

Navigating the moral imperatives of parenting in the age of (dis)connection

A care-minded approach to digital media use by parents in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I examine how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care in the practices of parents living in Denmark. I ask the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technologies? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? This chapter is based on 20 in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 0–12. Parents' experiences demonstrate how digital technologies can help create both the preconditions and the context for care. The use of technology does not come without tension, however, as parents perceive that it can also interfere with an active good life and compete for their attention. Taken together, parents' practices and discourses of (dis)connection offer insight into the moral imperatives surrounding digital media use in the family.

KEYWORDS: care, dependency, disconnection, moral imperatives, parenting

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Introduction

To keep up a “good life” for themselves and their children, parents need to use digital technologies. At the same time, in recent years, parents have been encouraged to take care of their “digital health” as well as that of family members by creating times and spaces free of digital media (Mascheroni et al., 2018). This contributes to what has been called the “disconnection turn”, that is, the belief that digital disconnection is no longer a luxury, but rather a moral obligation (Fast, 2021). While research abounds on the types of technology rules and mediation strategies parents establish for their children, less is known about parents’ own qualms and struggles over technology use (Clark, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Even in the best of circumstances, raising a child is challenging, and the wealth of technological innovation currently available to parents has the potential to ease or complicate these challenges (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Through examining parents’ multifaceted relationship with digital media, in this chapter I explore the tensions that exist between demands for self-regulation and family life’s inherent relationality. In doing so, I look at how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care. In particular, I ask the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technologies? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? Empirically, this chapter is based on 20 in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 0–12 living in Denmark. Theoretically, it draws on feminist approaches to care to look at how parents try to improve the lives of their children both by incorporating and rejecting digital technologies (Tronto, 2013; Mol et al., 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

The care-minded approach I take in understanding the empirical material grounds my argument in the lived experiences of parents and offers insight into the moral imperatives surrounding digital media use in the family. Additionally, this approach allows me to see parents’ contradictions and inner conflicts as an intrinsic part of caring for children in the digital age rather than as failures of care. In this way, I aim to articulate how the seemingly opposing forces of digital dependency and the expectation of disconnection in family life present parents with a series of dilemmas that lead to specific media-use patterns. Concretely, I find that, in their everyday life, parents attempt to develop a more sustainable relationship with people and technology by orchestrating daily life using digital devices, creating caring spaces with and without technology, keeping human connections through technology, and balancing adults’ and children’s attention demands. In doing so, this chapter illustrates how digital technologies can both provide the preconditions and context for care while simultaneously posing a threat to what parents conceive as good parenting.

In the following, I first outline the specific literature on digital disconnection and dependency that forms the backdrop of the analysis. In the next section, I relate these two concepts to a feminist notion of care to outline what

disconnection studies can learn from care's relational and situated approach to practices. Next, I provide a brief description of how data were collected and analysed and introduce the research participants. I then continue with an analysis of interview excerpts, offering interpretations of the dilemmas that permeate families' relationship with digital technologies. I find that digital technologies play several, somewhat contradictory, roles in parents' accounts: "personal assistants", means for human connection, obstacles to an active good life, or competitors for attention. Finally, in the discussion section I examine the implications of my findings for (dis)connection research, showing that parents' practices enact a moral order pertaining to digital media use in the family.

(Dis)connection and digital dependencies

With the integration of digital devices and screens into our daily lives, discussions on responsible media usage have become commonplace. The recent "disconnection turn" (Fast, 2021) is spreading through the general public, where disconnection is viewed as both a right and a duty to live more meaningful lives (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). In other words, there is an increasing sense that leaving or taking a break from digital media is a moral obligation and the solution to various problems, such as media (over)dependency or screen "addiction". People are therefore urged to unplug from digital devices to create periods and spaces in their lives where digital media are not present.

As others in this edited volume have noted, however, disconnective practices do not usually represent a binary choice of usage or non-usage. Rather, disconnection presupposes connectivity, since its practices are usually the result of users reevaluating the meanings and values of digital media in ways that reshape their place in everyday life (Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume). This suggests that disconnection is part of a moral economy of digital media use, that is, "a web of affect-saturated values" that relate to one another (Daston, 1995: 4). Yet, the moral boundaries of this "emerging symbolic battlefield" are not fully defined, partly because of digital media's relative novelty (Fast et al., 2021). That is, disconnection is one of many competing and even incompatible priorities that people must balance in a complex sociotechnical landscape.

Indeed, the widespread negative reactions to digital media expose how unprecedented it is for a media regime to become so integrated into as many aspects of daily life that it punctuates "everyday experience, sensations, emotions, and sociality" (Paasonen, 2021: 10). Over the past few decades, digital media have transformed how we organise and understand sociality, and mobile devices have become a necessary part of the management of social relationships, including child-rearing (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni, 2020; Paasonen, 2021). An always-on, always-reachable culture has emerged, where connectivity is not a personal choice but rather a social expectation.

