Many of the anxieties of the risk society—as expressed in the mass media and by politicians and as felt by individuals in their daily lives—center on “home” and “the family.”1 As government, welfare organizations, and schools affect daily life in increasingly intricate and personal ways, the burden on parents for children’s upbringing becomes ever greater. This chapter focuses on the young people’s lives at home, complementing previous chapters examining their lives with friends (chapter 4) and at school (chapter 5).

To the school, and even to the young people’s friends, life at home is often the most inaccessible part of young people’s lives. Yet home and family generally have the largest influence on their habits, values, interests, and expectations. Viewed from the school, home seemed a rather vague, even problematic place. Among the teachers at VFS, we heard both curiosity and skepticism about family life—seen as time wasting, ineffective, or just plain mysterious.2 As the school saw it, students moved beyond its control as they left the school premises each day, although the homework tasks, planners, phone calls to parents, and injunctions to students were all designed to ensure that the rigor and ethos of school reached into the home. From the young people, however, we heard a collective sigh of relief as the last bell of the day rang, with the noise level rising rapidly as they jostled in the corridors, gathered in their friendship groups, and chatted on their way to the bus stop, the parental car, or the walk home. What happened next is the focus of this chapter.

At 13 years old, the young people were in transition—about to make more serious academic choices, increasingly immersed in their immediate and wider peer culture, and yet still strongly anchored in life at home. Although they attended the same school and lived in the same neighborhood, their families were all very different. These differences were shaped by social class, cultural factors, and the many personal circumstances that make up family life in ways that are hard to classify or
predict. We wanted to understand how the young people developed and expressed aspects of themselves at home, possibly in contrast to those expressed at school or with friends. And we were interested in how their parents sought to construct the home and its resources.

We should first acknowledge that the very notion of “home” is open to interpretation, with scholars describing it as more of an imaginary than a geographic place: home is where we feel we belong. It is invested with our personal meanings and narratives and shaped by cultural and personal histories. Thus, “home” was not always a straightforward location for members of the class. Max divided his time between his mother’s and father’s houses. Adriana spent a lot of time in the “family home” in Spain. Jenna seemed happier outside hers. Who lived with the young people and what relation they all bore to each other—this, too, could be complicated. Within the home, too, spaces might be demarcated for particular people or activities. For Mark, space was shared, and he struggled to understand our question about whether he had a special place to do his homework. As researchers, we struggled to understand Dilruba’s bedroom, since there was only one set of everything, including the bed, yet two teenage sisters peaceably sharing everything.

Indeed, the more we came to know of the young people’s lives, the more interested we became in the dynamics within families as well as the variation across them. For example, even though the home is commonly conceived of as “private,” a place away from the public realm, within the home, there was much discussion about how to further demarcate domestic spaces or times as public and private or communal and individual. Also high on families’ agendas was how much of their economic and cultural resources to devote to “enrichment” activities or, explicitly or tacitly, to leave children to their own devices. Parents and children have unequal power in such decisions. Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, we can say that parents have strategic power to set the space-time parameters of life at home, while children must resort to tactical power if they wish to renegotiate or subvert these parameters. The time line of family life is also important; we entered their lives at a certain point in their personal histories, and we discovered some of their present dilemmas to be shaped by a history of past troubles (and pleasures).
Since the arrival of electronic media in the home half a century ago, they have become a key resource for managing domestic space-time relations, their schedules and contents variously demarcating family time or dad’s time or bedtime and so forth, just as their positioning in particular rooms is used to demarcate child from adult spaces or public from private spaces. In consequence, the use of media at home—along with the baggage they bring from the wider society regarding “good” and “bad” uses of time and resources—is a key point of contention between parents and children. Parents are particularly exercised by the never-ending task of embedding the latest technologies within family life, linking them to rewards and punishment and framing them in terms of deeply felt ambitions and values.6

Continuities and Discontinuities

As we planned the home visits, we had a host of school-based impressions of the students, but how would these hold up outside school? Would Sedat always play the clown, or did he have a serious side? Why was there a troubled atmosphere surrounding Lydia? Would Dom be as confident at home as at school? How disorganized was Fesse’s home given his continuous lateness in getting to school? And what of those seemingly sullen white, middle-class children, Alice and Adam—what would they be like at home? Entering their homes was a key moment in our year, revealing a host of contrasts with what we had seen of the young people’s lives at school.

