

research article

Performing parenthood through digital communication technologies at school: the case of WhatsApp parents' groups in Chile

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Literature on parenthood has highlighted that parenting has become more intensive over the years. Using data from interviews with 36 parents and teachers of Chilean schoolchildren, we explore how parenting is performed in parents' WhatsApp groups. This research is conducted from the approach of science and technology studies, as it allows us to focus on how everything/everyone has the potential to have the agency to affect and be affected by others. In our results we show that parenting within WhatsApp is performed by monitoring their children's school agenda, comparing and competing with the performances of others, and portraying themselves as attentive parents. Through these comparisons, families engage in a form of lateral surveillance, contributing to the intensification of parenting. We discuss how this digital platform operates in an ambivalent manner, enabling caregiving to be exhibited as a manifestation of presence and availability, and as restlessness, intensity and demand.

Keywords parenthood • WhatsApp • schools • lateral surveillance

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Introduction

Intensive parenting is a tendency that has developed all over the world in recent decades (Shirani et al, 2011; Gómez Espino, 2012; Perrier, 2013; Faircloth, 2014; Lee, 2014). The term indicates that caregiving and guardianship are increasingly child-centred tasks that are highly demanding in material, temporal and emotional terms (Lee, 2014). Although children in Chile and other neoliberal societies now experience fewer health and safety risks than in the past, parents generally feel a sense of urgency to plan, supervise, monitor and intervene in their children's lives (Furedi, 2008; Jezierski and Wall, 2017). According to parents, there are now many more threats

and vulnerabilities than ever and they closely oversee their children to avoid potential risks from the outside world (Faircloth, 2014; Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2018). The perceived sensation that something unexpected could happen to endanger their children's safety and wellbeing (Caputo, 2007; Gómez-Espino, 2012; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012) has led to an increase in practices related to 'hyper-parenting' (Rosenfeld and Wise, 2000) or 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2008).

In Chile, the civil and military dictatorship (1973–90) implemented various neoliberal reforms aimed at commodifying all public services. For example, a voucher system was implemented in education, increasing private spending. In health, a private insurance system was also implemented. In both cases, the quality of services is now segmented according to the households' capacity to pay. In this context, caregiving has become increasingly family-centric. At the same time, work outside the home is still highly demanding and has tended to become more precarious. This combination of greater family involvement in caregiving and more unstable working conditions has produced an excessive burden for parents (Martínez Cornejo et al, 2020; Vera Rojas, 2022) because, in addition to providing care and working, parents also have to manage their children's school life.

In recent years, the phenomenon of 'over-schooling' (Iturra and Iturra, 2023) has gained attention. This term denotes the practice of schools assigning children substantial amounts of homework and a heavy load of parental tasks, prolonging school hours beyond the regular timetable. Parental engagement and participation have typically been associated with school choice practices (Gubbins, 2014; Carrasco et al, 2015; Oyarzún, et al, 2022) and academic involvement (Lara and Saracosti, 2019). Both are closely linked to social class and the reproduction of inequalities (Cal et al, 2019; Bellei et al, 2020). In this respect, the literature has highlighted the significant impact of family engagement on their children's academic results (Clinton and Hattie, 2013; Gubbins and Otero, 2018; Lara and Saracosti, 2019; Otani, 2020). Furthermore, in the context of hyper-parenting, parental involvement has taken on a particular form, having to be deployed at home and at school or in school-related tasks (Dannesboe, 2019). This phenomenon appears to exert particularly high pressure on mothers from the middle and upper-middle classes (Lareau, 2003; Caputo, 2007; Jezierski and Wall, 2017).

It is interesting to note that hyper-parenting within the school environment presents a significant challenge for mothers (Sheng, 2012; Lavee and Benjamin, 2015). Indeed, broadly speaking, the roots of this concept lie in the idea of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996). Mothers are still predominantly expected to be the primary caregivers (Caputo, 2007; Shirani, et al, 2011; Lee, 2014), even though fathers have taken on increased caregiving responsibilities for their children. Within the framework of 'parent determinism' (Furedi, 2008), which is understood as the linear and straightforward allocation of responsibilities for their children's problems, mothers are often primarily blamed for their children's 'mistakes'. Consequently, mothers are held to the demanding task of closely supervising their children's development (Perrier, 2013).

