

# Australian report cites 'datafication' of childhood

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To protect privacy in our homes we may build fences, grow shrubs, hang curtains and install security cameras.

But according to a recent report from Deakin University in Australia, one of our most significant privacy threats looms inside our homes.

University researchers say that the burgeoning popularity of [smart technologies](#) in the home is providing a gold mine of data to app developers and the creators of digital devices.

Homes are increasingly populated with devices such as robot vacuum cleaners, smart TVs and internet-connected refrigerators, that along with smartphones and tablets, generate enough data to provide a remarkably detailed portrait of members of the household.

"Information can be extrapolated from them quite easily about who is in the house, what is in the house, the comings and goings when you're leaving for work. And so the patterns of life can be mapped, collected and then analyzed," researcher Lucy Pangrazio says.

Of particular concern to researchers is the exposure of personal data in homes with children 8 years old and younger.

In what they referred to as "the datafication of childhood," Pangrazio and fellow researcher Jane Mavoa say families are increasingly turning to technology "to organize, communicate and document" their day-to-day activities that can be tracked and analyzed by digital apps.

They cite apps that collect information on pregnancy, breastfeeding, infant sleep habits and food choices.

"These connected apps and devices may collect information that can identify individuals, meaning children's toys and gadgets are now synonymous with 'dataveillance' and commercialization," say the researchers.

Also troubling is the fact that devices such as "Owlet," a wearable sock for babies that tracks [heart rate](#) and oxygen levels, "normalize" the notion that good parenting accommodates such digital surveillance, the report said. (The device has not received FDA clearance for sale in the United States.)

Although the study is based on 504 Australian households, the researchers say this is "an international phenomenon."

There are more than seven internet-connected devices tapping into [daily routines](#) in the average home, researchers said. Nearly 100 percent of homes had smartphones, and more than half had a laptop, smart TV or gaming console.

Last year, a study found that more than two-thirds of the 1,000 most popular iPhone apps used by children retrieve [personal information](#) that is sold to advertising interests. Nearly 80 percent of Android apps popular among children partner with advertisers, according to fraud and compliance software company Pixalate.

The report, published in *Media International Australia*, cites a 2020 study that found nearly three quarters of 46 of the most popular parental control apps in the Google Play Store share data with third parties without mention in their privacy policies.

In the battle for children's privacy, the numbers are grim.

"By the age of 13 years, it is estimated that advertisers will have collected over 72 million [data points](#) about a child," the researchers report.

They conclude that it is critical to explore [privacy issues](#) further in order to ensure that "protecting the digital rights of children and families is at

the forefront of technological innovation in the home."

**More information:** Luci Pangrazio et al, Studying the datafication of Australian childhoods: learning from a survey of digital technologies in homes with young children, *Media International Australia* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/1329878X231162386](https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231162386)

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