Virtually all of the homes were expressive in one way or another, with photos and certificates on display, evidence of particular commitments or talents, a sense of tradition revealed through accumulated artifacts or activities halfway completed. Some were laughingly chaotic, with piles of clothes whisked away to allow us to sit down. In some, we were more formally entertained in the living room. In others, we were plonked down in the kitchen and plied with tea and snacks, with conversations casually interrupted by siblings to see what was going on. There were the more “open” homes, where family and friends variously popped in or even stayed for extended periods of time. There were also a few rather sparsely furnished or largely silent homes. How the young people and their parents constructed their accounts of family life re-
revealed something of how the family lived and also the diverse range of ways of valuing “family.”

Having formed our impressions of the young people from observing and talking to them at school, we were curious to see continuities between the school and home identities. Several of the young people showed different sides of themselves. Fesse told us about his art and music interests, of which only the former was visible at school, while Sedat proved much to our surprise to be a skilled musician. We explore their musical interests in chapter 9.

We have already noted in chapter 3 that the members of the clique all seemed to have personal reasons for banding together so firmly. Jenna, for instance, was more forthcoming and seemingly happier at school or with her friends than she seemed—at least to us—at home. Indeed, visiting her home was a somewhat difficult experience: the worn and cluttered living room dominated by a constant loud television offered us little space to sit, and there were few artifacts revealing family interests or commitments. Most striking to us was the absence of any soft toys or girlish customizing of the tiny bedroom she shared with her older sisters.7 There was also a language barrier between Jenna and her single-parent mother, revealing a pattern we saw in several families, in which only the older but not the younger children of immigrant parents would speak to their parents in the language of origin, meaning that the older siblings played a key role in parenting the younger children in English.8

For Jenna’s best friend, Alice, the opposite was the case. Alice had puzzled us at school, often looking bored, withdrawn, or sulky. Yet in her middle-class, bohemian home, Alice turned out to be chatty and confident, delighted at our visit and cheekily pressing us for indiscretions about what we were finding out about the class. Her life proved one of the most civically engaged: she played a leadership role in the Guides (Girl Scouts), helped her mother with local charitable activities, babysat for neighbors, and joined the rota for cooking family supper. She was also one of the busiest, with many extracurricular activities, including singing, ice-skating, and digital photography. Her bedroom was the messiest we saw, with evidence of diverse hobbies: several digital devices, broken and operational, along with books and music, the placard from the family’s participation in a political protest, even her father’s drum kit. Her mother’s philosophy was one of self-reliance, as
revealed when we asked about social media: “I don’t check on Alice that much really. They’re going to have to make their own judgments about it, actually, and given they do everything else, so it doesn’t stop them going ice-skating. You know, they actually go to a lot of things outside, so I already see them managing it reasonably well.” Although Alice was not without her problems—one problem was being overshadowed by a high-achieving older sister⁹—within the clique, she seemed to have the warmest home life; hence her invitation to Max and Jenna to share some of it with her. Nonetheless, the Alice we met at home and with her friends was quite different from the one that we and her teachers saw at school.

Joel, by contrast, was much the same boy at home and school, but he never seemed particularly happy. Our field notes describe visiting the house as follows:

The house is messy and disorganised. There is loads of stuff all over the place. Mainly to do with music and bikes. I get a sense of a more isolated social world. This is where Joel's life revolves. He has little personal space. Despite the Bohemian ambience, this is most heavily regulated domestic space so far with time limits and weekend internet use being proscribed and controlled. There are loads of cultural resources here but it's not always clear how they are drawn on.

The school had told us that his mother had died and that his father had recently remarried, so maybe we saw a “new” family working hard to make itself whole. We had wanted to pursue Joel's seeming interest in digital technologies—he played the keyboard and experimented with a digital camera—but this turned out to be merely part of the stream of stuff, along with a skateboard, roller skates, and more, that his parents bought him during our year with the class. But Joel's interest in engaging with these technologies did not persist, illustrating an emerging theme across this book, namely, that young people’s initial interests would stop and start, frequently meeting obstacles and so not being developed, often seemingly without explanation.¹⁰ The warmest moments we observed centered on homework, perhaps because here the demands on Joel were both sustained and valued, also drawing in his stepmother’s expertise at art. Joel told us, “They just help me a little bit, like, but
usually I’m fine. But my dad’s usually the one that checks my homework. My stepmum is like, a bit . . . I don’t know. She sometimes looks at it and sometimes my planner, but she—it’s like she’s usually helping more where we have to, like, build stuff for [art or design].” In turn, Joel helped his little sister with her homework, and in this way at least, the efforts they were all making to construct a sense of successful family life were positive, if rather self-conscious. But an effort it did seem, in contrast to, say, the easy management of independent or overlapping activities that made up the lively hubbub of Alice’s home.

