The Connected Parent: An Expert Guide to Parenting in a Digital World

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Jonathan Zittrain:

All right. And with that opening benediction, my name is Jonathan Zittrain and I'm so pleased to welcome you all to our event today. Our, being a joint effort of the Berkman Klein Center For Internet and Society, Harvard University and the Harvard Law School Library, for a conversation with professors John Palfrey and Urs Gasser on the occasion of the release of their new book, The Connected Parent: An Expert Guide to Parenting in a Digital World. And it will be moderated by our dear colleague, professor Leah Plunkett. So we're so pleased to have everybody here. And I think my role is simply to do a little bit of introduction of everybody and then let the hounds be released.

Jonathan Zittrain:

And I couldn't be more pleased to be doing those introductions since these are probably three of my favorite people together in one place. Urs Gasser is somebody who has stood for connectivity and interoperability among people, places, things across culture, language, and national boundary. Among many other things he has started a network of internet and society research centers for which the Berkman Klein Center is but one. I think Urs's now up to over a hundred, which is extremely exciting. And maybe one of us will have a presence of mind to put a link to that networks into the chat room if it can reach beyond the panelists to those attending.

Jonathan Zittrain:

Urs is someone who among other things has been a law professor at the University of St. Gallen and for 10 years has been on the faculty and the executive director of the Berkman Klein Center and has been someone, with John Palfrey thinking so much about what the internet is doing with, for and to our children and what it's drawing from them. And both he and John have now been thinking about it long enough that the kids they were thinking about 10 years ago are now adults who can look back and see how much they were right. And it's been such a pleasure to see their thinking evolve from books such as Born Digital, then a successor volume of Born Digital, and now this one, The Expert Guide to Kids in a Digital World.

Jonathan Zittrain:

So thank you so much Urs for being willing to be here today. And for talking about your work with John. John Palfrey, hard to summarize in a tweet or a single sentence. One would begin with his commitment to open knowledge to being an educated, thoughtful, kindly world. Himself educated at Harvard University and the University of Cambridge. Also a pivotal era of time as the executive director of the Berkman Klein Center and as the head of the Harvard Law School Library. And as one of the founders of the Digital Public Library of America, looking to see what new institutions and institutional relationships might be able to come together in the name of open knowledge.

Jonathan Zittrain:

John also served as head of school at Phillips Andover Academy, chair of the Knight Foundation or I think as it's called chair of Knight Foundation, and is currently president of the MacArthur Foundation. And as I said, open knowledge is one of John's things, but so to is kindness. Looking for a world, how to build it and how to introduce our kids to it, that is not just a world of threats and worries, but a world of building and of opportunity and of connection with one another. And I think that's what we might hear some of today. Finally, our moderator and question asker in the first instance extraordinaire, Leah Plunkett. A scholar, author, mentor, and civic actor, and in the author category, Leah herself wrote a book, Sharenthood, on the behavior of parents online in relation to their kids.

Jonathan Zittrain:

So it's really under one roof virtually. We have such a bumper crop of expertise on exactly the topics we're going to talk about today. Leah is a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law School, has done work around the rights of children and other citizens, including word service on the ACLU of New Hampshire, serves on the Harvard Law School and UNH law faculties. And if I'm remembering correctly has a background in improvisational comedy. So not to set expectations too high for your questions today, but Leah we're so grateful and glad that you're here to serve as MC and with that, I turn it over to you to do just that. Thank you all so much for being here.

Leah Plunkett:

Thank you so much, Jonathan. It is such a pleasure and a privilege to be in the company of three such towering figures in this field, and even more importance, three such extraordinary human beings. You've heard teachers, superb scholars and world-class mentors. So with that, I'm going to launch into a discussion of The Connected Parent, which I have read with enthusiasm from cover to cover. And I have lots of questions, starting with, you are pioneering scholars and understanding youth and digital life, you were also world-class educators of young people. What made you decide, Urs and John, to shift your audience a bit and write a guide for all of us parents of which I am one, about navigating digital life for our children?

Urs Gasser:

Thank you so much for this very warm introduction Jonathan and Leah, and for many years of collaborations, excuse me, and John, it's great to see you. I wish we could be together in one space, not too virtually but physically but we'll wait for that moment. It's just a wonderful gift to be together today and share a few experiences and thoughts. I would also like to thank our team, the youth and media team, who's been instrumental in the research behind the book. So why did we write the book addressed to parents when usually we have different audiences? A good question.

Urs Gasser:

My personal answer is, I've been struggling translating stuff we've learned about youth and digital technology in research to my life as a parent, I have two children's age, 16 and 19, and it's been just really hard to make sense of issues like screen time, when should they get laptops and iPhones to all the way, how much worried should I be about the excessive gaming in my view that my son is doing. And so we thought that our struggling making sense of the best data that's available, some of which we've contributed ourselves with the team, how that is applicable to actual parenting, which is on a whole other level of decision making where you usually can't pick up the phone and first ask the researcher what's the right thing to do. That was a big part of the motivation at a very personal level to share that side.

