



# Dealing with kids online: a critical study of parenting with reference to Kerala, India

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## Abstract

*Technology equipped society and its positive role in developing the society to this level has given rise to many issues and challenges. High rate of Kids online is one among them. Dealing with such kids is the main challenge in the contemporary society. Parents are struggling to perform the concept of 'parenting'. The study was done among the school going children of age group 11-18 years. The study was done keeping all the ethical standards of qualitative method and adopted a purposive sampling in the state of Kerala. Some of the main issues that parents come across are unawareness of the technical aspects for better surveillance, extra needs and demands from children, increased aggressiveness, extra trust that they have on children, and etc. This study has carried out to suggest some productive measures for the better parenting too. It is high time to think of a remedial measure to deal with kids online.*

**Keywords:** Kids online, Parenting, Cyber Criminology, Cyber Sociology, Selfies, Cyber world.

## Introduction

Parenting is always a matter of concern. Good parenting is a must for a child to function well in the society. But the term 'function well' depends on the society where the child lives. There may be cases where one child's bad behavior may be an acceptable behavior for other society. So the term good parenting should define as the upbringing of a child in a way that he/she should be capable to function well in that corresponding society. Most cases of parenting that we have observed during the past were considered to be satisfactory. In past, the parenting was much easier as compared to the contemporary society where technology driven life dominates.

Technology has changed the life style of human beings where they have facilitated with speed and ease. This introduction of technology has created three groups in the society. This classification is more of a common man's point of view and not of a social scientist's by means of scientific method. This very classification is the most suitable to understand the challenges in parenting with the introduction of technology. The sudden drift in the life is often created a chaos in the minds of the people. In most of the cases parents are in a state of bother while dealing with their children.

In the book *Kids and Credibility- An Empirical Examination of Youth, Digital Media, and Information Credibility*, authors describe about a survey conducted among kids of United States of America of age group 11-18 years. The main findings draw us towards the fact that children start using internet in their early ages. As per the survey findings, the average time that the kids are online varies from 8 hours to 16 hours daily for kids of the respective age group that were in consideration<sup>1</sup>.

In *The Parent App: Understanding Families in the Digital Age*, author talks about the huge amount of texts that a teenager sends daily in their early ages. The author is also of the opinion that this very fact creates challenges in better parenting. Parents are in a dilemma to choose between right and wrong for better parenting of kids online. So through this book author tries to provide maximum information that help parents to overcome the conflict of children and digital media/ devices. Author is trying to ascertain what is just perfect practice for a child when comes to digital exposure. At the same time reminds the audience that the book is not a guide for parents but instead a directive measure to discover the right and wrongs. Book also talks about various 'risks' that the children and parents are facing in the digital media. Parents are concerned about cyber bullying, sexual predators, social isolation of children, sexting and other mental disorders of children due to increased exposure of children to digital media. It also laid down some public opinion such as the internet is often viewed as the 'risk amplifiers'<sup>2</sup>.

## Methodology

Main objective of the study is to unfold the facts behind parenting of kids online. The specific objectives are: i. To understand the challenges in parenting of kids online. ii. To study the implications of technology in defining the value system for kids. iii. To bring about some suggestions for better parenting.

The study is carried out with the clear aim to unfold the challenges in better parenting of kids who are into virtual world. This study has adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in the state of Kerala among the children of age group 11 to 18 years of age, excluding those who have

completed 18 years of age. The samples were derived from four districts of Kerala namely Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, Kozhikode, and Kannur. The research adopted a purposive sampling. Data were collected from children and their parents through in-depth interview and observation method. The data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis manual method and the results were drawn. The sample consisted of 16 children and their parents. The study excluded children of single parent or orphans. The data were collected from school going children with in the ethical standards.

The interview was carried out from the children who are online comparatively for longer duration. The interviewer had to visit children many times to build up the rapport. During those visits and communication, the researcher made sure that the behavior is been observed and made a note of it. The respondents were informed that the research study is been conducted and made sure that the data will not use for any purposes other than research. The interviews were carried out individually.

## Results and discussion

Unawareness about technical aspects: Respondents are of the opinion that they don't give much attention towards their kid's behavior online. The reasons behind them are: parents are not that known to computers, they don't know how to inspect their activities online, they don't see things of deviant nature while going through the files and folders.

*...My son is always on computer and mobile phone. I have no knowledge about computers. I know little about mobile phones. He must be busy with his school assignments or games. I don't know what is he doing and I have nothing to do too (C4, Communication, January, 2017).*

*...I use to check all the activities like history, files and folders kept inside the computer. Always go through the messages in phone too. Nothing I could find (C6, Communication, March, 2017).*

Extra Trust: One of the common things that has observed among parents of the kids who are online is the extra trust that they have on their kids. They don't believe that their children do anything wrong online.