**Family Difficulties**

Understanding the contrasts between life at school and home took some investigation, and fortunately several families were open about the problems that shaped their child’s experiences, giving us an insight into how trouble at home could affect life at school and vice versa. For instance, at school, an aura of misery hovered around both Abby and Lydia. Abby was sometimes focused in class but often disorganized or just blank. Sometimes she was boisterously friendly with a group of girls; at other times, she was withdrawn, on edge. At home, she was far more relaxed and forthcoming, revealing some serious musical ambitions. She took her homework seriously, working conscientiously in her room and calling on her older sister or father to help when needed. Her father unburdened himself about their problems almost as soon as we entered the house, first about his once-successful professional life that had ended in bankruptcy and homelessness, then about Abby, a once-happy, sporty girl who was badly bullied when she entered VFS, resulting in a crisis that necessitated professional intervention. He saw their stories as linked, because he was rehabilitating himself by devoting himself to his family:

Last year in school, she just switched off. She wouldn’t react, she wouldn’t respond, she wasn’t working, she was doing no homework, you know, and she was getting an awful reputation at school as far as somebody who was going nowhere. So people weren’t bothering with her, which is not ever any good, and . . . but she’s determined—she was determined for herself, and she said to us before the end of the school year as from September last year, this year, this current year, “I will work, and I’m going to
make it happen.” And we’ve supported her with that, and, bless her, she’s done it, you know.

He stressed a family narrative revolving around fierce emotional support:11

**Abby’s father:** There’s a lot of family around. There’s cousins in at the moment, yes. Abby’s mother has two sisters that live very close by, both groups, and all the families have got . . . and we’ve had some family holidays together, which have been great fun.

**Interviewer:** You’re very positive; most people think family holidays are their idea of a nightmare!

**Abby’s father:** Absolutely not. We took 13 of us up to the Lake District for a week, which was great, a couple of years ago.

**Interviewer:** I bet you planned it.

**Abby’s father:** I did, yes. . . . I think that’s important. I think family is important in life anyway, yes. It’s part of the ethos, I guess, of this family, of this household.

By contrast, the family narrative about Lydia was more uncertain. Her school report recorded that she had received the most “concerns” in SIMS (see chapter 6), and we observed her at school to be painfully shy with adults, sometimes in tears, or rude and unresponsive, in trouble for forgetting homework or flouting uniform rules. The class tended to give her a wide berth, and she generally sat alone. From the start of secondary school, she was excluded several times. As she herself told us, “I used to do bad things. Like, they used to say that I bullied people, but I didn’t.” Her head of year told us that things came to a head when an online “hate Lydia” group was set up. He recognized that she was the victim, yet he also told us how she used the “full array of tricks” for getting under people’s skin. Indeed, Lydia admitted that since people “wind her up,” she, too, “winds people up.”

Lydia’s mother, living in a modest and charming house complete with roses around the door, had her own painful story to tell. Lydia’s parents had separated just before she transferred from her familiar local primary school to the much-larger secondary school, and her father maintained no contact, leaving the family with significant financial
problems—nearly losing their home—as well as considerable anger and sadness. Ever since, it seemed, the school was constantly phoning Lydia’s mother to express concern about her behavior. To account for what was happening, Lydia’s mother narrated the painful history of the family breakup and resultant poverty. Yet in so doing, she subtly seemed to side with the school rather than her daughter (perhaps because her own escape from all these troubles was work she loved in another school).