Urs Gasser:

Maybe one other follow up is also, we care a lot about young people, about children and to enable a good use of technology in a very maybe optimistic version. We thought it's helpful to work with parents who are quite often closest to children and give them some sound advice, how they can empower their children as they navigate together this increasingly interconnected world speaking of intra. Over to you, John, if you want to add your sense of motivation.

John Palfrey:

Sure Urs, thank you. But first let me thank Leah of course for moderating and Jonathan for such a nice introduction and all our colleagues for coming together. Leah, I have read cover to cover this fabulous book as well, Sharenthood. I also got to read it earlier in a draft form and then in the printed version that's a mighty press and a great volume for parents and takes up a topic that we do in part, which is privacy, but relative to the way we as parents act related to our kids' information, which is just the best and most deep book on that topic. So I hope everybody will read it. Exactly. And if I can also just say a few thank yous as were stood to the team that helped us in producing The Connected Parent.

John Palfrey:

Anybody who's written a book knows that you do not do it alone. You do it as a team, no matter what. And the key members of that team where the media lab in Sandra Cortese and Alexa Hasi for sure. And I never do anything anyway without a fabulous librarian at my side, Gosha Sturgos, who has been involved in the Harvard libraries, the Berkman Klein Center, and also at Phillips Academy Library was a great guide in this book too. So if Gosha, if you're out there or Alexa or Sandra, please know you have our love and gratitude for support on this book. And Leah to your good question, part of it of course is doing our homework in public as parents and trying to be better at it.

John Palfrey:

So we all know we make mistakes and Urs's kids and my kids grew up together in the Cambridge public schools. My kids are 18 and 15, so just slightly off in age but essentially the same as Urs's and it's been fun to see them grow up together, even sometimes at a distance because of the Swiss-US divide. But part of it is of course how we try to do our work as well as we can relative to those kids. But I'd say the other category of people that prompted at least my interest in writing this particular book was in doing book talks. And you'll recognize this experience when you go out to a school or you go out to a group of parents, if you're presenting research, the first question and the last question on, most of the questions in between are about advice for, "Right, so what should we do?"

John Palfrey:

And after writing Born Digital and I think doing two full rewrites of it between 2008 and 2016 and various iterations, consistently, I would try to say, "Well, I'm a researcher. I could tell you what I did as a parent, but not really in the advice-giving business." It just seemed like that was inadequate and that we ought to try at least to put the advice. So what's different about this book is on every topic, we take a stand. And we say, "Here's what we think you ought to do, based on our best experience, the best research we've had out there. We know it's not perfect. We know every parent is different. And particularly in this very broad increasingly divided world that there are lots of experiences."

John Palfrey:

But doing the best we can with the data and with a consistent philosophy, which is this idea of Connected Parenting. So that's really what we've been trying to do. Is to translate all of that learning over a period of time and experience into something that could be usable sort of on a take it or leave it basis, not saying we're definitely right. So that was the idea.

Leah Plunkett:

And now I have a law professor question because I just can't help myself. I'm going to zoom in on some terminology. You use the term Connected Parent and to what are you referring? The ways in which digital technology creates connection? The ways in which family members create emotional connection unmediated by devices? Or a more multifaceted concept? And I'm not afraid to cold call gentlemen.

Urs Gasser:

Well, I think we have taken a common law approach to this definitional question and actually a rather pragmatic one. So the idea behind this Connected Parent concept or philosophy is relatively straightforward. The first and most important dimension of it is to keep communication lines open with our children. That sounds very trivial, but as we all know as parents, also observers, official people in our families, that's not always a given and it's a real effort and requires a lot of trust-building and it's also an investment overall.

Urs Gasser:

The second dimension is some sort of, not only have communication lines open, but specifically talk about digital technologies and the use of technologies, the experiences. And when I say talk, then I don't mean just talk at kids, but importantly, even more important than our experience is actually to listen to young people, what their experiences online are as they use cell phones and navigate all of these platforms. And then there is one tweak to it, that is that parents ideally not only some sort of listen and learn, but also try out themselves different technologies that their children are so deeply immersed in. So we encourage parents not only to browse the web, but also to play games. To figure out how TikTok works, or to understand what is this hype of Instagram and social media.

Urs Gasser:

And then the last element of the Connected Parent approach is, not only to look at technology, but really at the reality and the context of young people themselves. What's happening around them? What do they care about? What they're moved by, what they're struggling with. And it's these sorts of connection between the parent and the young person, the connection between the parent and the technology, and some sort of a network approach, the parent, the young person and the world around it that's at the core of this Connected Parent approach.

Leah Plunkett:

Thank you. John, anything to add, or should I jump to my next question?

John Palfrey:

I think go to the next one. Otherwise we'll just talk all day on the first one. So then if I, Urs was thorough and good.

Leah Plunkett:

So you propose that the Connected Parent should apply what you call the Goldilocks principle to screen time. I have a five and a nine year old. So this is a reference that resonates with me, can you unpack that Goldilocks principle further and offer some examples of its application?

