

NSR

New Society Rules | A We Are Pi Publication



The Parenting Upgrade

NSR is a research platform exploring the changing rules of society today. To talk with us, get in touch at NSR@wearepi.com. This report was produced in partnership with Human.Dev.

Good parenting and technology have often been portrayed as enemies.

Most people's impression of the role of technology in parenting is as a 'downgrade', a way for parents to pacify their kids and get some downtime. While there is truth to this, we think that technology can also revolutionize parenting. In this volume of New Society Rules, we sat down with a range of child development experts to discuss several topics: the current state of parenting, the role of technology within the family, and how technology might enable a parenting upgrade.

On our journey, we learned a lot about the realities of being parents today: the pressure to not let your child fall behind in a competitive academic landscape, the confusion of navigating contrasting philosophies on child development, the concerns around a decline in free play, and the growing levels of anxiety in children.

In every area, we've found that technology isn't the enemy but a potential part of the solution. When used in the right way, technology can help children learn in new ways, give parents more community

support, provide kids with more opportunities for free play, and help with their emotional and social development. We've also heard from almost all of our experts that it's time to leave the idea of "screen time" behind. It's an unhelpful phrase that treats the incredibly wide range of activities that children do online as if they were of equal merit. Online learning and exploring massive virtual worlds are not the same thing as watching hyper-stimulating cartoons on YouTube.

Perhaps most importantly, we've heard that parents need to stop implicitly rejecting their children's digital worlds. These digital spaces are where kids are doing a lot of their growing up, and they need their parents to dive in alongside them, to help guide them.

We hope you find our experts' thoughts as provocative as we do.



08

Exiting the Helicopter

We spoke to the founder of human.dev about how parenting styles are evolving, and how technology can help us evolve past the limits of helicopter parenting.



26

Breaking the Fourth Wall

We spoke to Andrew Davenport, the creator of “Teletubbies” and “In the Night Garden”, about what it takes to create children’s entertainment that captures kids’ attention and fuels their imagination.



14

Training for a Digital World

We consulted an international speaker and author about the challenges, realities, and opportunities of raising children in a connected world.



20

Embracing Kids’ Digital Worlds

We spoke to the CEO of Peppy Pals about technology as a tool for helping children to develop empathy and emotional intelligence—and why parents shouldn’t reject it.



34

Crash-Test Techies

We spoke to Tara Sharma, host and creator of The Tara Sharma Show, about what it feels like to be a parent today, navigating a new world of tech that is changing faster than you can learn it.



40

Closing the Learning Gap

We spoke to Omowale Moses, Founding Member & Strategic Advisor of the Young People’s Project and MathTalk, about using technology to integrate maths into our everyday life.

Exiting the Helicopter

We spoke to *Zelda Yanovich*, founder of human.dev, about how parenting styles are evolving and how technology can help us evolve past the limits of helicopter parenting.



Zelda Yanovich is the founder of [human.dev](#) (the co-creator of this issue). Her career has spanned work with the United Nations, the BBC, and the LEGO foundation”. Throughout, she has focused on the science of learning and early child development. Zelda is also an advisor for the Real Play Coalition, Brookings Institute Playful Learning Landscapes and [Intrinsic Labs](#).

You’re both a parent and someone who has studied child development deeply. What are the most important lessons you’ve taken from your work into your own parenting style?

The principles that I hold really close are warmth, love and autonomy support. And what we’re learning from neuroscience is how important that autonomy support is. To explain this visually, think about how we walk behind a young child. We walk behind them, trying to give them a couple of feet of space, and if they fall, we lift them up and help them try again. They get that space to experiment, to fail, to succeed, but we’re not taking control of the journey. That space is really important, as well as creating a sense of safety and structure for your child to experiment within.

The only way we’re going to get our kids to experiment is if we model it ourselves. So we should, within our parenting journey, allow ourselves to try new things, and see if it’s working or not. We need to find permission to be kind to ourselves and enjoy that process together with our child or children. If you think of other human relations (for example a best friend) we don’t reach for a book on how to do best friending every time there is a bump in the road, we talk it through, figure it out and we know the way we are with our ‘best friend’ is completely different from the way other people relate to their ‘best friend’ and all that is important is that it works for the humans involved.

When you look at parenting today, what do you think are the most important forces shaping how we parent-and how we think about child development?

One important trend for parents is this sense that

there is a lot of competition. A lot of competition to get into the right schools, for university places, for the right professions, et cetera. As parents,

As parents we’re in fight-or-flight mode.

if we are focusing on that sense of competition, we’re upping the stress for ourselves and moving to a fight-or -flight mode. Parents are stressed out about doing it wrong, about whether they’ve done all of the things that their neighbour down the road has done to ensure their child’s success. If that’s the environment you exist in, I think you’re likely to come out fighting for your child.

What a lot of academics are talking about is that helicopter parenting has emerged from this environment and parents are trying to support their child. They’re clearing the pathway for them because they perhaps lack trust in the meritocracy and they want to prevent their children from slipping backwards and having less opportunity or disposable income than they had.

