

Discovering Media Together – Why good parenting also involves media education



For many years now media technology and media content have changed at an increasing speed. Media are more integrated in our lives than ever; we communicate through social media, watch content on different screens, and create an online identity that will, most likely, stay there forever.

According to Potter (Potter, 2001), we live in two worlds: on the one hand, the real world in which we have direct contact with people, events, places, etc; on the other, we live in the media world(s) that we visit in our constant search for information, social interaction, entertainment, games, (sub)cultures. Children nowadays spend more or less equal time in both worlds. Both are part of their everyday life and they don't separate one world from the other.

Young children early on master the different touch-screens that seem perfectly fit for curious fingers. You touch and something happens! By using all kinds of devices from a very early age onwards, children not only have to master the technology, but very rapidly are developing an online identity, not only as consumers, but also as producers. As the findings of Net Children Go Mobile show (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014), one out of three children has a profile on a media sharing platform such as YouTube, Flickr or Instagram. Because of this paradigm shift, it is even more important that (young) children are taught critical usage of media content and are instructed in the specificities of online media.

Thus, helping children to develop responsible media usage is an unmistakable part of parental education⁽¹⁾. Parents' educative aims and strategies have been investigated in several studies, following mainly two directions: parental media mediation and media education (Wagner, Gebel, Lampert, 2013). Studies of parental mediation have been conducted mainly in the United States, the UK and the Netherlands, while media education has been investigated mainly in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The principal question of both parental mediation and media education is: How should parents attend to the media usage of their children. The most important prerequisite for good mediation or media education is that parents know what their children are doing with media, what they use media for, why they are attracted by media, etc, and that they are interested in and know the media worlds of their children.

⁽¹⁾When we talk about 'parents' and 'parenting', we also acknowledge the important role that grandparents play here. All recommendations made in the article also refer to them.

Family is an important cornerstone of education

To become competent media users, children need to learn how to handle the technology, but even more important is that they build a critical attitude towards the omnipresent media content, which is deeply rooted in culture and tradition. It requires experience and deeper knowledge to master all the different stories and modes. This is, of course, a knowledge that cannot be expected from a child. Children need to mature, to grow up in a safe environment, to learn how to deal with different kinds of content. Therefore, media literacy is more than ever a public affair. Educational systems, international organizations and industries agree on the need for strong and creative media education. At a time when media are everywhere, are changing all the time and are perfectly adapted to young people's tastes, this involvement is reassuring. But at the same time, media literacy education has to take into account the first educational actors: families! In this respect parents and grandparents play an important role, since a lot of learning takes place in the family.

Unfortunately, the news mainly report on the negative effects of media usage. Video games with a lot of violence, cyberbullying, etc have become the main reference for some parents in shaping the relationship between children and media. But there is a risk in this: worrying too much about the dangers will compromise family behavior and rules. Understanding how to use screens and displays (computers, smartphones, tablets and TV) in a proper manner within the family and the rules for using these devices well are important topics, and often an open question for parents. Some of them

worry that they won't be able to keep pace with the fast development of the technology. However, even if they find the technology a bit difficult to master, the content is often not so new, and the experienced adult will know much better than the child how to evaluate it. Based on their greater experience, adults can help children to use the different media so that most of them benefit without getting harmed.

Media are part of family life

The first place where children are confronted with media is the family. Even before having their own experiences with media, they see their parents and older siblings using media: watching TV, reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, communicating via their smartphones, playing computer games, etc. The family is also the place to decide from the beginning what kind of media the children will get in touch with, and what importance media and media activities will have in their everyday life. In our day, media are part of family life and have diverse functions. They are used to create situations of shared experiences and being together; media or media content can be a starting point for discussions on values and ideas, or for the furtherance of a conflict, etc. Until the age of 11 or 12 years, parents are the most important role models for their children regarding media usage. When the children get older, they use media with their peers and have new and different experiences. Sometimes they tell their parents about them, sometimes they don't. How they use media outside the family depends on how they have experienced media usage up to then. The family creates a media culture.

Besides their parents, the siblings of children and also their friends (peers) play an important role in their media usage. Older sisters and brothers, mainly, can influence what kind of media and media content their younger siblings use, and how they use them. They are often the 'experts' who introduce the younger ones to new techniques or uses. Particularly when we talk about new technologies such as Internet tools, social media and mobile devices, they are often more experienced than their parents. The younger sisters and brothers are excited to learn what kind of content the older ones use, what are their preferences, what they use the media for, etc. However, the older ones often don't take into account the fact that younger children can't understand or deal with certain things yet, because of their developmental stage.

For these reasons it's the responsibility of parents to support their children by fulfilling educational tasks such as:

- **Setting boundaries:** It's hard for children to control their own media consumption. Media are omnipresent and very attractive to them. When they play a computer game, watch TV or communicate with their friends in social networks, they forget about the time. Also, often, when children are bored, the only activity they can think of is to use media. Parents have to limit the time spent on media consumption. They have to raise children's awareness about the time they spend with media and agree on limits with them. But parents also have to show the children alternatives, what else they can do with their time.