John Palfrey:

Absolutely. Thank you. And screen time of course is one of the things that we put right up in front of the books. We know lots of parents have a concern about it. I think it's an overplayed concern and we make that perfectly plain in the book. But it is one that's certainly is quickly on parent's mind. The Goldilocks principle of course comes from a children's book if you are not of a culture that reads about Goldilocks, basic idea of course being not too hot and not too cold, and having a nice warm balance there. And I think that we make this argument throughout the book in a number of ways, which is that I think it is neither a good idea to demonize the technology or give in fact the technology too much agency itself, nor to fantasize it and just assume that because we have internet everybody's now brilliantly educated or whatever.

John Palfrey:

We know from decades of studying this and either of those is true. But trying to find something that's not kind of a weak synthesis in the middle, but actually some clear pathway through is I think what we're aiming for in the book. And so what we do is break down what we think is the best advice on screen time by age. So I do think that if you're talking about a child who's just born through a child who's in their first couple of years, there's no real argument saying that it's a good idea to have them exposed to screens a lot. Now, during COVID, to have them connect for the first time with their grandparents, just as one is, of course that makes sense.

John Palfrey:

Of like, you shouldn't keep them off screens for that reason, but neither should you buy into the maybe Einstein marketing strategy that says if you're not having them exposed to certain videos, that they will never catch up academically. That's baloney. Now, as you go older, you get to the other end of that spectrum and you get to kids who are in their later teens, as we're saying my kids are. And the idea of having technological controls on their computer is just simply not going to work, right? They're either going to route around it, and B, it will undermine the trust that they have with you as parents, and it's just a bad idea. But between those two poles, there's actually a lot you can do.

John Palfrey:

And it's going to vary depending upon your family circumstance, we are highly aware that there are single parent households out there where people are working multiple jobs. And certainly during this time of COVID that you really need to be more flexible in that way, we certainly know that during this period, kids who are learning a lot of their schoolwork in addition to their out-of-school work through these kinds of devices. I think it's sort of blown up the screen time debate in that way as well, we can come back to that. That's an area of expertise we should flip it back to you for sense. As well as to say we really, really, really, think that it is more important to think about the quality of what kids do online rather than the quantity of time.

John Palfrey:

So we know they spend a lot of time online and it would be good that that were time spent in reasonably productive ways. And there are less productive ways so they can also spend time. That is just

true in life in general. And we think it applies in the internet era as well as before that. So that would be a version of the Goldilocks principle. We do have a handy chart, and that kind of thing that says the different ages is where we think the research shows. But it's much more important I think to come up with a plan for your family and then be as consistent as you can.

Leah Plunkett:

So building on the notion that there are always ways in all areas of life and at all ages to use time more or less responsibly, I mean, I think your book concluded that all of us parents always use our digital devices responsibly. Right? Just kidding. So next question, throughout your book, you encourage all of us parents to be honest and forthcoming with our children about our own evolving relationship with digital life. For instance, you suggest that we parents use our own struggle to limit our tech use as a conversation chart starter with our children about screen time and that all of us adults, whether in our roles as parents, educators, or otherwise become comfortable saying, oops and sorry, when we inadvertently offend in our digital discourse. In taking this advice, we adults would make ourselves more vulnerable than might be comfortable for all of us. So what is your advice for how we might get comfortable with a greater level of personal vulnerability?

Urs Gasser:

Well, I think being truly connected means to be vulnerable and particularly in the sense that I feel when having open communication channels, whether it's with friends or coworkers, or in this case with a family member, with a young person, my assumption is always that I may get it wrong, that I may have one perspective, but not the only one. And that I can learn something from the person I'm talking to. That I don't have all the answers, sometimes more just concerns or questions or ideas. And it's that sort of I think vulnerability that is a prerequisite to have meaningful connections, not only with our children, but with other human beings. And that's almost like a lifestyle choice I would say, are we willing to listen? Are we willing to go into even difficult conversations?

Urs Gasser:

With this acknowledgement that I may be wrong, but still being true to your own perspectives and concerns as well. And now I understand that's perhaps a privileged position to have, this ability to go into conversations like that. And it's perhaps also a little bit more of a Western idea of parenting. If you go into different cultures as we do, you see that parents may not have a cultural setup where it's okay to not have the answers but they're expected to have the answers.

Urs Gasser:

But we still think there are ways how you can be a Connected Parent and not the less. So for instance, there are ways to structure conversations where you start by listening what the young person is sharing about an issue they care about. Or you can start with a more kind of a topic, about say, privacy issues. And understand and share what do you know about it, then try to empower the young person by sharing your skills and your ideas, and then vice versa, be in conversation to hear and learn how that sounds from the other perspective. So I think there are ways to some sort of manage with vulnerabilities across cultural contexts and parenting styles and still being a Connected Parent. But my default is yes, connectedness comes with vulnerability.

