year . . . they have listed the project in their Title I grant application as one of their parent communications."

Connection of Parents to Extension

Several respondents also mentioned the role eParenting played in increasing their knowledge of UWEX resources, as indicated by the following remarks:

- "I did not know the UWEX has this type of information available as a resource. I now check the UWEX website for more good information."
- "I didn't realize the amount of resources available to help in this area. eParenting opened my eyes to these resources and I will be referring to them more frequently."

Discussion

Parents want to learn more about the digital world their children are navigating, and our evaluation of eParenting suggests it is a program that can begin to bridge the communication divide in families with teens.

Lessons Learned

Several factors contributed to the success of eParenting in Wisconsin. UWEX family living programs committed funds and staff time toward the development and implementation of digital outreach for families. A digital parenting specialist was hired as a point person, and a team of county educators was encouraged to commit time to the project. Implementing robust, effective digital programming requires solid institutional support. Strong local school–Extension educator relationships also were vital to the success of the programming. Simply developing the content and promoting it as a workshop did not prove to be an effective way to reach parents.

The school–Extension partnership, however, created an important bridge between Extension programming and parents. Since the creation of eParenting: High-Tech Kids, UWEX personnel have developed, conducted pilot testing on, and implemented two additional eParenting programs, using different technology and relying on different community partnerships to deliver the programs.

Limitations

A project of this scope is not without limitations. First, although very low response rates to online surveys and low online participation are expected and typical, our low response rate meant that the voices of many parents who received the program were missing from our evaluation. Because the blog post notices are emailed via schools' email systems, we do not have the direct access to parent email addresses that would allow us to make multiple follow-up requests for feedback. Second, the school connection is essential to the project's success, yet finding the correct contact person at a school can be challenging. The most effective contact may be not the principal but a school secretary or counselor tasked with daily communication with families. Finally, the program's reading-based email format is both its strength and its weakness. Parents who are confident readers with English as a primary language are likely to benefit the most from written programming. To further benefit participants, Extension personnel conducting future iterations of the program should consider having materials translated into Spanish or other languages and carefully analyzing the reading level of all materials.

Conclusion

Responses to the online delivery of eParenting through weekly school-based emails indicate that it is an efficient and effective way to provide support to parents regarding digital media. The program increases parents' knowledge and use of digital media in their parenting and their awareness of appropriate strategies and resources for parenting tweens and teens.

Acknowledgments

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