*...My kid does not do anything wrong online. He is a good boy. I do trust him. He loves us too great (C1, Communication, December, 2016).*

Family and Social Interactions: The respondents are of the opinion that they face trouble in dealing with kid's social and family interactions in the physical world. But many of them talk to people online and that might not be possible in physical world.

*...Most of the time she indulges in typing something on phone. We find difficulties in dealing with her while on family functions*

*and social gathering. People often complain about her not interacting with them (C3, Communication, February, 2017).*

*...We have seen strange relationships of our son. He easily deals with distant relatives and peoples who are not acceptable by our family where he struggles to deal with near and dear ones (C7, Communication, March, 2017).*

New fashion trends: The respondents are of the opinion that they could see a change in trends of their fashion concepts. They are struggling to cope up with the situation. Some of those trends are even against the normal behavior of dressing trends of state of Kerala.

*...He was a normal guy till he got his phone. Now he use to wear costly dresses and reluctant to go out without sunglasses. He always buys them from internet. He has got my ATM card (C10, Communication, March, 2017).*

Aggressive behavior: Respondents are of the opinion that it is common to have short tempered kids. They are often aggressive and not ready to compromise on anything.

*...When I was young, I used to respect my parents and they were my bosses. Now I am his slave. He is rude to me. It started since he got his new phone (C2, Communication, March, 2017).*

*...If she wants something, she should get it as soon as possible. Else he will start eating our head. She always takes examples of her facebook friends (C5, Communication, March, 2017).*

High and unorthodox demands: Respondents often get feedback on their religious believes from their kids refereeing to the information in internet. Parents get unorthodox demands for example life style changes, diet changes, selfies, updating of parents gadgets, high demand for new and high end smart phones and accessories, and etc.

*...Google says X (God of a religion) was not a good person. He was a cheat. Then why are you following him. This was the question that my son asked to me (C9, Communication, March, 2017).*

*...My daughter asked me one day that why don't I go for night parties. I never knew what kind of parties that she was referring to and I don't know if it is necessary to attain the social status (C11, Communication, March, 2017).*

*...Son asked me to start drinking alcohol and to have a bar at my house as he has shown it in internet (C8, Communication, March, 2017)*

*...She always talks about taking selfies and uploading it in internet. She is keen of updating her friends what she is doing in every moment (C12, Communication, March, 2017).*

Earning tendency: It is observed that kids who are more into internet posses an earning tendency quite early in their life by means of both online and offline works. Most of these works are

high earning in short time. They do spend the same in internet for purchasing things from e commerce sites and for buying games and videos online.

*...He earns money and gets things online for his use. He makes use of it to change his phone in every 6 months at least (C10, Communication, March, 2017).*

Tracking tool: Parents buy their children mobile phone is to get in touch with them always. It often creates a sense of security among them. This is the reason why they entertain the use of mobile phones among children.

*...I can always contact my daughter over phone and have surveillance that she is safe outside (C13, Communication, March, 2017)*

*...I literally go out of my comfort level if my kid forgot to take phone when she goes out (C16, Communication, March, 2017).*

One of the main issues in dealing with kids online is the technical unawareness among parents. Most of them are not even known as there can be hidden files to be kept inside computers and easy to hide them. Especially in the case of the communication C6, it is evident. The respondent's daughter is having a habit of keeping erotic pictures and videos in her phone. But she has a habit of keeping them as hidden files. The unawareness of her parents to search for such types of files, keeps her safe from getting caught. This is how kids outmaneuver the parents.

The other common interesting character of today's parents is the extra trust that they have on their children. In the case of Communication C1, the parent trusts their son and they think that all aspect of cyber deviance is not applicable for him. The interviewer could find out that their son is always use sexting apps and often visits sites of terrorist nature. He is found to have an inclination towards such activities too.

In case of communication C3, the aspect of parenting a daughter who is always on phone texting something and is not that active in family interaction. Here the parents are facing issues in building up the habit of social and family interaction. Parents are much keen about those aspects with which they can have good relationship with the family members by means of interaction in the physical world. But communication C7 draw a map towards a new form of interaction in the virtual world where close relatives can be distant and distant relatives may become near ones. This actually breaks all the conventional concepts of sociology.

Another interesting aspect is the current fashion trends where there are lots of controversies exist. In case of communication C10, parents think that mobile phone has changed the life style of their kid. He is found to be addicted to online shopping sites. He admitted that he is updated about current fashion trends.

