



# Caregiver Perceptions of Technology: Emergent Theming

October – November 2023

---

## Approach

To provide Craft Futures with data for their advisory group to review during the 10/27 session, ResultsLab has done light coding of emergent themes and elevated exemplar quotes where possible. The themes begin with context about [who participated in interviews](#) and move into [perceptions of struggle](#), [reflections on independence](#), and [reactions to technology in the classroom](#).

## Methods and Engagement

Caregiver interview participants were recruited to engage in 30-minute interviews through the Caregiver Advisory Group of the Community Insights Network, managed by ResultsLab. Six caregivers were engaged during the week of October 16th, and for their participation they received a \$50 incentive to either Amazon or PayPal. ResultsLab spoke to caregivers from Oregon, New York, Pennsylvania (3), and Texas with representation across small, rural communities and urban metropolises. Participants brought perspectives from a wide range of family dynamics, including raising an only child, multiple children in different age groups, students with special needs, extended families who support in childrearing, two-parent households, students with divorced parents, and students in public and charter schools as well as students in online programs. There was oversampling of caregivers with students in the elementary to middle school grade bands.

Children of Caregivers by Grade (n=12)

Grade	Number of Students
Kindergarten	1
2nd	4
3rd	1
5th	1
6h	1
8th	2
9th	1
10th	1

## Emergent Theming by Interview Question

### Struggle: How do you know whether to intervene when your child is struggling versus let them figure it out on their own?

Overall, caregivers from various family dynamics can agree that this is an ongoing challenge for them to figure out with their child(ren) how to negotiate struggle – when to let their child struggle and when to intervene. Caregivers with multiple children refer to needing to take an individualized approach for each of their children, as interaction with struggle and natural inclination toward independence show up differently for children. If the caregiver understands their child(ren)'s relationship with struggle, they can be better equipped to employ healthy coping strategies with/for their child(ren).

Through our interviews, caregivers talked about the following ways that struggle shows up for their child(ren):

- Scenario 1: Child is overall more independent and comfortable struggling on their own or is willing to seek out support.
  - o This can look like being comfortable with trying things on their own first and then asking for advice, guidance, or help once they feel stumped. Children may seek support with their struggles from a variety of resources available to them – caregivers, friends, siblings, teachers.
  - o This can look like struggling for a time, identifying that they need help, asking to be shown an example but not wanting the caregiver to do it for them, then working through it themselves based on the example.
  - o This can look like refusing to seek out help entirely even if it means performing poorly or not being able to accomplish a task at all.

*“With my eldest, she has found that sometimes she doesn't want Mom around and Mom doesn't know any better than her friends, too. She says, ‘No, I don't want you talking to my teachers.’ But she comes for reassurance and to make sure that she's follow all the steps that I would have told her to ... My middle child is not like that. She will go straight to the teacher and she will make sure the teacher will help her with whatever it may be.”*

*“My daughter is very independent. We're finding that math can be challenging for her. I think either my husband will offer assistance or I will. It's more of just like showing an example and then having her do it and then she just takes off with it.”*

- Scenario 2: Child is overall less independent and more ready to give up rather than struggle.
  - o This can look like coming to parents immediately rather than trying on their own first.
  - o This can look like having issues with emotional regulation – yelling, throwing things, anger – when they struggle with something.
  - o This can look like needing a lot of hand holding, positive validation, and kudos to accomplish a task that involves struggle.

*“My son, the youngest, gives up so quickly. He is like ‘I can't do this. You need to talk to this teacher.’”*

*“When they are struggling, they're having a hard time doing something, they don't want to do something and their emotions are not normal. Like they're out of balance or upset, sad, whatever it may be.”*

- Scenario 3: Child is gifted and does not frequently struggle – like if they are naturally very gifted academically – then it can be uncomfortable and emotionally jarring to struggle, causing the child to not have as much exposure with how to cope.
  - o When they do encounter something that they struggle with, it can be extremely uncomfortable for them to grapple with struggle.
  - o Child can be disruptive or lose their ability to self-regulate.