In the context of schooling, research has also revealed the convergence of intensive mothering with the intensification of children's school lives (Caputo, 2007). In this scenario, interconnected mothers not only closely monitor their own children, but also scrutinise other mothers who are perceived as contributing to the formation of 'good' and 'bad' families. This dynamic is especially pronounced among upper-middle-class families, where extra-curricular activities are intensified

(Jeziarski and Wall, 2017). As emphasised in the literature on educational and class reproduction, parents invest both time and economic resources in their children's education and development to maintain their class advantages (Lareau, 2003). In that sense, education serves as a means of transferring these privileges rather than a mechanism for upward social mobility, as may be the case in middle- and lower-middle-class families (Bellei et al, 2020). Therefore, as Wheeler (2017) observes, parental involvement becomes more intensive and enduring in upper-middle-class families compared with their middle-class counterparts.

Intensive parenting has counter-narratives from parenting literature and feminist perspectives. Evidence has shown that fathers are more likely to question hyper-vigilance of experts' advice, or withstand material consumption which is linked to hyper-parenting practices (Shirani, et al, 2012). Indeed, intensive parenting narratives are very much related to gender, class and cultural context (Faircloth, 2014). Studies have shown that for the working and middle classes, material necessity outlines the disposition of these parents towards their parenting practices (Nelson, 2010). In terms of cultural context, France is very different from Chile. In that country, women are encouraged to practise a balanced life between family and work (Wagner, 2006). On the contrary, in Chile as in the US, institutional public support for parenting is limited, so balance is still difficult, and child-rearing is still highly privatised. On a related note, feminist academics have advocated for fathers and partners to be involved in childcare as a way to overcome the intensity that parenting consequences have for mothers. However, as presented by Lee et al (2010), these discussions are still child-centred, when the focus is on what parents should or should not do for their children. A different approach is much more related to what we understand and how we approach childhood (Hays, 1996).

This article is based on a three-year project during which we conducted interviews with 36 parents and teachers at both public and private schools in Santiago, Chile. The primary aim of the project was to gain insights into the outcomes produced by the use of digital communication technologies between schools and families. Of the different applications and platforms studied, WhatsApp emerged as the most prevalent (Author, 2023). WhatsApp is an instant messaging application that enables the exchange of text, images, stickers, gifs, voice messages, locations, contacts and documents. Its widespread use in Chile can be attributed to the country's access to some of the most economical mobile internet plans in the world (Cable UK and Instituto Federal de Comunicaciones, 2020).

In this article, we are specifically interested in exploring how the various ways of parenting emerge within the aforementioned context, drawing from the extensive body of literature on parenthood. In this sense, our focus is directed towards understanding the manifestation of hyper-parenting within digital environments, where the everyday use of digital communication technologies in school settings provides an intriguing arena to explore how these new ways of parenting appear, as the literature shows (Leaver, 2017).

We will structure the presentation of the information in the following way. Initially, we will introduce our theoretical framework, based on science and technology studies, and elucidate the conceptual connection between surveillance and parenting. Subsequently, we will outline the research methods and present our findings, organised into three main sections. Last, we will engage in a discussion of the findings and conclude the article.

Theoretical background

In recent decades, the social sciences have shown the interconnection of our interactions and broader social life with digital technologies and emerging new materialities (Latour, 2007). The social use of digital materialities has created established routines of use and corresponding value systems (Silverstone et al, 1992), thereby infusing a moral dimension into our digital engagements (Horst and Miller, 2012). This research is grounded in the science and technology studies (STS) approach, which allows us to focus on the interactions and actions of networks of devices, proposing that everything/everyone has the potential to function as agents (Moyano Dávila et al, 2023) and have agency to affect and be affected by others. From the STS perspective, entities act and evolve within relationships (Latour, 2007). Consequently, we are interested in how parenting emerges as an assembly of human interactions and the opportunities unleashed by digital technology.

