The Role of Social Media and Online Communities in Parenting Support

Community Service Learning Project
Student Name: Junghyun Park, Fan Yang
Supervisor: Jama Watt

Table of Contents

Introduction

Ensuring the healthy development of children is important for every family. Before we can understand the types of support services that different parents can benefit from, it is important to examine the resources that are currently available to them. There are two broad categories of support networks, formal and informal support networks. Formal support networks can be defined as support provided by professionals, including parent education, behavioral training and therapy programs that help reduce parental stress, increase coping and foster better child outcomes. Informal support networks can be defined as advice, information and support provided by family members and friends, which may also play a role in helping parents to become better caregivers. Within informal support networks, the use of social media and online communities have been recognized as a source of parenting support. Its effectiveness is still an area that requires further research (Min 2010).

The purpose of this report is to examine a specific component of informal support networks, which is the role of social media and online communities in parenting support. Throughout this report, the emergence of online resources, social media and online communities, as well as areas for further research will be discussed.

The Emergence of Online Resources

The Internet is playing an increasingly bigger role for parents seeking parenting information because of its availability (e.g., home, work and libraries), convenience and anonymity (Bouche and Migeot 2008; Romano 2007). Not only do new parents use the Internet for alternative sources of parenting formation, they also use the Internet to seek guidance and support in their parenting roles (Madge and O'Connor 2006). With the Internet, parents can give and receive emotional support. They can also share information about child developmental changes they observe in their infants with other parents as a way to normalize the experiences that they are having (Drenta and Moren-Cross 2005; Hall and Irvine 2009).

There is existing literature that shows online parenting support can be effective and that parenting information and social support found online can potentially empower parents (Madge and O'Connor 2006). Access to online resources has been found to increase confidence and parenting efficacy among parents. For instance, Hudson et al. (2003) found that many single, low-income, African American mothers lack social support, experience psychological distress and suffer difficulties caring for their infants during the transition to parenthood. They showed that New Mothers Network, an internet-based social support intervention, may be an effective social support for improving these African American mothers' psychological health outcomes, parenting outcomes and health care utilization outcomes. Also, Na and Chia (2008) found that parents who had access to KidzGrow Online reported an increase in knowledge of their children developmental milestones in comparison to parents who did not have access to the program in a period of three months. This study further showed that an online resource, which facilitated informal learning, did have a definitive positive impact on parenting.

With regards to access and use of the Internet, there has been a "digital divide" hypothesis, which entails that socio-economically advantaged groups tend to use the Internet more than the general population. Sarkadi and Bremberg (2005) lead a cross-sectional study of users of a large Swedish parenting website which investigated whether users of a Swedish general parenting website were subjected to the digital divide phenomenon. They found that out of a total of 2221 users who have completed an anonymous survey posted on the website, 95% respondents were female and most respondents' educational level were not significantly higher than in the general population. Additionally, 68% of respondents had income level at or below the national average, contradicting the digital divide phenomenon. Furthermore, for parents living without a partner and having lower income levels and education indicated higher perceived social support. In conclusion, Internet based parenting support can be potentially useful and that Internet use for general parenting issues, mainly used by women, does not necessarily follow the lines of digital divide. It is important to realize that there is a gender bias in the sense of that fathers are less involved as participants in using the Internet as a source of social support.

Overall, it is important to realize that current research studies only offer a glimpse into parent's experience of using the Internet. Through understanding why and how parents engage with existing online resources, we can potentially improve and develop better resources to help parents supporting their children.

Social Media and Online Communities

According to Andreas Kaplan, Professor of Marketing at ESCP Europe Business School, and Michael Haenlein, social media is referred to as a "group of internet based applications…that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." To name a few examples, these applications take the form of blogs/microblogs (Twitter), Internet forums, and social networking sites (Facebook). All of these applications allow for the exchange of user-generated information—although the flow of information may be more mono-directional for some. These applications also provide a fertile platform on which users can form online communities: "an Internet-connected collective of people who interact over time around a shared purpose, interest or need, reliant on people's voluntary commitment, participation and contributions" (Ren et al., 2007).