If we were cut off from digital media, not just our personal connections would suffer. Because connectivity has grown infrastructural, shaping “the conditions for relational life”, individuals hoping to disconnect also risk being left out from other important areas of sociality (Paasonen, 2021: 9). Public and private services in Denmark, and much of the Global North – from banking to taxes to school–parent communication – are accessed primarily through mobile apps (Dencik & Kaun, 2020; Paasonen, 2021). As a result, we are now witnessing the rise of a new form of digital participation which is no longer purely voluntary but rather “coerced” (Barassi, 2019: 419). Digital technologies, scholars argue, “are intertwined with the things we love the most and the things we need to keep up a decent human life” (Jansson & Adams, 2021: 15). To completely disconnect from digital media, one would need to disengage from modern society, since today’s personal, socioeconomic, political, cultural, organisational, and bureaucratic structures all generate digital dependence.

Care

Digital technologies are, therefore, increasingly integral to maintaining the “living web of care” for humans (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019). Here, care is understood as a diverse range of affects, ethics, and practices that bring humans and non-humans together in the activity of nurturing that which is necessary for life’s sustenance and flourishing (Hjorth & Lupton, 2021; Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Within care, the subject is not a self-sufficient or independent actor; people are always mutually interconnected, vulnerable, and dependent, often in asymmetric ways. Hence, the capacity to act is not possessed by individuals, but rather emerges through and within relationships. This approach departs from the “autonomous man” who is “free from the tangles of relationality” (Drichel, 2019: 6). Agency is understood here as always distributed and always more than human; it is people’s relationships with other people and things (including digital technologies) that opens or closes humans’ capacities for flourishing (Hjorth & Lupton, 2021).

Care is characterised by three dimensions, as illustrated in the earlier definition: care as everyday labour, an affective relation, and an ethico-political sensitivity (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). The first dimension refers to what is involved in *doing* care, or in caring as “the practical engagement of contributing to restoring, sustaining, or improving something” (Mol & Hardon, 2020: 185). Caring includes not only material, but also immaterial tasks related to communication, the maintenance of connections, and the production of sociability. Secondly, the affects that mediate these relations, while not always positive, are integral to care situations, as an “oppressive burden, as joy, as boredom” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 5). Finally, the disposition to care is never neutral, leading to its ethico-political dimension

(Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Care, as a practice, continually attempts to sustain and improve lives. While feminist theorists leave the definition of what counts as a “good life” productively open, care practices *themselves* always have ethical implications because, when engaging in caring activities, positioning is inevitable (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). That is, when we care for someone, we enact certain standards of what a “good life” is.

This last point is best developed by Annemarie Mol, who has contrasted what she calls the “logic of care” with the “logic of choice”, namely, a rationale that assumes that we are autonomous individuals and celebrates individual choice. The two logics reflect two sets of normative values on what a “good life” is. While the logic of choice values autonomy and equality, “in the logic of care attentiveness and specificity are good and neglect is bad” (Mol, 2008: 74). Care is not a matter of making well-informed decisions, but of attempting to attune knowledge and practices to complex lives in order to live “as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). In caring, then, determining what is “good” to do depends on the situation, and as things change, new adaptations are required. Additionally, when multiple “goods” are simultaneously at stake, caring involves mediating between them (Mol & Hardon, 2020).

What can feminist theories of care do for disconnection studies?

The logic of care described above does not necessarily provide a better alternative to the logic of choice in every situation. In everyday life contexts fraught with dilemmas like the ones studied by research on parenting and disconnection alike, however, care as a concept is better able to deal with uncertainties and respond to new problems, frictions, and complications. A logic of care may therefore be mobilised in discussions about digital (dis)connection to negotiate with the rationalised logics of both popular discourses and academia.

Additionally, this feminist perspective on care and agency can help disconnection literature grapple with the dialectics of digital connection and disconnection. It does so by avoiding dichotomies and staying with the unsolved tensions and relations (Jansson & Adams, 2021). Based on this approach, it is apparent that where and how we use digital technologies, as well as who and what we use them with, shape our experiences and feelings on digital (dis)connection (Lupton, 2022).

As the world becomes increasingly digitally dependent, a care perspective reveals the ways in which we seek to ground ourselves again. We do so not by disconnecting or becoming independent but by developing (or attempting to develop) sustainable relations with each other and with other-than-human things, such as digital technologies. If dependency is inevitable, “emancipation, when it concerns care, might be less about breaking with ties and attachments than about recognising and fostering some modes of (inter-)dependence

more than others” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019: 38). From this perspective, grounding ourselves implies maintaining and repairing our relationships with people and things, as well as attending to the normative ideals that help us define which attachments are worth nurturing and preserving.

