

Helicopter apps and parental mediation. Facts and myths about parental controls

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Bieke Zaman and Marije Nouwen take a closer look at state-of-the-art parental controls, and call for a more nuanced approach that balances online risks against online opportunities. Both Bieke and Marije are researchers at the Meaningful Interactions Lab (Mintlab), a research group within the **Institute for Media Studies (IMS)** of the **Faculty of Social Sciences at KU Leuven**, and affiliated with **iMinds**. They tweet via **@biekezaman** and **@Marije_N**.


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Tablet and video games are **hugely popular** among children of all ages, and the **majority** of teens own or have access to a smartphone. We are left wondering if and how we should guide children in this digital society, allowing them to reap the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls.

If only the response could sound as simple as *there's an app for that...*

Parents and caregivers may be tempted by the many innovations that can aid them in guiding their children's digital media use, and companies are more than willing to cash in on their concerns. To date, a variety of **parental controls** exist that give caregivers new means to monitor and track their children's digital media use.

A recent survey showed that **39% of the parents of 13- to 17-year-olds already report using parental controls** for blocking, filtering or monitoring their teen's activities. One in six say they use them to restrict their teen's mobile phone use, and just as many say they rely on tools installed on the teen's mobile phone to track their location.

But what do we really know about parental controls? In our recent **EU Kids Online report**, we looked at today's available parental controls, and gave advice for parents, researchers and industry. 

An overview over parental controls

The functionalities of available parental controls include time, content or activity restrictions, as well as monitoring and safety measures. Parental controls often combine these different features. Some monitoring and tracking tools allow parents to set content restrictions by blocking specific sites or limiting the available websites to an approved list. Other examples are child-friendly browsers, child-oriented 'safe' searches and child-friendly online media consumption zones.

In terms of implementation, controls can be deployed at the operating system level, the web browser (e.g., kid browser) or on the home network (e.g., router-based solutions). They can also be implemented as a separate application (e.g., as an app installed on the child's mobile phone), or integrated into a mobile device or games console.

And the creation of parental control features has been initiated by a number of different companies, such as telecoms companies, software providers, social network owners and hardware manufacturers.

But do they work?

To be honest, we don't know whether parental controls really work! Previous research has not yet reached a conclusive answer. If parents decide to install parental controls, they are unlikely to use them in the same way. The different controls offer a varying combination of different functionalities, so parents are unlikely to use them in the same way. And the different controls offer a varying combination of different functionalities.

Parental controls must also be integrated into everyday family dynamics. In another of our studies we reveal the complex, dynamic and often paradoxical nature of parental mediation practices in families with young children. Although parents of young children don't like their child to be too absorbed in digital play at the expense of a healthy balance in leisure activities, exceptions are allowed when media use serves educational goals or is a convenient way of occupying the child.

Parents' mediation practices depend on contextual demands, which evolve over time (depending on the rapidly changing popularity of a particular content or device) and vary between locations (e.g., more relaxed rules in the car or restaurant). Under certain circumstances, technologies serve as a substitute (as a 'babysitter'), while under others they form the subject of parent-child interactions. Taking the context of family practices into account helps us to better understand how the actual use of parental controls may eventually unfold in different, often challenging ways, like teens circumventing or uninstalling the controls, or lying about their age.

Protection, protection, protection

Parental controls are all about prevention, but by only focusing on avoiding risks and restricting behaviour, children are likely to miss out on online opportunities. Such a one-sided focus on protection may even be detrimental to children's rights and wellbeing. It may impede children's right to benefit from online relationships, communications, explorations, information, etc. When restrictions are enforced by the parent without any explanation or negotiation, it is likely to worsen internal family dynamics. Big brother-like 'spying' behaviour through the use of parental controls may also involve the risk of revealing information about others. What if parents (unwittingly) monitor the online activities of their child's friends?

The next generation of parental controls should consider ways to afford positive outcomes for children and parents, as well as addressing online risks. Since we can never fully protect children online, protective measures may include solutions that help children build more resilience to cope with the risk and harm they may encounter. Control and restrictive measures cannot achieve this goal.



Such a shift in thinking about parental controls can only happen if we move beyond the preconception of the parent as protector and the (all-knowing) 'teacher'. Parents are often learners themselves. And let's not forget that parents' own socialisation practices and media use are influenced by their children as well.

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Parenting issues will not be solved 'because there's an app for that'. Parental controls are like the timer we use when baking a cake. It will not bake the cake for us, but merely help us to prevent the cake from burning (and even then we can still ignore it, or not hear it!). In the same vein, parental controls should provide guidance to both parent and child, who can use the tools to fit their everyday practices, child–parent relationship and family values.

In essence, what parental guidance boils down to is family communication, and there are good [online tools](#) that help families in discussing, negotiating and communicating parental rules, such as the [Family Media Agreement](#).

The discussions and negotiations surrounding the level of blocking and choice of settings are, in fact, often more important than the choice of the software or hardware itself. Consequently, [digital literacy](#) is crucial for the selection of parental controls, understanding the [digital jargon](#) and coping with the variety of default settings. In this context, a benchmark study, like the one performed by [SIP Bench](#), can serve as a basis for guiding parents, helping them to critically assess the available tools.

In sum, parental tools should not just be conceived of as helicopter apps that serve the needs of parents who would like to 'hover' over their child. On the contrary, we argue that the potential of parental controls lies beyond mere preventive and protective functions. A more nuanced approach that balances online risks against online opportunities will help us to avoid over-controlling or over-protective parenting, allowing children to fully benefit from their connectedness.

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