Parental Perceptions of Young Children’s Information Behavior Related to Free-Time Activities

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ABSTRACT
This poster presents an exploration of parental perceptions of the everyday life information behaviors of children between 4 and 8 years of age. Twenty-three parents/caregivers completed a survey about their children’s information behaviors related to their hobbies and interests. Findings indicate that young children exhibit a heavy reliance on interpersonal interactions for information seeking and information sharing, while information use is more likely to be an individual activity. Information behaviors were evident in children who engaged in a variety of free-time activities, though not all free-time activities resulted in reported engagement in information behaviors. The findings of this study indicate that children as young as 4 years of age engage in observable information behaviors related to their everyday free-time activities. Additional research is needed to better understand young children’s everyday life information behaviors.

Keywords
children’s information behavior; information seeking; information sharing; information use; information creation

INTRODUCTION
From the very beginning of a child’s life, he or she begins engaging in behaviors that contribute to the process of learning about the world. Many of these behaviors can be understood through the lens of information behavior (IB). The importance of gaining an understanding of the IB of children as a group distinct from adolescents and adults becomes evident when the many ways in which children are developmentally different from these groups are considered. Children grow and develop in areas such as cognitive abilities, language development, and literacy (Spink & Heinstrom, 2011), making it reasonable to expect that the ways in which they engage in IB will similarly grow and develop.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Research on the everyday life IB of children has typically focused on those over the age of 9 years (Spink & Heinstrom, 2011). Older children have reported using a variety of information sources and seeking strategies, including interpersonal, print, and digital sources (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Meyers, Fisher, & Marcoux, 2009). Research that has included younger children has shown that their IB can be quite different from that of older children (e.g. Shenton & Dixon, 2003; Spink & Heinstrom, 2011), although these differences have not been fully explicated. In order to overcome some of the difficulties that may arise when studying the behaviors of young children, parents and other adults who play central roles in children’s lives have been included in some IB research. For example, McKechnie (2000) asked mothers to keep diaries of their children’s observable IB.

Hobbies and interests have been identified as an important, yet relatively unexamined, area of interest for IB researchers (Hartel, 2010). Previous everyday life information seeking (ELIS) research has indicated that children and adolescents engage in information seeking in response to their own personal interests, including sports, hobbies, and other leisure activities (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Meyers et al., 2009; Shenton & Dixon, 2003). To date, little research has investigated the IB of young children specifically in relation to their hobbies and interests.

Information and Information Seeking
Williamson’s (1998) ecological model of ELIS takes into account both active and passive information seeking, and also allows for a variety of information sources to be considered. The ecological model of ELIS is rooted in Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological model of child development which also emphasizes the importance of external influences on behavior (Williamson, 1995), making it especially appropriate for use in this study. Bates’ definition of information as “all instances where people interact with their environment in any such way that leaves some impression on them – that is, adds or changes their knowledge store” (2010, p. 2381) was employed.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
While everyday life IB related to personal interests have been investigated in preadolescent and adolescent populations, their existence in young children has been relatively unexamined. The current research study examines parental perceptions of the IB of children 4-8 years of age related to hobbies and interests through the lens of the ecological model of ELIS. Specifically, the following questions were under investigation:

1. What sources and strategies do parents perceive children using when seeking information related to their free-time activities?

2. What other information behaviors do parents perceive children engaging in related to their free-time activities?

METHOD
Participants
The participants in this study were parents/caregivers of children between the ages of 4 and 8 years of age. Parents/caregivers were selected as participants rather than the children themselves because of the exploratory nature of this study. Before engaging children in research, it should first be determined that they have exhibited some evidence of the behaviors under study. Participants were recruited via Facebook using a snowball sampling method, as well as through a local childcare center.

Procedure
In order to address the research questions stated above, participants were asked to complete a survey about their children’s interests and behaviors. The survey included questions about demographics of the family and child, the child’s hobbies and interests, and the child’s IB in response to their hobbies and interests. Definitions of information seeking, use, and sharing were not provided in order to elicit responses reflective of participants’ understandings of these behaviors.