Family and digital technologies

If at all grappling with the concept of care, discourses on digital (dis)connection focus on “self-care”, where the “disconnecting agent” is typically a young, self-reliant individual (Bagger, Chapter 6 in this volume). This ignores digital technology’s social entanglements and reiterates an idea of human beings as fully autonomous creatures who can command their interactions with others and make decisions about where, when, and how to direct their attention (Harmon & Mazmanian, 2013). In studying family life and how digital technologies are part of (or excluded from) it, this chapter follows Bagger’s (Chapter 6 in this volume) suggestion to look beyond the individual media user towards the organisations and institutions in which everyday life takes place.

As a unit of analysis, the family is significant because it is a social structure that is enacted through care practices. The family is also a space where more and more responsibility for care is allocated. A combination of intensive parenting becoming the main parenting ideal and concomitant changes in the Nordic welfare state contribute to this phenomenon. Intensive parenting, as an ideal, expects parents to devote their full attention to children’s needs, emotions, and behaviours around the clock (Lee et al., 2010). In Denmark, this ideal of the child-attentive parent is complemented by an increasing expectation that parents will contribute to the state’s citizen-making project (Gilliam et al., 2017). Thus, parents are not merely responsible for their children at home, but also for ensuring that optimal conditions are created for the child’s development in childcare and educational institutions (Dannesboe et al., 2018).

Most research on the use of digital media in the family focuses on parents’ mediation strategies to protect their children from media’s harms (Jennings & Wartella, 2012; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018). Consistent with the discussion on digital dependence outlined above, studies that *do* look at the role of digital media in parenting find that digital media has become increasingly entangled with parenting practices (Lim, 2019; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Lupton et al., 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2018). Technology may seem empowering when it enables people to manage their daily lives; however, scholars warn that, because of the availability of technologies, parents are now expected to use them to be constantly attentive to their children’s safety, activities, and feelings in the hope that this will optimise their (uncertain) future (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020).

Methods

To examine the dilemmas that parents face surrounding digital technology, between October 2021 and March 2022, I conducted individual and couple in-depth interviews with 13 parents of children aged 0–12 living in Denmark. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions to get to know participants and their context, as well as to probe different aspects of their experiences with digital technologies. Additionally, I included a walkthrough component to the interviews, whereby participants gave me a tour of their phones and walked me through their screen-time modules as well as other relevant apps (Light et al., 2016).

After institutional ethics approval, I recruited participants through my personal networks as well as Facebook parenting groups. This study is part of a larger ongoing project on digital parenting where parents are interviewed three times in a year. At the time of writing, I recruited 13 participants – 4 fathers and 9 mothers – all of whom gave written informed consent. Table 12.1 presents a summary of the participants' characteristics, as conveyed by them during the interview sessions. It is important to note that the majority of participants reside in the Capital Region of Denmark, have higher education, and work full-time jobs. This limits the generalisability of findings to other socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Yet, researching the parenting practices of privileged families can offer valuable insights into the prevailing parenting ideals and norms within contemporary Danish society, frequently presented as universal and deeply ingrained within institutional structures (Bach, 2016).

I carried out interviews with individual parents as well as one joint interview in the case of a dual-parent household (Henrik and Anna, see Table 12.1). In total, twenty interviews are part of this article: twelve first interviews and eight second interviews. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed in English. To enhance readability, some of the normal stumbling in verbal speech has been removed from the quotes included in the analysis. This includes false starts, fillers (e.g., uh, um, you know, and, like, so), and some repetition of words. In cases where a long stretch of words has been deleted, three dots appear in brackets to indicate this. Furthermore, the transcripts and any other data were anonymised, and all the names used in this article are pseudonyms (see Table 12.1).

TABLE 12.1 Overview of interview participants

Pseudonym (gender)	Age	Children	Education	Job	Parenting Status
Julie (F)	30–39	3 (ages 5, 3, 3)	MA	Freelancer (Copenhagen)	separated; main carer
Carla (F)	30–39	1 (age 4)	MA	Tourism (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Sofie (F)	30–39	2 (ages 0, 3)	Higher education	Pharmacist (Jutland)	dual-parent household
Helena (F)	30–39	3 (ages 12, 8, 5)	PhD	Postdoctoral researcher (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Laura (F)	30–39	1 (age 4)	Professional education	Restaurant manager (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Anna (F)	30–39	2 (ages 7, 12)	Higher education	Communications/ design (Jutland)	dual-parent household
Emil (M)	40–49	1 (age 1)	Higher education	Theatre lighting designer (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Jens (M)	30–39	2 (ages 4, 1)	Higher education	Director of communications (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Morten (M)	30–39	1 (age 2)	PhD	Front-end developer (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Luise (F)	30–39	2 (ages 6, 4)	Higher education	Business development and sales (Brønshøj)	dual-parent household
Tania (F)	30–39	2 (twins, age 2)	Higher education	Start-up (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Sara (F)	40–49	2 (ages 2, 4)	MA	PhD Candidate (Copenhagen)	dual-parent household
Henrik (M)	30–39	2 (ages 7, 12)	Higher education	Teacher (Jutland)	dual-parent household

In order to describe participants' experiences regarding digital (dis)connection related to care, a coding scheme was developed iteratively from the empirical data and initial theoretical concepts. A major focus of the first cycle of coding was on parents' explicit discourses of disconnection and their practices or strategies for doing so. However, as I read and re-read the full

empirical material in search of patterns and classifications, what emerged as important were the tensions between the need to use digital technologies to support a good life and the expectation that parents attend to their children undisturbed by digital technologies. Thus, I reorganised and reconfigured my first-cycle codes and their associated coded data in subsequent coding iterations. I eventually developed a more select set of themes or extended phrases that indicate what a data unit is about or what it means (Saldana, 2021). The final set of themes and subthemes are summarised in Table 12.2.