We had known that Lydia was keen on athletics, but since she no longer ran, we had not paid much attention. The field note describing the moment when we entered her bedroom revealed our surprise—and her own pride in a very public success: “Pride of place on the chimney breast in the centre of room is her large display of running medals—her preferred distance is 100 metres, she tells me.” It turned out that she had engaged in athletics at a high level for much of her life, culminating in participation in the London Youth Games and leading her London borough as a runner, while also being an “excellent swimmer.” This was narrated positively as a family tradition. As her mother explained, “I was good, her father was good, my father was excellent, my mother. Jason [Lydia’s older brother] continued it.” Yet this family narrative, along with the culture that sustained their shared athletics, was all focused on the past, and apart from the medals and the stories, there was little that was positive that the family seemed to share in the present.

Lydia’s coping strategy involved something of a break with her own family, leading her instead to “adopt” that of her best friend, Kimberly. She would go early to Kimberly’s house for breakfast before the girls caught the bus to school together. They often went back to Kimberly’s after school, messaging friends outside school, before Lydia went home around 5:30 p.m. Lydia’s mother, who juggled multiple part-time jobs, was relieved: “I mean, it’s lovely because Kimberly’s got a big extended family, great-grandmother, grandmother, and she’s very nurturing. Lydia, she loves little ones, so Kimberly’s got two little sisters, so Lydia is just there.” Lydia described how, once home, the evening meal was eaten “separately but at the same time.” In other words, “My mum will cook something, and then I’ll sit in here, my brother will go upstairs, and my mum’s in the kitchen.” “Here” was the living room, where Lydia ate while watching television, explaining that her loud eating annoyed her mother.
So while Abby’s father told a story of the family rallying round and supporting Abby, there was no positive narrative for Lydia’s mother to address her daughter’s problems at school or home. This is not to say that she had given up on her, as there had been a period of professional counseling and, more recently, a new puppy, but none of this seemed sufficient to alleviate Lydia’s downward spiral from a once-happy and successful little girl.12

Mediating Private and Shared Lives

Perhaps because the use of digital media and communication technologies is relatively flexible, resonant with possibilities, they tended to crystallize tensions over shared versus individual lives within the family and between the home and the world beyond. While parents and children might hesitate in telling us of their worries, arguments, or values, they readily regaled us with the dilemmas, squabbles, and emotions surrounding the media at home. The popular linking of the internet to discourses of risk added to parents’ concerns.13 For their children, the media offered rich resources to explore and express their growing independence, as well as to engage in pleasures that were not always favored by their parents. Analyzing the “domestication” of media in everyday life thus offers a lens through which processes of socialization and individuation become visible—to us as researchers and to the families themselves—stimulating parents to reflect on how their children’s childhoods differed from their own.

In the history of domestic media, from the radio or television to the computer or mobile telephone, the trend over recent decades has been from shared to personally owned goods and thus from large, showy objects with fixed locations to ever-smaller and more-portable goods. When it comes to content, the trend is from mainstream genres shared by the nation (from soap operas, news, and sporting events) to more variation and niche (yet globalized) markets (although popular fads may suddenly grip a cohort to briefly bring people together around a soap opera or boy band or sports competition or YouTube meme).14 For parents trying to manage the socialization of their children just at the moment when their children wish to individuate from them, this complexity adds to the options and tensions of family life.
Typical of UK homes in the early 21st century, all the young people's homes contained a diverse array of broadcast, printed, and digital media, and all had a computer or laptop and access to broadband internet at home. But the management of these media through location and rules of use was variable and complex, depending partly on household income and also on family composition (the single children had more personal devices, for instance) and parental values. Are the media to be shared, or are they personal possessions? Are they to be used in full view in the family living room, or can the children use them as they please in their bedroom?

We have already examined the young people's bedrooms as opportunities for identity expression. But parents set the basic parameters. In table 7.1, we classify the young people's bedrooms to reflect parental choice. In working-class homes, more media are generally seen as a good thing, if they can be afforded. For the middle classes, economic and cultural capital often clashed: thus, the better-off homes might lack the largest or latest technologies, especially when it came to goods located in children's bedrooms. Consequently, not all the middle-class youth had as many private media possessions, although the common areas of the house were generally media rich. Nor were all the working-class youth lacking in such possessions, since media represent a means by which

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<th>Typical possessions</th>
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even relatively poor families can try to “keep up.” Thus, domestic media were determined as much by parental cultural capital as by economic capital, given the middle-class tendency to prize books over screens and quality time to concentrate or be creative over displays of the latest technology.17

