

CONSUMERLAB



BRINGING FAMILIES CLOSER

The impact of communication
technology on families in the US

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METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this US report, Ericsson ConsumerLab conducted five focus groups – two with parents, one with boys aged 14–15 and two with girls aged 14–15. Additionally, 12 at-home interviews with both parents and at least one child in the 12–15 year old age range were conducted in the San Francisco area.

Further to this, Ericsson ConsumerLab carried out an online study with parents in 1,005 families across the US, including 570 children aged 12–15. This study represents middle class families in the US that have two working parents, with at least one working full time, and children aged 12–15.



THE VOICE OF THE CONSUMER

Ericsson ConsumerLab has 20 years' experience of studying people's behaviors and values, including the way they act and think about ICT products and services. Ericsson ConsumerLab provides unique insights on market and consumer trends. Ericsson ConsumerLab gains its knowledge through a global consumer research program based on interviews with 100,000 individuals each year, in more than 40 countries and 15 megacities – statistically representing the views of 1.1 billion people.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, and hundreds of hours are spent with consumers from different cultures. To be close to the market and consumers, Ericsson ConsumerLab has analysts in all regions where Ericsson is present, developing a thorough global understanding of the ICT market and business models.

All reports can be found at:
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FAMILY COMMUNICATION

The introduction of smartphones and tablets has created new social patterns in our society and how we communicate. These new ways of communicating have had a subsequent impact on family communication. But how have new forms of communication changed family behavior, and do families take advantage of the new possibilities this brings?

In this US report, Ericsson ConsumerLab looks into how families communicate amongst themselves, whether in person or using various technologies. In what ways have they seen their family life transformed by technology? What modes of communication are used in what situations and why? What constraints or controls are attempted or imposed by parents? Are the benefits of communication technology embraced or resisted by parents?



KEY FINDINGS

Communication technology has a positive impact on families

- > The ability to have continuous contact throughout the day with other family members increases the feeling of closeness and happiness. The majority of families claim they communicate more, know each other better, and are able to organize practicalities/logistics during the week more easily

Texting is increasing

- > When apart, texting and voice are still the main methods of communication for the majority of families. Texting in particular is described by families as a “life saver” for organizing logistics and practicalities in busy day-to-day life. Texting and voice are the most used services, while newer communication services are used much less and could be short lived. The usage of texting is increasing and very few have stopped using it

Different services for different purposes

- > Face-to-face is the natural choice for quality conversations, as well as sharing interests, while texting and voice come into play for practicalities. In general, fathers seem to prefer voice in more situations than both mothers and children, who favor texting

New services mean increased communication

- > Although a minority, some families also use apps such as WhatsApp and KIK. Parents who use new services communicate five times more with each other, and eight times more with their children. In addition, families who use new services use texting and voice twice as often as other families

Separate services for family and friends

- > There is a clear divide in what services are used to communicate with family compared to with friends. This is especially true for children who use many more services than their parents. They also separate the usage by using different services to communicate with their friends. Keeping their privacy is key for teenagers

More worries, more rules

- > New communication services have created new worries for parents, so unsurprisingly there are more rules in place for their children. At the same time, worried parents have a perfect tool in the smartphone to monitor their children. 72 percent of parents use restrictions of the mobile phone as a punishment

Need for more contact

- > Almost half of children want more communication with their parents during the week. Communication technology will not solve this as it is mostly face-to-face time and family time that is in demand. The study shows that we should be aware that an obsession with our phones and tablets, by parents and children alike, is impacting on valuable family time

COMMUNICATION WHEN APART

In the days before the existence of the mobile phone, there was little or no contact between family members during a normal weekday while they were at school or at work. The introduction of the mobile phone changed this completely. The personal phone enabled family members to have continuous contact during the day through either voice or texting. With smartphones, there are even more ways to be in contact during the day.

Busy lifestyles

With both parents working and children in middle or high school, families have exceptionally busy lives. To families who are stressed by schedules, commutes, and flexible working hours, as well as multiple after school activities, the mobile phone is the perfect tool that knits the family together during the day.



THINGS TO CONSIDER THAT HAVE AN IMPACT ON FAMILY COMMUNICATION

A teenager's relationship with the family

In order to understand family communication, we need to understand the different stages children go through in their teenage years. When young, there are two things that have a great impact on your life: your circle of friends and your parents' control.

