

## Maximising Opportunities and Minimising Risks for Children Online: The Role of Digital Skills in Emerging Strategies of Parental Mediation

### Aims

This article analyses a large-scale survey exploring parental beliefs, concerns and actions in relation to parent and child online skills, risks and opportunities, and parental mediation. It aimed to see if parents are close to finding the 'holy grail' of simultaneously optimising the online opportunities for children while minimising online risks.

### Key Findings

#### Two main parental mediation strategies

- Enabling mediation, unlike the 'active' mediation long found for television viewing, reflects the greater complexity of supporting children's internet use. It encompasses active mediation (talking, sharing, helping) plus use of technical controls and parental monitoring, to build a safe framework within which children's positive uses of the internet can be encouraged. Enabling mediation enables not only children's internet use but also children's agency within the parent-child interaction, as shown by the positive association with child-initiated requests for parental support.
- Restrictive mediation – primarily preventing or limiting children's use of the internet - is negatively associated with child-initiated support, suggesting that parental restrictions discourage children's agency and may even create a negative dynamic whereby children with restrictive parents learn not to draw parental attention to their internet use.

#### Enabling versus restrictive mediation and digital skills

- Enabling mediation is practised more by parents who judge their own and/or their children's digital skills to be relatively high. The outcome is that children experience both more online risk as well as more opportunities, but it seems that such parents may be confident that they and/or their children can handle with risks when they occur, thereby avoiding actual harm.
- By contrast, restrictive mediation is practised more by parents whose own digital skills or those of their children are lower. The outcome is that children experience fewer risks and fewer opportunities online.
- There is more enabling mediation in Spain and Italy, less in Sweden and the Netherlands, compared to the UK which is more in the middle.
- Country differences are less prominent for restrictive mediation than for enabling mediation, though still statistically significant, with more restrictions in France, and fewer restrictions in the Netherlands and Sweden.

#### Parental risk perception

- Parents are more restrictive not only when they doubt their own or their children's digital skills to deal with risk but also when they perceive the online risk of harm to be very high.
- As parental risk perception rises, parents do more enabling and less restrictive mediation. But as parental risk perception rises even higher, parents intensify both enabling and restrictive mediation, presumably believing that enabling alone is insufficient.

#### Balancing children's online opportunities and risks

- The study found no combination of enabling and restrictive mediation that both increased opportunities and reduced risks to children online.

- Parents are thus faced with a choice. Enabling mediation is associated with increased online opportunities but also risks. This strategy incorporates safety efforts, responds to child agency, and is employed when the parent or child is relatively digitally skilled, so may not support harm.
- Restrictive mediation is associated with fewer online risks but at the cost of opportunities. It is used more when parent or child digital skills are lower, potentially keeping vulnerable children safe yet undermining their digital inclusion.

### Policy Context

Policies to remedy children's digital exclusion should work to support both their own and their parents' digital skills. Future advice to parents should encourage them to develop their digital skills and those of their child, and reflect on how these can enhance online opportunities and build resilience through coping with adversity as it arises. Because more enabling mediation was positively associated with children's online opportunities and risks, it is problematic that policy tends to urge parents to restrict children's internet use to avoid risks, without recognising the costs to their online opportunities, as well as the tendency for educators to encourage parents to enable internet use without recognising that this might bring more risks.

### Methodology

The survey questioned European parents aged 25-65 with children aged 6-14 living in their household and under their responsibility or care. The survey was conducted by computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) using online panels in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, with 800 interviews per country ( $N=6,400$ ). Quota sampling was used with random sampling within age quotas (25-34, 35-49, and 50-64) to ensure a representative sample.

### Background

Although recently there are growing signs of acceptance that there can be benefits from media use, albeit still within a highly protectionist agenda, it remains to be understood how parents can safely optimise use of the digital media that many are investing in at home. Parents are trying out a wider range of parental mediation strategies in their efforts to increase opportunities while also reducing risks, and personal levels of digital skill are decisive in whether people are able to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the internet while still avoiding the harms.

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