*"When a task is not easy, for lack of better words, he loses his mind. Like he just kind of explodes a little bit. He was trying to make his bed recently and he could not ... He didn't take the time to realize that these sheets don't fit. So, he's just up there upstairs and I can hear him throwing things, pounding on his bed ... In the past, I would have gone up and been like, 'What's going on, buddy?' But this time I said he has to come ask for help."*

Caregivers also have natural inclinations toward how they want to help their child when they are struggling. Some caregivers mention that this stems from the way they themselves were raised but can also be influenced by other family dynamics. One example is if a family is going through a divorce, a caregiver can feel helpless and want to control as much as possible for their child. These caregivers may feel drawn to being a 'fixer' and immediately jumping into support, not as inclined toward intentionally building their child's sense of independence and not wanting to see their child struggle. Other caregivers feel less equipped to help their child with their struggles, especially for caregivers whose children have special needs or struggles with emotional regulation.

*"I tend to Google what might be [going on]. I try to be realistic and know that not everything you read is going to be good. So, I try and get some ideas like I've read ... or go to a pediatrician. But for the most part, I probably go to Google and then I go from there like based off of whether I think it's real or not real."*

*"I think that some of that is learned behavior because how my parents helped me. I was very independent when I went to school. I do find myself trying to be more of a - I wouldn't say helicopter parents and not swooping in - but definitely trying to help him avoid bigger issues. His parents are divorced and his dad got remarried. So, I try to fix things at home a lot more."*

Below are some strategies that caregivers talked about using to support their children when they are struggling:

- Some caregivers would just let the child struggle and get help from other avenues if they are not able to directly help themselves, like if the caregiver is not able to help with the math assignment, let child leave it blank and have the teacher help them
- Validate the child's struggle, their emotions that may be coming up.
- Prompt the child of how they might get started and then encourage them to try it.
- Asking the child what ideas they have about finding a solution or getting help -> Helps build self-advocacy and independence.
- Some caregivers incentivize working through struggle by providing a positive incentive for completing the challenge (I.e., a fun snack, playing outside).
- If the child resists help, try to be comfortable with letting them fail or learn the lesson of what happens if you do not seek out help when you need to.
- If a child asks for help too quickly, approach the situation with levity (if the situation fits) and prompt them to go ahead and try it themselves first.

### **Independence: How do you help your child build their independence?**

Most caregivers naturally viewed struggle and independence as concepts that are interrelated and when they spoke about struggle, they commonly also referred to independence. In this context, caregivers spoke about feelings that the more independent a child is, the more comfortable they feel with struggle. In other words, a willingness to struggle may be a marker of independence. As one parent explained it, when a child is playing to their natural strengths, they will feel more comfortable with struggle and will be more independent. Several caregivers expressed that independence is something that a child needs to develop, but that it also is something that the caregiver has a direct role in fostering and encouraging their child to build.

*"I look at it like everybody has strengths that they are good at and there are things that come easier to them. When those strengths go with something that is appropriate for independence, it works out better."*

*“There are so many everyday life things that kids do not know, until they are taught it or experience it for the first time. And while there will always be some things that they learn by doing (i.e. the hard way) or the parent explains it first, then they experience it. It starts with me/my husband as the parents clearly identifying expectations and parameters/guidelines, and then giving the child the space to prove that they are capable of delivering on what's been mapped out for them.” Either way, we cannot expect them to be capable of navigating these things unless we mentor them through it or give them the chance to succeed (or even fail).”*

Some caregivers believed that their children were more naturally inclined toward independence but that a child’s sense of independence can also be influenced by their age, their relationship with their siblings, and other family dynamics. As children get older, caregivers discuss exposing them to more opportunities for independence and looking for signs of success before adding more. Children with older siblings may be drawn toward independence at a younger age because they have observed their siblings and learned how to model behaviors and actions.

*“My oldest is starting to have more responsibility, not only like school responsibility but like chores ... My youngest, I feel like we kind of push him up a little bit. I kind of blame Covid a little bit because we'd be doing school with my older son and he would be right there like listening to all of it. [My younger son], he's always been like, “I've got to do my workbooks, I've got to be reading.” So, I feel like we kind of treat him like he's a little bit more mature.*

*“Does one way of helping build independence work equally for my daughter and son. At its core yes, just the two of them require different levels of nurturing and support and guidelines too. Building an ecosystem of independence and support and their comfort levels.”*

Several caregivers felt it was important to note that the ability to introduce independence at a rate that is appropriate for a child’s age and individual needs is a thing of privilege. While one inclination may be to look at caregivers as having the ability to increase independence with time and readiness, such intentional scaffolding may not always be possible in situations where parents work or those in which children play a unique role of tech support or translators for their caregivers. Due to lived experiences, some kids must become independent sooner than others.

