Factsheet

Five key findings from a study on parents' experiences of infant feeding and baby-tracking apps

Key findings from 28 conversations with parents from a range of genders and family constellations.

1.

Digital parenting supports enabled increased independence from familial support

Generational differences and geographical separation have increasingly driven parents to seek support in online spaces — a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online sources were highly valued for being up-to-date, and for offering information on a wide range of parenting approaches, enabling parents to make self-directed decisions, specific to their family's needs.

For same-sex coupled parents, online spaces and connections were often critical to making parenthood a reality in the first place and provided opportunities for ongoing peer-support and advocacy.

2.

App use was prompted by routine health monitoring, and was often self-limiting

All participants reported tracking aspects of their infants' daily routines – such as feeds, nappies and sleep – in response to health professionals' questions during routine health monitoring. While not all participants used apps, advantages of app use for tracking included increased convenience (parents usually had their smartphone handy), and ease of long-term tracking, allowing the identification of trends over time.

App use commonly ceased once parents had developed confidence in their ability to identify their child's needs, and a sense of familiarity with their infants' routines. Few parents continued app use beyond 6 months. Less commonly, app use was discontinued due to negative experiences; this was often in relation to breastfeeding struggles, including instances where numerical data about infants' feeds was interpreted by health professionals and treated as evidence of breastfeeding 'failure' – without recognising the impact of these judgements on women's mental health.

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3.

Apps can amplify gendered stereotypes and expectations in parental role divisions

In heterosexual couples, the use of mobile applications for parenting information and support is commonly gendered. Mothers often take the lead on accessing online health and parenting information, including the use of apps to track fertility, pregnancy, infant care and development. Simultaneously, apps that focus on informational parenting support are commonly geared towards mothers – encouraging use by women while excluding caregivers of other genders.

Gendered differences in the use of digital technologies can amplify uneven divisions of parenting labour, especially in heterosexual couples. Women often spend more time and energy on becoming 'expert' parents, and on becoming educators to their partners. Although mothers' efforts to access parenting and health information (online and offline) have become an expected part of 'good' parenting/mothering, these are frequently belittled by male caregivers.

4.

Apps can support more equitable role divisions

Parents of any family structure were able to share their parenting responsibilities more equitably when uneven labour divisions were acknowledged and actively negotiated between partners. Apps that seemed to facilitate more equitable role divisions were those that provided shared access to tracking tools and data only, rather than focusing on informational support that usually targeted mothers. Participants who shared tracking reported that it provided a shared source of knowledge that allowed both parents to be involved in the mental labour of infant care, and in the organisation of family routines.

For single parents who had little choice but to carry all primary caregiving responsibility, infant feeding and baby-tracking apps provided opportunities to unload some of the mental labour of tracking infant development and family routines, providing a sense of control and reassurance.

5.

Parents worry about obvious identifying information, but are resigned to data sharing

Parents were aware of the potential tangible and concrete risks of sharing images, names and addresses of their children online, which may put them at risk from 'bad people' (e.g. paedophiles). However, less tangible future harms from algorithmic sorting and profiling seemed too vague to worry about, and too difficult to avoid. For instance, access to digital parenting tools, such as infant feeding apps, often necessitated parental agreement to terms and conditions that gave developers permission to access and share user data with third parties. When the only alternative to personal data sharing was non-use of technologies, this situation led to a sense of data sharing as unavoidable, promoting feelings of 'digital resignation'.