The proliferation of various mobile platforms and applications has instigated a transformation in the dynamics of social interaction, both within and outside the family unit, including its relationship with external institutions such as schools. The space traditionally reserved for 'doing family' now extends well beyond the home (Morgan, 1999). Furthermore, the wide array of information that can be shared through these apps, such as video, images, documents, emoticons, text and voice messages, reshapes the multifaceted dimensions of interaction among family members.

The use of digital communication technologies has also transformed the nature of presence. Owing to the immediacy of information and the availability that users are expected to maintain, digital environments have also become spaces of surveillance. Within this context, families have developed practices and preferences for internet safety, encompassing actions like blocking certain websites and applications or monitoring the activity of their children (Dedkova et al, 2022). This dynamic engenders an ambiguous relationship between caregiving and surveillance as the decision to use monitoring applications clashes with families' ideals of trust and privacy (Widmer and Albrechtshund, 2021). New family contradictions appear, especially in the forms of parenting, due to the need to establish and teach the 'proper' ways to use these tools.

This form of peer-to-peer surveillance, also known as lateral surveillance, is facilitated by the features of these apps. In other words, the app exercises its capacity for agency in family relationships, both within and between families. Protecting and caregiving become practices of inter-surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007) and, hand in hand with the growing acceptance of various forms of monitoring, a system of intimate surveillance has been established (Leaver, 2017). This is one of the ways in which intensive parenting is expressed and performed in contemporary digital spaces.

Within the school setting, surveillance practices also take place. The use of digital communication technologies has intensified the connection between families and schools. Consequently, new demands and expectations arise in the use of applications, and the digital space emerges as a platform for demonstrating 'good parenting'. This is typified by the constant availability of parents in the school and the continual assistance of their children with their school work (Akselvoll, 2016). Thus, the tension between monitoring and caregiving is also evident between parents and teachers. In this scenario, there is a dual relationship with WhatsApp: it facilitates communication,

coordination and practical decision making but, at the same time, it opens up a space for misinterpretations, conflicts and demands outside regular school hours (Doğan, 2019).

With the advent of this new space for interaction between parents and schools, novel forms of parental normativity have also emerged (Author, 2023). Intensive parenting is a specific form of normativity, which demands a specific form of cultural capital to comply with the envisioned idea of 'good parenting' (Akselvoll, 2016). These surveillance practices encourage families to construct innovative ways of presenting themselves according to what is expected of them as WhatsApp users. Thus, digital surveillance in schools operates according to at least two objectives: optimising learning and increasing security and care in the school context (Stockman and Nottingham, 2022). These two objectives coexist and shape the interactions and expectations of the different actors who engage in WhatsApp groups.

Given that the entry of technology into schools is a global phenomenon, the theoretical position we adopt allows us to explore the particularities of Chilean society. It is important to mention here that our interpretation of intensive parenting does not refer to a universal moral imperative, but to a pluralisation of the repertoires and spaces in which families define themselves and present to others as such. This theoretical framework affords us a lens through which to observe the dynamic ways in which technology and social actors interact to construct new spaces for engagement. Within the digital space, normative and moral codes are disseminated, thereby promoting either desirable or acceptable ways of using the application as a parent or, conversely, delimiting the parameters of good parenthood based on the use of WhatsApp.

Methodology

This article is based on a three-year project to understand the varied forms of normativity that emerge from the use of digital communication technologies within family and school contexts. For this project, we conducted 36 interviews with parents and teachers in three different types of schools (private, private subsidised and public) which serve as a proxy for socioeconomic stratification, thereby enabling us to underscore some of the differences between the elites, middle classes and lower-middle classes. While the final results allow us to establish some distinctions between these three types, we place particular emphasis on these differences in the discussion section, where we also draw on theories and secondary evidence that furnish explanations regarding the phenomenon of parenthood in these scenarios.

The interviews centred on the diverse uses and particularities of WhatsApp groups and the interview guidelines addressed the topics of usage (locations, frequency, roles and responsibilities), the daily school life of their children and themselves, the case of teachers (academic autonomy, digital communication technologies as an enabling or hindering factor, student and family privacy, academic accomplishments and challenges, conflicts and topics of discomfort), and expectations surrounding the use of digital communication technologies. We worked with official school WhatsApp groups: that is, where parents and the head teacher of each class participate. We also interviewed teachers who had participated in parent groups but who were no longer involved, since their experiences were very useful to understand the effect on parents' behaviour.