The arrangement of media goods at home was the outcome of past parental strategies and youthful tactics. But this was not simply a matter of parents seeking to control their children and children to escape their parents. Rather, all members of the family sought time both together and apart; the question was how this was managed and on whose terms. Adriana’s mother captured many parents’ sense that the acquisition of multiple devices was not quite under her control: “In the past year, suddenly the house has been filled with more things, and I think for a long time we didn’t have many. Even we used to have a very tiny TV, and suddenly—I guess with the girls becoming teenagers—and suddenly more things came.” Although each purchase has its own rationale, the emergent effects on the household can be unanticipated. Devices bought for one purpose may be used for something different. Or devices bought to reduce conflicts between the children in the living room enable a dispersal of children to the bedrooms, resulting in new conflicts with parents. Population surveys show that parents employ several strategies to manage domestic media, including active mediation, in which parents discuss or interpret media with their child; co-use, in which parents share a media activity with their child; and restrictive mediation, in which parents set rules or restrictions on their child’s use.18 The choice of mediation strategy reflected parents’ wider values (or dilemmas) regarding family life.

Restrictive practices are often the simplest to justify. For example, explaining that Mark must prepare for exams, his rather-strict East African father restricted media technologies to weekends because, he said, “I don’t see the point of it, to be honest.” Although watching television, especially football, was also a shared common family experience, even more so was the importance to Mark’s parents of going out to visit family friends. The concern of middle-class Max’s mother was more global: “I didn’t want them to be box kids. . . . I think it’s very dangerous. I think it penetrates a life, their lives, without them knowing that. I think it penetrates the life of a family.” Rather than imposing simple restrictions, her strategy was more subtle, involving the temporal and spatial arrange-
ments of family life. First, she divided the after-school period into individual time (in which Max completed his homework and also used the computer before she returned from work) and family time, when, she said, “we discuss the day and what’s happened and what’s going on. So then it’s not ideal for you to be sitting with your headphones on, on your iPad.” After a family meal, then, Max often watched television with his mother and older sister. Second, she arranged their rather elegant, arty home so as to have no other screens than the television set in the living room, although they were permitted in the bedrooms. While she drew on a discourse that links cultural capital, quality time, and the value of restraint, in some other middle-class homes, the same discourse was used to justify the opposite strategy—few media in the children’s bedrooms, while living spaces contained several screens.

Limiting “screen time,” however achieved, was a particular concern in virtually all homes. Yet, at the same time, all sought to avoid conflict. In Abby’s family, where we have already seen an effort to generate mutual support, multiple personal devices were acquired to avoid domestic clashes, allowing partially parallel lives to be lived under the same roof:

**Interviewer:** If I were to hang out here for a week, would I see everyone here every evening watching the telly together?

**Abby’s father:** No, because there’s another telly upstairs, so we would . . . you would see different programs operating upstairs and downstairs, and you would even see TV on the computer as well.

**Interviewer:** Are there rows that go on in this household around what to watch on telly or too much Facebook or . . . ?

**Abby’s father:** Yes, but then we’ve got—that’s part of the reason we’ve got more resources for that to be able to happen in different places upstairs, downstairs, whatever.

A more complex ambition for many families was that of “being together” in a sustained, enjoyable, and preferably voluntary way. To achieve this, the media, especially television, were often given a positive role in family life. Adriana’s family was fairly typical, using computers for separate interests (including professional work on the part of her parents), while television was used as a source of commonality. In that
family as in others, it was the children growing up that necessitated a rearrangement of the bedrooms to alleviate tensions:

**Adriana’s mother:** We decided to separate the girls in different rooms to have their space.

**Adriana’s father:** Well, the three of them used to share a computer, and that sharing of a computer was one of the main sources of conflict in the house. And basically we got two other computers to avoid that conflict.¹⁹

Then, to avoid family members each being alone with their own screen, the parents constructed a positive “life of the living room”:

**Interviewer:** So in a typical evening, is everyone on their own laptop, or is everyone . . . ?

**Adriana’s father:** It varies a lot. I mean, sometimes—last night, we were the four of us. . . . The boy was upstairs reading a book, because we wanted to watch a film together that was not appropriate for him. So we were watching here a movie together. So it varies a lot. Sometimes each of us is in their own, in front of their own computer doing their own things, and some other times we do something together or we play a game. It really depends on the circumstances or how tired they are, how tired we are, and that kind of thing.

