

Why parental media mediation is important

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Parental media mediation has been investigated in many studies (Valkenburg et al., 2013 and 1999; Haddon, 2012; Pereira, 1999; Bryce & Leichter, 1983; Desmond et al., 1990; Weaver & Barbour, 1992, among others). First centered on television and more recently extended to digital environments, these studies have highlighted the importance of parental mediation as the most important and decisive way for parents, and other significant adults, to promote positive use of the media by children.

Mediation is part of families' educational process. When they explain the world to children and deconstruct the various events of daily life, families are playing a mediating role. As media are part of children's everyday life, being "almost another family member" (Gunter & Svennevig, 1987: 4), it is important that parents include media in their mediation process, helping children both to better understand media messages and to develop a healthy and safe relationship with the media.

However, mediating children's media use is not an easy task. It's a complex and demanding process. The increasing portability of the media, and consequently their more and more private use, make this process even more difficult, but also more relevant. Children need to be offered guidance through autonomy-supportive parenting, so that they are empowered to take full advantage of the opportunities that the media provide; and they also need to be protected, with respect for the child and their rights; for example, the right to privacy, the right to express an opinion, the right to inform and be informed.

A greater number of studies (e.g. Weaver & Barbour, 1992; Valkenburg, 1999; Pereira, 1999) on parental media mediation have identified three main forms of mediation:

- *Restrictive mediation*: Parents sets rules that restrict children's uses, namely the time they spend with media and/or the content that they are exposed to.
- *Active or evaluative mediation*: Parents explain media content to their children, actively engaging in discussions to deconstruct media messages and stimulating positive media uses.
- *Non-focused or indirect mediation*: This is a form of mediation by example, by observation. It requires little or no engagement by parents. It refers to parents' opinions, habits and attitudes in relation to media. Several researchers argue that many co-viewing or co-use situations involve this form of mediation.

It's critical to choose effective parental media mediation strategies (Valkenburg et al., 2013). They are diverse and are generally related to – or should be read in the light of – parenting style and its communication patterns. Indeed, there is a set of other factors that could influence parental mediation: one is the child's personality. In adolescence, there is usually a strong reaction to control or parental guidance, especially when personal issues, choices and preferences are involved. For some adolescents, the media are a kind of extension of themselves, of their bodies, that establishes with them a strong affective relationship. Several studies show that parental mediation loses its impact when children enter adolescence; this is closely related to the fact that at this age parents lose their influence on children and they accept less parental interference. In these situations, it is preferable to engage in a dialogue and build a relationship based on trust, rather than use strategies of control or even prohibition.

Other factors that could condition mediation are parents' attitudes to and perceptions of the media and their role in society. Another factor is the child's age (and gender); mediation occurs more frequently in younger age groups.

Some studies show that active mediation is more effective than restrictive mediation in reducing the negative impact of the media on children and in encouraging positive effects (e.g. Fujioka & Austin, 2003; Nathanson, 2001; St Peters, 1991; Corder-Bolz, 1980). However, it may not be exactly the type of mediation that counts most, but rather the type

of strategies that parents resort to (Valkenburg et al., 2013). Active mediation that does not listen to children, that does not consider their perspectives, interests and preferences, may have little impact on their media uses. On the other hand, mediation that is based on rules but occurs in an open atmosphere, based on dialogue, can be effective. And it will certainly be very different from a restrictive mediation that occurs in a controlling environment of prohibition and inconsistent rules.

There is a body of evidence that shows that families from a medium-high or high socio-economic status and with a higher level of schooling tend to be more attentive both to the risks and the opportunities. These families tend also to promote active mediation, stimulating positive uses of the media and promoting the child's autonomy. On the other hand, families of low socio-economic status report less mediation, either active or restrictive. This situation surely accentuates differences in children's digital literacy and, consequently, their digital and social inclusion. To address these potential handicaps, schools and social and civic institutions can play an important role, promoting training and special activities for parents so as to give them information about children and the media, and to sensitize them about media education. School can play an important part in ensuring that, as far as possible, children are given equal opportunities.

Testimony based on personal experience

I can testify about parental media mediation not only as an academic but as a mother. This testimony reinforces the evidence that this mediation is indispensable, but also affirms how demanding it is. The media are so present in the lives of my children and they are so connected to them, that, inevitably, one is alert to and talks about their practices and their media experiences. This mediation means helping them to develop critical understanding of media content and messages, to be more demanding about what they consume, and also to develop a critical attitude towards media uses. I identify as active the predominant media mediation strategy in my family because it is mainly based on conversation, in preparing children to use the media wisely, and on moments of co-viewing or co-use as opportunities for greater interaction around the media. But there are also times when restriction is necessary to regulate the time children spend with media, to convince them to quit using the media for a while, to engage in other activities (reading, playing sports, visiting a museum, being with friends outside social networks, etc) or simply to go to bed because next day is school time and it's important to rest in order to perform well academically. But this task is not easy. As parents, we must be coherent in our family educational project; we need to be persistent in our intentions and consistent in our actions. We cannot depart tomorrow from what we define today. Our work needs to be based on a secure and assertive style of mediation, without being authoritarian, so that we can help children and young people to be aware of media risks and take full advantage of the potential and the opportunities that the media can provide. In this mediation process, children or young people play an active role for themselves, and siblings and grandparents can also play an important role. It is indeed a rich form of intergenerational dialogue and a way to understand how digital 'natives' and digital 'immigrants' can learn from each other.

References

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