TABLE 12.2 Themes and subthemes

Themes	Sub-themes
Digital technologies as enabling care	Digital technologies as: • “personal assistants” • means for human connection
Digital technologies as a threat to care	Digital technologies as: • hindering an active good life • competing for attention

Analysis

In this section, I explore how digital (dis)connection intertwines with and relates to care in the practices of parents of children 0–12 living in Denmark. In particular, I ground the analysis on parents’ daily struggle to develop sustainable relations and to care for children with and without digital technologies.

Digital technologies as “personal assistants”

Julie is the main carer for her three daughters aged three to five. In our first encounter, we discussed how she uses digital technologies throughout what seemed to be a hectic day. Julie juggles dropping off and picking up her three kids at different daycares, working from home as a freelance translator, and volunteering online for a local charity. When I asked her what she would do if she did not have digital technologies, she promptly replied: “Oh my god, let’s say I wouldn’t be able to manage a life with three kids. That’s crazy!” Digital technologies have become pervasive and infrastructural in Julie’s life, shaping the conditions for everyday parenting, from grocery shopping online when children are asleep to consulting the doctor.

Her daughters, Julie explained, grew up with digital media and expect her to use it to take care of their everyday needs and wants: “they are used to ‘mommy check your mobile and buy something, mommy check your mobile, make a playdate’”. Because they grew up in a media-saturated environment,

Julie “can’t really imagine like... going back 10, 20 years ago, without a smartphone”. These comments demonstrate, as has been voiced by others looking at the ambivalences surrounding digital (dis)connection, that digital technologies allow people to orchestrate daily life (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). They are, as Julie vividly put it, “like a personal assistant helping me to memorise and organise everything. Really everything. From shopping, to kids, to playdates, activities, everything”. These technologies are weaved into social life, including the expectations of toddlers who have only known a world where everything is one click away.

While Julie felt her daughters’ expectations pressured her to be online, Henrik, a father of two living in rural Jutland, explained that because many of the things he needs for parenting are accessed primarily through his smartphone: “your life is worse if you don’t have these things”. In the context of discussing how he used Facebook to access parents’ groups from his children’s classes, he explained that “the biggest challenge” for him was that he kept being “addicted, as to what is going on”. Thus, it is not that he is addicted to the screen itself, but rather that he has to always be online to have the information he needs to enact being a “good parent”. It is important to him to be part of those groups, even if he would prefer to leave Facebook, because “there’s types of information that you need, you need them to be accessible”. While he has been contemplating getting a “dumbphone” for a while, he feels like not being connected “is kind of like being handicapped, sometimes”. These comments exemplify some parents’ dilemmas when it comes to technology: They feel like they have to choose between two undesirable options – in this case, being on Facebook or forgoing important information regarding their kids’ lives. Agency is at the heart of this dilemma. Not being on Facebook might diminish one’s capacities to know and do things: “It’s impossible to lead a life if you don’t have these things. And of course, it’s not, but sometimes it feels that way” (Henrik).

While it may be *possible* to live without digital devices, these technologies shape the conditions for contemporary relational life. For instance, Jens, who worked part-time as a communications’ director at a small company, explained that if he did not have access to his e-mail and calendar, “it would be difficult to be so flexible” in deciding when to work and whether to do it from home or the office. This flexibility has allowed him to be more responsive to the situation at home, for example, by working from home when a kid was sick or leaving a little later for work on a slow morning. Thus, digital technologies participate in the “articulation work” of parenting, that is, the continuous efforts required to weave together often disparate social worlds such as home and work (Strauss, 1988).

Digital technologies also enable the creation of caring times and spaces. Parents were mindful of clearing enough physical and mental space to allow time for what they saw as the most valuable aspects of parenting, such as playing

together, being a comforting presence for children or helping them navigate their emotions. In this context, a tightly scheduled routine may offer a sense of calm for overstretched parents. It provides them with a sequence of tasks they can do habitually, “without thinking”, leaving space for quality time (Morten). To keep track of these schedules, participants maintained physical and digital calendars, and some of them shared the digital ones with their partners “so we know, and we can plan things around, so we don’t forget” (Tania).