- > **12–13 years old:** At this age parents are actively involved in their children's social lives.
- > **14–15 years old:** Now children are beginning to develop autonomy, and their own social networks outside the home are, for the first time, independent of family life.
- > **16 years old:** Parents now have fewer restrictions and social control.

The average age when children get a mobile phone



Feature phone
– 10 years old



Smartphone
– 11 years old

The age when you get a mobile phone

For a child, owning a smartphone for the first time is seen as an important rite of passage, marking the transition from a dependent child to a slightly more autonomous person – a journey that eventually ends in adulthood.

While a child's focus is mainly on what their smartphone can do for them, they also think it makes them seem more grown up.

Attitudes to ICT usage correlated with parenting styles

Families have different parenting styles. These will stem from parental values, how they accommodate the developmental needs of their children and how they relate to each other.

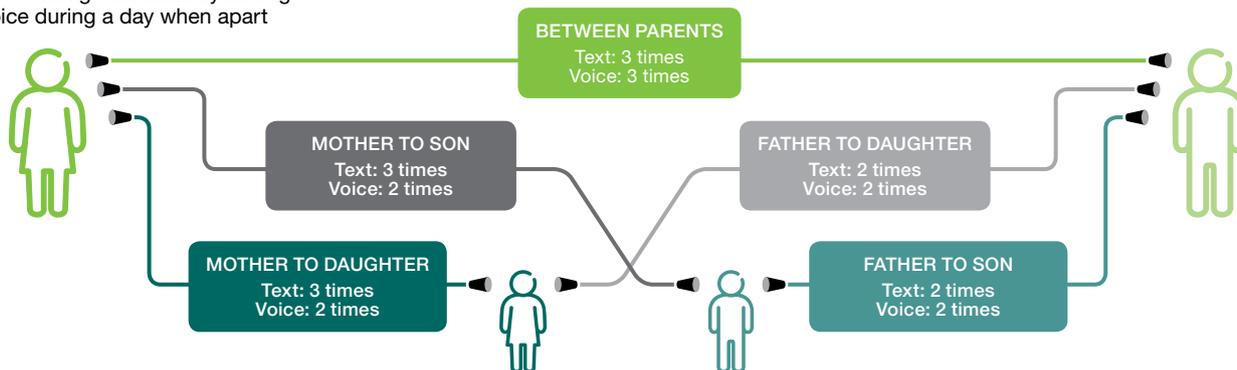
The need to control and manage ICT usage in a proactive manner is more pronounced in authoritative parents. Permissive parents are more hands off and are more likely to rely upon the common sense and innate values of their children.

Number of children's activities

Children aged 12–15 years old nearly always have after-school activities, at least three during the course of a week. The higher the number of activities, the more frequent the communication between family members during the day.

Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Talking, texting, poking and dating, 2012; Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, 2015; Ericsson ConsumerLab, Dynamics in the home, 2011

Figure 1: Average contacts by texting and voice during a day when apart



Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, US, 2015
Base: All respondents

Texting has surpassed voice in family communication

Texting and voice – still going strong

With both parents working, family members are apart for most of the day, spending 9–10 hours outside the home. This creates a need for solving family logistics and practicalities throughout the entire day. Usually the content of overall family communication using technology is about logistics and practicalities. Texting and voice are the perfect services to support this and as a result they are used for half of all family communication. Texting in particular is described as a “life saver” for the short, distinct communication that is needed during the day to share schedules and logistical arrangements, for example when arranging drop off and pick up times for after-school activities.

Interestingly, the amount of contact between family members does not increase with the amount of hours the parents are away from their children. The greatest impact on how frequently family members contact each other is the number of activities the children have, i.e. the more activities, the more contact they have. Texting is also used more than voice when children have more after-school activities.