In Alice’s family also, watching television brought the family together, while using the internet separated them, even when everyone was in the same room. Her mother explained: “There are times when [Alice’s father] and I can be watching telly, and we’d have both our laptops, you know, like doing notes while we’re all there. And actually there have been times perhaps when all of us have had our laptops. I mean, it’s a bit bizarre, I think.”

In some families, the worry about fragmentation is more poignant. Giselle’s father, who worked as a designer from home, describes a very similar resolution to that of Adriana’s family. But in this case, the parents were trying to sustain family life for the children despite their own recent split:
We keep trying to limit their computer time. . . . There are times when we just want them off the screen, and they’ll fall off the computer into the iPhone or the Touch or something. . . . I think it’s a bit sad really. There are times now when sometimes we gather as a family—and we’re a bit of a fractured family, because [Giselle’s mother] and me are actually separated, although we’re all under the same roof—where we kind of say, “Come on.” . . . In the past, it was “Let’s not watch any . . . ,” you know. Now it’s “Come on, let’s watch a movie together and get off the computer to watch the telly.”

Sustaining togetherness was also a challenge for Nick’s family, since he was coparented by a single mother who worked long hours and his grandmother who lived abroad. Rather than banning or restricting technology, Nick’s grandmother embraced a strategy of active co-use, both face-to-face when she was in London and by Skype when she was in Sweden:

We are not leaving him alone all day long, you know. We ask, “What are you doing? What’s that?” I’m sitting with him. I think, for me is very interesting. I have time for him, to see what happens, how he plays World of Warcraft or whatever. So he explains for me. [Then] with Skype, for example, we are sitting and talking about everything and about also topics at school and really . . . so we just . . . it’s a, kind of, being together.

So when Nick and his grandmother were physically colocated, his grandmother normalized their shared use of the computer so that this could be comfortably continued when they were apart, their mutual online interests helping to sustain their relationship.20 It may be that the computer will increasingly displace television as the chosen medium of togetherness—computer gaming seems to be the practice that enables this. For example, Sebastian’s dad would join him in playing the popular game Call of Duty, creating a sense of togetherness over an activity that, for Adam and his father, pushed them apart. Here again, the particular narratives of different families can be important.

Adam’s favorite games—Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, Assassin’s Creed—were rated for over 18 years only, and this upset his father, as his mother explained:
Adam’s mother: This is because [Adam’s father’s] parents were German war babies; they grew up through the war. He’s first-generation postwar German. He has very strong feelings about anything martial, anything military, anything... because for him that’s a very real history.

Interviewer: Okay, so the idea that he’s got a son that wants to go round shooting people for pleasure...

Adam’s mother: Is abhorrent to him, deeply abhorrent to him.

I respect that... I don’t have quite the same position. That’s his position, that’s my position; we’ve had to work this out.

So, while Adam’s mother was fully aware that he used the games as “a very, sort of, buoyant, active social tool, although he’s up there on his own, you can hear him, you know, partying,” and although she herself liked to remain open to digital media, she felt as a parent that she had become locked into an anxious framing of Adam’s activities as part of her role as mediator between Adam and his father. She tried a compromise designed to please them both: “To keep a... so my position, I keep a theoretical eye on it, so I say—you know, I’ve made a rule. I’ve just said I don’t want anything sadistic in the house. That’s it. It can be violent, it can be aggressive, but it can’t be sadistic.”

This discussion about games led into a deeper appraisal of Adam’s academic interests and motivation. Adored by his middle-class parents but seen as lazy by his teachers and as sleepily disengaged by us, Adam described himself as a practical rather than an abstract or creative learner, even as “kind of stupid.” Whether this had frustrated the aspirations of his middle-class professional parents we did not discover, but they told us of his history of anger and school refusal. In his mother’s view, “I think it’s because he’s not a driven person, he’s not a motivated person... He just sort of does what’s in front of him or resists it, but he’s not... he doesn’t seem inspired by anything at the moment... It seems to me that the thing that totally engages him is the gaming. The thing that doesn’t engage him is school”—hence her need to find a compromise between the father who hated violent games and the son who found little else motivating. She was not, however, entirely successful in her efforts, and Adam remained critical of his father’s position, which he considered inconsistent and unfair:
He doesn’t want me to have 18s [age rated] either, although I don’t understand why. But he lets me watch war films, and he says it’s because it’s like educational and it’s like real things: “You should learn about stuff.” And I say, “Oh, my gosh.” And so he doesn’t let—well, he doesn’t want me to have those games, and then I say, “Surely if I buy it with my own money, then I could have it.” And then he says, “No, because I don’t want it in my house” and stuff like that. It’s just really annoying. So I sometimes buy them off my friends and, yes, because like half my friends are just playing CoD [Call of Duty] all the time and war games that my dad wouldn’t let me have.