To assess whether or not these applications will be useful for parents, it is necessary to define their purpose for seeking help from online resources. If the parent is searching solely for information from social media, most of these applications will suffice, as they exist primarily for the exchange of information—though the type of information available does vary. On the other hand, if the parent is searching primarily for a community in which to belong and to receive emotional support, the sense of community established for each application varies greatly.

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to read and send short messages (140 characters maximum) called "tweets" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It can be a useful resource to receive links for useful information from reputable twitter accounts on a daily basis. In this way, parents can follow twitter accounts such as Daily Parenting Tip and receive tweets with headlines of information of interest such as:

> Steps to a Calmer, Less-Yelling Family -> ow.ty/riM8r (via @micheleborba)
> **(**DailyParentTip, 2013)

However, there is little sense of community and the information is usually mono-directional for this use.

Other useful twitter accounts

Ottawa Public Health: https://twitter.com/ottawahealth

Blogs are "the Social Media equivalent of personal web pages and can come in a multitude of different variations, from personal diaries describing the author's life to summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The information available from blogs can range from personal accounts of parenting, opinion pieces, parenting advice, local deals, and anecdotes.

> You cannot spoil a child with love: So many new parents hear well-meaning people telling them that they are spoiling their baby by holding him and responding to his needs. But you cannot spoil a child with love. You can only spoil a child by giving the child stuff as a replacement for the time and attention that you are not able to give your child. This great article discusses the issue in more detail: Am I Spoiling My Child?
>
> Excerpt from PhD In Parenting
>
> (Urban, 2008)

A sense of community can be established through the use of comments on blogs, however this usually requires a fair bit of dedication to establish relationships with bloggers. Therefore, the flow of information is usually quite mono-directional in this case as well unless the parent establishes his or her own blog.

Examples of blogs on parenting:

Leanne Shirtliffe, Calgary: http://ironicmom.com/

Canadian Dad: http://canadiandad.com

All for my boy: http://forkayden.blogspot.ca

For parents with an established support system, popular social networks such as Facebook can be a convenient way to connect and share information with their friends, family, and colleagues. For example, a mother looking to arrange play dates for their children in Ottawa—and in turn, informal support from each other—can contact some of her friends on Facebook to form a group of mothers or fathers interested in getting together. They can also invite some of their own friends to the group, quickly expanding the network of parents involved in the group.

For isolated parents— newly immigrated parents, and young mothers (including teenage mothers)—Facebook is of little use without a baseline level of support in place. For these parents, Internet forums however can be of great use for obtaining information, advice, and emotional support. Internet forums are online discussion sites where users can have conversations as a group in the form of posted messages. For example, the user finds a topic of interest (Parenting Chat), selects a specific forum (Toddler), and finds a thread (conversations such as "Potty Training—help!") to view posted messages of the discussion. With such a large forum like the Canadian Moms Community, there exists a huge range of parents who exist within the online community and can therefore address a variety of concerns or questions that parents may have. For example, for a parent concerned about how little her child is eating, the following comments were posted in response:

> "What about a smoothie? Show her that you are adding milk, juice and raspberries…It is frustrating and worrisome. Will she take a children's multivitamin? If so, you wouldn't need to fret so much about her getting her nutrients" (Warby, 2012).

> "Sorry to hear that Jenn. Mikey still won't eat either. He has milk, toddler forumula and breakfast shakes. And that's about it…Hopefully Chloe is just going through a stage and starts eating. I would not wish a noneater on anyone. It's so stressful" (luv_sarah, 2012)

Aside from the purpose of obtaining information, the forum can also be used as an informal support network—this would be especially useful for isolated parents. To illustrate this point, forum posts from a thread titled "Bored? Lonely? Blah!" is shown below.

> "I'm having trouble dealing with mat leave again. I find the days really long and lonely…I still have 6 months left before I go back to work. It's so hard for me to be here everyday, yet it's so hard to explain to anyone why! I have everything I could want in life but all I want to do is have another place to go and something else to do, just for a little while. Does that make sense to anyone? I don't really talk about this with anyone offline because it seems selfish and a little

crazy. I chose to be a mom, right? It's awesome being a mom, right? We are so lucky to have a year off , paid, right? What's my problem? Can anyone relate? Thanks for reading in any case" (Niespetha, 2013).