*“As a parent, it's really hard to give your kid independence. I'm very fortunate that I have a job where I'm able to be at home most of the time, and I don't have to give them that independence quite yet. Compared to some families that don't have the ability to make sure their kid gets to school safely. They're just sending them walking at 6:45 in the morning because [the kids] have got to get to school and they've already left for work. I have seen in other communities that their kids have definitely gotten a lot more independence compared to what my kids have because that's just what they [have] to do.”*

*“I see that some of the kiddos in the school, they tend to grow up quicker than they have to because they're the interpreter , the translator . They're the ones that are doing a lot of the work for the parents because of language access and because they [understand tech].”*

Caregivers have different definitions of independence, including:

- Ability to watch what/how others are doing things and then try out modeling that behavior or activity
- Starting to build up some of the life skills they will need to eventually be okay out on their own, including ability to ride the bus and cook for themselves
- Ability to problem solve and have a grasp of what resources are available to them that can support them in finding a solution
- As a child gets older, independence can look like ownership and responsibility over their schooling and chores.

*"Because he goes between two households, and he plays multiple sports ... he has a lot of things at both houses. Like his baseball gloves, for example. If he has a game that day, he has to have the forethought of that glove."*

*"It is continuing to give them props for the little things that matter. They took the garbage out. They washed dishes. They got homework done without me asking. I see them becoming more independent in the little things. It's them taking the initiative to make breakfast. They're trying to accomplish things on their own. Are finding their reasoning, their sense of me."*

*"[Independence looks like] cleaning up after yourself without a million reminders. Being able to use the microwave to cook for himself. Being able to ride the bus by himself."*

*"I was really proud of her for asking to do a new activity which was cheerleading for her. No one ever talked about it. It was just like something she decided to try out. So, when she does those things, she shows her independence. I like to highlight and give a lot of positive reinforcement for that."*

Ways to help build independence:

- Provide children with a safe space to practice their independence.
- Lay out choices and let the child own the decision – help them talk through rationale the caregiver may have to help build their thinking on decision making.
- Give children structure, organization, consistency.
- Model behaviors, structures for children to learn and adopt as they become more independent.
- Rather than throw a child in the deep end and expecting them to be independent without support, instead, incrementally build up their independence over time. Provide children with opportunities to try one bite-sized piece, get comfortable with it, then add the next small piece, and build from there. In a way this is scaffolding independence like how a teacher might scaffold a child's learning in an academic setting.

## **Technology: Beyond screentime, what concerns do you have about technologies that might be used in the classroom?**

### **Concerns About Technology in the Classroom**

Caregivers seemed a bit thrown off by this question and many did not seem to feel very comfortable or familiar with discussing emerging technologies, like VR and AI (Artificial Intelligence). Though the question was framed to seek caregiver concerns about technology in the classroom, many caregivers spoke about their perceptions of technology beyond the classroom into their general life. Overall, many caregivers seem to accept that technology is and will continue to be an integral part of their children's lives – that it is the way things are now. Overall, most caregivers are understanding of their children needing to have exposure to technology and to start building related skills young to prepare them for later in their life, but they struggle with how to balance that needed exposure with how to prepare the and protect them well. Additionally, some caregivers try hard at home to encourage a life lived outside a screen.