Data Analysis
Responses to the survey were analyzed for common themes in information sources and seeking strategies, information use, and information sharing using the constant comparison method (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS
Participants
In total, 23 participants completed the study, including 19 mothers, 2 step-mothers, 1 aunt, and 1 father. Twenty of the participants identified as white, one participant identified as African American, 1 participant self-identified as “White/Asian” and 1 participant self-identified as “mixed black and white”. Family income levels ranged from under $20,000 per year to over $150,000 per year, with a modal income level of $50,000 to $69,999 per year. Fourteen participants provided responses about a female child, 8 participants provided responses about a male child, and 1 participant preferred not to provide the gender of the child. The ages of the children included six 4 year olds, one 5 year old, six 6 year olds, four 7 year olds, and five 8 year olds, with 1 participant preferring not to provide the age of the child.

Information sources and seeking strategies
Participants were asked to describe the ways in which their children find new information. Participants reported that their children seek information using a variety of strategies and sources. Interpersonal interaction was the most commonly cited strategy, with 16 participants describing strategies that involved direct interaction with others. Eleven participants described their children asking questions in order to find new information, with 5 of these 11 participants specifying that their children ask questions of their parents. Talking with friends was a strategy reported by 4 participants, and talking with teachers and talking with classmates were each reported by 1 participant. Three participants described information seeking strategies that relied on the behavior of others, with 2 participants describing engagement with sibling’s activities and 1 participant describing observation of other children’s play.

Use of physical resources was another common information seeking strategy cited by participants, with 13 participants reporting their children’s use of such resources in their information seeking. Eleven participants reported that their children use books in their information seeking. The internet was a source of information seeking cited by 7 participants, with 3 of these 7 participants specifying that their children engage in search on the internet. One participant specified that her child uses an iPad for his internet-based information seeking. Five participants stated their children find new information by watching television.

Participants also reported other, perhaps less traditional conceptualizations of information seeking. Two participants cited their child’s use of their own imagination as a way of finding new information, with one stating that his child “relies heavily on her imagination” and another stating her child “just comes up with things on her own”. “Trying new things” was another strategy cited by 1 participant. Visiting the library was reported by 2 participants and attending classes at the YMCA was reported by 1 participant.

Some participants described their children’s information seeking in terms of active and passive seeking. For example, one participant described her child’s information seeking activities in terms of information encountering, stating that “she happens upon items” of information rather than engaging in active information seeking, even though the participant also listed asking questions as a strategy used by her child. Another participant stated that her child “is quick to ask questions from her father or myself in situations where she needs something explained but doesn’t actively seek new information”.

Through the language used by several of the participants, it is evident that for many young children information seeking
is not a solitary activity. Participants gave responses such as “He asks his parents, then we looks in books”; “I provide him with info off line”; and “We go to University games from the web site that we look at together” that indicate heavy parental involvement in information seeking.

**Information sharing and use**

Participants were asked to describe the ways in which their children engage in information use. The majority of participants described ways in which their children incorporate new information into various free-time activities. These activities included play (listed by 5 participants), drawing (4 participants), story development (4 participants), crafts (2 participants), games and building things (each listed by 1 participant). Two participants also described their children incorporating information into physical activity, with one participant stating that her child “mimics” the “actions/play” of other children. Three participants indicated that their children use new information to make purchases related to their hobbies and interests. Two participants stated that their children use information to plan attendance at future events. Three participants described their children engaging in information use by sharing information with others. In addition, 3 participants provided responses that were less specific in that they did not describe particular instances in which their children use information. Instead, these participants stated that their children use information in “implementing new ideas”, to “participate in something new”, and “to complete the task at hand”.

Participants were also asked to describe the ways in which their children engage in information sharing. Participants described their children engaging in activities that fell into three main categories: sharing found information, sharing information sources, and sharing information creations. Sharing found information was the most commonly cited method, with 19 participants describing their children sharing found information with others. All 19 of these participants indicated that their children engage in information sharing through talking to others, with 2 participants specifying that their children talk to friends, 2 participants specifying that their children talks to family members, and 1 participant specifying that her child talks to classmates. One participant also stated that her child shares information with others by text messaging. Two participants stated that their children share information by inviting others to join in their activities. One participant stated that her child shares information by showing others “what she’s learned”.