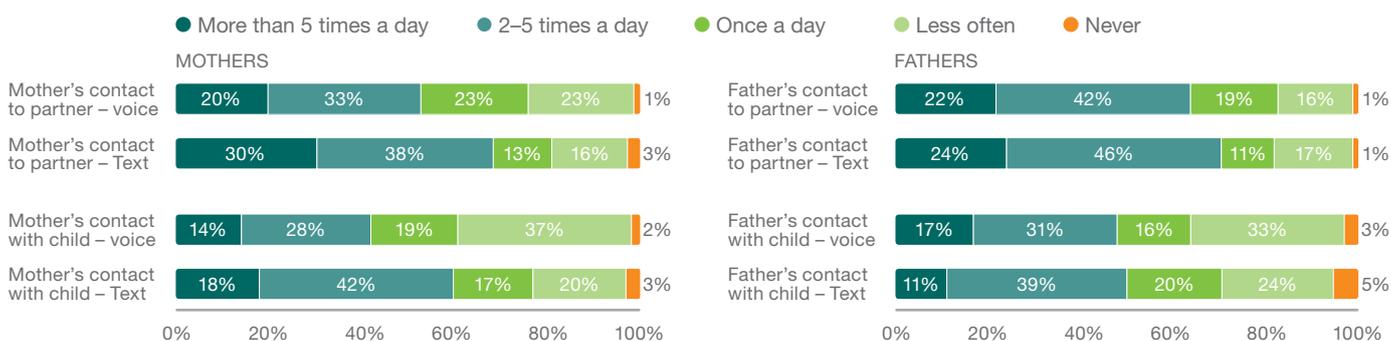
Advantages of texting

Texting and voice are the foundation of services for most families, and very few have taken up services such as WhatsApp and KIK. For the majority of families, there are no services replacing texting or voice yet. The advantages of texting are still valid. The prevalence of texting is an assurance that all family members can be easily and quickly reached. If not in a Wi-Fi area (some children might have only Wi-Fi connected mobiles) texting always works. In addition, texting is good enough for any short, fast communication that is needed during the day. Consequently there is no compelling motivation to replace texting with another communication method, as it works perfectly well today. Besides there is no incentive to save costs (e.g. using over-the-top (OTT) internet services) as most families have family plans with unlimited voice and texts.

Email is used less and not as frequently

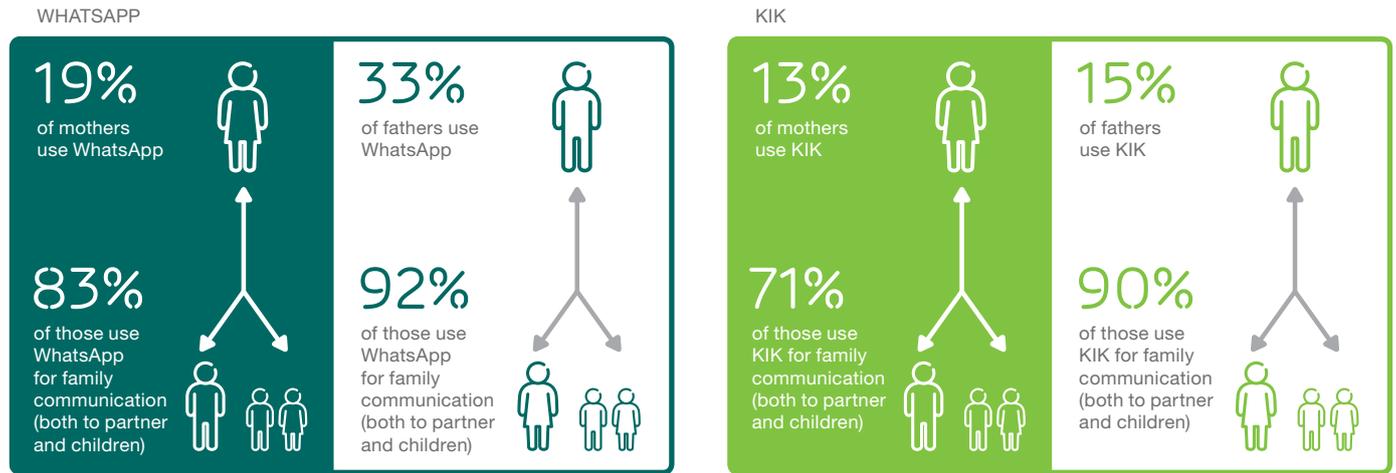
With email there is a difference in how many use the service and how many use it for their family communication. In comparison, a clear majority of those that use texting and voice also use it for family communication. Even if the parents belong to the email generation and almost all parents and children use email, it is not used much to communicate with each other. Email is the practical communication method for work and school, but is not as suitable for family communication, except for when they want to attach a picture or link to a fun video, or send a longer document.