In the spirit of creating time and space for care, some parents, such as Julie and Laura, also had intricate systems with alarms to portion time and make sure they were not only punctual, but that the time they spent together with their kids was enjoyable:

I could feel that in the morning, we started to stress a little bit... And to make sure it was a nice environment for him in the morning with me not stressing around, I started setting an alarm for when we have to get up the latest [...] to have a watch that says when he has to get dressed in the morning [...] he finds the whole thing about the alarm actually very reassuring because then he can just *be*... and then he knows when the alarm rings that we have to start getting dressed for the day. And then there won’t be any stress. (Laura)

Like Hjorth and Lupton pointed out, it is not only cutting-edge technologies – such as the care robots or artificial intelligence that captivate popular attention – that shape and participate in care (2021). In their everyday lives, parents use mundane and well-established digital media and devices, such as a smartphone’s alarm app, to address what they identify as their family’s needs and to create space for intimacy. With the alarm, Laura explained, her son Ralph knows that “in the morning we will be getting up, having time to cuddle, still having good time to eat breakfast”. Moreover, the set routine was a way of teaching Ralph boundaries and to take responsibility: “So you know that of course we can, like, have fun for a whole hour. But then you have to get up”.

Remarkably, when asked whether digital media can help take care of children, most parents replied with a categorical “No”. Upon being pressed to elaborate, they would insist that digital technologies did not “care for” children, in Tronto’s (1998) sense of assuming responsibility to meet the child’s needs, nor could they provide care in the sense of meeting children’s emotional requirements. As Helena put it: “in the word ‘caring’, there’s also... some kind of emotion, and an iPad or a phone can’t display emotions, and it can’t substitute a real person”. Rather, technology, according to parents, is a tool or even a “personal assistant”, as mentioned earlier, enabling *them* to do the caring in ways that help children become self-regulating and reflexive people.

Digital technologies as means for human connection

The previous examples show how even as parents' discourses expose notions of care as pre-technological (something developed in the next section), their practices demonstrate that such care also requires the use of digital infrastructures to support a good life. Technology, therefore, helps create the preconditions for care. In this section, I discuss another use of technology that demonstrates how digital media help create the context for care: technology's role in enabling and maintaining family relationships.

When I asked Tania, a Portuguese mom, what the role of technology in the family was, she distinguished between its logistical role, which she believed was dispensable, and its use to stay in touch with people living outside Denmark. For her, "getting us closer to each other is probably the one thing that I would say we are able to do now". More generally, participants mentioned their relational tasks as reasons why they could not fully unplug from digital technologies. The thought of disconnecting was, in fact, anxiety-producing for some, like Sofie. She explained that when she broke her phone some years ago, she felt "paranoid" by the inability to contact her parents, her partner, and her brother. The negative affects produced by the lack of connection were also expressed by Laura. She said that while pregnant, she would get "really pissed" at her husband when he was not available on his phone, fearing she would go into labour and be unable to contact him.

Moreover, in the families studied, connection to digital technologies allows parents to care both for their children and others by "working *on* these relations – trying to establish or maintain them – and *with* these relations" (Muusse et al., 2021: 1590). That is, part of parenting is to be a nexus between children and older relatives, particularly grandparents, which is increasingly achieved with digital technologies.

From the moment I started recording, Carla made it clear that she and her husband had hard and fast rules when it came to their son's screen time: "We do not use screens with him", she explained. There was only one explicit exception to this rule, which she mentioned immediately after: "We only use our phone to call our parents once a day, my mom in the morning, and his [husband's] parents once a week and my dad twice a week, something like that". This one exception was very important to Carla, who mentioned it several times during our interviews and considered it the reason why her child, Leo, had developed a relationship with his grandparents, especially her own mother who lived in Italy: "It is nice to see that they can actually have a relationship even though they are far away". Moreover, for non-Danish parents, like Carla but also Julie, digital communication with grandparents was a way to transmit cultural identity and let their children practice the languages of their families. This illustrates how the care enabled by digital technologies encompasses not just material tasks, but also immaterial ones related to social interaction, communication, and maintaining relationships.

Previous research widely recognises digital media as essential to the maintenance of transnational families, cultural identities, and support networks (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Hjorth et al., 2020; Wilding et al., 2020). However, a care-minded approach argues that technologies do more than that. Because they are part of the practices that generate our reality, technologies can be considered as participating in “doing family” in the sense of “performing” or “enacting” the family. The boundaries of who is part of the family and who is not are being produced relationally and through the use of digital technologies.

As Carla’s comments attest, digital technologies are used to bridge the distances between “here” and “there” and create intergenerational connections. Danish participants who lived in different cities than their relatives also mentioned this type of use. Yet, parents’ use of technology to create and maintain relationships with older generations went beyond bridging long distances. Jens and Morten would send pictures to grandparents to share their children’s daily activities and development. This was especially important to them when their children were less than a year old and changed faster than the grandparents could witness during their visits. Sofie, for her part, printed digital photos to create family albums that she praises for helping her daughter recognise all her relatives.