*"I don't really have a concern with technology knowing that's the way the world is going. I just feel like it's made things a lot simpler. As scary as it can be knowing my kids are carrying around these Chromebooks and we've already had one smashed ... I'm glad that they have that opportunity. So, yeah, I am thankful for it."*

*"My concern is how we're impacting core developmental progress that could have long term repercussions. Same as above, human brains really are not made to do the multitasking that we have been forcing ourselves to adapt to. This applies to adult brains - and I have to imagine is even greater for developing/youth brains... we just don't know the full impact yet. We want our children to mature into successful, independent adults - but are trending toward maturing them at a rate way faster than they're prepared to due to technology and the apparent AND underlying influences that it has."*

Nevertheless, caregivers across the board share concerns around accessibility and technology. By being constantly tapped into technology – computers, YouTube, Google – their children have access to a broad spectrum of content that may not be closely monitored or controlled. Some caregivers wonder how effectively their children’s teachers can actively ensure that their students are all on task and not going down YouTube or internet rabbit holes. One caregiver who is a school administrator added additional concern around the access to technology opening new doors for bullying – mentioning that she has heard of students even bullying each other through Google Docs. Other caregivers mention concerns around how addictive technology can be.

*I had that experience during the pandemic where my kid was bullied by a girl we had no idea knew she was from another school. Because you're able to access anybody and everybody on Microsoft Teams .. The school didn't know anything was happening and I had to reach out to that principal and let them know that that student was harassing my son.*

*Access is probably my biggest concern. I'll use YouTube for example. A lot of teachers ... use YouTube for various things because why wouldn't they? You can find endless examples of whatever topic it is that they're teaching. It gives you access to things from all over the world or, you know, whatever it is to help demonstrate the topic that you're teaching. My concern with that is with every video that you watch, there's the lineup of suggested videos that can really take you anywhere. I have been surprised at the things that my kids can access on their school computers.*

Other caregivers, while accepting technology’s place in their children's lives, seem to be more averse to being deeply involved in stewarding their children’s experience and exposure to technology and a desire to have distance from it entirely. Other concerns include that if learning is happening mostly online, there is a perception that kids might just be clicking buttons to move through content and exercises and not actually doing deep learning anymore. One caregiver discussed the use of AI in their child learning how to read as a successful use of technology in a way that is adaptable and supportive of helping their child work through their struggle.

*“We have to prepare them to be able to deliver in this world where A.I. and robotics and technology is everywhere. But do we have to give them an iPad when they're in second grade to do their math? Where do we draw the line? My biggest concern is that there's not a clear pathway to prepare kids for the world we live in.”*

*“Like some kids just click something just to get done with the work. Some kids don't know the answers, but they're clicking on whatever they think the answer is.”*

*“So for us in my house, [tech] is a rewarding thing .... If you get your room clean, you can play on your tablet. It hasn't really been a struggle to not have the tech, but they are still young. My oldest son has struggled with reading, though, so we have been using this AI program [for reading] ... It has been really cool because it motivates him. Before, reading as kind of a fight.”*

### **Emerging Technology to Bring People Together or Pull Them Apart**

To think through technology’s ability to bring us together or pull us apart, some caregivers moved mentally away from emerging technology entirely and started talking about other technologies, like social media and other apps, like Venmo. When they brought the topic to technology that felt more familiar to them, they felt like they could see both sides to the coin. In some cases, technology can give you social access to people where there are physical constraints (living far apart from others) but it can also create isolation and reduce how often people physically interact with each other.

*“In the past, new technology brought us closer together in some ways. Like with Facebook, you can connect with people from high school. It makes me think that [tech] could draw us closer together. But then again, you need less interactions if you have things like Venmo. [You] don't actually have to see someone to get the money. I would say I'm split between tech dividing and bringing us together.”*

Specific to the classroom setting, one caregiver expressed concern around children losing penmanship skills by typing things out and learning on computers instead of handwriting notes and assignments. They are also losing that physical connection to their learning that they would have if they engaged more with handwriting and tactically holding physical books. Due to a lack of connection to physical learning materials, one caregiver elevated that the tech divide and lack of parental onboarding that school could inadvertently be separating school and home by not giving parents ways to support students. This same parent also elevated equity issues of online learning if resources are not offered in multiple languages.

*"I am still old school, I like paper. But I notice the kids are not. Nowadays they rely on iPads or Chromebooks ... But what happens to the parents like me? I want to hold the book. Is it the connection that I will make with a physical book in my hands? What happens to the parents that are not tech savvy? ... It needs to be not only 'Yes, I have the technology.' But also how do we make sure that everyone knows how to use it? ... We are already starting to see some of the disconnect. We are "partners" in education ... But if we don't know what's happening at the schools and technology, how can we be partners?"*

*This work was written through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.*