John Palfrey:

I love the sense of humility Urs that comes through your comments. I think it is a big part of what we are urging in this approach. And Leah, you mentioned the oops as a strategy. And I think that's one that might take us into a slightly different direction as well, which is the diversity chapter that we wrote about. And in that particular case, that's an oops, a mistake that I made that so I will own up to it, but one I think that was at least helpful for me to reflect on. And part of what we are thinking about with these templates is how do we bring our kids into different conversations that are important for us as parents? So to the extent we, as parents feel that diversity, equity and inclusion are important things to talk about at our dinner table, that's true in our household and I know in Urs's as well, and I suspect in yours too, we thought this was a good entree.

John Palfrey:

And some of that actually is playing out online. So in the particular example we use in the book was one where, when I was head of school, I was writing about our policies relative to transgender students. And we ended up creating a dormitory for students who were non-gender binary. So the idea was to have a dormitory that was neither for boys nor girls necessarily, but worked for what we called an all gender dormitory. So in the context of that, and in something I typed probably too quickly on Facebook or Twitter, I can't remember, I used the term transgender ED, transgendered. And very quickly got some notes back saying that was an inappropriate term and why and so forth.

John Palfrey:

And at that time there was a fair amount of discussion about what the desired and appropriate term should be. And that to my mind was a really good example to say, "Oops, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to give offense. I'm wading into something that's an important and complex topic but obviously don't have all the answers or the right terms and to go from there." And so using those kinds of moments where we inevitably make mistakes as I did in that case, both as a learning experience for yourself, but I think as an entree for a mode of hopefully learning and connecting to others, but also into importance and occasionally tricky topics as diversity, equity and inclusion can be.

Leah Plunkett:

So building off of the wonderful openness, I'm going to bring in a question from our Q&A tool. We have a media scholar from Eastern Europe who is focused on the generational aspects of media use. And this question asks, if you could unpack a little bit more, what parents can learn from children, teens, and tweens when it comes to technology. So John wonderful example of an equity educational moment that you had. And so sort of building on that, are there some other areas in which both of you, either in your capacity as parents, or as scholars have learned things about technology use from the kids, tweens and teens in your personal life or in your research life?

John Palfrey:

An awesome question. And at end over there is a thing that kids with so much to talk about, which is if you wanted to get the other person to speak at the terms that you throw them a popcorn. So I'm going to send a popcorn over to Urs because he is really I think along with Sandra and others emphasized at exactly this point in terms of how they've run the Youth and Media lab at the Berkman Klein Center. So Urs maybe you should have the lead on this one.

Urs Gasser:

I mean, there's so much I've learned, we've learned from the young people, but maybe just kind of one overarching theme is, I still remember when I sent the first email. So the way some sort of I got into the digital technology space is by drawing a sharp distinction between what's offline and the real world and what's online and some sort of cyber space, that's the term used back then believe it or not. And of course we all know and experience ourselves today during COVID that the lines are blurring between not only online and offline, but between spaces more generally. Home and office space is now reserved for learning, work and play. There are blurry boundaries and so forth. And my feeling is that young people have often a more sophisticated, more tested knowledge may be the right term, way of approaching these highly interconnected spaces.

Urs Gasser:

Where yes, there may be an online component to it. Yes, there may be an offline component to it, and they're not the same but they're integrated yet follow different norms and rules of sharing for instance, or of connecting and managing audiences and the reach of a message. And that's an unbelievable skill and wealth of experience. Now I would hate to add there are also blind spots. We can talk more about those too, but I feel this what it means to live these highly integrated lives where technology plays such a vital role in almost anything you do, whether it's looking up news or whether deciding to wear a mask outside or not, or whatever it is. Online and offline play hand in hand.

Urs Gasser:

I had to grow into that and I think young people have more some sort of a greater sensibility also to some of the nuances. Now, last caveat of course, I also acknowledge the 90 parts of the world. We have huge access barriers and participation gaps. So I want to acknowledge that for sure. So just talking a little bit about my own experience there, being again privileged and having access to technologies.

Leah Plunkett:

I'm going to shift us a little bit from the wonderful insights that we can get from our kids and tweens and teens, and talk a little bit about those fears, where you recommend that parents take the lead. So I have sort of a question that I had, and then a couple of, I'm just going to add in a couple of popcorns John, if I'm using that term correctly, that are coming in through the Q&A tool. So the question I had was that, you are encouraging parents to take up issues of online safety with our kids the same way that we should have 'the talk' in quotes with them about sex and drugs.

Leah Plunkett:

So when we have this talk, what should we say? Don't we run the risk of coming across as anti-tech or out of touch? If we frame guidance on digital safety, the same way we would sex and drug? And a related to time, two threads that have come in from the question tool, specifically, how might we talk in this talk to our kids, tweens and teens about what questioners are calling the addictive aspect of social media, the power that the YouTube algorithm has? And also sensitizing their consciences so that they are engaging online in ways that are safe, both for them physically, but also in terms of being an ethical and virtuous connected citizen themselves.

