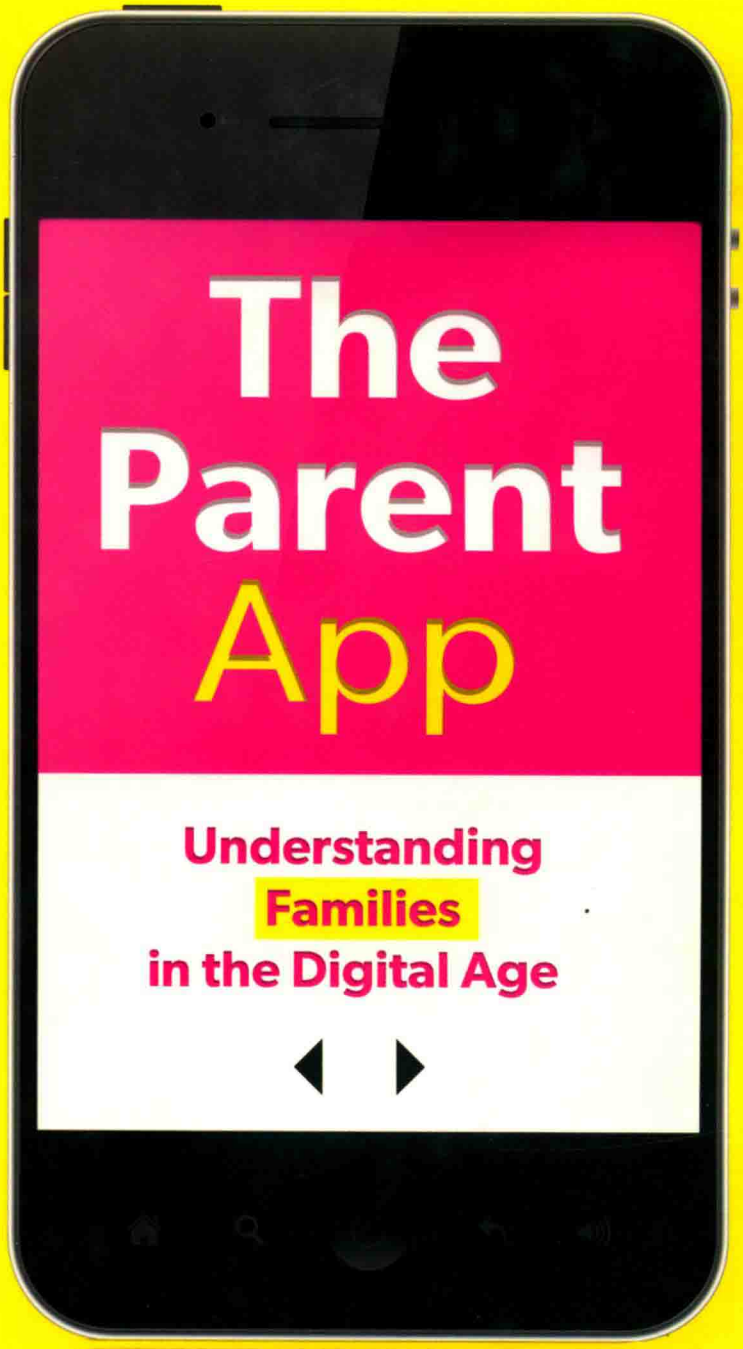

Lynn Schofield Clark

The Parent App

Understanding Families in the Digital Age

LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK

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PREFACE | *The Parent App and the Parent Trap*