Parents join these groups voluntarily. In general, they are added to the group on their child's first day, since WhatsApp has an important role in the coordination and delivery of daily information about the school, particularly about their children's

classes. Although both parents can be part of the group, usually only one of them participates. Households are in charge of deciding which parent will participate in the group as the family representative and in charge of the child.

The sample size responds to our attempt to achieve a well-balanced distribution between parents and teachers for each type of school. We selected two interviewees in each educational level (pre-school, primary and secondary) to address the perspectives of parents and teachers of different educational levels. However, the variable of interest for the analysis is mainly the school administration.

We use a grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021) to analyse the data (please refer to Figure 1 for learning about the sample). Using the Atlas.ti software, we first carried out an open coding process conducted collaboratively by the whole team (four people), guided by the primary objectives of the project. The codes we established were explicit, showing the essence of the cited content. Consequently, only a few codes were reused, reducing the need to revisit the original quotes in the subsequent stages of the analytical process. We then reviewed each code as a team, grouping those that encapsulated similar ideas. For this article, we reviewed those groups, focusing on areas related to affect, academic autonomy, expectations regarding the use of WhatsApp groups, intervention in conflicts, student privacy, participation in the educational process and the impact of digital conflicts on school life. These areas formed the foundation for constructing our three principal findings.

Results

Performing parenting in the digital realm

Our results are divided into three main sections; each section reveals that diverse parenting performances are enacted in WhatsApp parent groups, but those productions concurrently contribute to the propagation of different stereotypes and normativity. These digital interactions, as previously shown by the literature, constitute another scenario where parents exhibit the current tendency of over-parenting. Participants tend to perceive WhatsApp groups as spaces where distinct parental typologies emerge.

Figure 1: Sample by type of school

Type of school	N° of interviews	
	Parents	Teachers
Public schools	6	6
Private subsidized schools	6	6
Private schools	6	6
Total	18	18

Source: Authors' calculations.

There's a bit of everything there. There's the apprehensive mum who finds faults in everything, like 'the teacher doesn't say this', 'my child this, et cetera, et cetera'; all the complaints are there. Then there are the mums who say 'remember that this week there's that thing', and there are those who don't say anything at all; the ones who are more like ghosts and only show up later to complain. (Harold, teacher)

In the first of the three sections, we first describe how WhatsApp works as a tool for parents to stay abreast of their children's school-related responsibilities. We emphasise how this is problematic for students and other parents and teachers. Second, we illustrate how this hyper-parenting fosters a culture of comparison that evolves into competition, not just among students but also between families. Finally, we show that comparison and competition may be connected with the practice of 'lateral surveillance'.

Staying abreast of school-related responsibilities

First, parents actively engage with their children's school-related responsibilities, primarily involving the management of the school agenda. With readily available access to direct information from teachers and administrators, parents develop an intensive parenting approach (Gómez Espino, 2012) by monitoring their children's school work without the need to cross-verify or check the information with them.

Participants in the different types of schools emphasise that their participation increased during the pandemic. WhatsApp was the place for them to ask about classes, homework and exams.

I feel that the children lost a lot of autonomy there because it was practically the parents who were more concerned about the homework when they had a test or they were speaking for the students instead of the students being able to speak. Even when we were in online classes, it was like 'I'm going to speak for my child,' and they did speak for their child, or they often did their assignments for them. So, it was like they lost a lot of autonomy and that's what we're trying to regain with them now. (Delia, parent)

Parents acknowledge that this is sometimes an issue with their children. Students want more autonomy, but parents feel it is their responsibility to take control of their school-related tasks. The practical use of WhatsApp's parent group gives them a sense of inclusion and presence in their children's lives. Within this dynamic, we can perceive a tension reflecting the challenge of allowing space for their children and giving them a sense of responsibility, but, at the same time, maintaining a continuous presence to 'support' or 'remind' them. This type of 'soft vigilance' establishes a mode of care that takes place particularly in the digital realm, as a form of permanent presence.