The second category of information sharing cited by parents was sharing information sources, a type of information sharing described by 2 participants. One participant described their child sharing information sources through reading, while the other described showing pictures as a way of sharing information. The third category of information sharing involved sharing objects created using found information. Four participants described their children sharing information creations, including stories (4 participants), drawings (2 participants), and crafts (1 participant).

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study indicate that children as young as the age of 4 years engage in a number of IBs related to their hobbies and interests, including information seeking, information use, and information sharing.

Interpersonal interactions were the most commonly cited source of information seeking, with conversations with others playing a primary role. These findings are consistent with Williamson’s (1998) work and Harris and Dewdney’s (1994) principles of information seeking, which state that people have a tendency to turn to other people for information first, as well as previous research with preadolescents (Meyers et al., 2009) and adolescents (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005) in which a preference for interpersonal sources was noted. That young children display a heavy reliance on interpersonal information seeking is also not surprising when one considers their lower literacy levels, which may make information seeking using traditional text-based sources difficult. These difficulties are highlighted in young children’s reliance on assistance from others in seeking information using traditional text-based sources.

In addition to information seeking through interpersonal interactions and traditional resources, parents reported that their children engaged in several information seeking behaviors that are quite different from those typically discussed in IB research. Activities such as trying new things, using one’s imagination, and observing others are outside of traditional conceptions of information seeking. However, observation has been noted as an information seeking strategy in previous research with children (Crow, 2011). The use of such non-traditional sources of information may again be a reflection of children’s limited access to traditional sources because of their limited abilities to read and write. The diversity of information seeking strategies and sources used reflect the considerations of information seeking outlined in Williamson’s (1998) ecological model. However, Williamson’s (1998) model places much emphasis on information encountering, a type of information seeking that did not have a prominent role in parental descriptions of children’s IB. This may reflect that information encountering is a more difficult type of information seeking behavior to observe than purposive information seeking.

Interpersonal interactions were also the most commonly cited strategy used by young children in information sharing, but not in information use. This is not surprising because information sharing by definition involves imparting some form of information from one person to another. In many cases, information use served as the step between information seeking and information sharing, with some parents reporting their children using information to
create objects such as stories or crafts that were then shared with others. Participants’ responses did not indicate a heavy parental involvement in information use, unlike information seeking. This may indicate that the activities children engage in when using information may be better suited to their developmental levels than the activities typically engaged in for information seeking.

Participants’ responses to questions regarding information use and information sharing demonstrate that parents perceive these activities to be related, with some overlap between the types of behaviors described regarding information use and information sharing. For example, several participants described information sharing as a way their children use information. Participants’ responses also included activities that could be thought of as information creation, such as writing stories or making crafts. The distinction between information use, sharing, and creation is not well defined in the IB literature (Kari, 2010). That neither scholars nor laypeople can always differentiate between these behaviors highlights the interconnectedness of these various ways of engaging in information.

Some participants did not provide information about their children’s IB in response to their hobbies and/or interests. While this may be an indication that not all of children’s hobbies and/or interests, such as playing outdoors or watching television, generate information needs, it may also be an indication that not all of children’s IB is observed or interpreted as such by their parents/caregivers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that children as young as 4 years of age engage in IB related to their hobbies and interests. The IB of the children included in this study are in some ways similar to those of adults. For example, children engage in information seeking through interpersonal interactions and use of resources such as books and the internet, and share information with others through interpersonal interactions and information creations. However, children’s information seeking behaviors are often completed with assistance from their parents, and children sometimes use methods of information seeking that are not typically included in descriptions of adult information seeking, such as observation, trying new things, and use of imagination. These findings highlight the ways in which children’s IB may differ from those of adults and are in need of direct attention by IB researchers.

As so little research has been conducted on the everyday life IB of young children, there remain many unanswered questions that would benefit from future research. The current study was limited in its reliance on the observations of adult parents/caregivers. Further investigations should include the perspectives of the children under study and also make use of a variety of research methods in order to gain a more complete picture of young children’s IB.

REFERENCES