The result was a degree of subterfuge on Adam’s part about his computer game playing, creating a distance between himself and both his parents. However, when we revisited him at the end of the year, this moment seemed to have passed. He had reorganized his bedroom so that instead of having separate gaming and “work” equipment and spaces, the consoles and computers were brought together on the one desk, and he clearly felt that his gaming pleasures were now more understood by his parents.

The potential risks of today’s digital media pose further challenges, again either pushing parents toward simple restrictions or, when it could be managed, to more communicative strategies that sought to respect and support their children’s own capabilities. Here is one example:

Sebastian’s mother: Basically I was brought . . . you know, my parents trusted me, and I trust my own child.
Interviewer: Yes, and that’s an attitude as a way, yes.
Sebastian’s mother: And then, you know, basically, you have to have these experiences in your teenage [years], don’t you?
Interviewer: Right. So you . . . that’s a deliberate strategy to expose safely to risks, as it were?
Sebastian’s mother: I think he’s . . . I think he’s quite open with us.
Sebastian’s father: Yes.
Sebastian’s mother: I mean, he’ll sort of say, “Oh, come and look at this thing I’ve seen on YouTube,” and you might think, “Ooh, that’s a bit . . . isn’t it?” But he’s . . .

Megan’s father took a similar line when her older sister saw Megan acting provocatively on Facebook, resulting in a family row; but her father
responded that this was to be expected of a 13-year-old, and simply talking with Megan was a sufficient response in his eyes. Yusuf’s father took a more autocratic approach, dealing with his concerns over internet content by only sustaining internet connectivity in the main living room space and explaining this in religious terms: “As Muslims, we are restricted to go to—we can’t go [on] every website we come across.”

While the media were sometimes presented to us as a problem in the family, requiring management, we also saw the media proving to be a resource that families called on to solve more fundamental problems in their lives. After all, it is a robust family that can sustain long periods of positive face-to-face interaction. Giselle’s dad seemed to speak for many parents in welcoming the safety of gathering around the television as a way of being together despite underlying tensions. Yet even when, as he poignantly put it, “we’re trying to be a nuclear family” in front of the television, “I’ll be checking my emails, [and] the kids will also have things shuffled away—it’s the phone or the Touch or the iPhone or something knocking about.” Sustaining togetherness can never be fully achieved, and for the most part, we were struck by these families’ commitment to engage in a form of continuous “work” to make it so.

Conclusions: Living Together and Separately

In the 21st century, coming together “as a family” is ever more a matter of choice than of necessity, often seen as a task to be managed rather than taken for granted. Parents operate with varying norms and expectations for themselves and their children, and they face a range of problems depending on their circumstances. These problems, and their resources to cope, are both socioeconomic and social-psychological in origin. In chapters 3 and 4, we have already seen how young people use their limited free time to exercise control over what they do and with whom, seeking out moments in their often-full days to be alone or to hang out with friends on- or offline. Those who have expressively customized, media-rich bedrooms have recourse to a bubble of privacy even within the family home, although those who lack their own space at home could achieve a similar result by using earphones, for example. Yet when parents construed the living room as an opportunity for the family to come together, often around the television set, their children
generally responded positively even while seeking—before and after—a measure of separation within the home to enable privacy and to avoid conflict.22

We might speculate that, just as schools are tempted to regard new technologies as offering a route to solve some long-standing problems with schools, so parents seize on these as resources to reshape their domestic practices in ways that can reduce conflict and enhance family harmony. In both cases, the driving factor is young people's evident interest and pleasure in digital media, as it is this motivation that, the adults around them hope, can be harnessed to fulfill larger goals. Hence, we disagree with Sherry Turkle, who despairs, in Alone Together, that “we are increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone.”23 Indeed, we saw little evidence that young people—or their parents—are becoming so obsessed with their personal screens that they no longer have time for each other. It might be said, however, that our class of 28 young people is too small for us to counter this claim, or maybe our 13-year-olds are still too young.