Just yesterday, I think we received a screenshot from [a parent], who is the representative of the parents' group for the class, and she told us, 'Just in case,

tomorrow there's this or next week there's going to be a language test, and the book is this,' and things like that. So, each time, less and less. Yes, it's all part of a process, isn't it? Because, because it's true that, on the one hand, especially teenagers are demanding more autonomy and that's fair and good that it's like that, but on the other hand, you also realise that sometimes it's good to give a little support, reinforce, remind them, 'Look, you have that test tomorrow or next week.' (Matilde, parent)

Those uses of the group chats are predominantly related to the academic responsibilities of their children. Parents tend to try and control their children when the school highlights their performance. In this context, the virtual presence and the intensive use of WhatsApp emerge as a manifestation of caregiving. According to the fathers, the various school stakeholders are present to supervise and provide care, a capability that is made possible by the inherent features of the application.

Look, lately we've needed them more because Gaspar hasn't been doing well at school, so we've had to use this chat to find out about the tests, the deadlines, these dates, because Gaspar hasn't been paying attention either. ... In fact, last year my son was on the brink of repeating [the year] and we had everything on him, family, school, that is, everything contrary to autonomy because he wasn't responding. (Hector, parent)

However, there are dissenting voices among the parents who believe that students' autonomy is essential but is a process that has to be developed. The parent below believes that part of the parents' responsibility is to nurture their children's autonomy. He is very careful not to create the perception that parents can do everything for their children.

So, the issue of academic autonomy is something that shapes it in a way, in a sense of non-autonomy; as if you're always meddling and not letting the student solve it however it might come out, with the feeling that you can do it yourself. (David, parent)

Controlling parents are subject to criticism and stereotypes. The mother below is quite categorical when she points out that such mothers are seen as 'anxious' and she believes teachers should intervene when they use the WhatsApp group to enquire about students' academic responsibilities.

Because the mother gets involved, 'Hey, what's the homework?' or 'Hey, where's X crayon?' Well, the child needs a bit of responsibility with their things, so 'Hey, kid, tomorrow go and ask where your crayon is,' so it's like a thing where you don't need to be in the chatroom, but there are mums who get really anxious and then the teacher has to say 'Hey, don't ask about the homework in the chat,' but, hey, it's so obvious [laughs]. (Sandy, mother)

This form of hyper-parenting through the use of digital chats is also a subject of comment and criticism by teachers. With the capability of accessing and enquiring

about every facet of their children's school schedules, parents can do their child's homework directly. However, teachers also use the parents' chat group to reinforce students' school responsibilities. So, when they offer criticism, they also use the digital space to underscore the academic obligations of their students.

I think it depends on each family and how they handle it as a family because, of course, there are children who are really autonomous and some remind them in the classroom and then, of course, you send the WhatsApp to the parent, the parent tells the child and the child says 'Ah no, I already have it.' In those cases, yes, but there are other cases where, of course, the parent ends up finding out through the WhatsApp and in the end, they end up doing things for the child when they aren't quite so autonomous or when, I don't know, they're more forgetful, I don't know, I don't know. So, as I was saying, it depends on how each family handles it and what the children are like. (Isabel, teacher)

There was a situation in which a teacher recounted a specific conflict concerning students' autonomy. He found himself involved in the criticism made by a mother who had requested a page from a book. In his narrative, he also refers to the student as someone who 'over-intervenes', which is a term typically used in psychology to refer to individuals subjected to multiple and varied psychological interventions.

'Hey, I'm missing page such and such,' and there are some mums who are really irritating regarding what the child has to do, asking for everything. The children are clearly highly intervened, and there are others who throw in [a] comment like 'Hey, relax and let the child do it.' That sparked a debate in the WhatsApp chat and more people joined in, et cetera. (Harold, teacher)

Other teachers hold the view that over-parenting has a modest effect on students' outcomes. One teacher emphasised the idea that, ultimately, the outcomes depend on the students:

I don't think it goes hand in hand, I believe, well, because, in the long run, the achievement of ... learning is still a process. So, regardless of whether the student can be autonomous for certain things, if they don't see, if they don't work on this process to keep, to keep learning, they won't achieve success, even if their dad is on top of them, you know? Even if they bring the work every day. But if the student doesn't put in the effort or work as they should, no, there won't be any achievement. (Fernanda, teacher)

Finally, over-parenting can turn into over-schooling practice that, on the one hand, elevates students' demands for autonomy in their daily school life and responsibilities, and on the other, invites criticism from other parents and teachers. The latter is particularly relevant because those criticisms are not typically directed at every parent. Nevertheless, there is a significant inclination among participants to depict and assess situations as hyper-mothering. Mothers are, in general, the primary subjects of criticism, usually described as anxious and over-involved.