What do you think the costs are for parents and kids in the “helicopter parenting” model?

There’s a cost in terms of building a child’s confidence, their self-regulation, resilience, and their creativity. If you want them to explore the world, you need to give them more autonomy. Many kids have just been driven to violin class and extra maths tuition, and haven’t truly shaped their own journey. That has a cost on that child’s potential happiness, confidence, and social and emotional skills.

Moving forward, I see a huge amount of emphasis on social and emotional skills. We know that kids who are confident and have strong social and emotional skills do better in school and eventually have more successful careers. They have a more civic nature, and they give back more to society. It’s a win-win-win situation. And so, as nations begin to compare their education systems based on the development of social and emotional skills, and

universities start to do the same- it’s adding more fuel to that fire of parents seeing that as their role too.

There’s been a lot of talk recently of the growing anxiety crisis among both parents and children. Is there a connection here?

There’s been a massive spike in anxiety, certainly in countries like the US, the UK-and across Europe. Normally, we talk about exponential growth in the content of positive trends around technology, but we’re seeing some really worrying numbers around anxiety and depression. It’s also happening unequally, so families in poverty or high-crime areas are most at risk.

I think parents are feeling like they need to respond to this, and that this is an important area for them alongside the schools, the sports coaches, and others. We need to find the space to begin to talk about and explore emotions.

I think the challenge for parents, and I can put my own hand up here, is we didn’t grow up talking about that stuff. Do we have the language to have this dialogue with our children? A lot of parents are realising it’s a skill set we need to sort of experiment with and get more comfortable with.

Any time an issue like anxiety is acknowledged, it seems that “technology” is quick to be blamed. Do you think there is a case?

I agree with you that there is this media frenzy around technology as a cause, and that doesn’t stand up in terms of the science. It’s more complex than any one answer. What do we even mean by the word technology? You know, do we mean watching television together? It’s way too simplified a narrative.





Do you think the digital world can play a meaningful role in giving children the space to grow up?

Kids used to be able to go outside, to go on their bikes and run around with the kids in your neighbourhood. The fact that kids can now go online, and they can experience anything and everything, well, it's gigantic. I see kids coming to parents and asking, What do I do with this access? They're asking: How do I make sense of what this guy's saying to my friends in a chat room? And they need parents to play a slightly different guiding friendship role. As parents and caregivers, we need to have our door open to that. We need our kids to see us as someone that they can chat with as they shape their journey.

The fact that kids can now go online and experience anything and everything, it's gigantic.

You've previously explained that you see parenting naturally evolving to a more "friendship" based model. Could you explain more what you mean by this?

So, a lot's been written about how you shouldn't aspire to be your child's friend, because you're supposed to be a parent, right? Like you should maintain the structure and the safety of that authoritative parenting style. There's a lot of merit in that, and I wouldn't want to totally move away from the science. I just see that, within the parenting structure, it's important to be alongside your child in their exploration of emotions and social skills, and to create that space for children where they have autonomy, where they can explore, experiment, make mistakes.

How should the environment and support around parents needs to change to help them more?

I don't think it has helped that parents have felt under so much pressure. As a baby, when you're looking at your parents' faces and they smile, you smile back; when they stick their tongues out, you stick your tongue out back. That is the child quickly understanding the parents' emotions, and how those emotions play out. It's unbelievable how sensitive children are to the levels of stress that parents and caregivers are experiencing.

So, it's easy to blame technology. But you might equally ask what's been the support for that family unit and that child as they're growing up and learning to manage their emotions? I really love how technology can help boost a parent's confidence and help them understand that they are all their child needs. I think that platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp and BabyCenter are taking us back to the idea that it takes a village to raise a child.

How might technology evolve to help parents more, too?

I'm excited about where the design of technology is going, because I think at the moment, we've all got a phone in our hands. We're not the best at sharing that screen with someone else-it's seen as a solo sport.

There's research that showed two-year-olds reading a book with a parent and caregiver, and they really want to interact with the parent or caregiver. You give them the same book on the tablet, and then the child literally moves away from the parent.

I think that has something to do with the hardware and that we're moving towards new technology. I think it also links to modelling: I make a conscious effort to share text messages that come in with my kids, to build out this sense that the screen can create shared experiences. But I'm excited to see how we create those shared experiences using technology as human-experience (HX) design takes root.

Training for a Digital World

We spoke to *Jordan Shapiro*, international speaker and author, about the challenges, realities, and opportunities of raising children in a connected world.





Jordan Shapiro is an international speaker and author whose fresh perspective combines psychology, philosophy, and economics in unexpected ways. His book, [The New Childhood: Raising Kids To Thrive in a Connected World](#), changed the cultural conversation about parenting and screen time.

In your book “The New Childhood”, you took a deep look at the new digital landscape of childhood-why did you think that was important?

It’s so often that you’ll see these memes on social media: “when you think back to your childhood, what do you think? Are you going to remember the days when you played outside, or the days when you played a video game?” Whenever I see that, I’m like, Actually, I totally remember sitting in the theatre watching E.T. for the first time. There are so many things around screens that I do remember. And I’m not even crazy digital, like my kids. But every time I would hear these things, I would think, what are these things that people think are essential nostalgic moments of family time?