"I totally get it. Each person feels differently, but for me, I get a lot of my self-identity from my job. I always considered it a calling and I feel like the work I do is really important. That has nothing to do with loving my children; that is the continuation of the "me" who existed before I had kids. My work is intellectually stimulating and challenging. Also, I am independent. It is really important to me to feel like I can take care of myself. In some ways it is silly because my husband and I have a very stable and loving marriage; also, if I ever needed help my parents and extended family and friends would certainly be there. Still, I like earning my income and benefits. I find that when I am on mat leave, little problems become big problems, if that makes sense. And there is a certain monotony to the work. Like, you are never "done" the laundry, there is always more coming" (Warby, 2013)

"I totally get what you are saying. We moved to Edmonton when my first was 2 months old. Away from all family and friends so I never wanted to leave the house. I didn't know anyone and well for a while I didn't want to take the effort to get ready to go out and meet people either. Hang in there it will get better" (TATE, 2013)

One of the major drawbacks of Canadian forums such as the Canadian Moms Community is that it requires some level of proficiency in English and may not be of great use for parents with a language barrier. However, an online resource such as the CMAS[1] ((http://cmascanada.ca/2011/02/07/new-in-canada-parenting-support-series-brochures/) is available in a number of languages for parents with these language barriers. In addition, mothers generally dominate these forums, so it may pose a slight barrier for fathers to join communities such as these.

Other Canadian parenting forums:

BabyCenter Canada: http://www.babycenter.ca/community

SmartCanucks (Forum: Canadian Parents): http://forum.smartcanucks.ca/canadian-parents/

To summarize, social media can be of great use to parents depending on their purpose of accessing these resources (Figure 1). If the primary purpose is solely to obtain information on parenting, social networks with a more mono-directional flow of information such as Twitter and Blogs may be suitable. On the other hand, if the primary purpose is to establish informal support systems in an online community, social networks such as Facebook and Internet forums may be a better option. However, for isolated parents without a support system set in place, Internet forums may be more suitable and accessible.

---

[1] CMAS is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and provides online resources for new Canadians to support the care and settlement of young immigrant children.

Figure 1: Summary of social media applications available for parents

To promote better health outcomes of children—especially in preventing at-risk children from progressing further into a high-risk group—it is essential to target the home environment in which they belong. Thus, as a broad range primary intervention, it is logical to target the caregivers and work on enhancing their parenting skills. One of the major ways one can work to achieve this is to improve the quality and accessibility of support networks available to parents. As mentioned previously, two broad categories of support networks exist—formal and informal. Both help to enhance parenting skills and in turn lead to better health outcomes of children. Of these, informal support networks are of particular interest as they are often lacking for isolated parents, such as young mothers, and new immigrants. If the precedent is that informal support enhance parenting skills, then to evaluate whether or not the use of social media can aid in improving better health outcomes of children, one has to establish that the use of social media is a form of informal support (Figure 2).
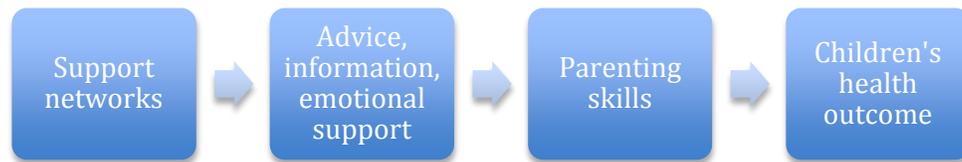
Support networks → Advice, information, emotional support → Parenting skills → Children's health outcome

Figure 2: Flow chart to illustrate the sequence of factors influencing children's health

As defined previously, informal support networks consist of advice, information and support provided by friends and family. Online communities established by social media applications, specifically Internet forums, provide a strong source of informal support for parents.

This notion is well illustrated by a study by Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, where by using "participant observation and discourse analysis" on 180 mothers on a Internet parenting forum, they found a high degree of "emotional support, instrumental support—both formal and informal, and community building…all of which contribute to the creation…of social capital." The social capital gained from participation in the forum "mitigated the stress of these mothers and provided valuable information regarding the care of their children" (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Thus the evidence strongly suggests the great value of social media in forming a supportive network in which the parents can access and in turn positively influence their role as a caregiver.