It's 2:45 p.m. and I'm late—again. My husband, Jon, already texted me to tell me that he was going to be at a meeting, a subtle reminder that it's my turn to pick up the kids today. I left my office on time, but I'd forgotten to allow for the construction project at the end of Evans Avenue, the main thoroughfare separating my office from the highway. So I've got my iPhone on the seat next to me, at the ready for when I hit the next red light, and I'm already scrolling through the list in my head. Should I call Delia? No, she's working on Thursdays; so is Suelita, and she always works until six. Keiko and Mike are at work, too, and Jodi's got to take her boys to baseball right after school. Laura, my friend who's a dedicated stay-at-home mom, just helped me out two days ago; I'm too embarrassed to have to ask her to bail me out again. Red light: what's the plan? I decide to call Margie, who works at the school's front desk, and ask her to catch my young family members as they exit the school and let them know I'm on my way. But I dread that, too: who knows what the school staff does with the dirt they have on chronically late parents like me? I suddenly find myself wishing, for the very first time, that my ten-year-old had a cell phone. Life would be so easy then, I muse. I could simply call Jonathan and tell him that I will be there ten minutes after school lets out, and ask him to alert his younger sister so that they can wait for me together. Such a call might have an added benefit, too: maybe I could forestall "the look" (any parent who's ever been late for pickup will know exactly which guilt-inducing look I'm talking about).

I quickly dismiss the idea of getting him a cell phone. I couldn't do that, because then eight-year-old Allison would be more convinced than ever

that Jonathan was the favorite—unless I bought one for her, too. Which she'd no doubt lose within a week, since she'd really have no use for it. And anyway, their school doesn't allow them to bring mobiles into the classroom, so even if they both had one, there'd be no guarantee either one of them would remember to pick it up from the office and turn it on to check for a message from Mom. And then I had the strangest realization of all: the real reason that I didn't want to get them cell phones was that I felt unprepared for it. I didn't know enough about what getting them mobiles would *mean*: for them, for me, for our family. What would having a cell phone lead to? Is it sort of like the adult drug abuser's slide from beer to hard liquor to heroin, so that the next thing I know they're twelve-year-olds with a CrackBerry habit?

Especially strange was the thought that occurred to me in the next moment: how could I not know what having a mobile phone would mean? I've had a cell phone for more than a decade. What's more, I've been studying family uses of mobiles, the Internet, television, and a host of other media for the better part of fifteen years. I can rattle off statistics with the best of them: 95 percent of kids have access to the Internet by age eleven; 89 percent of families have multiple mobile phones, and 75 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds have their own phone; the average age at which young people get a cell phone is around nine and a half, and children in single-parent families tend to get cell phones earlier than those who have two parents living in the same household; the average number of texts sent a month by a U.S. teen is well over three thousand.[1] I also know that it's parental concerns for safety, as much as kids' desires, that are fueling the growth of Xbox, PlayStation, Wii gaming, and portable game devices, since parents want kids to be supervised and kids who have fewer resources for or access to supervised outside activities are more likely to spend time inside with mediated entertainment. I know all about the defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act and the Verizon-AT&T showdown over the iPhone. Like most moms, I'm sometimes unsure of myself, but shouldn't I, of all people, know what to expect?

I realized then that what all parents really need, or wish we had, is some way to discern the most caring, smart, sensitive, and effective responses to the dilemmas that digital and mobile media have introduced into the lives of our families. What we need is a Parent App. Is my thirteen-year-old responsible enough to handle a Facebook page? Check the Parent App. What will happen down the road if I allow my seven-year-old to download games onto my cell phone? Consult the Parent App. The house phone is ringing and ringing, but my twelve-year-old has decided that pounding out

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the Harry Potter theme on the piano is what he'd rather be doing right now. Parent App, can you help me out here? How about helping out with dinner, laundry, or after-school pickups while we're at it?