Thus, regardless of whether they were part of transnational families or not, parents’ engagement with digital technologies results in “digital kinning” (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). That is, they use media to maintain support networks and nurture connections with relatives. As Tania put it: “I use WhatsApp a lot, because obviously, *that’s family*. And it’s valuable because of that”. This is the case even in the most screen-averse households, such as Carla’s. Digital media take part in family routines and rituals, from Leo’s breakfast with grandma to Laura’s FaceTime “wine nights” with her sister, and in doing so, they also re-produce what it means to be a family.

Digital technologies as hindering an active “good life”

When asked what some of their favourite things to do as a family were, parents almost unanimously replied with an outdoor activity like going to the playground or a nearby forest. The good life here is an active life, usually away from screens. Anna, for instance, explained that she thought of themselves as a “quite analogue” family and longed for a time without digital technologies:

I want to just travel back in time and live in the 80s again, where just... I was bored, you know? Back when kids, they weren’t stimulated all the time [...] I don’t know, maybe I’m just like really romantic about it, because I have this idea that you use your fantasy.

Being bored was mentioned by multiple parents as an experience they had growing up. It was understood as a positive thing to go through and as something that screens hinder. Thus, parents either imposed screen time limits or – more often, especially with older children – encouraged their offspring to not (over)use their devices in the hope that boredom would spark creativity. As Sofie explained about her daughter: “Of course she has to learn technology but, in the meantime, she also has to learn it is ok to get bored and think by yourself or get creative or play something else”. Luckily for her daughter, she has company. The other parents in the neighbourhood, Sofie explained, share her understanding that “it is good to get outside”. Therefore, the neighbourhood children are all encouraged to “play outside or go cycling or play ball” (Sofie).

This appreciation for an active life and the outdoors was seen by Julie, who lives in Copenhagen but is originally from China, as particularly Danish. She believed she had to learn to incorporate the outdoors into her parenting – partly through using social media to look at what “local families” do:

They like to take kids to the... like, nature! Forest! [Laughs] play sands or, you know, go to the beach. And the kids are not afraid of the cold or something. For me, it's like “oh my god! Wintertime!” It is cold and I don't feel I want to go out and I... I know that they go out in kindergarten. But for the weekend I still feel like “Ah, let's get to stay at home”. And then I see... Okay, all the other parents running around with their kids outside. And I feel like “Okay, that's something I need to learn”.

It is interesting to note that Julie learnt the value that Danish families give to spending time outdoors by being online and curating her social media in a way that would give her a glimpse of what families around her do. Thus, it is her use of digital media to learn how to parent “appropriately”, according to local standards, that taught her the importance of time outdoors (and offline) in Danish family life.

Digital technologies competing for attention

Sometimes, then, care also has to do with creating digitally disconnected times and spaces. The dinner table is particularly relevant here, and mothers were usually the ones enforcing them as phone-free spaces. Helena, for instance, said, “I have a rule that there's no screen time while we eat”. Morten, for his part, explained: “My wife sometimes tries to convince me to do phone-free periods. She really wants us to not spend time on our phone at the table”. A device-free family meal is a way to create a space of togetherness and conversation, where no one is distracted by the outside world.

Distraction is in fact a keyword when talking about (and with) parents about technology. In popular media, parents' (dis)connection to digital media is seen as a matter of attention – or lack thereof. Parents are accused of being “constantly present in their children's lives physically, but they are less

emotionally attuned” (Christakis, 2018). I also found a similar normative discourse in some of my interviews:

So, the problem I see with parenting today and the use of that is that first of all you are not a good example if you yourself are glued to your screen and not paying attention to, you know, your child calling for you or playing [...] What is he learning from that? (Carla)

Being “glued to your screen” is understood here as a moral breach of what is expected from parents. There are (few) good uses of technology, like Carla’s mom “establishing a relationship via the technology” with her grandson. There are also bad uses of technology, which distract and distance parent and child. Thus, Carla’s experiences emphasise that parents’ feelings about digital (dis)connection depend not only on whom they use digital technologies with but also on where and how they use them (Lupton, 2022).

Furthermore, Carla’s comment demonstrates that the risk of parents being absorbed by mobile devices while in the presence of their child is not simply getting “distracted”, but what this communicates to the child. This resonates with the experiences of other parents, who emphasised that they needed to manage their engagement with digital media in order to be good examples. Seeing his pre-teen daughter (over)use her smartphone, for instance, was for Henrik a “good reminder” to put his phone in his pocket. Here, the parent is expected to provide a model for digital (dis)connection, rather than impose strict rules on children’s screen time. In order for their children to become self-regulating and thoughtful, parents sought to be attentive and good role models, balancing their own need for digital connection with their kids’ need for attention.

However, the cases above reveal that wanting to be a good example emerged from family connections, not necessarily from parents’ individual determination. They arose relationally. Parents’ disconnective practices were the result not of conscious self-imposed restrictions, but of how they thought they may be seen by their children. Laura put it nicely when she reflected:

When you have a kid, you just see yourself from the outside. That’s also why I’m suddenly so aware that every time I sit with my phone – it doesn’t always mean that I put it down – but how aware I am of how he sees me.