Similarly, in a study done by Wang (2003) explored the impact of a popular online parenting discussion forum called Yaolan in China and found that, "many young mothers…surfed parenting discussion forums everyday…not only for information they needed, but also a place [in which belong]." Once again, validating the fact that these Internet forums foster supportive online communities for parents.

Mumsnet, a popular parenting forum for mothers in the UK, further supports the notion that social media can function to provide informal support through the exchange of personal advice and information. In a study by Pedersen & Smithson, 2013, 391 users of Mumsnet responded to prompts regarding their experience with Mumsnet. Of these respondents, 86% reported advice as one of the major satisfactions from Mumsnet, 64% for support, and 54% for company. It is evident from this study that these online communities fulfill their role in providing informal support for parents. In addition, the pool of information available is also much wider and diverse than what mothers would have access to in their personal network, breaking the "digital divide" between parents of different socioeconomic status (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005).

When considering ways to improve the support networks for parents, which would in turn enhance their parenting skills, it is important to consider social media and online communities—particularly Internet forums—as an informal support network for parents. Based on the evidence presented, such as the sense of community established and emotional support gained from on-line interactions, social media can be an accessible and convenient way to provide informal support for parents.

Areas for Further Research

The Internet may be regarded as one of the most effective means of communication on earth, and consequently it is one of the fastest growing conduits of parenting education and support for families (Harrison and Lee 2006). Although it is very powerful in providing parenting information, it is also very difficult to measure its impact.

Firstly, when it comes to measuring its effectiveness, it is important to realize that parents' online participations are fairly challenging to measure. For instance, parents' passive online activities such as reading online content or comments cannot be recorded or measured. As a result, research studies tend to capture the norms and expectations of active members of a virtual community as they tend to influence other members. Therefore, future research should focus on using survey methods to investigate the impact of virtual community on parenting behavior and parenting efficacy for both active and passive members of online communities (Jang and Dworkin 2012)

Secondly, there are variances between different parenting websites which makes it difficult to understand how parents are using and benefiting from virtual resources and communities. As Jiang and Diworkin (2012) elucidated in their study of parents using babycenter.com, parents using other parenting websites may participate differently than parents on babycenter.com, may have different characteristics and interests. Thus, the next step would be to find out effective ways to compare different parenting websites to expand our understanding of how parents can benefit from the different online resources.

Lastly, it is hard to know in what ways fathers are involved in the use of virtual communities. As Sadraick et al. concluded in their research study that fathers are less involved as participants in using the internet as a source of social support (Sarkadi and Bremberg 2005), or they might participate in the community in passive ways (Jang and Dworkin 2012). Therefore, it is important to conduct future research to explore fathers' involvement with virtual communities as they also play a crucial role in parenting.

Conclusion

In today's age, there exists a tremendous amount of information available online. Thus, online resources are becoming increasingly relevant in the way in which parents gather information pertaining to their role as caregivers. It is becoming increasingly evident that the information and social support found online empower parents with knowledge regarding their children's health and boost their confidence in their parenting skills. In addition, the accessibility and convenience of online resources allow for socioeconomically disadvantaged parents to seek and find the same information and support from a wide range of parents online—breaking the "digital divide."

The use of social media among parents to share and receive information is becoming increasingly prevalent. Not only is it convenient and easy for the exchange of information, it also allows for online communities to form and provide informal support for parents. Social media applications such as Twitter, blogs, Facebook, and Internet forums can be useful for parents depending on what they need from these applications. If they are primarily looking for information, then applications such as Twitter and reputable blogs are more suitable. On the other hand, if they are seeking for personal advice and emotional support within an online community, application s such as Facebook and Internet forums are more suitable. For isolated parents without an already established support system, Internet forums may be more appropriate due to the ease at which one can readily connect with a vast number of online users.

Social media holds great value for parents seeking for advice and support. Studies examining online parenting forums repeatedly found evidence that Internet forums function as an informal support system for parents. The online communities formed by these forums allowed for parents to find a place in which they belong, and gain social capital from interactions with other members—mitigating the stresses of being a parent and also obtaining valuable information to help raise their children. Thus, since a strong support network is necessary to build strong parenting skills—which in turn directly impact the health outcome of children—the use of social media can therefore have a positive impact on children.