A number of companies have rushed in to address our felt need for apps that will help with parenting. Parents can diagnose children's aches and pains with the Portable Pediatrician mobile app, look to the Dinner Spinner for suppertime plans, or figure out what their teens are saying by checking the Teen Chat Decoder. There's even an app you can use if you put your child in time-out: it will remind you to take her out of it when her time is up. Additionally, parents can consult a number of social network sites for advice on parenting. Almost all of the most frequently trafficked have the word "mom" in the title. With sites such as CafeMom, Mamapedia, and MomsLikeMe, help is only a click away.[2] These apps hold the promise of making life more manageable and productive, especially for women who are expected to balance the demands of work and family and to move seamlessly between them. But does technology really make life easier for us? Is that how technology is changing family life today? Most parents instead are reporting that technology is making life with their children more challenging, not less.[3]

Parents have always had to face challenges. Yet digital and mobile media have put a fine point on the experience of living with preteen and teenage young people who believe they know better than their parents about how best to manage such things. I decided to name this book *The Parent App* when I said the title out loud and realized how much the voices of the young people in this book remind me of the perennially popular film with a similar name: *The Parent Trap*. Hayley Mills and, later, Lindsay Lohan brought to life a humorous fantasy with enduring appeal among generations of elementary, tween, and teenage young people, including me and later my own children. In those films, twins who were separated at birth discover a deep secret about their parents' past that is obvious to everyone who meets them. Then they connive to help their parents recognize and correct the mistake the adults made so long ago. Once the parents have realized that the kids were right, they all live happily ever after. The pink landline phones featured on the cover of the 1961 video version are replaced with mobiles in the 1998 version, but the theme is the same: young people are able to work around and ultimately correct their parents' wrongs because they are smart, they can pull together resources (including those of technology), and, of course, they knew all along what was best for everyone.

Young people thinking they know what's best for everyone: that may sound familiar to parents and to those of us who remember what it was like

to feel that way. In the interviews with mothers and fathers that form the core of this book, this is the way that many parents of teens and preteens characterize the interactions they have with their children about mobile phones, social media sites, gaming platforms, and the Internet. Parents recognize that young people are growing up in a world saturated by digital and mobile media, and we often feel trapped because the context seems so different when compared with our own growing-up experiences. Yet, like the similarities between the 1961 and 1998 films, we also know that some aspects of the growing-up years remain the same. We just need help navigating the new situations.

But this book is not strictly an advice manual for parents. For one thing, digital and mobile media are changing so rapidly that any book could be outdated before it reached publication. Numerous websites and blogs exist that provide excellent advice on how parents can address particular situations they confront, and thus it's possible to find suggestions tailored to the unique challenges of individual families. Some of these resources are highlighted in Appendix B, and specific suggestions for parents are offered in the concluding chapter of this book. But in order to set those suggestions in context, this book explores the meaning behind the changes that we are all experiencing. It asks how families are experiencing and responding to the challenges, both new and old, of parenting young people through the late elementary, preteen, and teen years. Why are parents responding in the ways that they are? And perhaps most importantly, what will these responses mean for us as family members and as members of society?

In order to investigate these questions, in this book I bring together two different bodies of research. First, as a sociologist who studies media, I consider various theories that are helping to explain both the characteristics of today's new media and the ways in which these characteristics may be changing our individual and social experiences. Second, as a communication scholar interested in families, I look at how families have adopted various strategies for communication between family members, and how these strategies shape the ways in which digital and mobile media technologies fit into our lives as individuals and as families. I also bring to this book my perspective as a married working mother of a teen and preteen, with our family living in a middle-class neighborhood.

When I first realized my own hesitation about getting my son a mobile phone, I wondered where the nervousness was coming from. I wasn't overly worried about the risks that receive the most media attention: sexting, possible exposure to undesirable content, or contact with sexual predators. I just wanted to know whether a mobile would help me in my

quest to be a good parent. Would getting him a phone help me achieve my goal of having positive connections with my son, or would it undermine that goal? I realized then that I didn't want to write this book solely about the risks of new media. I wanted to write about how digital and mobile media fit into this felt wish to be a "good-enough" parent.[4] Of course, my own context and family background shape what it means to me to be a "good-enough" parent. I *might* use a Parent App to help me locate a family-friendly restaurant, but what I could *really* use is a Parent App that would help me recognize risk as I define it, so that I can be the best parent possible in my own context, in relation to my own children, and in what often feel like unfamiliar situations.