Figure 2: Amount of times families have contact through voice and text when apart during weekdays



Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, US, 2015
Base: Users of voice and text

Figure 3: WhatsApp and KIK usage



Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, US, 2015
Base: All respondents

Newer services

Few families use newer services such as WhatsApp, KIK, Snapchat and Vine. Figure 3 shows that of those who do use WhatsApp and KIK, the majority use the services in their family communication, and communication is more frequent. The reason for parents to start using those services is mainly to try them out because their children are using them. But usage might be short lived, because almost half of those who started using newer services have since stopped using them.

Families have different usage patterns

It is interesting to look at different families in respect of how many services they use. All families use texting and voice as their main methods for communication, and few families have included the more recent services to varying degrees. There is a clear difference, both in usage and behavior.

Families using many services have five times more communication between parents and eight times more communication with their children

Families using many services

Families that use many services have much more frequent contact with each other during the day when apart, compared to families that only use texting and voice and maybe one other service. This is valid for both the communication between parents as well as with their children. On average, families using many services have contact 27 times a day between parents and 25 times with children. In contrast, families who use few services have contact five times a day between parents and three times a day with children.

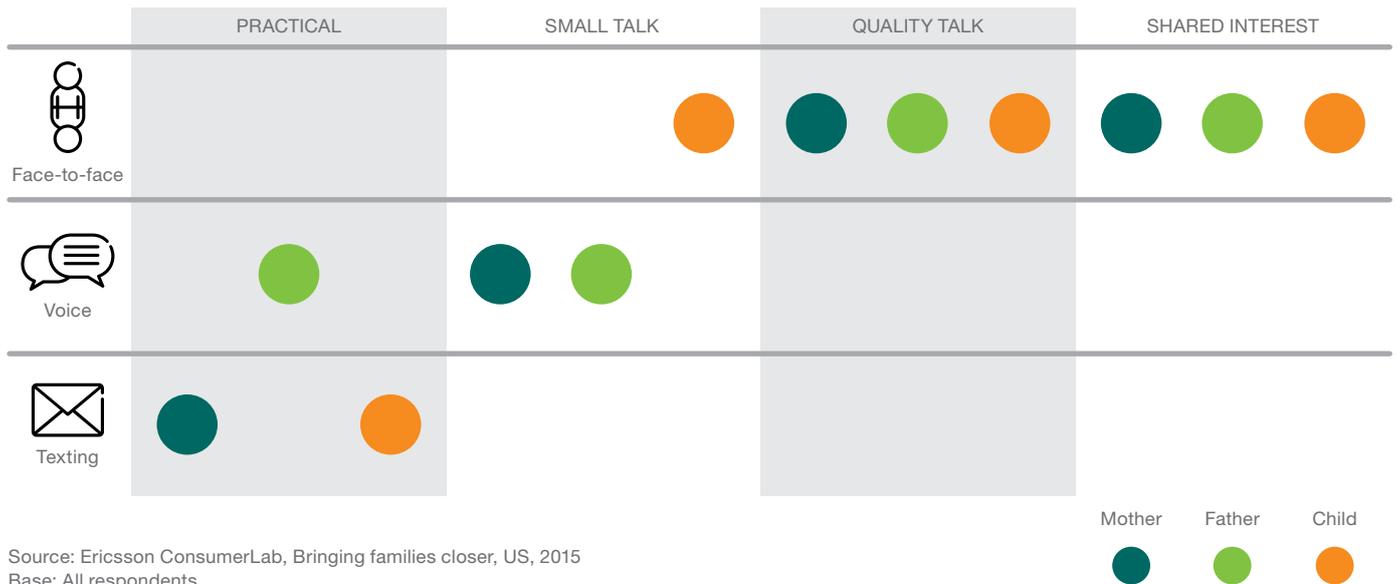
Children contact their mothers more often than their fathers

Very communicative families also use all methods more frequently in their family communication – not just the most recent ones such as OTT services, but also the more traditional ones like texting and voice. These families use texting and voice twice as frequently as families not using OTT services.

Families who use many services are more communicative, have a closer family connection, use many devices, are tech oriented and feel up-to-date on communication services. Parents in these families also want more control over their children and are very much involved in their lives. Their children are very active and as many as 30 percent have five after-school activities during a week. One in five of the families in this study belongs to this type of family.

