

Chapter 14

Young Children and Digital Media in the Home: Parents as Role Models, Gatekeepers, and Companions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an overview of the digital practices of young children (under 8 years old) in the home. At such an early age, parents are the main mediators of the contact with digital media, thus paying a preponderant role in shaping young children's practices, perceptions and attitudes. In this chapter, we present partial results of a European-scale qualitative project that followed a methodology based on grounded theory, using interviews to families as method. Our findings reveal different roles played by the parents – role models, gatekeepers, companions, and supervisors. We also found that these different roles are related to the parenting style and also to the parents' own digital practices, and most importantly to perceptions and attitudes towards digital media.

INTRODUCTION

Our society is profoundly shaped by the integration of digital technologies in our daily routines. Children are being born in homes filled with computers, smartphones and tablets, and they are increasingly being exposed earlier to digital media in the home, and consequently engaging with such devices. They are “digitods,” they were born after the launch of smartphones in the market (2007) and their parents are usually experienced digital users themselves (Leathers *et al.*, 2013; Holloway *et al.*, 2015). Digital media are fully integrated in the family's daily routines (Kucirnova, 2011).

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However, most research on children and digital practices has focused on older children, mostly adolescents, who soon stood out as pioneers and trendsetters in the use of the Internet and mobile phones. Our research fills this gap by exploring the way young children (under 8 years old) engage with digital technologies in the home, looking particularly at family dynamics (Vatavu *et al.*, 2014; Plowman, 2015). Both the academic literature and industry reports show that young children have facilitated access to digital technologies at home, and parents are the main mediators of digital experiences at such a young age, as children learn directly from their help and support or by observation and imitation (Plowman *et al.*, 2008; Findahl, 2013; Genc, 2014).

BACKGROUND

There is a broad body of academic literature on parental mediation of media consumption, focusing particularly on young children and television (e.g. Dorr *et al.*, 1989; Sang *et al.*, 1993). This concept refers to the role played by parents as mediators of young children's engagement with communication media, thus shaping their practices and perceptions. Different facets of parental mediation have been explored, namely mediation styles, factors that may influence mediation styles, and the consequences of mediation styles for children's practices and perceptions.

There are different models of parental mediation styles, that Valkenburg *et al.* (2009) sum up in three categories: a) restrictive, corresponding to highly controlling parents in the sense of monitoring and limiting media use; b) instructive, referring to parents who are still controlling but more in the sense of teaching and advising; and c) coviewing, a concept used to describe negotiations, dialogue and search for consensus between parents and children regarding media engagement.

Recent research on parental mediation has addressed this phenomenon when it occurs with digital media. Livingstone (2007) was a pioneer, suggesting the concept of "parent regulation" to describe that parents often draw on family roles, particularly their dimension of authority, to negotiate rules and practices concerning media. Usually, there was an adaption of the rules already set regarding television for digital media. Proposals by other authors (e.g. Barkin *et al.*, 2006; Eastin *et al.*, 2006; Rosen, 2008) can be synthesized in two categories: whether parents tend to 'support' the children's digital practices, thus teaching and helping them overcome difficulties; whether parents tend to "control" their digital practices (at this age, control is more exerted over time of use than over content). Later on, previous mediation styles identified for television watching were applied to digital media: restrictive, active and co-use. Moreover, new mediation styles specific for digital technologies were added: monitoring and "helpdesk" (Nikken & Jansz, 2013).

DIGITAL PRACTICES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Although most research on digital practices has focused on older children, in the past few years, as children are coming into contact with digital media at increasingly younger ages, a considerable body of academic literature and industry reports have been produced. Despite the different contexts – some international, some national – and methodologies – qualitative and quantitative – they all point to the same conclusions: young children have access to digital media very early and they are spending increasingly more time interacting with such media, to the detriment of others.

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