Immediately after the Capitol Riots [my kids] were on games, playing with Trump supporters.

That’s what really led me to “The New Childhood” as a book. I did research and discovered that so many of the things that people think of as the essential key to perfect parts of family life were invented in the 20th century. They never existed in any form before that.

Do you believe the online world gives more opportunities for kids to explore than they currently have in the offline world?

Parenting has become very restrictive in comparison to what it was a generation ago, kids aren’t allowed to go play on the street the way they were

a generation ago. I think they found the “street to play” in things like Roblox and Minecraft and Fortnite. They found a place to live in that imaginary world and I think that’s positive. Especially if you think about the potential for those who wouldn’t have had it anyway because of where they live, it has the potential to open up worlds. It even has the potential to level out the current play gap.

The access to a wider world through technology is huge. There’s a really positive thing in online gaming in the amount of global communication that’s happening with kids. My kids are playing with kids from all over the world, and they constantly talk about it. Immediately after the Capitol Riots they were on games playing with Trump supporters and hearing what their families were saying about it. I think that’s really powerful. It gets them outside of a bubble, which they’re definitely in, no matter how hard any of us try.

Many parents find it challenging to figure out the rules on technology. Do you believe parents should be giving children more freedom to roam, or should they take more control of their child’s online world?

I think kids should have the right to explore on some level, but we also need parenting that teaches them how to explore in positive ways. They need to know how to make sense of what they’re seeing and what they’re doing in ways that align with your family’s values.

Where parents are often wrong is that because the devices feel so private—because cell phones go in your back pocket or under your pillow, because the device feels so personal to you when you’re using it as a parent—there’s this sense of hands-off when it comes to kids. A sense of I’m not going to watch everything they do, especially when they become teenagers, that they deserve their privacy on their phone. This is an absurd notion. There’s no such thing as privacy on the internet. You don’t have any, and the last thing I want is for my kids to think that they have any privacy there. We do not want our kids to think it’s a safe, private space. You need



to learn that certain behaviours aren't for public places, certain behaviours aren't for school. When you were a little kid, just like me, you learned, I'm allowed to say "f*ck" all I want, as long as I'm behind the bushes and the teachers aren't listening. You learn how to do the code-switching. And we're at risk of giving them the total wrong sense of code-switching.

It sounds like there's an online etiquette that needs to be part of modern-day parenting; how can parents teach this?

You teach that by going, "Let me see what you're doing". You have to teach that by letting them live a life where you're noticing them, where you're following them, where you're watching them. My children had a phone around the age of six. Six-year-olds don't really have a sense of privacy, they don't want to hide anything from their parents. They want their parents to be proud of everything they

do. I think waiting to give a device that powerful to a child until they're 13—when their hormones are raging, full of anger, rebelliousness, and recklessness—I think it's a big mistake.

The idea that phones are private is an absurd notion.

When my kids were six, and I asked them to do something, they'd come back proud to show me that they had done exactly what I had asked. Now, when I ask them to do something, they go, "No, and here's my argument for why not". You can't teach sex in one conversation over dinner about the birds and the bees. That's an ongoing conversation about consent, about understanding reproduction and

understanding, respect and dignity and so on, and so many things that need to be reinforced for years before it's ever a possibility. And so, I think it's similar when it comes to technology.

You can't teach sex in one conversation. I think it's similar when it comes to technology.

Do you see the digital world as a place where children can experiment and develop?

If you think about how much of your life is lived through digital technology, then you need to understand that kids need the access to experiment and to learn, and to be creative with it in a low-stakes environment. That's what childhood is, childhood is the low-stakes time to try out different things. We need that chance for them to experiment and learn, and to become accustomed to it, and for it to become somewhat second nature.

And for that, they need the play time. For that, they need the opportunity to play with digital toys, digital tools, in digital spaces. Don't let it replace anything else. You should absolutely be worried if your kids are not on a playground, if your kids are not going outside, if your kids are not interested in anything but the things on the screen. But you should also be worried if they're only interested in books and nothing else. Screen time is not optional anymore; it's part of a well balanced life.

Do you believe growing up with technology from a young age can give you a better chance at success in life?

You can't participate in an adult economy without technology. Therefore, you want to get your kids to do that well. A good example might be how it's hard to communicate tone in a text message. It's easy to misunderstand people in text messages.

I'm pretty sure the next generation will not have that problem. When you get to grow up while doing that so much, that doesn't happen. It's a speculation but I would make that argument based on [the fact that], while I might misunderstand your emails or your text messages, I don't misunderstand my wife's emails and text messages because there's so many of them, we've learned how to interpret.

Those are skills that you learn through practice. Starting kids young is going to make them better at email, at text, at slack than most adults are. More effectively and in a way that doesn't interfere or distract them in a way that it can. There's a huge difference between those who can write a good email and those who can't. Those who say too much and those who don't, and those who understand how people use it. This is a skill that's probably best learned through practice. There's no right way to do it, it's a social skill, it's the same as a playground interaction. It's about me being able to read the tone in your email and knowing what to send back. And kids need practice with that. We'll have much smarter, more fulfilled adults, if they start practicing that now.