John Palfrey:

Well Leah, that's incredible and great synthesis of questions and a hard set of them. So one thing that happens in pandemics I learned is that one watches more television than one otherwise does. And I have not been a big TV watcher, but in my household, Modern Family has been very popular and I've

seen most of them now with my daughter which has been fun. And one of the scenes that keeps coming up in Modern Family is the two dads Cam and Mitch often will zip into the room of their daughter, Lily, to have some form of the talk, she'll say, "Do we really have to?" They say, "No," and they leave. And so I've been thinking a lot about the talk and the form it takes. And I think, to very clearly having one version of the talk one time obviously is not going to work.

John Palfrey:

And so in this field like others, Urs and I are arguing in favor of this connected approach, which means you're going to have lots of conversations of this sort. And ultimately on internet safety as in the case of these attendant issues, you are not basically giving one lecture one time, but you rather you were engaged in an unfolding of conversations over the life of your kid and at the end they're so sick of having heard it before that they're repeating it back to you and say, "Yeah, yeah, dad." Right? Or, "Yeah, yeah, mom." That would be good.

John Palfrey:

So then I think that's the first thing. Is that it should be a connected series of conversations specifically on safety, just a couple of facts, which I think have really held up during internet era time that are important for parents to bear in mind. So if you just were to watch the TV and you were to see, To Catch a Predator, that show that used to run, you might think that since the internet came online, that kids are more likely to be abducted by somebody they meet since the internet came along and then harmed outside. It turns out that that's simply not true.

John Palfrey:

But I think the best research comes out of UNH, Leah, up near you, where David Finkelhor and his team have looked at the fact that really over the last couple of decades, the likelihood of that happening is actually down, not up. So it is not the case that because the kids use the internet or social media, that they are more at risk of abduction. Now, of course it's every parent's worst nightmare for it to happen. And it is the case. And particularly so during COVID, right? Where else can people meet? Right? They do meet up in dark corners of the internet or in Urs's old word, cyberspace. And so that does happen. It just happens in ways that we can't prepare kids for.

John Palfrey:

So most of what we've seen in the research is that when kids are in a circumstance like that, they know that they are involved in a conversation for instance about sex. So they are looking for it in one way, shape or form. They're not really wanting of course to be abducted and harmed, but they are in a conversation that they know is edgy. It is very infrequent that somebody that they don't know at all comes up to them and totally fools them. Then all of a sudden, oh my gosh, they're talking about sex. They tend to be in a chat environment of some sort that's either devoted to that topic or it's within a game and so forth.

John Palfrey:

So part of it is I think to give kids the sense of what is likely in fact going on, and making sure that they have someone to reach out to get help from. So whether that is somebody in a crisis, either on their own or with somebody else that they know about Crisis Text Line, just one particular example, or they would come to you Leah, as their mom, or they would go to a teacher or guidance counselor. Figuring out the experiences that people would have and the ways in which they can get help. If they find

themselves in that circumstance, they've made a mistake. Now they need to get out, how do they do that? What are the kinds of specific skills, but again, that can't be one conversation, that's got to play out over a period of time.

John Palfrey:

Let me take briefly the addiction topic and then, Urs can pick up on some of the other elements. One of the topics that comes up constantly with parents and not surprised to see it appropriately in our chat, is whether it's possible for kids to be addicted to using new media. And there's a raging debate on this and neither Urs nor I are psychiatrists or psychologists. So we can't answer it as doctors do. The data really seemed to suggest that there are disorders around using lots of technology, but maybe not an addiction, at least in the way we use that term in the United States. If you were to go to China or to South Korea, the term addiction is more generally used.

John Palfrey:

So we sort of adopt the fact that yes, it can be a disorder. But we see it almost always connected to some other underlying thing going on with the child. So it could be that a child they are exploring their gender identity, or they are having a struggle with anxiety or depression, or they are feeling some other kind of pain that they're expressing through using technology so, so much. So very often I think what we urge parents to do of course, is to connect with the child first and then the technological use, if that makes sense and really to go to what those sort of underlying concerns are.

John Palfrey:

And then if that's something that you can't handle directly as a family, then to get help. I saw on the chat a question about treatment options, there are particular places that you can go and we referenced a few in the book. Of course it depends where you are and what your means are. If you are in Boston, where some people are, Children's Hospital in Boston happens to have a guy named Michael Rich. Dr. Rich is the mediatrician, and he has a particular practice in this area. There may be, you might be in Philadelphia near the children's hospital there, and you could find some, so there may be a specialist in your area. But really, ultimately I think it is important to note that it's about the underlying concern, the underlying issues the child might have and very rarely is it actually about the technology per se. But Urs, there are many things to clean up there or improve on I'm sure.

Urs Gasser:

This is so great that I don't know what to add Leah, you tell me what direction you want to take the conversation.