In this book, I want to add to the numerous important studies exploring how parenting is changing in the United States, particularly with the rise of overparenting and the "helicopter parent," trends that are much in evidence in my own cultural milieu.[5] Some books, such as Margaret Nelson's *Parenting Out of Control* and Barbara Hofer and Abigail Sullivan Moore's *The iConnected Parent*, have argued that today's technologies make it altogether too easy for "helicopter parents" to spy on their children or remain too connected to let go as the children get older.[6] The temptation to be this kind of parent is surely there, but it's one that many parents in my study actively tried to resist.

I also wanted to consider insights from my field, media studies. It does have an important lens of theory to bring to these issues of how families are experiencing digital and mobile media in their everyday lives and how children and parents struggle together over the when and why of their practices involving media.[7] The field of media studies reminds us to think about communication technologies not as things we merely use but as innovations that evolve in specific contexts in relation to perceived needs and which continue to evolve in relation both to those needs and to practices that specific technologies discourage or make possible.[8] Technologies such as mobile and online communication do not only enable our connections with others and with information. They also add a new layer of meaning to those connections, and in doing this, they change our relationships with each other. New technologies make possible certain ways of being, and how we use technologies then further shapes our options for the future.[9] I wanted to look not only at how parents and their children were using technologies but also at how those uses made sense to us in relation to the rest of our lives.

The media-saturated context of our lives is undergoing change, and this provides an excellent opportunity for us to reexamine some of the

taken-for-granted ways in which we have approached communication and communication technologies within our families. Some of our assumptions may be outdated given this new context; as this book will argue, they may even be having unintended consequences that we are not yet able to see. As Carolyn Marvin suggested in her book *When Old Technologies Were New*, "new practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings."[10] It's in the spirit of this observation that this book turns to how, exactly, families are improvising in the new settings inaugurated by digital and mobile media.

This book argues that two distinct patterns in how families communicate are shaping media use in the digital age, and each of these patterns is rooted in particular histories and is now evolving in relation to digital and mobile media affordances. Among upper-income families, I observe an *ethic of expressive empowerment*, in which parents want to encourage their children to use these media in relation to education and self-development and to avoid use that might distract them from goals of achievement. Among lower-income families, I observe what I term an *ethic of respectful connectedness*, in which family members want to encourage the use of digital and mobile media in ways that are respectful, compliant toward parents, and family-focused. Certainly upper-income families want their children to be respectful and connected, and lower-income families want their children to grow into expressive and empowered people, and there are many instances in which family members use these media in ways that end up being disrespectful or even disempowering. I use the term "ethic" to signal that there are guiding principles that help parents and young people determine a course of action in relation to communication practices. Even if our efforts fall short, we all act out of the limits of our practical situations and in relation to what we take for granted as the right or good way to do things. But I argue that families live in a cultural milieu that tends to value one approach or the other, and we find ourselves adopting or responding to the patterns that are taken for granted in our particular context. Because there remain what Sonia Livingstone and Elizabeth Helsper term "gradations of digital inclusion," and because U.S. families experience lives that increasingly isolated from the lives of those in different economic circumstances, the uses of these media are reinforcing rather than alleviating a troubling economic and social gap in U.S. society.[11]

What may be surprising is this: when you consider the stories people from differing economic backgrounds tell about how they incorporate technology into their family lives, those with the greatest access to skills

and resources would find much to envy among the family communication ethics of those who have much less access to skills and resources. And yet the very embrace of a communication ethic of expressive empowerment may be undermining our ability to foster an ethic of respectful connectedness within our families and beyond them. Does this mean that middle- and upper-income families are actually losing something of value as we unconsciously embrace certain approaches to technology in our fast-paced and teleconnected lives? I believe that we are, and this is part of the larger story this book will tell about how technological advances and family communication patterns are working together to reshape the family and the communication environment in which we all live. What I will argue is that in the networked society, focusing on the empowerment of our individual children may be causing us to miss the bigger picture. We need to understand not only what's new about technology and how technology changes our children's environments but also how our traditional ways of communicating with one another in our families may be generating more work for us all, and may need to be rethought in the digital era.