Our fieldwork did lead us to conclude that, while parents certainly worry that their family risks living “alone together,” a better account is that families are finding ways to “live together separately,” as Patrice Flichy has put it.24 This familial desire for “commonality” differs from the notion of civility, which, we have argued, is valued by the school (see chapter 5) and by the young people themselves online (see chapter 4). Although both civility and commonality demand that, for certain purposes, the group’s concerns are put ahead of the individual’s, civility applies in the public realm where genuine differences among people connected by weak ties threaten to undermine the larger concerns of society. By contrast, the commonality that we see families concerned to sustain is centered on the emotional depth of strong ties among people bound together, even as their children move toward greater independence. Civility enables the public good despite fundamental differences. Sustaining commonality within the family may provide the confidence for individuals to express their differences in public.

This chapter has explored personal narratives of family life, finding that explanations for the time-space patterning of family interactions, and the ways in which digital media fit within these, have deep roots. Rather than interpreting media use as indicative of attitudes to the
media per se, therefore, we see media use as a way to move on from past problems or to find strategies to achieve deeper family goals. However, in pointing to the importance of diverse family dynamics, we do not mean to underestimate the importance of social class, gender, or ethnicity. But we do find that mapping these structural features onto particular families is not straightforward.

Lynn Schofield Clark identifies two increasingly polarized types of American family. Among upper-income families, she observes an “ethic of expressive empowerment,” visible in the ways that they encourage media use for learning and self-development while discouraging distraction or time wasting (as they perceive it). Among lower-income families, she notes an “ethic of respectful connectedness,” where the emphasis is on media uses that are respectful, compliant, and family focused. While these two ethics are convincing, they do not readily account for socioeconomic difference in our study. For instance, the challenge for Abby’s (very poor) father was to encourage his shy daughter to find expressive confidence outside the home. Middle-class Giselle’s father was trying to sustain both ethics, seeing the connected family as precisely what gives each member the confidence to go out and to succeed in his or her own way. Lydia’s and Adam’s very different (poorer and richer) families were each trying, in their way, to manage just a little more respectful connectedness and empowerment. Adriana’s middle-class family was quietly confident of her future success and so focused on respectful connectedness, as this seemed to them more at risk as the children grow and so go their own ways. This is not to say that socioeconomic differences make no difference. As we explore in chapter 8, these shape the resources available at home, including the time and expertise on offer from the young people’s parents and their own take-up of a range of activities.

Living together, then, remains the bedrock of family life, but recognition of the individualization of modern lives, including the rights of children to explore their own interests and the complexities faced by parents with their own pressures and desires, demands a degree of separation within the home. This is intensified by the limitations on young people’s freedom of movement beyond the home, as noted in chapter 4. The panoply of shared and personal media devices within even relatively poor homes aids the exercise of choice over how time and space
within the home can be used to support a particular balance between
the individual and the communal. Digital media also mean that the
boundary of the home is ever less a bar to communication beyond the
home—as children come home and use social networking sites, staying
in touch with relatives abroad or even saying good night to each other
via the phone while forgetting to say the same to their parents down-
stairs.27 Being together, in the media-rich home, is significantly a mat-
ter of choice, involving more negotiation, some conflict, and a general
openness to the possibility of sharing. Flichy describes this as a kind of
lifestyle juxtaposition, with family members colocated but each attend-
ing to his or her separate screen or physically dispersed but connected
to each other through their screens.28 The result is an often-mediated
but still-genuine togetherness that sustains the fragile balance between
individuality and commonality required in the modern “democratic”
family.29

All families, in varying ways and degrees, seek to sustain both the
warmth and respect of family life and the self-development and life
chances of their children. But there are many pressures on families’
capacity to do this. In today’s often-busy, “time-poor” families, time not
already allocated to homework, housework, or earning is precious. No
wonder that “family time” has become an explicit category to be planned
for and protected30 or that, as we will see in chapter 8, homework
and extracurricular activities have become a new burden for parents
as they adopt pedagogic roles.31 Since whatever remains as free time
is, therefore, even more under pressure, it is no wonder, too, that the
media—with their capacity to structure the lifeworld both spatially and
temporally—have become a particular focus of contention in families,
for what they bring, what they promise, how they organize social rela-
tions, and what they displace.