Comparing and competing

As previously demonstrated, parents use WhatsApp groups to over-school their children with homework and academic responsibilities. These practices are primarily related to the everyday academic outcomes of the school. In this context, over-schooling through digital applications is associated with monitoring their children's academic performance and comparing them with other students and families, thereby presenting themselves as attentive parents.

Parents gauge their children's performance by enquiring about and comparing with other children. Their oversight pertains to the completion of school homework and the quality of their responsibilities.

It's not like it's a matter of ... if the girl, when she was a child, had to do her homework because if she didn't, she'd be reprimanded when she got to class, right. So, that's going to make the child do their homework, I think. And, obviously, the whole thing about projecting onto the child, that the child should be incredible and do everything well because, even the mum says, 'Hey, I want my child to do it well,' like ... not just do it, but do it well, like ... 'Hey, but you know what? It's his assignment, not yours.' (Sandy, parent)

It is essential to note that excellence is also sought after in other dimensions that should accompany academic outcomes. Parents express their desire for their children to have friends and be socially well adjusted. This implies that parents are attentive to their children's peers and are concerned about the influence that those peers could exert on their children. This also means that parents are assessing other parents to glean insights into the nature of their child's friendships.

The issue of obsession with success isn't just academic but also wanting my child to be cool, to be sociable and I think any parent wants that, but at what cost? They have to hang out with this child because the other one isn't good for them, and they pass that on to the kids. (Valentina, teacher)

The constant evaluation by parents can be particularly intense during WhatsApp interactions. Parents readily transmit that assessment to the students, and it affects them most.

Sometimes it's as if they get so caught up in this connection to the whole class thing that they forget a bit about the individual human being. And, like I say, unfortunately, it does get transmitted. For instance, that year, my daughter wasn't invited to any birthday parties ... I genuinely felt, I don't know, maybe it's the wrong perception, but I felt like the parents didn't like me, the kids didn't like my daughter, and no one invited her to a birthday party. (Carolina, parent)

The practice of extending an adult's concerns to the students through WhatsApp is very common. When parents engage actively and intensely in their children's performance (both academically and socially) within the chat, they simultaneously assess other students and their families (parents). Consequently, the WhatsApp parent

groups function as a platform where families appraise not only their own child's development, but also the attitudes, values and 'quality' of parenthood of other families.

Teachers also engage in these judgements in face-to-face settings such as at school, as well as in the WhatsApp groups. These chat groups also function as a means for teachers to 'involve' parents in the school, serving as an extension of the school environment.

So, in my case, since I have parents [or guardians] who aren't very involved in the students' education, I need to have that channel to convey information and also bring them closer to the school. I need that channel. (Catalina, teacher)

No, I feel that no, it didn't change ... no, not at all. I believe that what the pandemic did mainly was make people realise that lots of parents didn't know anything about their children in terms of learning, that they weren't involved in the process. (Fernanda, teacher)

In contrast to hyper parenting, absence is another approach to practising parenting. However, this is determined by other actors like teachers. Teachers assess parents and make conclusions about family life based on frequency and speed of parental responses in the chat. Parenting in this context is continuously shaped by the interactions with other school actors such as teachers and other families, as well as in the way in which it is expressed through the possibilities offered by WhatsApp, with respect to hyper-connectivity, immediacy and multi-spatially.

Ultimately, our data show that the act of comparing between families and students may lead to competition. This competition encompasses not only the performance of students, but also that of families. For example, the topics of presence and absence are often a matter of discussion in the WhatsApp groups, and comparisons with other families is a way to justify one's own parenting practices.