Not all upper-income families engage in the same strategies for setting guidelines regarding digital and mobile media, and not all lower-income families are similar to one another, either, as this book will demonstrate. But I believe that the patterns of difference that are emerging now will continue to shape the landscape of the future. The ways in which families are now differently engaging in digital and mobile media use suggest that technology is playing a role not in leveling the playing field, as many of us had hoped it would, but rather in contributing to the income inequality that has been on the rise in most countries since the early 1980s.[12] Thus, this book will foreground three issues: (1) how new technologies are introducing new situations that parents and children confront in their daily lives, (2) how inherited patterns of communicating within families are shaping our uses of and approaches to digital and mobile media, and (3) how the ways we communicate with one another (and not only the ways we regulate or oversee the uses of technologies) may need to be reconsidered so that we can better understand and manage the changes we are currently experiencing. All three of these components are needed if we are to understand how young people and their families are experiencing the mediated environment today, what parents can and should be doing to help young people to prepare to face the challenges of the emergent digital environment, and what we might anticipate for our future together. I believe that for too long we have overlooked the connections between family, technology, and what researcher Roger Silverstone referred to as the

"moral economy of the household"—the relationships between what we do in our individual households and what happens in the world at large.[13] We owe it to ourselves to understand both how digital and mobile media are reshaping family life and how family uses of these media are, in turn, reshaping our society. Ultimately, these interrelated issues inform what parents need to do with, for, and in relation to young people in the emergent digital environment.

In order to write this book, I relied upon both formal and informal interviews held over more than a decade with parents, young people, relatives, educators, and researchers. I also relied upon the excellent research being produced in the areas of parenting, digital and mobile media, and gender and technology, and am especially grateful for the many journalists who have worked hard to keep parents informed about the issues confronting parents and young people today. Although my research team and I analyzed interview and survey data that filled well over a bookshelf's worth of three-ring notebooks, this book is also informed by my own experiences. As my children have grown up, the issues of this book have taken on increasing urgency in my own family's life.

In this book, I write in a way that is consistent with what some scholars have called "women's ways of knowing," in which there is no harsh separation between research and life, and where what happens in one realm inevitably informs the other.[14] Researchers are charged with telling stories that help to convey new interpretations of data and to offer new insights into shared experiences. Similarly, when parents, and in particular mothers, are faced with parenting dilemmas that relate to digital and mobile media, we also share stories. Just as researchers contribute to an ongoing conversation in which they build upon or challenge existing understandings, parents listen to what others have done and we try to learn from the successes and foibles of other parents. Sometimes the stories that parents share with one another are laugh-out-loud funny; other times they're sad and deeply troubling. Sometimes they're not even our own stories, but stories that have attained a mythic level of resonance because they speak to deep fears or anxieties about what it means to be a human being who cares about others. We are symbolic animals, and by putting our experiences in story form for others we learn what to do and what our actions mean.

My own understandings of the role of digital and mobile media within family life have been impossible to separate from my personal experiences as a parent who now lives within the milieu of expressive and empowering parenting. They are also influenced by my own experiences of having been parented in a context that was a study in contrasts. I grew up in a household

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where one of my parents came from privilege and the other didn't; one liked television, the other liked reading. Members of my mother's Italian American family have lived their entire lives in an economically depressed rust belt city of the Northeast. Many members of my father's Anglo-American family moved from the New York City area to the upwardly mobile and progressive city of San Francisco. On my mother's side there are bankruptcies; on my father's, millionaires. I think my own complicated background is why the relationships between economics, technology, and family life have always fascinated me. I'm sure it's why I am uncomfortable with the term "working class" or even "lower middle class," as you will see in this book. Sociologists would refer to half of my extended family in that way, although my family would never use those terms themselves. Members of my extended family buy middle-class things; they do things middle-class people do. If things had worked out differently, they would have had middle-class incomes and security. Some of them do now; others might someday. That's the way they, and I, see it. Like most parents, and like my own relatives, I hope that my own children are able to craft a balanced life that is meaningful and not financially strapped, and I worry about today's economy and their future prospects. Today my children go to a school two blocks from a mobile home park and two blocks from mini-mansions, and I sometimes wonder if there will be anything in between when they are older. As much as anything else, my desire that there be something in between is behind this book.

