

Support children by supporting parents (because grown-ups need guidance too!): examples from Sweden

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Daniel Kardefelt-Winther looks at digital gaming and parental struggles to guide and protect their children in a digital world where one of the most popular activities is perceived as both beneficial and a cause for concern. Daniel is a post-doctoral researcher at the *Department of Clinical Neuroscience at Karolinska Institutet* in Sweden, where he conducts research on internet and gaming addiction. Currently he works as Research Coordinator at *UNICEF Office of Research* where he coordinates a global project on *Children's Rights in the Digital Age*. He tweets via *@Winthernet*.

In Sweden, children's use of digital media has been increasing over the past decade. The Swedish Media Council recently published their biennial report, *Parents & the media*, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, highlighted that even very young children now engage with digital media to a greater extent than two years ago. Today, **26% of Swedish children below the age of two** play digital games, compared to only 7% in 2013, and this **seems to follow** a general trend for young children, too.

However, as digital engagement among children and young people increases, so too does parental concern. The Council **reports** that 75% of parents to 9- to 12-year-olds believe that digital games are addictive, and 63% believe that gaming takes time away from more important activities. While Swedish parents generally encourage digital media use, a majority (**92%**) think that it contains content that is harmful for their children (**these concerns are also mirrored elsewhere**).

Importantly, parental concern has increased compared to previous years, and signals that although Swedish parents encourage their children to use digital media, this also leads to increased concern, particularly among younger parents.

Benefits of gaming?



This presents an interesting situation where, although Swedish parents are concerned with gaming addiction, and generally believe that their children spend too much time playing digital games, they also recognise its potential benefits. For example, 47% of parents of 9- to 12-year-olds agreed that digital games made their child more passive. And 65% of parents agreed that digital games taught their children positive things, with 70% agreeing that digital games were entertaining and relaxing for their children. This illustrates the struggle for contemporary parents who have to guide their children in a digital society where one of the most popular activities is believed to be both beneficial and at the same time a cause for concern.

Protecting children

While a large majority of Swedish parents (90%) feel that they are responsible for protecting children and young people online, more than half feel that they are not receiving enough information and guidance to be able to do so effectively, and this is worrying. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a right to protection, provision and participation. So increased efforts to provide parents with information and guidance might be necessary to uphold these pillars of children's rights in a digital society.

The immediate concern is, how can we expect parents to contribute to children's rights to protection and provision if they themselves feel that they do not have the necessary information and guidance? While parents feel that digital games are addictive and a source of great concern (protection), they are also convinced that games are beneficial and can teach their children positive things (provision).

Consequently, restricting children's access to digital games, as an addiction discourse would suggest, may protect some children from harm, but it also inevitably reduces their access to skills and opportunities.

This illustrates a conflict between children's right to protection and provision, which is difficult to properly navigate. However, it *must* be properly navigated because the ways in which parents engage with their children's use of digital media might have consequences for their children's future, [as discussed in an earlier blog post by Alicia Blum-Ross](#).

Navigating the conflict between protection and provision

To give an example of such navigation in practice, [results from the EU Kids Online project](#) showed that active parental mediation (i.e. when parents talk to their child about the internet, encourage them to explore new things and sit by them as they go online) was associated with less online risk and a lower degree of harm. It was also associated with more online skills because of increased access to new opportunities; in other words, active mediation is one way for parents to safeguard their child's right to both provision and protection.

Equally illuminating is that while restrictive mediation (restricting children's access to the internet and imposing rules and regulations) was associated with reduced risk, this also reduced opportunities and led to fewer skills. Thus, while perhaps upholding children's right to protection, restrictive mediation puts a dent in children's right to provision that could lead to disadvantages later on in life. This illustrates how crucial it is that parents are able to adequately guide and support their children in their use of digital media.

Lessons to learn

There are at least two messages to take away from this:

- Even in 2015, some parents are still struggling with conflicting ideas about the benefits and drawbacks of digital media and gaming. While being encouraging but concerned regarding their children's use of digital media are not necessarily mutually exclusive positions, it would be valuable to understand [how](#)

parents' notions of benefit and harm are formed, and how their opinions might be informed by evidence.

- In Sweden, a country with relatively high digital participation, knowledge and skills, more than half of parents do not feel that they can adequately support their children online. This is cause for concern, and needs to be addressed by teaching parents how to actively mediate their children's use of digital media so that they might become the knowledgeable guides and guardians that children always need – in a digital society too.

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