

## Children's Digital Play as Collective Family Resilience in the Face of the Pandemic



### What this research is about

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and other life-changing adaptations that occurred during this period had an overall negative effect on many adults and children. Studies have revealed that many children experienced an increase in mental and emotional health problems, as well as issues with social development. The use of digital tools and social media increased as both adults and children tried to compensate for the lack of in-person social contact. This increased usage fostered concerns of unhealthy overdependence. However, some studies discovered that people who were able to embrace “lockdown literacies” fared better. Lockdown literacies in this case refer to people’s digital literacies and social practices during lockdown, which involved language, objects, and places.

This study examines the role of lockdown literacies in the ways in which children applied agency, embraced creativity, and built resilience during the pandemic with the use of digital play.

### What the researchers did

The participants consisted of three families in an urban neighbourhood of Newfoundland. The region had two lockdowns in spring of 2020 and 2021. The focus of this study was on the second lockdown. The participants were a convenience sample who were willing and able to take part in the study. One family had two children and the others had three children. All children were between the ages of two and 10 at the time of the study. All parents were employed, and all families were financially stable. The families knew each other, and their children played together.

The researchers used day-in-the-life methods to capture the children’s digital habits and uses of

### What you need to know

Many people increased their social media use and screen time during COVID-19 lockdowns. While this was initially thought to be creating unhealthy dependencies, especially in children, recent studies have shown that digital play during the pandemic could have positive outcomes.

In this study, the researchers used day-in-the-life methods to review and analyze the ways in which children from three families used digital play during lockdown. They discovered that the children were using online platforms and social media to develop unique ways to maintain relationships in the absence of in-person interactions. They would modify the usage of these tools to suit their own needs. Such digital play also helped foster the children’s agency, creativity, and resilience. Interests and skills they developed co-operatively online continued to be used after the lockdown was over.

social media and virtual platforms. These included Zoom, TikTok, and YouTube. The researchers used video recordings, photos, interviews, and field notes to compile daily narratives of the children’s digital practices. The data collected were analyzed to understand how the use of digital tools during lockdown influenced children’s social development, agency, and resilience.

### What the researchers found

The children in this study discovered creative ways to use online platforms to increase their agency and build resilience in the face of the lockdowns. This helped maintain social ties and allowed for new kinds of play. In the beginning, the parents struggled to

integrate the increase in their children's screen time into daily life, along with safety and social development concerns. Eventually, the parents came to accept the necessity of screen time for educational purposes and maintaining relationships. The following describes how children used three digital platforms to develop agency and build resilience.

**Zoom:** The children used this video conferencing platform to engage in group activities like watching shows, having a virtual birthday sleepover, and participating in baking competitions. Zoom allowed for the organization of real-time activities. This enabled the children to continue social interactions and have playdates during lockdown. Milestones like birthday celebrations could still be experienced with peers in unique ways, like the virtual sleepover.

**YouTube:** The children gained an interest in watching clips of competitive baking shows like *The Great Canadian Baking Show* and *The Great British Bake Off*. The children became devoted to this domestic task. How-to recipe videos from the shows were easy to follow. The children grew inspired to create their own versions of "bake offs" with their own rules. The end products would be judged by the other households, and containers were left on doorsteps to comply with physical distancing policies.

Some parents noticed that their children's use of YouTube expanded beyond simple entertainment. For example, one father described being surprised and impressed by his daughter's use of YouTube to find DIY solutions to household issues.

**TikTok:** The children were drawn to short clips of dancing on TikTok, and created accounts so they could share videos of dance moves among themselves. The children created private groups for themselves, eliminating the chance of strangers seeing and commenting on their videos. Their creation of a safe space for their play and their method of using TikTok to engage group play shows how they adapted the platform to suit their own needs.

### How you can use this research

Research into family resilience, as opposed to only child or parental resilience, could have implications for education and social work. Providing children

with digital tools along with parental support could help build social skills, agency, and creativity during periods of restricted in-person activities. Pandemic recovery policies and programs could consider the positive role that digital play has in building family resilience and coping with adversity.

### About the researchers

**Anne Burke** and **Caighlan Smith** are affiliated with Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. **Kristiina Kumpulainen** is affiliated with Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. Questions about this study can be sent to Anne Burke at [amburke@mun.ca](mailto:amburke@mun.ca).

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*Research Snapshot by Erika Cao*

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### About the Vanier Institute of the Family

The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

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