Embracing Kids' Digital Worlds

We spoke to *Paulina Olsson*, CEO of Peppy Pals, about technology as a tool for helping children to develop empathy and emotional intelligence (EQ) and why parents should embrace it.

Photo by Alexander Coggin





Paulina Olsson is CEO of Swedish children's brand Peppy Pals, a series of playful apps, books and movies teaching children social and emotional skills. Paulina was awarded by the Swedish King for her work to inspire kindness and empathy in every child.

Peppy Pals is designed with the goal of helping children develop social and emotional intelligence. Why do you think this is so important, and is it something we're neglecting currently?

We've grown up into a system that is a one-size-fits-all, a world where academic skills are worshipped, and define if you are successful or not. But we are coming to realise that that's not true. In fact, research shows only 15% of success is related to academic skills, and that 85% of our successes are linked to strong emotional intelligence.

We've grown up in a system where academic skills are worshiped.

Putting everything on academic skills and less on human skills doesn't help us become well balanced individuals, nor successful leaders. The educational system is aware of this, however, to create real system change it requires policy making, lobbying as well as big companies to recognise this as a priority. All parties need to work together. Now why are academic skills more valued? Well, IQ is easily measurable. You are able to see its progress. Whereas empathy and emotional awareness are more difficult to quantify, one reason being it's a dynamic skill that changes depending on your life situations. Not to say it shouldn't be measured, but more to say it's less tangible and more difficult to grasp.

What type of experience is Peppy Pals trying to create for kids and parents, and why?

We want to find a way to bridge parents and kids in talking about emotions and empathy. It's important we do this through the lens of the child and not through something we, as parents, want to force on our child. Kids are on all digital devices, phones, tablets, etc. They download apps and unfortunately, many of these apps are about putting makeup on Barbie dolls; racing cars; or shooting guns. We wanted to participate in the digital world in a meaningful way, and help parents with the right tools.

We took on the challenge of gamifying social and emotional learning for kids and became a leading creator of digital experiences that teach kids how to deal with life. And we do that through different methods: books, TV series, apps. And today, [we] also advise brands and companies on how to incorporate social and emotional learning into their products and experiences. It's a competence that we have, and that a lot of parents need help with. Because it's not easy for a parent to say to a four-year-old, Let's sit down and talk about empathy.

Can technology really help children develop core life skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence?

Technology can help teach children to share, collaborate with others, or even overcome fear. The key is translating the message into something age-appropriate and relatable for kids. We've worked with psychologists and kids in designing our stories. Through studies and observations we've noticed that when kids play through relatable scenarios and are able to interact with what's going on, it leads to a more meaningful and helpful learning experience.

It creates visual memories in their mind that they can relate real-life situations to later in life, helping them navigate tricky moments and emotions in life. Technology is a powerful tool, it's a tool 21st century kids have grown up with, and thus a part of their everyday life. And even though it hasn't been that way for us growing up, it's important we participate,



support and show interest in all digital instead of moving away from it.

How important do you think it is for parents to embrace technology as a parenting tool?

Actively rejecting technology or dismissing it all as 'screen time' means missing out on all the amazing things kids are up to when they're online. It creates a gap between you and your child. Children need to have us adults participating in the digital playground, rather than have us not willing to put ourselves in their shoes of what it means to be a child today. It's just as important to raise kind, caring individuals online as it is offline.

It's beautiful to participate in your child's digital life.

Needless to say, children like having present parents who are curious and ask questions about what happens in their world, whether that is asking about what has happened in Fortnite today or what's so fun about TikTok? When you do so, it's important to listen to your child and not make your own assumptions or judgements. Help them navigate feelings and friendships online instead, just as you would in school or at home.

Technology is not just a place of addiction to screen time, even though it's important to be aware of it too. We can benefit so much if we saw it as a beautiful way to participate in your child's life, because let's face it, it's a place where your child hangs out with his/her friends quite a lot. It's beautiful to participate in your child's digital life.

Many parents feel a general nervousness towards all new forms of technology; what would your advice be to them?

Many parents feel insecure, overwhelmed or even uninformed about the many different inputs technology can have in their child's life. It's natural.

We as humans fear the "unknown", making it easier to reject something rather than trying to understand it. Oftentimes when we are introduced to new things, it's in our nature to be sceptical, to react in a way that assumes it's there to pose danger. That's how we've been taught to look at things.

I get it. It's difficult for parents to navigate and understand what is good and bad. In trying to figure this out, it helps if we compare it to something more concrete, like food for example. If we fill our body every day with unhealthy food, our body will eventually react and say it's not good for you. We know a healthy diet is about having a varied diet. Same goes with technology, there are inputs that are not good for our kids, games that are addictive and triggers nerves within our brain that give us an instant kick. If we feed our brain with only this everyday it can lead to a short attention span and have negative consequences.