The most recent services like snapchat and vine are not used by many families in their communication. Of those that do, it is mostly the parents that contact their children via these services and not the other way around. These services are seen by children as “theirs” and used in their communication with friends. Texting and voice are still the dominant and preferred ways to communicate with parents.

Figure 4: Preferred way of communicating, depending on the type of communication



Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, US, 2015
 Base: All respondents

Families are surprised by how rational their communication is and how little they share emotions and feelings during the day while apart. Mothers in particular noticed that communication was mainly purposeful, and less emotional.

Preferred service for different kinds of communication

Family members do not have the same idea about what a conversation is. Children perceive instant messaging (IM) and sending a text as having a conversation. This is especially true in their conversations with friends. It implies a fast tapping of keys, with messages going back and forth at a speed that their parents would have difficulty keeping up with. Children change their way of communicating, both in how they write messages and what mode they use when communicating with their parents.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a common understanding between children and parents that face-to-face, texting and voice are the preferred ways to communicate with each other, but this varies depending on what kind of communication they want to have.

Face-to-face conversations are preferred for quality talk and sharing of interests, compared to sending a text which is mostly used for practicalities.

Figure 4 shows that a majority of mothers, fathers and children prefer to meet face-to-face for a quality conversation. For mothers it is even more important to wait to meet in person in order to have a quality talk with their children. When sharing interests, face-to-face is also preferred by both parents and children. A fairly small group prefers to use Facebook or email, even if these modes of communication are suited to sharing interests.

For small talk, children prefer face-to-face, whereas mothers and fathers prefer voice. For practicalities and logistics, texting is the preferred way for most, except for fathers who seem to be more voice-centric. There is a clear difference in how many mothers compared to fathers use texting in this situation.

Children and mothers are generally more text focused for any kind of communication compared to fathers. Eight percent of children prefer to use Facebook for all their communication, both to parents and siblings, while parents mainly use it for shared interests.

In summary, face-to-face, texting and voice are the preferred ways for communicating. The more personal and emotional the communication is, the more inclined we are to leave technology and have conversations in person. This is true for parents and children alike. And it is apparent that the need for face-to-face conversations between child and parent is even greater than between parents.



COMMUNICATION WHEN TOGETHER



SMALL ISLANDS OF FACE-TO-FACE TIME

The family meal reinforces the unit

The main face-to-face interaction on a weekday for the family is during the evening meal. It provides a short island of time in a busy day and helps to reinforce the family as a unit. It is also a time when the day's activities, events and experiences are shared and when emotions are vented, which may not be possible during the day.

Devices are usually banned from the table so that the family can converse without distractions.

48%

have an evening meal with the whole family on a daily basis



71%

of families do not use devices during the evening meal



Time spent in the car

Those who drive their children to school or after-school activities value this opportunity for face-to-face time, enabling more intimate conversations to take place. With no distractions, there could be more quality talks, while at home the conversations are usually more rushed and purposeful.

Interaction between parents and children when in the car:

- > 28% – Only talk
- > 45% – Mostly talk and the child somewhat engaged with their device
- > 21% – Talk while the child is equally as engaged with their device
- > 5% – Talk while the child is mostly engaged with their device

Communication through devices at home

There are situations when some families communicate with each other through services on their devices, even if they are all at home. A quarter of families say they do this on a regular basis.

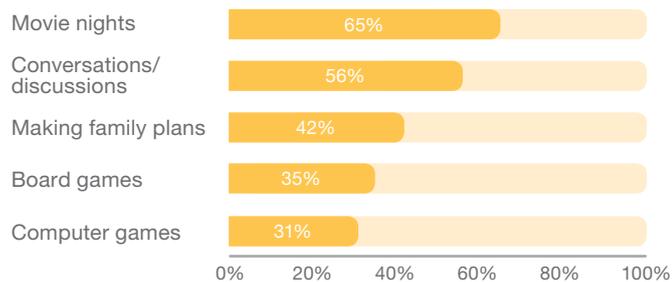
Family time

After the evening meal, families usually fragment into independent activities, often in personal media zones.

But there is a fair amount of time that the family spends together during a week at home. 74 percent have “family time” at least a couple of times a week, where watching TV or a movie is the most regular activity.

Almost half of children want more face-to-face time with their parents as well as family time during the week. For children in families that have very frequent contact through devices, this figure is even higher. It is only during the weekend that children think they have sufficient time with their parents. This might be evidence that communication through devices cannot replace face-to-face communication, but can only complement it.