Leah Plunkett:

So I'd to build a little bit on some of the questions that have been coming in that are at this nexus of child protection and privacy. So we have had some questions come through the Q&A tool that's asked about really sort of two distinct, but also related scenarios related in terms of what are the boundaries for parents in terms of mediating children's access to devices or to apps, or to programs on those devices in the name of protecting privacy? So one read is that some parents for different reasons, perhaps socioeconomic limitations could share their phones with their children. Could you talk about device sharing, whether it is a parent sharing a phone or device sharing within a family.

Leah Plunkett:

And of course, during the pandemic, when we are trying to do all the things online, those of us who are fortunate enough to work from home, keep our kids safe learning at home and so on. There may be few devices to go around and what might be some of the privacy considerations within a family, if you're device sharing. And then on a related thread, what is an appropriate balance of a parent going into a child's device or to a program or an app? So what is the line between respecting their autonomy and their engagement, but also when this question or said, when you might infringe on a use privacy to see what is really going on? So reflections on those two threads, or more generally about how you drop privacy boundaries within a family space.

Urs Gasser:

Yeah. I wonder if we could use the popcorn and on the first topic, send it over to you. Since we have the author of Sharenthood. I wonder how you would answer the device sharing question from your expert on privacy topic.

Leah Plunkett:

I will accept the popcorn and I will say that parents very often with the best of intentions or inadvertently do compromise children's privacy. Whether it is handing over a phone that even a very young child can navigate very quickly, to all of a sudden post something to the world you don't want them to see, or when a parent is taking a picture and posting it on social media or letting a child engage in a whole number of apps that may be tracking the child through the parent's phone. So I do think that completely understanding and respecting that there may be real device limitations, particularly in pandemic operation, that parents would be very wise to first of all, when it comes to taking information about their kids and affirmatively putting it out into the world.

Leah Plunkett:

Use a little bit of what I sometimes call holiday card rule of thumb and not put something social media or broadcast it broadly. If it is not something that they would feel comfortable putting in one of those old fashioned hard copy newsletters and sending to everybody from their great aunt to their boss. And in terms of the actual devices, I think that having a family privacy plan, doesn't have to be formal, it can be on a post-it note, but really taking stock a little bit the way a company does. What devices are in the home? Who's using which device for what purpose? Are there any devices that are owned by an employer or by a school that may be picking up even more information?

Leah Plunkett:

So I do think that of course making sure that parents can get into their work and people can get into telemedicine appointments and children can get into school, really trying to take inventory and being very careful about whose devices are going into which hands. So those are some of my thoughts and I will popcorn it back over perhaps to either of you or both of you, to talk about when as a parent it might be okay to kind of infringe or go into a device that a child or a tween or a teen has been working through, whether that is a device owned by the parent or whether it is in the child's custody and control, or maybe it's never away.

Urs Gasser:

Well, that's definitely more in the, it's an art set, not a science category of giving advice. I think that's the baseline. We want to acknowledge that also young people and children have a right to privacy and that also applies to vis-a-vis their parents. And that's something we want to respect and I think it's an

important part of family life to negotiate these different boundaries. Of course it changes depending on age and experiences and contexts, where we draw these boundaries at the given moment in time. And I really agree very much with you Leah, that having some sort of a family contract or at least a conversation around these issues is the way to go and also revisit these questions. Where does one's sphere of privacy, at times the right to be alone starts. Again, depends on the circumstances of life and so forth.

Urs Gasser:

I would say that of course becomes more important the older the young person becomes. A teenager has different I think needs. A right to sell than a small toddler, let's say. But it also highlights another I think important dimension, what your early response Leah, that is, one question is whether we're dealing with an emergency situation or not. Right? The things we're proposing here, I think work very well if we take the longer view as John mentioned also in the safety context to have conversations over time. How we think about privacy, how we manage our own privacy, what's my approach to your privacy in the household. But then also talking about the world at large, how we share information on social media about our family life or the like.

Urs Gasser:

So that's the benefit if we are not in crisis mode and can really work through some of these issues and those that disagree at times, of course. But it's a different story when you as a parent have to be concerned that something happened. That there was an incident of identity fraud or identity theft, or where you fear that someone pulled the device on your kid's smartphone that has surveillance capabilities, to track every movement or activate the camera remotely. I think these emergency situations where you have a crisis, I feel much more confident that the parent has not only a moral rights, but also actually an obligation to step in and intervene.

Urs Gasser:

And of course you want to do it in a way where, again, you approach the young person and respect the autonomy of this young person as well. But I do feel that's a different category. Now, the last thing I want to say on this topic is, I do think when it comes to privacy, we focus now a lot of kind of relationship between parent and child. The biggest challenge I think, where we're also parenting is so difficult is when it comes to the larger question of our data world that we live in and that we're embedded in. Some call it surveillance capitalism as some sort of the larger context around us, the business models that drive some of the tech firms that give us the services and hardware that you're using and our children are using.