Actively rejecting technology or dismissing it all as 'screen time' means missing out on all the amazing things kids are up to when they're online. It creates a gap between you and your child. Children need to have us adults participating in the digital playground, rather than have us not willing to put ourselves in their shoes of what it means to be a child today. It's just as important to raise kind, caring individuals online as it is offline.

On the other hand, it's soothing for parents to know there are tools, games and shows that have been curated or even developed for kids and won't harm them. Parents often know what is good for their child. They need to trust themselves more when it comes to tech and simply remember moderation and a balanced diet is always good.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

We spoke to *Andrew Davenport*, the creator of Teletubbies, In the Night Garden, and Moon and Me, about what it takes to create children's entertainment that captures kids' attention – and fuels their imagination.



Andrew Davenport is the brilliant mind behind some of television's most successful shows for children, including the global blockbuster, Teletubbies. His work has focused on children's natural instinct to play, and how tailored content can engage that instinct effectively.

For an adult it's not always apparent what makes a great piece of children's entertainment. What was it about Teletubbies that made it so captivating to young kids?

I think Teletubbies' special impact came from its novel approach to a young pre-school audience. The design of the Teletubbies world, the characters, and the stories was very much about engaging that audience in a playful dialogue.

Adults often complained they didn't know what was going on in the show, that it was slow and boring and that there was nothing happening. I always say that if you watch Teletubbies without a child, and you can't see how they're actively involved in it and constantly responding to it, then you're only really seeing one half of a conversation. It's hard to fully appreciate a tennis match if you can only see one player!

I deliberately constructed the stories with constant reiteration and repetition, with pauses to give space for the child to process what was going on and then give a response, before the next thing happens. Maybe that's boring to an adult, but it's exactly how a child likes it.

Play is a peak state of performance for kids.

Everything was done in a way that was playful. The playfulness is the most essential thing. We know that in a state of play, children are more adventurous, they use language in a more advanced way, and they retain information better. It's like the peak state of performance for them.

In your work it's clear you think very carefully about how to speak to and engage children. What influenced you most in identifying your approach?

Looking back, many things. The four years I spent studying speech therapy and speech science at University College London in my early twenties. Although I never followed that career, I still draw heavily on the studies and theories of child development and language acquisition I was introduced to, and I try to stay up-to-date on that. I think my involvement in theatre taught me a real sense of audience. One thing you learn very quickly standing on a stage, is respect for your audience. The certainty that there's absolutely no point in doing anything unless you have the full attention and engagement and interest of your audience.

There's a lot of children's programming out there that's much more frenetic than Teletubbies; how do you think that engages kids differently?

It's super-easy to get a child's attention—to distract a child—with frenetic activity and noise on a screen. In today's age of social media algorithms designed to distract us, we all get to experience how just gaining our attention alone is not meaningful. In fact, it's destructive to thought. I strongly believe in meaningful exchange with the child. Mirroring the natural way we all speak to a child. When we speak to a young child we all slow down, we all use repetition, silly voices. We become playful. Then, we tell the child useful things. It's not much of a secret formula.

At the time Teletubbies launched, there was a lot of pushback in the media from adults. What do you think they missed about what was happening in the show?

Yes, everybody ripped into it at first. The press said Teletubbies was banal, boring, repetitive. Even the UK government said Teletubbies was dumbing down children. It's like adults couldn't see it somehow, couldn't understand what it was.





Photo by Bobo Choses

Couldn't read the Teletubbies' intent in the way a child so easily could. Teletubbies was about the developmental processes in the first three years of life. And I guess, as adults, we might remember how we learned things at school, but not how, long before that, we learned to speak, walk, run and jump, and think. How we had to grow our minds

For a child in the first three years of life, formal learning is not useful.

to make sense of the new experiences and sensations of the world we inhabit. This early learning is the foundation of our human identity. As adults, we can easily forget all about it, and fail to recognise its importance.

Do you think a show like Teletubbies has educational value for kids—can it be helpful in the healthy development of children?

At the time the series launched, people working in children's television often tended to come from the world of education, so preschool programming tended to focus on preparedness for school. It was often about giving the child experience of formal learning. Teletubbies was for a younger stage of childhood, so had different aims. There's also the definition of "educational". In children's TV, "educational" all too often means content like songs about ABCs and so on. For a child in the Teletubbies age-range, ABCs have no relevance. It's like giving a baby a bicycle. It might be useful one day, just not yet.

Teletubbies speaks to the young child's growing mind and physicality through simple, carefully structured, playful, physical, cause-and-effect story events. At that age, our mind and developing physicality are closely connected, and understanding how one event leads to another is just one critical early learning that a programme like Teletubbies can support.

Presumably there are limits to the educational value of television, what do you think children's entertainment can and can't do for kids?

I don't think television is especially good at teaching children in a formal way. To try to use it like that is to criminally underuse it as a medium. And plenty of studies show that screens can't replace human interaction when it comes to essential stuff like learning language. But good screen content can contribute some really important things. One is modelling.

