

Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology: A Qualitative Exploratory Study Across Seven Countries

Aims

This qualitative pilot study aimed to explore young children and their families' experiences with digital technologies such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and games across seven European countries.

Key Findings

- **Digital homes.** Children grow up in media-rich homes. They are in daily contact with a wide range of digital tools. This rich-media context, however, does not lead automatically to high use by the children.
- **Digital technologies are an important (but not dominant) part of children's lives.** Even though children love playing digital games or watching videos, they also enjoy performing other non-digital activities. Digital technology use is balanced with many other activities, including outdoor play and non-digital toys.
- **Children are digital natives, but only to some extent.** Most children easily and quickly acquire basic operational skills. Some have also acquired more advanced online competencies. Yet, they also encounter situations that they cannot manage, for which they have to ask for help.
- **Children have little or no understanding scope, origins, purpose or risks of the online world.** They lack awareness of what 'online' means, the risks they can encounter, or the benefits they can gain.
- **Children learn from observation.** In most cases, children learn from observing others, parents and other family members at first, but also from older siblings and extended family members (e.g., grandparents, peers) who usually have a more active mediation style.
- **Children use digital technology individually rather than socially,** while watching videos, gaming, browsing for information, or being more creative with pictures or video. Shared activities focus more on communicating via online video conferences (Skype) when members of the family are distant.
- **Tablets are children's favourite device** due to their size, portability, and ease of use due to the touchscreen technology.
- **Smartphones are melting pot devices** as they are very versatile in their use. In most cases, children use their parents' devices **which are actually not tailored for them. This increases the potential risks of children's contact with inappropriate content or commercial temptations.**
- Parental spending priorities tend not to include app purchasing, favouring instead free apps, physical toys, books and magazines. **This may expose children to in-app purchasing and targeted advertising,** which are less prevalent in paid-for digital products.

- Despite the safeguards put in place by parents, **they still seem to have little knowledge of the actual digital activities of their children.** Moreover, parents seem unaware in some cases that their safeguards (password or filters) are actually easily bypassed by their children.
- In most cases in this pilot, **parents use restrictive mediation strategies.** They set rules to limit children's access to digital technology mainly through time limits and restrictive conditions of use. **A minority use shared digital activities with their children,** although some help their children in the digitally creative process.
- **Some parents seem to underestimate the risks of the use of technologies by their children.** They generally postpone worries about the risks to the future as many parents believe that robust strategies to mitigate online risks do not need to be developed until children get older. **Nevertheless, parents would welcome advice on fostering children's online safety.**

Policy Context

The results of the pilot study are published in a Technical Report by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's in-house science service. It aims to provide evidence-based scientific support to the European policy-making process in the framework of the EU agenda for the Rights of the Child (2011) and the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (2012).

Methodology

This study involved seventy families in 2014, and was simultaneously implemented in six European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, UK) and Russia. The research environment was limited to the home and family context. It focused on interviewing children that accessed digital technology at least once a week, aged between 6 and 7, their younger siblings and their parents.

Background

The study is pioneering in Europe. Its goal was twofold: testing a new methodology, whilst also collecting information on how children between 0 and 8 years old engage with (online) technologies, how parents mediate their use, and to identify potential benefits and risks associated with their (online) interactions with new technologies.

Source <http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC93239>

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