Although these online tools and resources have been available for parents for some time, there are still a number of areas that should be further researched. Further research should be conducted to compare the different online parental communities available, survey the impact of online communities on parental behavior and efficacy of parenting skills, and finally investigate the involvement of fathers in these online communities.

References

Bouche, G., & Migeot, V. (2008). Parental Use of the Internet to Seek Health Information and Primary Care Utilization for Their Child: A Cross-sectional Study. *BMC Public Health*, *8*(1), 300.

Drentea, P., & Moren-Cross, J. L. (2005). Social Capital and Social Support on the Web: The Case of an Internet Mother Site. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, *27*(7), 920-943.

Hall, W., & Irvine, V. (2009). E-communication Among Mothers Of Infants And Toddlers In A Community-based Cohort: A Content Analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *65*(1), 175-183.

Harrison, J., & Lee, A. (2006). The role of E-health in the changing health care environment. *Nursing Economics*, *24*(6), 283-288.

Jang, J., & Dworkin, J. (2012). Babycenter.com: New parent behavior in an online community. *The Forum Board* , *17*(2). Retrieved December 20, 2013, from http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2012/v17-n2-2012-summer-fall/jang-dworkin.php

Kaplan, A., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53 (1), 59-68.

Luv_sarah. (2012, Apr 6). Re: Cannot get her to eat! (help!) [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.canadianmomscommunity.com/forum/showthread.php?t=14446

Madge, C., & O'Connor, H. (2006). Parenting Gone Wired: Empowerment of New Mothers on the Internet? *Social & Cultural Geography*, *7*(2), 199-220.

Min, K. (n.d.). Informal and Formal Community Supports for Parents: An Assessment of Information Sharing in Connecticut Schools. *Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND)*. Retrieved December 27, 2013, from http://www.uconnucedd.org/lend/fellows/projects/cohort3_2010_2011.html

Na, J., & Chia, S. (2008). Impact of Online Resources on Informal Learners: Parent's Perception of Their Parenting Skills. *Computers & Education*, *51*(1), 173-186.

Niespetha. (2013, Jan 3). Re: Bored? Lonely? Blah! [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.canadianmomscommunity.com/forum/showthread.php?t=14881

Pedersen, S., & Smithson, J. (2013). Mothers with attitude – How the Mumsnet parenting forum offers space for new forms of femininity to emerge online. *Women's Studies International Forum, 38*(1), 97-107

Romano, A. M. (2007). A changing landscape: Implications of pregnant women's Internet use for childbirth educators. *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, *16*(4), 18-24.

Ren, Y., Kraut, R., & Kiesler, S. (2007). Applying common identity and bond theory to design of online communities. *Organization Studies*, *28*(3), 377–408

Sarkadi, A., & Bremberg, S. (2005). Socially Unbiased Parenting Support on the Internet: A Cross-sectional Study of Users of a Large Swedish Parenting Website. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, *31*(1), 43-52.

TATE. (2013, Jan 3). Re: Bored? Lonely? Blah! [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.canadianmomscommunity.com/forum/showthread.php?t=14881

Urban, A. (2008, Aug 8). 10 Things All New Parents Should Know [Web blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.phdinparenting.com/blog/2008/8/4/10-things-all-new-parents-should-know.html.

Wang, G. (2003). 'Net-Moms'—a new place and a new identity: parenting discussion forums on the Internet in China. *Provincial China, 8*(1), 77-88

Warby. (2013, Jan 3). Re: Bored? Lonely? Blah! [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.canadianmomscommunity.com/forum/showthread.php?t=14881

Warby. (2012, Apr 4). Re: Cannot get her to eat! (help!) [Online forum comment]. Retrieved from http://www.canadianmomscommunity.com/forum/showthread.php?t=14446

@DailyParentTip. (2013, Dec 9). Steps to a Calmer, Less-Yelling Family -> ow.ty/riM8r (via @micheleborba) [Twitter post]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/DailyParentTip