The preschool years are when we're laying down our relationship expectations, which stay with us the rest of our lives. And you can model those. You can model, good, healthy, bonded, loving relationships, in a story with characters. So important. You can model characters who can be completely different, come from different places, can be interested in different things, but come together and love and support each other. Whether it's shown as a family group, a group of friends, that's really vital. That's why the Teletubbies 'big hug' was so important.

And story itself has huge value for learning. We've used it that way since we started out as humans. Story exercises the mind. A well designed and developmentally appropriate story exercises memory, attention, concentration, recall, deduction, logic, real developing skills. Story does that really well and television does story really well.

It's all about the possibilities that television, or other screen forms, give you. This vast palette of tools you can use to engage and tell the story. All those possibilities of time and place, physical events, change, movement, gesture, pops, tinkles, birdsong, emotions, music. It's a wonderful thing, and also a wonderful medium simply because it's so ubiquitous. It can deliver the benefits to children everywhere. To those children who might not have access to appropriate stories, to playful environments or to happy, functional relationships.



Photo by Bobo Choses

The idea of stories ‘exercising the mind’ is a fascinating one; is that an idea that you’ve had for a while?

I was so excited a few years ago to come across a book from 1794, apparently the very first piece of children’s literature. Back in the 18th century, the idea of a book specifically for children hadn’t been heard of before, so like any piece of new media, it had to explain itself and justify its existence. So, in the introduction, it said it intended to give ‘unfatiguing exercise of mind’. I just love that phrase, and I’ve never found a better description of what any good children’s content should provide.

Stories are an exercise of the mind.

What opportunities and threats do you think the internet now offers for the world of children’s entertainment?

I suppose the greatest opportunity is that there’s so much there, which is also the greatest threat! So the internet has allowed children and parents to access more, and have more stuff to play with, whether it be music or imagery or stories or the experiences of other people and other children from around the world.

There are lots and lots of positive things that can come from just understanding how big the world is, how different everything is, all of that is positive. But obviously, there are issues with how you identify good content from amongst the trash, and how you can ring-fence that good content and make sure the child accessing it isn’t then wandering off into something less appropriate, or even damaging.

That’s why it’s so important for us creators to keep on experimenting and exploring, playing around with the incredible array of media around us for the best benefit of the youngest minds.

Crash Test Techies

We spoke to *Tara Sharma Saluja*, creator, co-producer and host of 'The Tara Sharma Show', about what it feels like to be a parent today. She talks about navigating a new world of tech that is changing faster than you can learn it.



Tara Sharma Saluja lives in India and is a successful actress. After becoming a mother, she created The Tara Sharma show, a platform for discussing topical issues about family, parenting, women, and children. Sharma's emphasis is on positive change. We talked about the concerns of parents today; trying to balance a digital diet for kids; and how 2020 was the year that fused technology and parenting.

You often speak to your guests about the moment they became parents, describing it as 'the great leveller'. Can you tell us a bit more about your own experience when you became a parent?

Without sounding too cliché, I do think that the moment both our kids were born was the most incredible moment of my life. And I know, it sounds very cliché, but it's the most incredible job bringing up kids... but I don't think anyone's really prepared for this. I wasn't, I had no idea!

Actually, in our family, I think I was always the less 'kiddy' one, you know? I continue to be someone who's not very good at cooking or doing household stuff. I was quite ambitious as a kid. And after doing my BSc at The London School of Economics, and working in the corporate world, I think I surprised myself and many by deciding to become an actress and creator in the entertainment space. In all this, I don't think I pictured myself as very maternal, which is probably why I was so overwhelmed by it all, thrilled and semi-surprised by how much I love—and immediately took to—being a mum.

It's a journey, of course, as you get into it, it's full of learning, but I've always noticed that being a parent is such a leveller. The way anyone loves their kids is universal in terms of being so unconditional. And it really doesn't matter where you're from, or who you are, or what you have.

You've been doing your show for 10 years now, and it's been hugely successful. Why was it important for you to create something where other parents have a space to hear and share their experiences?

I had never really seen an honest show about the ups and downs and wonderful parts of being a parent, and one that alleviates some of the fears that go with it and makes it seem not-so-difficult.

Before I had children, I found that so many people would scare you by saying, "Oh no, you're not going to go on holiday anymore, you'd better do what you want to do with your husband before they're born, because after that you're going to be so stressed!" and I just found that there was so much hype and misinformation. People meant well, but often, perhaps unknowingly, spread stress.

So I thought, "Why don't I just create a show about being a mum?" It may have sounded simplistic and maybe even weird, but I guess it was relatable universally. I would literally be feeding the baby at three in the morning, and at the same time I'd be writing something on my blackberry and emailing my producer. So, I think technology enabled me to carry on with my career, and I started embracing it more. But having said that, I'm still cautious around technology actually—I'm a bit of a nervous technology user. Sometimes, I need somebody who knows more than I do to be there to help.

You've spoken to parents on your show before about technology and parenting; what do you think is a healthy role for technology and children?

I think the truth is, we as parents don't know enough yet about technology.