Urs Gasser:

And I think there we reached the limits, what parents can do through parenting and want to connect the parent is up to, I think the tools have to change. I think we have to wear to hat as parents, the hat of a citizen, where we have to advocate for stronger privacy protections and privacy laws. That also change some of these dynamics and incentives that companies have. And I just wanted to flag that. That in our book you will find several examples where frankly, you can't leave it to the parents and their kids and open conversations and being connected. No, we need societal interventions. We need policy changes. We need better, stronger policies, not only to protect, but also empower the next generation.

Leah Plunkett:

I concur completely. And I'm going to keep us going in that space of how you balance being a Connected Parent, or perhaps a connected educator when you are dealing with cyber bullying. So behaviors that can exist in crisis mode as well as can exist in more of an ongoing, systemic, lower level, but still can boil over into crisis. And especially during remote or hybrid operations, still for most K through 12 students in this country, a questioner is asking, how can parents and teachers work together to try to prevent cyber bullying during online classes as we have districts across the country that had previously not had nearly so many students and online classrooms now having these all or partially online set ups?

John Palfrey:

Leah, it's such a good question. And it's also points to a limitation of Zoom, which is, I note in our participant list in the Q&A that we have Samir here who is along with his colleague, Justin Patchin, one of the great experts on cyber bullying. And if only we could just popcorn out to one of our participants, you'd have a much better answer than we could offer, but certainly point you to their research in the area of cyber bullying which I think is the most reliable out there in over a long period of time. I think the notion of how parents and educators connect during this period is clearly emergent. So we don't know all the answers. But I do think that one thing is crucial is for parents not just to recede too far in the background in the virtual schooling environment and to use the opportunities to stay connected to teachers.

John Palfrey:

And my sense is the teachers are exhausted and working very, very hard during this period and having to adapt in really tricky ways and administrators too. And not having a lot of them close friends in those roles. And they want to continue to have this level of connectivity during this period because once it starts to fray, once it starts to come apart, then you lose the contact entirely. And so one of the concerns I hear from fellow educators, has been actually that in some school districts they can't find kids and families. So there really is such a falling apart of the fabric that makes some of the really acute issues around bullying or even other kinds of safety issues.

John Palfrey:

One of which came up in Chicago recently of a direct sexual assault that was seen on a Zoom. There are really extraordinary issues that will be made much easier to deal with if there's a continuing connection. So I think that, and this is silly thing or a basic thing to say, but I think making sure that the connections don't fray and that the connectivity is there so that there can be that open back and forth as there are worry signs. I would say, the one big thing about bullying on the internet that we try to stress in this book is that separating it totally between cyber bullying and just bullying doesn't make a lot of sense. And this is one of those great examples where, to young people, there's not kind of an offline life and then an online life, it's just life. There's a whole bunch of life.

John Palfrey:

And they've got conversations that are happening in different environments, whether that's social media or it's in temporary zones of things like Snapchat or it's when they actually meet up in person and so forth. And they glide very effectively between them in different ways. And I think we have to be as facile because a student who's being bullied is probably being bullied in multiple environments and the information and the experiences is flowing between them. And I think being facile in that way as parents and educators is crucial. So not a simple answer to a very hard question, but one I think that points to a fundamental concern in their era.

Leah Plunkett:

Thank you very much. So I have a question that I had been wondering about, and also dovetails with a question that has come in through the tool. So in your book, you fast forward to future generations and you predict that someday a person staring down into a phone will look the way a 1980s hairstyle does to a teenager in 2020. So when will that phone image, right? All of us kind of going like this, become the equivalent of the mullet or the perm, and what types of digital technology do you envision displacing the phone? Or maybe we'll never be over the phone.

Leah Plunkett:

And a questioner has written in and said, actually built on this question. They didn't even know I was going to ask and said, what are some ways that parents of the future might anticipate and plan for the new types of technology that might be here in a decade or so, including things like developments in artificial intelligence, machine learning, or similar and unexpected new and emerging technologies?

Urs Gasser:

That's definitely more the speculative part of the book. I mentioned already, and it has come up throughout our conversation that of course it's unbelievable how fast paced the changes are that we've seen even since we started working on new digital media issues as Jason, you introduced us kindly. When we started, smartphones were not the main devices through which many young people are accessing the interconnected world. Back then Facebook wasn't the platform or Instagram and the like, so we really I think are shaped in our thinking by this experience of change and how fast technology has evolved, how fast platforms have come about that we haven't heard of even 10 years ago. And also with these changes, how users and particularly young peoples who come up with new ways, how to make use of technology, good and bad as we just discussed.

Urs Gasser:

And it's I think this theme of change that makes it very likely that yet again, the next 10 years will bring us, technological innovations and applications that we can't even envision today. You mentioned a few of them, whether it's the power of AI and the AI based technologies, whether it's augmented and virtual reality applications, but I think they're all the technologies too if we think about fabrics, there is so much innovation going on to think about innovation in building smart technology into clothes. There is a big merger between the bio sciences and digital technologies that may lead to very different interfaces.