Figure 5: What do you do during “family time”?



Source: Ericsson ConsumerLab, Bringing families closer, US, 2015
Base: All respondents

Distractions

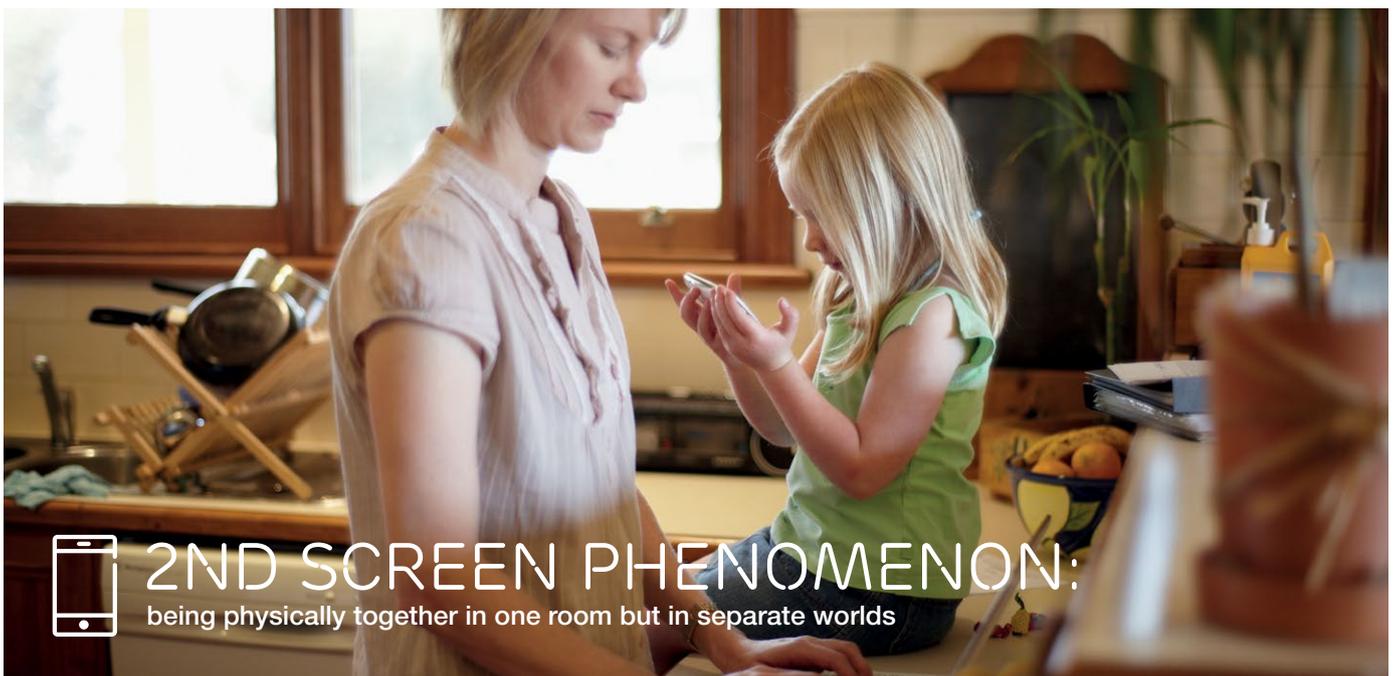
The dependencies and even obsession with our devices (smartphones and tablets) influence the way we communicate with our family members. The distraction is not just valid for children but for parents as well. Instead of being present during family time, parents might be reading work emails or active on social media.



After dinner we could be all flipping through our phones when a show is on.”

Son, 13 years old

The need for constant attention from the world outside the family seems to be as important both for parents and children. They do not want to miss out on something. 30 percent of parents and 60 percent of children often engage with their devices during family time. Parents do not seem to have an understanding of how much their children use their devices during family time, as the children admit to using their devices more often than the parents believe they do. 75 percent of parents are concerned by the fact that family members use their devices during family time, compared to 50 percent of children.



2ND SCREEN PHENOMENON:
being physically together in one room but in separate worlds

RULES AND WORRIES

Smartphones and mobile phones are at the center of broader cultural conversations. Parents, especially mothers, talk to other parents about their children's mobile phone usage and the drama caused by specific mobile phone incidents. They read about potential dangers of smartphones in the media; not just their distractibility but also the risks associated with internet browsing and the careless use of social media apps.