Laura went on to contrast her smartphone use with her father reading the newspaper when she was growing up, exposing some thought-provoking views on the relation between media and distraction:

I grew up with a dad who just read the newspaper instead, we can talk about... is it better to look in a phone than look in a newspaper? [...] But it’s the whole thing about disconnecting from your kid and the kid learning to see you as someone who’s approachable. And, are you approachable when you sit with your phone? I don’t know... probably not. And then I can pay for that psychiatry session when he gets older!

Providing care here is all about attentiveness and responsiveness. Once again, Laura's comment exposes how the risk of (dis)connecting has to do with what you communicate to your child by refraining from giving them attention. Being absorbed by media communicates that you may not be approached, creating a distance between parent and child – with consequences so severe as to require a “psychiatry session” in the future. For participants, being perceived as unapproachable was problematic because, according to their own accounts and in line with the imperatives of intensive parenting, caring for a child involves showing availability and affirmation. Morten had a similar perspective: It was inattentiveness, not digital devices themselves, that were the problem. “Being present in the moment”, as he called it, can be hindered by a book as much as by a phone. The issue is withdrawing attention from people.

Furthermore, it is not solely media's “addictive” content that has the potential of disconnecting a parent from their child, but its materiality. Here, handheld devices like smartphones may in fact be less estranging than traditional newspapers, which restrain parents' physical field of vision. “At least with the phone I'm not, like, completely covered”, Laura elucidated. “With the phone, I can still see what he does. Like, my whole peripheral vision is not hidden behind a newspaper”. Again, it is not about the difference between analogue and digital technologies but about the extent of what parents can see and attend to while consuming media:

It's the same with my husband. When he opens his computer, he's hidden behind the computer. And that makes a difference, I think, because that means that you can't see the other people around you, they can't see your expressions. And I think for a kid, it's important to see how your parents react when they [the kids] say something to you.

Thus, media's physical features play a role in structuring attention, as well as parents' and children's fields of vision, in ways that may deter or encourage human connection.

Concluding discussion

In our technologically saturated age, parenting is a complex and morally challenging activity. In this chapter, I have discussed the struggles and dilemmas that permeate Danish parents' relationships with digital technology. By mobilising a care perspective, I found that parents attempt to develop more sustainable relations with people and technology by using digital devices as personal assistants to orchestrate daily life and keep human connections. Digital technologies, however, are experienced as threatening care if they hinder an active “good life” or compete for attention. Participants constantly balance what they consider valuable uses of technology and its risks. In doing so, parents enact notions of what a “good parent” and a “good life” are. This exposes a moral order or system of values and priorities surrounding digital media use in the family.

Parents' accounts reiterate that digital technologies are weaved into sociality in ways that make them unavoidable. This is not simply because media are “addictive”, but because they are *helpful*. As one participant, Henrik, put it, “your life is worse if you don’t have these things”. Technology plays an important role in how parents orchestrate their daily lives with kids, and at least some parents praise it for making completing a myriad of responsibilities easier and even possible. Moreover, individuals delegate tasks to digital technologies to make space for the things they value most. These valuable practices include using media to nurture relationships with family members, including those at a distance, resulting in “digital kinning” (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). In this way, parents’ ongoing efforts to forge connections, aided by technology, structure kids’ place in the family. They do so by allowing children to form intergenerational relationships and enacting the family as a social unit even when members live far apart.

When parents mentioned disconnecting from digital media, the disconnection practices they reported were usually temporary, even in screen-averse households. Moreover, these practices resulted from a desire to prioritise other types of connections. Thus, similar to Vertesi and colleagues’ (2016) study of personal data narratives, this chapter finds that people combine devices, practices, and social ties in a “locally-adjudicated” way to embody an appropriate relationship with digital technologies in parenting. Just like with parenting, there are collective moral expectations and affective elements to digital media use (Daston, 1995). What parents do with technology, what they say they do, and why they do it are, therefore, articulated in moral economies or systems of values that parents mobilise in their attempts to take care of their children in the “right way” (Vertesi et al., 2016). That is, by attempting to balance connection and disconnection, parents aspire to be(come) good parents – to give their children a “good life”, whatever this means for them. In practice, however, this sometimes involves negotiating incompatible priorities.

In parents’ narratives, the moral imperative of digital disconnection is intertwined with the values and norms associated with intensive parenting (Lee et al., 2010). In explaining why they value disconnection, parents point out that children need parental attention for their development and that being “attached to the phone” communicates to the children that they are unapproachable. Moreover, breaking away from digital technology was framed by nostalgia for their own childhood. Yet, parents’ narratives also recognise the value of digital connection in parenting. This is not only for efficiency; there is also the expectation that parents will connect their children with older relatives by digitally initiating and maintaining contact.