Urs Gasser:

How information can be accessed, processed, stored, exchanged, that we do believe slightly speculatively that the future will look different. And it's not necessarily symbolized by we're looking at the cell phone. Now, again, big caveat, honestly I also don't think that these changes will unfold in similar speed across all parts of the world. I mentioned already, and we emphasize also in the book the digital divides. And so I really would expect that this is some sort of a global parallel process of change but I do think we will be surprised and it is up to everyone's imagination to envision these futures and actually to help to shape these futures.

Urs Gasser:

That to me is perhaps the most exciting part about our work. That we together with young people and the next generation can do something about what directions these technologies develop, how we want

to use it, where we draw red lines, where we don't want to rely on technology but on good old human interaction and help and kindness.

Leah Plunkett:

I'm going to ask another forward looking question now, less about technology and more about sort of our broader civic space. So in the book you reject the proposition that our kids and teens engage in clicktivism or slacktivism such that they do not have a civic impact. What do those terms mean? Another law professor nerd question. Sorry. And why do you push back on the notion that digital engagement fails to translate into broader social and civic engagement?

John Palfrey:

Well, thank you Leah, for taking us into the last chapter of the book which is on kids and activism. And clicktivism or slacktivism, are you're saying derisive and silly terms, and ones they're easy to kind of millennial shame or kid shame with the idea that just by clicking, like on an Instagram, a blackout page or hashtag BLM, or it might be, would somehow be not a good thing to do. Or that it's insufficient or that it's lazy somehow. Which I just think is sort of missing the bigger context. We see in the context of the technological space, the same dynamic that we see when we look offline in terms of activism, which is that young people are more active in civic life probably than any time in the last 50 years, according to studies such as the ones that look at incoming college freshmen and save them over a long time.

John Palfrey:

In terms of going out for protests, in terms of the way in which they engage in volunteerism and various forms of civic action that are often not directly involved in big institutions. So the mistake is by saying if in a particular election, we may find out in this one that there, this wasn't the case, but if in a particular election, young people don't turn out to vote as much as adults might like them to. And then we say they're apathetic and all they're doing is clicking like on Facebook, I think we are missing a whole lot of what they're actually doing. And it's often connected to these kinds of things that they do online.

John Palfrey:

So one thing we track in Born Digital in the final chapter of that book, and then again in The Connected Parent is look at various instances of networks of young people who across time and space are doing really interesting things. So climate is one example, certainly Black Lives Matter is another example. We use a less known example of period.org, which is a young woman, Nadia Okamoto, who grew up as a teenager was from time to time homeless and realized that having period products was not available equitably. So she networked a group of kids all around the world who create little chapters and make sure that people get the feminine products that they need at different times.

John Palfrey:

And that's something that you can't imagine that model possibly working, but for this networked approach and all these cool scopes that we've observed through our Youth and Media lab and other research of young people developing and pulling out. I would point to the work of Cathy Cohen here in Chicago, who does The Black Youth Project and BYP100 as another example of looking at participatory politics, slightly outside of what we might typically measure in terms of traditional institutions, but which is really dynamic and interesting. So I guess what we try to do in this book is to shift the frame from the easy critical clicktivsm kinds of critiques of kids and then say, let's look at what's really interesting and what's going on. What's different, what's powerful, what's bringing people from the

margins to the center in a variety of ways or amplifying what's happening on the margins in important ways.

Leah Plunkett:

Thank you so much. And I recognize we are almost at the end of our time together. So I'd like to ask you both, you have shared a number of reflection this afternoon here on Eastern standard time I should say, maybe other times for other folks. Are there any other valuable lessons that your students or your own children have taught you about youth and digital life that you just want to make sure that the hundred plus folks joining us from all across the world are hearing, as they think about the important topics covered in this book?

John Palfrey:

I'd love to leave the last part for Urs so I'll go really briefly and then pinch it back to you two. But I think the principle one is really just to listen to and trust and learn from young people. And that's actually some of the fun. And so, being able to do something that you haven't done before and do it with a kid and listen to them, it's actually a really joyful thing. And so I deeply encourage it. And I think given how complex the world is and how many different apps there are, there's an endless opportunity for that kind of fun.

Urs Gasser:

Thank you, John. In that spirit, I think to me, young people are connection entrepreneurs. They teach me how we can stay connected, how we can make new connections, how we can have unexpected connections using technology, but also integrate technology in a different way than I experienced it. And I learned that from many young people we've talked to but also from our students. And they helped me to think through what some of the challenges are, how we should perhaps have still a critical perspective and a skeptical perspective when it comes to technology. And it's this ability to connect that I think is just a real gift for which I'm super grateful.

Leah Plunkett:

And we are all super grateful for your years of leadership and empathy and vulnerability in the best sense of that term that is captured in The Connected Parent, which as a parent and a scholar, I cannot recommend highly enough. I hope that everyone will take a look and continue to engage in these important and ever evolving questions and discussions. Thank you both for sharing your time and your insights. And thank you so much to everyone from around the world who joined us tonight to share your interest and your energy and your insights.

Urs Gasser:

Thank you.