When we're talking about what's healthy for our children—whether it's nutrition, exercise, or screen time—these are all concerns that every parent has, and anything which is a bit open-ended with no definitive answers, becomes a point



Tara Sharma Saluja with her husband Roopak and two children.

of questioning. I think the truth is, we as parents don't know enough yet about technology. I find myself saying to the kids, "Not so much time on the iPad, because it may not be good for you", but I don't really know why—you know what I mean?

Because of the pandemic, we have no choice: the children are on the computer from the minute they wake up.

I mean, already, I'm surprised when our kids are watching or developing some game, or working on some app, or where they're interacting with ten friends at a time. There's a part of me that's so happy that they're doing all of that, and playing with their friends, because they have fun. And in this year of online homeschooling and not physically meeting friends, I think technology like this has been a great way to interact and stay in touch. But then there's another side of me that keeps questioning, "Is this okay?" There's no rule book to tell you definitively what is okay and what's not, but for my husband and I, it's all about balance.

What have been the approaches of other parents you've spoken to on your show?

When we did the topic on kids and technology on the show, there were mums who all had very different approaches. I had one lady who was a clinical psychologist who had quite a strong belief in "digital detox". She and her family would have weeks without a gadget.

Then we had a hardcore corporate woman who was extremely ambitious about climbing the corporate ladder, and she was absolutely fine with seeing her child's first word through a CCTV camera, and she was grateful for the technology that enabled that. I found it very interesting to see that everyone's point

of view is actually so different. Everyone's situation is different because everyone's family is different, so I think deep down everyone does what works for them.

The global pandemic and national lockdowns in 2020 forced parents all over the world to rely on technology for their children's education. Tell us about your experience with that: has it changed how you, as a parent, changed technology??

Suddenly, because of the pandemic, we have no choice: the children are on the computer pretty much from the minute they wake up, because we've had to homeschool in India during lockdown. We've not opened schools for almost a year now, so we're reliant on technology for their schooling. We're just so grateful that they have tech, because they're able to engage with school still, and they're also able to see their friends, and interact with them. But of course the question, "Is this too much screen time?" is at the back of our minds.

It's been a huge learning for us as parents to be okay with that. What really helped was when I went for a talk where the junior-school headmistress said, "You know, if it's interactive screen time, it's not the same as passive screen time—that's not good. Interactive screen time is actually not that bad." That made me quite reassured that this kind of thing, or them being on zoom calls and learning, is actually fine. So then, I started realising that there are so many benefits.

We're all learning every day. I think parenting, at least for me, sometimes feels like I'm the student learning from the kids, learning from everyone. I don't think any of us are perfect at it. I know there are people who call themselves parenting experts, but I really don't know how anyone becomes that, because I think every kid is unique, and everyone's situations are different. But having said that, there are some universal truths, and I think that doing what you believe is going to keep you all healthy and happy, is really important. Maybe we were a bit too strict with our screen-time rules but thanks to lockdown,

we opened up. So I think, like with most things, it's just about balance: find the balance for you, and enjoy it, and don't get stressed and upset and overwhelmed by it, because I don't think anyone has all the answers.

Knowing that many parents feel a general nervousness towards technology, what would your advice be to them?

"Each to their own," is a line I often say on my show, and in general. Do what works for you and your situation, and let's not judge others, as long as no one is being harmed. This has been

an unprecedented time and children have been wonderfully resilient and largely adaptive and optimistic, with, of course, some understandable moments of frustration. As have all of us parents.

But I think supporting our kids and trying to adapt to the new tech norms too, helps alleviate some stress. We as a family insist our kids spend some time outdoors, doing some sport everyday—and try to balance their physical play and interaction and tech time. Balance I think is important, not just for them, but for us parents, too!



Photo by [Bobo Choses](#)

Closing the Learning Gap

We spoke to *Omowale Moses*, Founding Member & Strategic Advisor of The Young People's Project and MathTalk. We discussed using technology to integrate maths into our everyday life, and giving everyone an equal opportunity to succeed in life.



Photo of Omowale's Math Talk initiative



Omowale is a founding member of The Young People's Project and MathTalk. The Young People's Project is an initiative that works with high-school and college students to use math as a tool for personal and community transformation. MathTalk is a community-based initiative that inspires adults and kids—particularly those in economically distressed communities—to enjoy math everywhere.

Math has been such an integral part of your life and continues to be. At what point did you realise you wanted to play a role in how people engage with math?

I successfully took algebra in the eighth grade. Some of my peers weren't successful. And when I hit high school, I saw what happened to kids that weren't prepared to be able to access the educational opportunities the school system afforded. So I saw that there were two tracks. I was the only Black kid in my math classes for four years in high school. Most of my friends were taking remedial classes that weren't going to prepare them for college. I began to see first-hand, in the same school building, that we were getting two very separate educations. And that stuck with me.

During that time, my first work experience was teaching other kids math. The Algebra Project would have summer camps, and math became a job, basically. I was able to get paid to help other kids learn. In that experience of engaging your near peers around learning something, I got a sense of meaningful work. Not just doing something for them and resources, but helping someone learn something was as valuable to me as it was for the person that I was working with.

