

Parenting in the Age of Social Media

The experiences of parents of young children and parents-to-be

As a community we are only beginning to understand how social media may impact people's experience of being and becoming a parent. This project is the first stage of a two-year study aiming to explore the experiences of using social media among parents of young children and parents-to-be in Australia. We hope that this study will improve our understanding of how social media shapes parenting and parent wellbeing, and identify strategies to support parents to use social media in ways that enhance (rather than undermine) parent wellbeing. The study is run by La Trobe University and Australian Catholic University.

Summary of interview findings

In 2019-2020, we interviewed 24 parents of young children (0-2 years) and parents-to-be (in the third trimester of pregnancy) across Australia (10 men, 14 women). Participants shared their experiences of using social media in relation to their wellbeing and discussed how information from social media shaped their parenting attitudes, decision-making and behaviours.

- Participants valued the ease and accessibility of social media, the anonymity it afforded, and the opportunity it provided to seek and share information locally and globally.
- Participants made use of social media to search for pregnancy- and parenting-related information, to seek reassurance and see what's normal, to search for advice to help decision-making, to share experiences, and provide advice to other new parents or parents-to-be.
- Women were more likely to use social media for pregnancy or parenting-related purposes; men were more likely to use social media for entertainment or to "take a break".
- Participants appreciated relatable, honest and humorous content on social media, rather than posts by influencers or celebrity parents. While relatable content was highly valued, participants emphasised the positive aspects of their pregnancy and parenting experiences on social media.
- When they connected with pregnancy and parenting groups on social media, both men and women described being a part of an online community - a way to gain a sense of belonging, social connection and advice.
- Parents often judged other parents in response to their posts on social media, yet also worried about being judged themselves.
- Social media increased participants' awareness and knowledge of child health, development and parenting. Participants did not often act on social media advice alone, although some found that social media had helped with parenting strategies and confirming parenting decisions.
- Participants were generally sceptical about the accuracy and trustworthiness of information on social media and still relied on 'traditional' pregnancy or parenting resources (health professionals, family, friends); social media may be a starting point for information gathering.
- Some social media forums were described as "nasty", judgemental and "toxic", and a few participants had experienced unexpected backlash or criticism to a post. Social media exposed some participants to concerning topics or things they hadn't considered, which were experienced as upsetting (e.g. still-birth, sick children).
- Participants discussed serious online privacy and security concerns. This impacted how they used social media and how much they shared - especially about their children. Participants thought seriously about what they posted and the types of groups they engaged with on social media, gravitating to closed groups that were experienced as more open and honest.

We are now surveying parents of young children and parents-to-be across Australia to find out more about the key issues of using social media for parenting and pregnancy. If you're interested in participating, please click [here](#).

We are very grateful to the parents and parents-to-be who participated in the research - thank you! This project is supported by Transforming Human Societies Research Focus Area and the Transition to Contemporary Parenthood Program, La Trobe University. If you have any questions about this research study, please contact parenting.socialmedia@latrobe.edu.au.