This was done by means of internet. Impact of visual media is another factor. It is due to the difference in the thought pattern of parents to that of their children in the dressing pattern. Theory of Imitation in social psychology does explain this behavior<sup>3</sup>.

The short tempered kids are a common component in this generation. Communication C2 and C5 should be clubbed and read. The enormous change in the aggression levels of the kids facilitated by the internet and mobile phones is a new form of challenge in parenting. Children turning to be the bosses of their parents and the parents have no other ways than to accept and perform accordingly. This behavior would have seen in past but the incidents were much limited than seen today.

Sudden change that inculcated in the behavior of children due to internet is a matter of concern. Clicking 'selfies' and posting it in the social networking apps, asking the parents to try alcohol and to attend night parties, asking them to change the religion and thoughts are some of those strange behavior. This is the outcome of children over exposed to internet where they get valuable proofs to challenge the conventional thoughts. Communications C9, C8, C12 and C11 are the supporting remarks from the respondents.

There was a notion that the internet will clearly make the younger generation redundant. But it is seen from this study that they are somehow manage to work for their earnings. Communication C10 works for his earning both online and offline. He is much keen to have things of high standards and make use of his earnings for them. High end mobile and computer gadgets, accessories, dresses and etc. are some of their needs that they cannot fulfill only with the help of their parents. This situation can make them start earning or may make them indulge in deviant activities. Walter Reckless's containment theory could explain that what way he or she favors<sup>4</sup>.

In present days, there are lots of crimes are getting reported against the children. The parents are upset and even more worried about their kid's safety. This very aspect facilitates the usage of mobile phones among children. The parents want to track their children's activity. They think that mobile phones can somehow help them performing the tracking duty of their kid's activity when they are away. Communications C13 and C16 explain this very aspect.

**Suggestions:** As we say, Cyber is a technologically driven area which has a past of less years. Due to this 'new' nature of cyber world, we have limited resources to identify its issues. Breaking down of conventional thinking and more fast responses could somehow help in dealing with the ill effect of cyber world. Not many studies have been carried out in the area of cyber world and behavior of social animal in cyber world. Studies of crime in cyber world are also have limited resources. So a series of empirical studies is to be carried out in the field of technology driven society. We have already a branch of Criminology

namely 'Cyber Criminology' where we study the criminological aspects of crimes in cyber world. This is a high time to have a new branch of Sociology where we could study the sociology of cyber world.

We should therefore develop a new area of 'Cyber Sociology' in dealing with society and cyber world. Cyber sociology may be defined as the study of sociological aspects in the cyber world or virtual world.

Parenting in cyber world should also be exposed to studies with the help of feedbacks drawn from parents, kids, teachers, society, experts, psychologists, criminologists, doctors, and etc. This can brought a change in the concept of parenting. This may be helpful in performing 'parenting in virtual world'.

An early awareness to parents on what can their kids do should also be given. In other hand awareness to children on the ill effects and positive sides of the internet and mobile phones can be provided in an early stage itself. This awareness should be activity based and prefer not to have theoretical base. 'Parenting should start from school. Making new generation aware of the elder population, their gifted experience and how valuable their knowledge is one of the best way we can have'<sup>5</sup>.

Defining the set of rules and values was done in the beginning of a society. An amendment in this rules and laws is on high demand to deal with kids online.

Participation of teachers, educational institutions, NGOs, social gatherings, religious institutions, government, criminal justice system, media, and etc should be made sure in the activities to develop a model for the better treatment of kids who are online.

Law enforcement agencies and other component of criminal justice system should be vigilant enough to deal with any form of challenges to society. The following statement is found relevant while we talk about the role of law enforcement agencies in dealing with kids online. 'Though there are many elder abuses that are prevailing in the society, many of them are not getting reported because of various reasons. In most of the cases these abuses are not identified as abuses because it has

done by the children, grandchildren, in laws, relatives, servants and other known'<sup>6</sup>. This help us to identify the challenge in parenting and it is even more sever in the case of dealing with kids online.

## Conclusion

We cannot avoid the world equipped with technology as we had many positive developments due to that. The question is how you will compare the positive and negative sides. It is also relevant that we are not ready to lose those facilities that we currently enjoy by means of technology. So we have to think about ways to get rid of the negative aspect. We may not be successful if we think of erasing the evil effects fully. To control the negative impact of technology on human being we should have to formulate an action plan. This action plan can be effective only if it is done by means of scientific method. It is high time to do that. The only thing is that we have limited time and limited resources.

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