

## How Parents of Young Children Manage Digital Devices at Home: The Role of Income, Education and Parental Style

### Aims

This report draws on qualitative research with 70 families of children younger than eight years old, comparing strategies of parental mediation of the internet according to levels of parental education and household income. The aim was to inform policy-makers and practitioners about whether a generic approach to parental advice and awareness-raising is sufficient, or whether tailored guidance would be more effective for the different target groups of parents being addressed.

### Key Findings

#### In lower income, less educated families, we found:

- Relatively high device ownership at home.
- A generation gap in digital media expertise between parents and children, especially among immigrant families.
- More restrictive parental mediation strategies regarding digital devices, yet parents who are rather ambivalent and worried about digital media.
- An 'ethic of respectful connectedness' in parenting values.

#### In lower income, more educated families, we found:

- A mix of media-rich and media-poor homes in terms of device ownership.
- A variety of domestic circumstances, with a high proportion of single-parent households.
- Fairly confident parents in terms of both their digital skills and thus their ability to prioritise active over restrictive mediation. Still, knowledge of digital media brings concerns, and these parents also operate some restrictive practices.

#### In higher income, more educated families, we found:

- An 'ethic of expressive empowerment' in parenting values.
- A wide range of diverse mediation practices including different strategies to manage restrictions for digital device use.
- Efforts to promote offline (non-digital) activities for children while limiting digital activities in the home.
- Parents who work with digital media, or use digital media at home, who often find that their own practices undermine their efforts to limit their children's digital media use.

Inferring parental mediation simply from knowledge of household income is not straightforward due to the sizeable group of lower income/more educated parents. While both income and education influence parental mediation, it seems that education makes a greater difference.

Importantly, and complicating matters somewhat, the relationship between parenting style and parental regulation of digital devices is qualified by parents' own familiarity with digital media. Across all family types, insofar as parents had particular expertise in digital media, whether because of their work or interests, it appeared that they were more confident in managing their children's digital media activities and more engaged in them.

**For all parents, but especially those who lacked confidence, experience or expertise in relation to digital media, the study revealed a need for policy and practitioner support for parents which focuses on:**

- Knowledge of the benefits of internet use. This included lists of recommended imaginative, creative and educational sites and apps, along with public discussion of the criteria by which parents can evaluate them, and tips on how to find them.
- The use of technical tools to manage children's internet use for safety purposes. For example, digital safety settings, best practice for passwords, privacy protection and content filters.
- Beyond technical tools, many parents would welcome support for easy ways to increase their own digital skills and knowledge. Since parental digital competence and confidence results in more enabling efforts in relation to their children, these benefits would be felt by the whole family.
- Communication strategies to facilitate shared activities using digital devices and parent-child discussions about preferred values and practices, and how to address problems. This should include guidance for parents on how to mediate digital media for children of different ages, and how they can also play a guiding role in sibling conversations, since older siblings have a major influence on the play and learning of younger children.
- Parents said they would prefer much of this guidance and support to be provided by schools or nurseries, yet it was striking how little they actually received, as well as how little they even know (or are told) about their children's digital activities at school or nursery.
- Since these institutions are publicly funded and can communicate with nearly all parents, their potential to benefit domestic (as well as school) settings is considerable.
- The role of industry lies more in the first two points above – promoting a diverse array of beneficial activities and providing tools to minimise the risk of harm.

### Methodology

This report is based on a re-analysis of the qualitative research reported in Chaudron et al. (2015), *Young Children (0-8) and digital technology: A qualitative exploratory study across seven countries*. The 70 families (10 from each of seven European countries, the majority with children aged 4-7 years) were originally selected to span a range of educational and income backgrounds, thus permitting comparisons by socioeconomic status. For the present analysis the families were split into three groups: lower income/less educated, lower income/more educated, and higher income/more educated (only two families could be characterised as higher income/less educated) – while acknowledging inevitable overlaps or inconsistencies in classification given the complexity of particular family circumstances.

### Background

EU Kids Online is a multinational research network. It seeks to enhance knowledge of European children's online opportunities, risks and safety. It uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders. It was funded by the [EC's Better Internet for Kids](#) programme.

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