Researchers often fail to acknowledge how our own stories connect with what we study and why.[15] I include these personal stories to provide a framework for evaluating what I say here. It may not make the stories in this book any more "informational" or "factual," but I hope the stories will be resonant and instructive.

I have structured this book as a series of stories because I believe that even as human beings are challenged to access, process, and manage information to a greater extent than ever before, we do not make decisions based on a formula that is rooted in algorithms. Having information is not the same as *knowing*. Knowing involves feelings and intuitions as well as logical analysis. Knowing is relational, and our past experiences shape what we think we know about our present. We do not need more information on how to parent, therefore: we need ways of knowing that can frame how we understand the changes we are experiencing, and how we might parent as a result.

This book is divided into three parts, and you are welcome to read them in the order that strikes you as most interesting or urgent.

The first section foregrounds the most well-publicized parental fears related to digital and mobile media. These chapters tell stories that highlight concerns about possible links between depression and overinvolvement in social network sites, cyberbullying and teen suicide, and gaming and dropping out of high school. They include a discussion of how young people experience some of the things parents fear most about digital and mobile media contexts: cyberbullying, sexting, and Internet predators. Most of these stories reveal that young people are capable of handling the new situations that emerge with digital and mobile media, yet they also reveal the benefits that can come from advocating for those who are most vulnerable.

In the second section, I turn to the stories of young people, particularly preteens and teens. These stories illuminate why digital and mobile media technologies have come to be so central in the lives of youth today, and what that looks like in the lives of differently situated young people. These chapters consider how these media relate to youthful needs for identity, peer relationships, privacy, and autonomy, as well as to young people's continuing needs to maintain relationships with family members, cultures, and traditions.

In the final section, I introduce the two ethics of communication that I observed among upper- and middle-class families, on one hand, and "would-be middle-class" and less advantaged families. I do this by discussing how communication technologies both contribute to risk and are used to resolve it, how parents' patterns of communication have evolved to be responsive to these risks, how parents mediate the media as a means of overseeing their children's media environment, and how parents strive to keep their own familial goals in mind as they parent in spite of the host of other pressures they feel. I explore the ways in which even technologies that seemingly save time can add to the workload of the primary caregiver, who is usually but not always the mother.

The final chapter reviews the main themes of the book and presents a map for building a Parent App that will suit the needs of different families as they address themselves to the challenges and opportunities that digital and mobile media present to us all.

I have no interest in contributing to the already healthy amount of anxiety that parents have about technologies. Instead, I'm interested in understanding what's new about new media technologies as well as how these technologies are being used according to patterns that came before, so that we better understand how both factors are contributing to the changes we are all experiencing.

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A longer version of Steph Kline's story (chapter 3) first appeared in L.S. Clark, "The Constant Contact Generation: Exploring Teen Friendship Networks Online," in S. Mazzarella, ed., *Girl Wide Web* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

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A discussion of the relationships between parenting styles and parental mediation theory (chapters 3 and 7) were previously published in L. S. Clark, "Parental Mediation Theory for the Digital Age," *Communication Theory* 12 (2011): 323–43.

The stories of Tanya Cortez (chapter 3) and Montana Odell and Gabriela Richards (chapter 5) were first analyzed in L. S. Clark, "Digital Media and the Generation Gap," *Information, Communication, and Society* 12, 3 (2009): 388–407.

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