Do you think enough is being done to help kids from disenfranchised communities to get a great education and a fair shot at success?

When you think about being disenfranchised, you're not able to move through the educational system. In the eighties and nineties, they were building out the prison-industrial-complex, so kids, if they weren't going through school to college, were

ending up in jail. If you didn't go this way, then you ended up that way. Society is not structured in a way to really prepare those kids to move forward and to access the opportunities that they need for them to be successful.

I've often felt society was capitalizing off of people's failure.

I've often felt society was capitalizing off of people's failure. Today, a lot is tied into the educational system, and if you're not moving through the educational system in a certain way, then again, you're not going to have access to the economic arena. Kids that end up in prison, they don't have access to the political arena. They get disenfranchised because they're felons, and so, aren't able to vote. It just perpetuates the same caste system that we live in.

At what point did you realise there was a need to teach math differently?

As a parent, you always tell yourself you want to do stuff different with your own kids, than what your parents did with you. And so, for me, it was about having a different relationship with my son around learning math. I wanted us to have fun learning math. Like riding the train and learning math, playing basketball and learning math, eating breakfast and learning math. We were having a good time. Our relationship around learning was totally different from my relationship when I learned with my dad. That made me realise, wow, math is everywhere.

Most adults have some kind of fear associated with math and even if they don't, they don't have a sense of how to engage a kid to learn or access it. It wasn't natural for me to do it either, so I started looking and learning more about the research and early child development.

Math is incredibly impactful at an early age in terms of preparing kids for formal schooling. The impact of early math translates into formal schooling, into reading, writing, and educational outcomes. So if we could get parents and kids excited about interacting with math in the way that I was doing with my son, then kids would inherently have a different relationship with math at an early age. That would help them tremendously as they go through in schooling and that's what led us to thinking about MathTalk.

How has technology helped MathTalk create better, deeper learning experiences for kids?

With MathTalk, we want to show math is everywhere. We want to help adults and kids be able to see it, enjoy it and explore it. We want kids, in particular, to see math as something they can do, and that they enjoy, and that they can be good at. The way we've tried to do it is to think about how we can activate math that's inherent in public spaces, the spaces that you naturally find yourself in. We've done that by creating installations, if you can imagine some of them as installations you might experience in a children's museum, but a much-lower-bar version of that in a park, or on a sidewalk, giving you access to an Augmented Reality experience.

Most adults have some kind of fear associated with math.

It's been fun exploring the "wow factor" between parents and kids in having this new experience; seeing the opportunity to merge a device that kids gravitate to and enjoy just being on; but to be able to use it in a way that is more exploratory and is a tool for learning. We have to be proactive about how we use technology, and just think about how we're using it ourselves, and look for ways that help strengthen our relationship with our kids.

We've seen you use augmented reality in some fascinating ways, like figuring out how many dinosaurs would fit into a room. Do you see AR as an important technology, moving forwards?

Augmented reality enables you to deepen the connection between math and the world around you.

The Algebra Project got off the ground with the idea of learning math in a familiar context and in a common language. As kids had a common experience, they talked about that experience and extracted the more symbolic mathematics from just a common, everyday experience.

Augmented Reality has enabled you to see, access and engage the math that surrounds you in a way that wasn't necessarily available. I think we're looking at this idea of having a common or shared experience. Having this rich experience in your environment that is connected with something in your environment, and then really using that as a way to get at different mathematical ideas. I think that's a powerful way to learn.

Part of the challenge with math is we're learning without a particular context and so there's no meaning associated with it. I think AR enables you to deepen the connection between math and the world around you. It also enables you to play with some of the conceptual ideas that you wouldn't normally interact with, with a paper and pencil. It's much more visual and I think it enables building mathematical strength from a different perspective.

What lies ahead for MathTalk—and new ways to teach kids?

We've been thinking about how you can connect learning between the home and classroom and the community. Our goal would be that we're immersing math in the neighborhoods or elevating math in the neighborhood, in a way that you can't move through it without having some kind of interaction, or being reminded of its presence in the community—and then your life. We're preparing to launch the "Measure! Everything!" app. It's based off of the Apple Measure app. The idea is that instead of just being able to measure

in inches or feet, we can measure in apples or oranges or bananas or rabbits or panda bears, and stuff like that. We're super excited about that. It's going to be available on Apple and then, eventually Android. It's in English and Spanish right now. You can do it in the home, you can do it in the school, you can do it out in the neighborhood. We want to use this as a way to get people out and active, and begin to expand their minds around what is math, and what are the different ways in which you can experience it—and have fun with it.



Photo of Omowale's Math Talk initiative



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CEO

Alex Bennett-Grant

Head of Strategy

Mark Lester

Strategy

Chloe Ribas

Production

Daniel Padwick

Francesca Mirza

Design Director

Seth Josephs

Design

Fleur Ellis

Business Affairs

Barrie Williams

Anna-Maria Lorenzo

We Are Pi

Oranje Nassaulaan 7

1075 AH

Amsterdam

The Netherlands

wearepi.com

Contact

alex@wearepi.com

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pi.

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