So, they try to be there, but I don't know. It's there that conflicts arise among them, like, 'Oh, this mum is just with her kids and she can, but I have to work,' and they start that kind of competition. (Valentina, teacher)

How families present themselves in the scenario of comparison and competition: observing a case of lateral surveillance

As mentioned previously, the concept of intensive parenting through digital communication technologies like WhatsApp exhibits a specific form of parental presence in children's activities and new ways to present themselves as a family. Digital communication technologies provide a new space to perform parenting, where the representation is constructed in a relational manner, with those relationships between families and teachers. Through comparison, families engage in lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007), which is a form of peer-to-peer surveillance. This surveillance can be interpreted as a means for parents to continuously monitor what other people say (and think) about their children on WhatsApp.

The WhatsApp group functions as a new socialisation space within the school, where parents feel compelled to defend their children and speak on their behalf. This

has led to the emergence of new forms of parenting that revolve around constant availability and immediate access to information. Teachers perceive this as part of the parents' 'instinctive efforts' to exhibit how they are as a family.

I think the way the children behave makes parents feel like they have to defend them ... 'My daughter lost her apron today and someone took it. Why do they take things that don't belong to them? You learn that at home, and you, you, you.' Because they are their children, they're our children, you know? And when it comes to your child, that's your most precious thing. There's no child who's stupid, ugly or bad, not one. So, when they touch your kid, it hurts deep down. That's something you have to understand from the best perspective because it's very natural, very instinctual, very primal, and you have to understand those parents too. (Verónica, teacher)

Lateral surveillance emerges as the mechanism through which parents defend their children and indicate that other students and their families are not like 'ours', expressing a kind of boundary between families in the same school. Nevertheless, these boundaries are flexible. Occasionally, topics discussed in the WhatsApp groups are extended to and continue in the face-to-face world, even in interactions between students. Through the digital space, lateral surveillance transcends the confines of the digital realm. Even in their face-to-face life, families engage in discussions with their children to anticipate possible repercussions in the virtual space and how the family will be presented based on the opinions expressed there.

Yes, I think so. In any case, because if a parent has such a loose filter when it comes to arguing on WhatsApp, it's very likely that it will spill over to their children in some way. Kids also absorb things, their antennas are up, they don't miss a thing, and then they repeat it. I remember Aníbal came home saying, 'Mum, we have to vote for Sichel', and I was like, 'What? Why?' 'Yes, because so-and-so's mum is supporting Sichel,' 'Sichel and Boric, or whatever', and I told him that we're not going to vote for him, at least not me and he asked, 'Who are you going to vote for?' and I didn't want to tell him because I knew he would go and say that his mum was going to vote for someone else. And Ernesto says, 'Aníbal, we have to vote for Boric or whatever,' and I'm like, 'Shut up, Ernesto'. (Samanta, parent)

Teachers also notice that the constant vigilance of parents through WhatsApp is a gendered practice. Parents tend to be more attentive to what is said about their daughters and the situations in which they are involved more than academic issues. In contrast, parents are more focused on asking and monitoring their sons' academic performance.

They get involved when something happens to their daughter and the dad comes out to defend her. But it's like they don't care as much if she's not learning as much, but with boys, they do care, and that's where that gender part comes in. This is also generalising. I notice a big difference. Last year I had a class of girls, and now I have one of boys, and right away I notice differences in how they get involved. (Valentina, teacher)

Lateral surveillance acts even in the absence of a virtual or face-to-face interlocutor. It pertains to do the potential consequences of how families depict themselves in virtual interactions. This dynamic also affects how families relate to each other and to the school. It revolves around concerns about what others might say about them and how family's image could be conveyed. This represents the realm of 'what they will say' or 'what they might say', as well as the potential dissemination of the family's image throughout the school community.

Discussion

WhatsApp parents' groups have emerged as a distinctive form of parenting and an extension of the family institution. When teachers are part of these groups, they assume the role of institutional representatives of the school, mirroring how parents are the representatives of their families. As our findings show, how and what parents communicate through the WhatsApp group directly affects how families and teachers construct the image of the students and vice versa.