Any apparent contradictions, however, do not necessarily indicate a failure of care. Parents’ reflexiveness and their work mediating between different values are integral to raising children. This is because, in caring, determining what is good to do depends on the context and changes as the situation unfolds

(e.g., as children grow up) (Mol & Hardon, 2020). By balancing the need for digital connection with their children's attention demands, participants sought to nurture self-regulating and thoughtful children by themselves being attentive, responsive, and comforting. In their practices, then, parents strived for what was locally good (Mol & Hardon, 2020: 196). In the words of Sofie, determining what is good parenting in a particular situation is sometimes a matter of "just feel[ing] it in my stomach and heart".

Thus, even as parents' discourses show nostalgic notions of a good life and care as pre-technological, their practices evidence that such care also requires digital infrastructures to support that good life and maintain relationships. Taken together, parents' experiences show how digital technologies can help create both the preconditions for care – by assisting in orchestrating everyday life – and the context for care – by supporting the construction of the family as a social unit. But technology's participation in daily life is not without its tensions. Technologies can pull families together, but parents feel they may also pull them apart. As a result, parents constantly strive to balance these two opposing forces, sometimes leading to negative affective reactions, such as guilt or frustration.

Using a feminist care perspective to study digital practices has implications for disconnection studies. A logic of care is a powerful lens for negotiating the rationalised logic of both popular and academic discourses. This is because the care approach demands that we part ways with the "autonomous man" as disconnection's agent (Drichel, 2019). Instead, it requires that we address our digital, as well as interpersonal, dependence. In doing so, it avoids portraying humans as fully self-governing creatures who can choose where and how to focus their attention. This exposes how relationships may make it harder to disconnect, for instance, if we are attentive to a message from a loved one. But it also reveals how the will and ability to disconnect may, in fact, be motivated by relationships, for instance, in the case of parents who said they felt they had to disconnect from their phones to be "a good example". Because we are not autonomous beings, then, a care perspective exposes that it is the *way* in which we relate to other people and things, including digital technologies, that opens or limits our potential for (dis)connection.

Parents tread a delicate line between digital connection and disconnection informed by societal norms of what a "good parent" should do. Further research could expand on these findings by examining the consequences of the moral economy surrounding digital (dis)connection on the time and space dimensions of parenting. Specifically, studies could focus on the time pressures experienced by parents who must postpone social reproductive and logistical tasks typically performed on their phones until their children are away or asleep. From a feminist perspective, such research would also provide valuable insights into how the imperatives discussed in this study might be unequally – and potentially unfairly – distributed among family members. Additionally, the present study reveals that "good parents" aim to

cultivate self-regulating and thoughtful children through their own attentiveness and responsiveness. This can be seen as fostering a specific parenting style that aligns with the values promoted by the Danish welfare state, which prioritises the early cultivation of children's social skills, adaptability, and self-expression (Gilliam et al., 2017). Therefore, future research on digital parenting may shed light on how the “micro” moral order of digital (dis)connection interacts with broader moral frameworks, particularly in relation to the role of (digital) parenting in shaping future citizens.

A care approach also warns us against binaries and clear-cut solutions. Living in the digital age often involves conflicts and contradictions. Those hoping to (dis)connect, including parents, are constantly learning about and calibrating between diverse local or situated “goods”, (Mol & Hardon, 2020). Since digital dependency is inevitable, the path to emancipation is not to break all our attachments to technology. Rather, it requires that we recognise and foster certain modes of (inter)dependence more than others.

Grounding the analysis in the situated doings and meanings of parents helps bring this point home. Despite being conflicted – or as a result of being conflicted – parents’ practices illustrate how we may try, in everyday life, to ground ourselves. We do so by relentlessly attempting to forge sustainable connections with people and things so that we can be “present in the moment”, as Morten put it, while still getting things done.

To conclude, in this chapter I took a care-minded approach to studying parents’ experiences with digital media. I explored the following questions: How do parents strive to care for their children with and without digital technology? And what can feminist care perspectives do for theories of disconnection? The analysis revealed tensions between the use of digital media to support good parenting and the expectation that parents take care of their children undisturbed by technology. In parents’ accounts, digital technologies are assigned several – sometimes contradicting – roles as “personal assistants”, means for human connection, obstacles to an active good life, and competitors for attention. On the one hand, the chapter illustrates that parents use digital media to orchestrate daily life and nurture family relations. On the other hand, it also demonstrates how adults’ need for digital connection must be balanced with children’s attention demands. Additionally, parents were keen on limiting technology to pursue nostalgic notions of what a good childhood is.

Taken together, parents’ practices and discourses of (dis)connection enact certain standards of what the “good life” is, exposing a moral order surrounding digital media use in the family. As the chapter illustrates, then, a care-minded approach to disconnection studies can be useful in exposing our interdependences as well as the affectively and morally charged territories that digital media users encounter. This is a necessary first step in understanding how other people, things, and moral imperatives influence whether and how people (dis)connect.

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