When children get older, in some cases being prohibited from using media is the only punishment they really fear. For some parents that's the reason for using this method. But this is not the way to teach young people good media usage. Reasonable rules should be established by mutual consent, but parents shouldn't forbid them to use media.

Also, it's another important task of parents to teach girls and boys to have a very close and critical look at media content to see through its intention and understand, for example, what's the message, and who is seeking to convey it? Children have to learn that those who purvey a message generally have a single specific purpose. The content they put up – say, on the Internet – serves this intended purpose. The usage of specific content, such as violence or pornography, that can affect the development of children should not be allowed by parents.

- **Show interest:** To understand the media worlds of children, parents need to show interest in what their children do with media, what kind of content they like, which pages they head for, who are their favorites and heroes, etc. A great way for the children to introduce their parents to their media worlds is using and creating media together. In these situations parents can learn what the children use media for and what kinds of media they use. And they can also show them how diverse the media are, and how they can answer many different needs.

- Be **careful**: Especially when children are very young, parents should carefully observe what they watch or look at. Sometimes they watch programs or visit websites that aren't suited for their age because they can't cope with the content yet. They either come across such content accidentally or they watch or see it with friends or older siblings. Young children love repetition in what they watch. By watching one film over and over again, they learn to read the visual grammar and understand the structure of a storyline. Therefore it makes sense to offer them a limited selection that the parents know and have seen before, instead of letting the children click from one YouTube film to another. Also, older siblings should know that not everything that is okay for them suits their little sisters and brothers.
- Try to **balance between monitoring and respecting privacy**: Many parents have a good feeling about the media education of their children. But there is one part of the media where they feel very uncertain: the online activities of their children, especially their activities in social networks. They don't know what their daughters and sons do there, who they are communicating with, what they are talking about, what pictures or videos they are exchanging, etc. Parents can't control all the media and online activities of their children and they don't have to do that either. They should be interested in what their children are doing and they should be available if their daughters or sons have questions. But they also have to respect the privacy of their children. It has to be the aim to teach children to deal in a sensible way with their virtual freedom. Children and especially teenagers need time and space where they can have experiences and try things out for themselves without being observed by their parents. The Internet can be such a space.
- Have some **technical knowledge**: Children are curious and find it exciting to try out things. This also applies to new technologies. They're curious to try out the functions of a smartphone or a tablet and click on everything clickable, and they are not afraid to fail. If parents try out some things themselves, they can keep up to speed with their children and know what they are talking about.
- Be a **role model**: Especially for young children, parents are the most important role models. They copy their parents' behavior. This also applies to media usage. Children watch closely how often their parents look at their smartphone, what kind of TV programs they like, etc. The way their parents use media in their eyes is the normal and the right way. Therefore parents should be thoughtful and transparent in their media usage.

Parental education includes media education

Media literacy is a key competence in these days. Media are omnipresent and it's an important educational task to teach children how to use media in a good way and effectively. The responsibility for media education of children and adolescents can't be outsourced to teachers and schools only. It's the family where the keystones of personal development are set; the family thus has to play an active part in media education. But many families don't feel media-literate enough to teach their children; others are not willing to even recognize that media education is needed at all. Therefore it is important to raise awareness about the need for media education in the family, and to spread such education more widely.

Parents need support in media education

Parents have many questions about children and media; especially about the Internet and social networks. They want to protect their daughters and sons from the dangers, but very often they don't know much about their children's online worlds. It's important to offer parents spaces where they can discuss their questions and uncertainties, as well as material where they can find information and answers to their questions.

Supporting parents in their media education is the responsibility of many actors, such as policymakers, schools, NGOs, etc. These organizations need to disseminate information, tips and guidelines for parents in the form of flyers, brochures, (media) campaigns and online material, and so on. In addition, parents need to be offered opportunities for exchange.

One way can be groups with other parents guided by an expert. Here they can ask all their questions and discuss their experiences.

These groups need to help parents understand that media education always has to be linked to the needs of a family, and that the parents are always role models for their children concerning media usage. Therefore, it's essential – as in other educational matters – that parents be consistent with their children. If a parent looks on his or her smartphone all the time when the family has lunch together, children won't understand why they are not allowed to do so.

Generally, all parents want the best for their children and try to raise them as best they can. If they have questions or problems, they seek assistance. But often those families who most need professional assistance (socially deprived families, less educated families) don't know where to go or don't even realize that they need support. Therefore better and more structural exploration of how to reach out to parents and involve them in this matter is needed.

One very effective way to help parents understand the importance and the functions that media have for their children is to organize workshops or projects that parents and children attend together. Here they can experience media together and realize where they can support one another. For the first time, children and adolescents are more experienced in handling media technology than their parents. However, adults are more competent in dealing with media content. The projects in this publication show different ways of raising the media literacy of both children and parents.

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