

AI promises to make life easier for parents, but who is in control?

Retaining agency in the age of AI is critical for mental health



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It started like this: “Hey Siri, play *Thunder* by *Imagine Dragons*”. But now my 6-year-old daughter is so comfortable with Siri that, with one barked command, she can spawn entire playlists of songs neither she nor her parents have heard before but Siri knows she will like. (Her younger brother has come to believe that if you ask in the right way, you can conjure into existence a peppy kids’ number about literally anything in the world.)

At first, the magic of AI meant only one thing to me as a parent: convenience. AI was simply an always-on assistant to help me keep on top of my children’s ever-changing demands. Siri could play songs to keep my kids mollified while my hands were tied down driving, working or shopping.

But as my kids have grown, something has changed. The algorithms have become more ambitious – not only smarter, but more proactive. Rather than faithfully respond to commands, the technology increasingly takes matters into its own hands: I look at my photos, for example, and find that they’ve been organised into albums without my asking. AI is ready to assume control of all aspects of our lives, if we let it, from how we manage our meals to investments to shopping choices.

The big sales pitch is that all this makes life more convenient. Research suggests that the average person makes around 35,000 decisions per day, more than 200 about food alone (Graff, 2021). Making decisions is exhausting, especially for parents, and fatigue can be costly as it reduces the quality of our decisions. Surely, we should welcome the help?

But life for parents is about more than convenience. Agency matters. Research says our mental health is closely linked to our “internal locus of control” – the feeling of being in control of the consequences of our actions, as opposed to having our fate determined by outside forces (Shin and Lee, 2019). Which, in turn, seems related to the ability to cope with life challenges, such as scarcity of money or time, that can be particularly severe for parents (Groth et al., 2019). Indeed, feeling more in control as a parent may be linked with children’s own sense of agency, behaviour and emotional development (Morton, 1997; Freed and Tompson, 2011; Tone et al., 2012).



To be sure, time-saving hacks are critical for parents whose ability to concentrate on the things that matter is often under siege (Kalil et al., 2023). So reclaiming agency cannot be about shunning technology. Instead, it means using the technology we have to choose our own roadmap for how we can maximise our children's wellbeing – and our own.

“To take back control, we do not have to 'unplug' and give up on the convenience.”

I would not be exercising agency if I simply turned off the predictive algorithms on my kids' favourite entertainment platforms. Instead, I could exercise agency by choosing a parenting style that works for me and my family and applying it to their entertainment choices – and this could include choosing an algorithm to guide the individual entertainment decisions my kids make.

Already, AI-powered apps make it possible to reclaim some agency. You can first tell ChatGPT something about your preferences as a parent, and then ask for recommendations for books or movies in accordance

with this. Parents can start by reading, thinking and consulting with experts about different parenting styles and how they want to shape their children's development as well as their own lives. Then they can try to consciously choose the tools and technologies that propel their vision forward.

Algorithms can take away agency without us noticing. But AI-driven tools can be part of the solution, not just the problem. Imagine apps that, before they pick out movies for your kids or exercise routines for you, prompt you first to articulate your goals, parenting style, and vision for what attributes you would like your children to have. Such tools may not yet be widespread, but surely will be soon.

Having to make tough choices in response to technological advances is nothing new for parents. Video games brought worries about harmful content, but when used correctly they can also support kids' learning (Boudreau, 2021). With AI, the tradeoff is even closer to home: convenience has increasingly come to mean giving up control in the task of parenting itself. But to take back control, we do not have to “unplug” and give up on the convenience. Human-led parenting is still the best way to support children's development – and algorithms, if we use them wisely, can support the choices that we make.

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