Of the families in our study, 40 percent have had incidents with their child using communication devices and social media, but only 21 percent have had incidents multiple times. The majority of parents have never had an incident with either their children or their children's friends.

With all these issues around the smartphone and other devices, it is no surprise that many parents actively manage their children's devices. Protocols and rules about children's usage of smartphones/tablets and other devices are the norm.

Parents' rules

- > 46% – Allow devices to be used only at certain times during the evening and weekend
- > 32% – Have a written contract between parents and children about how to behave and act when using mobile devices
- > 27% – Do not allow their child to use mobile devices to communicate when alone in their room

Time spent on the phone

With devices and services being so important to us, there is an issue within families as to how much time is spent on them. Two thirds of parents and children agree this creates a point of tension in the family, leading to discussions. It is the smartphone that creates the most issues. Even if children do not agree with their parents, most see their point and understand why they are complaining.

72% of parents take away the mobile phone as a punishment

Mobile phones are the obvious punishment tool

Examples of why parents confiscate the mobile phone as a punishment include using a mobile after curfew, poor school grades, forgotten homework and inappropriate messaging.

Removing the phone can hurt the parent as much as the child, because the child cannot then be reached or monitored. 54 percent of parents agree on this. For some children it might not be a major punishment. When asked if they have ways to work around not having a phone, 26 percent of children said yes. Smartphones can be a real point of tension within the family, one that needs to be understood and negotiated.

Parents monitoring their children



- > 68% – Track the child's phone
- > 60% – Control the child's network privacy settings
- > 56% – Gatekeep apps
- > 42% – Mirror the texts their children send/receive



A POSITIVE IMPACT

Even if there are some negative aspects to the use of technology in family communication, the positive parts are agreed by most. Parents feel that they know a good deal more about what is going on in everyone's lives, and feel more connected as a result. This is in contrast to the level of knowledge within an earlier generation of families. While children generally had more freedom in the past, parents often knew far less about their lives.

More knowledge about the family often translates into a feeling that the family is closer. This is especially true for families who initiate short bursts of contact throughout the day, regardless of message content. The opportunities for short bursts of contact throughout the day may be more effective in creating a sense of satisfaction than lengthier but less frequent exchanges.



We are closer in a way. When I was growing up my mom and dad could not get hold of me.”

Mother

Family app needed

Current consumers' usage has changed since a year ago, and it has increased for all services. Texting, WhatsApp and Snapchat are the services that have increased the most with variations for the father and mother. Fathers are the main users of WhatsApp and have increased their usage the most.

New services such as Snapchat, Vine and KIK are the ones that some parents test out and then almost half of them stop using. The main driver is to check out what their children are using. Still the vast majority have never used those new services.

The question is, will the minority of families that have already taken up more services and are more frequent in their family communication lead the way for other families that have not? And in that case will those families be as frequent users?

One possibility is that more families will start to use more services in their family communication. This could be opposed by the children that want to keep some services to only be used with friends.

This knowledge and sense of closeness also means that parents feel much more secure about their children's wellbeing.

Percentage of parents who agree with these statements about communication technology:

- > **85%** – It has made it possible to have contact with the family throughout the day
- > **82%** – It makes practicalities/logistics during the week much easier
- > **75%** – I have better contact with my child/children
- > **71%** – The family has more communication with each other
- > **68%** – I communicate more with my child/children
- > **64%** – I have better knowledge about my child/children
- > **63%** – My child can spend more time outside the home since he/she can be reached

With the smartphone there are even more ways to keep in contact, not just with texting and voice. This potential has only been taken up by a minority of families today. Voice and texting are still the predominant methods used within families when communicating with each other when apart.

Alternatively, texting and voice will remain the main services for the foreseeable future. In that case, if families do not use services other than voice and texting in their daily communication, there might be a need for a “parent plus children” app that doesn't exist today but solves issues related to family communication. It should be easy to use by all family members, separating family communication from communication with friends.



68%

of children said there are no services that they use today to communicate with friends that they would like their parents to begin using

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Our services, software and infrastructure – especially in mobility, broadband and the cloud – are enabling the telecom industry and other sectors to do better business, increase efficiency, improve the user experience and capture new opportunities.

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