The images of the family that are produced through this digital application align with the idea of normativity. Indeed, digital technologies are a non-neutral device (Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa, 2019), they actively influence the production of practices and ideas surrounding parenting. Although our results show that there are diverse ways of performing parenthood within the WhatsApp groups, the way in which the participants reflect on these practices produces normative ideas that involve stereotypes (Authors, 2023). For example, in the WhatsApp groups, we observe the binary categorisation of hyper-parenthood in terms of closely monitoring the agenda. However, this idea is very closely connected to the participants' categorisation of 'anxious mothers'. While intensive parenting may appear to be the norm, with digital technology facilitating this heightened level of involvement, it frequently places mothers in a very negative light. Conversely, in the case of parents who are not digitally present, the participants assume that they are not present for their children at all. WhatsApp groups thus become a space for parents to exhibit and assess parenting regarding their children's daily school life.

This mechanism of producing ideas of emerging parenting within digital technologies, as already stated, is associated with the concept of 'lateral or intimate surveillance' (Leaver, 2017). This idea is interesting when interpreting our results because it intersects with intensive parenting in two interrelated ways. First, families practice lateral surveillance directed towards their own children and, second, they do so towards other families. In both cases, these actions and routines assume well-intentioned purposes, with the belief that using WhatsApp groups will increase the wellbeing of students and families. However, these dynamics also evidence a 'bureaucratisation' of the relationship between homes and schools (Head, 2020). This means that the management of information and communication becomes the priority form of parental involvement in the school. Thus, digitalisation intensifies the demands for participation and the emergence of prescriptive forms of parenting. This injunction to intensive parenting presents, however, important differences according to gender, race and social class, as evidenced by previous research (Nelson, 2010; Shirani, et al, 2012).

Digital platforms operate in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, WhatsApp groups serve as a space for caregiving where parents can feel actively engaged in their

children's everyday school activities, ensuring that they are well informed and able to enquire about anything they need to know promptly. On the other hand, parents often adopt a customer-like role towards the school. This constant accessibility operates in the opposite direction for teachers, as parents are more demanding than students. Digital spaces can embody caregiving as a form of presence and accessibility, but they can also generate feelings of restlessness, intensity and demand.

Conclusion

From our results, we can observe that within the general framework of intensive parenting, various parenting performances emerge. Therefore, intensive parenting sets a standard for how one should act as a parent in digital spaces through the ways in which they are present and available in WhatsApp groups.

Overall, our research demonstrates that parents employ WhatsApp as a tool to monitor their children's schedules and to maintain continuous awareness of their school-related responsibilities. This constant presence constitutes a form of surveillance based on care and concern for their children's school performance. This type of vigilance also mobilises the practice of comparing their children and family with other children and families, a practice through which the parents demonstrate their attentiveness. These practices are forms of intensive parenting that shape the ways in which families present themselves in the digital space of the school.

WhatsApp parent groups, as a digital communication technology within the school, have various implications for families. First, they are a novel way for families to engage in their children's daily school life, but they also simultaneously foster intensive parenting that can be problematic when it restricts the room for students' autonomy. This is related to a second implication, which involves the production of stereotype clusters of parenting that predominantly affect mothers. It should be pointed out that it is common for other parents to label a mother as an intensive parent due to her WhatsApp use, being swiftly tagged as 'anxious', 'excellence-oriented' or 'competitive'. At the same time, if a parent does not perform intensively, such as by not taking part in a discussion or not responding rapidly enough, they can be categorised as 'negligent'. As mentioned previously, the literature has used the term 'lateral surveillance' to describe the mechanism through which these implications are disseminated, eventually becoming perceived as normal behaviour within digital communication technologies.

Our aim is not to assign blame or demonise digital communicational technologies for families in the educational context. On the contrary, it is essential for both schools and parents to recognise that digital technologies can produce new ways of parenting that involve not only human interactions, but also devices and materialities. Performing parenting in an age of intensive parenting can involve both surveillance and caregiving at the same time. In essence, digital communicational technologies such as WhatsApp groups produce different performances of parenting that all align with the prevailing norm of intensity. Whether parents use extreme labels such as 'the anxious mother' or 'the negligent parent', digital communication platforms in this era of intensity continually prompt parents to observe and assess the parenting performances of others.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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