

Digital parenting or ‘just’ parenting?

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Has ‘digital parenting’ simply become another dimension of parenting, as ‘traditional’ parenting spills over into the ‘online’ world, with social skills, sexuality education, a healthy balance in children’s activities, social and emotional learning, and values such as respect all be transposed to online settings? **Martin Schmalzried**, a Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer at the **Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE)**, explores the dilemmas of modern parenting. His piece follows a special workshop¹ convened by the **Media Policy Project** and **Parenting for a Digital Future** on ‘Families and

“screen-time”: challenges of media self-regulation’ and the publication of a new **policy brief** about families and “screen time”, authored by **Alicia Blum-Ross** and **Sonia Livingstone**. [Header image credit: C. Brewer, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]

The online world offers ‘new’ sets of challenges, where children may encounter certain ‘risks’ or ‘inappropriate content’ online at a much earlier age, pornography being the most obvious example, and parenting clearly needs to ‘adapt’ to this new reality. Not all ‘traditional’ parenting can be transposed to online settings, however – bullying and cyberbullying are clearly different, for example. Cyberbullying can happen at any time, there is a greater chance that the perpetrator(s) remain(s) anonymous, and the ‘signs’ are harder to spot (black eye vs a nasty message/comment), while the outcomes may still be as harmful. So while a parent might know how to react to bullying, this doesn’t necessarily apply to cyberbullying. If the perpetrator is identifiable and a classmate, can the teacher/school intervene if cyberbullying has occurred outside of school premises/hours?

Screen time: still a relevant metric?

Digital parenting frequently struggles with **recommendations about screen time**. Even if messages like the **2x2 from the American Academy of Pediatrics** are well known (see the **policy brief on families and screen time**), they are too simplistic and don’t make any distinction between ‘screen time’ and ‘screen context’ or ‘screen content’. They fail to recognise that not all ‘screen times’ are



equal, and that playing a video game with family or doing homework is not the same as watching YouTube alone in a bedroom.

While we don't know ~~much~~ about the effects of online media and screens on children's cognitive developments, we do know about some of the 'physical' effects such as risks of obesity or sleep disorder. Even if technologies such as augmented or virtual reality may enhance physical activity since the player is invited to stand, walk and simulate gestures in a virtual environment, physical side effects may remain, which means that it will still be necessary to exert some control over screen time. In a not so distant future, when screens may become wearables much along the lines of Google Glass, how will this affect recommendations on 'screen time'?

What's good for children?


Parenting also includes accompanying children online and identifying interesting/positive content, but how can you distinguish between what is 'good' or 'bad' for them? As experts at a recent **Media Policy Project workshop on 'Families and "screen time"'** pointed out, some parents don't want to be told what is 'good' for their child. They could rely instead on peer-to-peer support, looking at other parents' recommendations, reviews etc. One of the **COFACE's** French members, **UNAF** (Union Nationale des Associations Familiales), runs **such a platform** enabling parents to review apps, websites or content for children, although this comes with its own set of challenges – it is heavily filtered and monitored by UNAF staff to ensure there is no conflict of interest or commercial endorsement in the reviews, and that parents use a consistent set of criteria to assess apps, websites or content.

As is typical of the internet, any piece of technology or platform that can empower users may also be used against them. User reviews and peer-to-peer support are deemed useful, but business models around reputation management have also emerged, allowing content providers or developers to pay for positive reviews. There are also issues of 'trust' – how can you be sure that the 'parent' on the other side of the screen isn't working for the app or website they are openly promoting or recommending? What are the credentials of the parents posting recommendations? Vocal parents online may not necessarily be the 'best' placed to objectively review online content/services. While peer-to-peer networks can be helpful, they are certainly not a panacea and need to be accompanied by measures to mitigate these problems.

Classification systems and information given to parents is another way to sort content/services. There have been many advances in standardising classification, notably via the **PEGI rating system** and initiatives such as the **MIRACLE project**, which aim at making existing rating systems and age labels interoperable. In this respect, the role of regulators is key – only with the right regulatory 'push' from government via legislation will industry agree to get together and agree on a common standard for classification. But classification systems also have their limits. PEGI, for instance, provides age recommendations along with content-related pictograms alerting parents about such things as violent or sexually explicit content, warning only about risks but saying nothing about opportunities.

Who should parents listen to?

The effect of online content/services on children's cognitive development needs further investigation. How does a game affect delayed gratification or locus of control? While it may prove to be very challenging to come up with a scientifically sound and accurate answer, we must move forward, since the serious game industry is booming, and video game developers or online service providers don't hesitate to prominently display (often unsubstantiated) claims about the educational value or benefits of their products.

While we may never come up with a one-size-fits-all answer, the private sector doesn't hesitate to bombard parents with their take on what's good for their children. The voices of independent sources such as from within academia, civil society or NGOs must become louder to counter claims driven by commercial interests. 

NOTES

¹ A summary of the related event on families and 'screen time' has been published by the [Media Policy Project](#) and Parenting for a Digital Future, and is available to read [here](#).

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