

New media face to face – parental monitoring as the key factor of prevention of risks from media environment

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Abstract. Contemporary family environment is becoming more and more media-rich. According to the latest data from statistical investigations, families with children are equipped by different media tools with the growing tendency. This also brings an increasing tendency to be attacked by different risks and danger from media environment. The paper shows the European situation regarding the on-line risks from last European research and describes the situation in the Czech society. The analysis is based on the data from a research in Czech families with children at the age 6–17 and the description of the situation regarding the parental activities and parental monitoring. We use the parental and also children's perspectives. Our data showed that regardless the high level of discussion about risks from media and especially the internet in society, school and family, there is still part of parents who do not pay adequate attention to these matters. According to these findings, more attention should be paid to parental support and education in this field.

1. Introduction

Contemporary society suffers from different and newly coming kinds of dangers and risks and many of them are related to the changing media environment. Especially new electronic media have brought into our lives new facts that can have their negative impact on children and young people. Facing these new dangers we try to find ways how to protect the young generation from them and how to obviate them. Contemporary children and adult population are influenced by a different society environment than it was before. The postmodern and plural society can be characterised as a space without one main way of thinking and values. More likely there are represented, disseminated and shared many various ways of behaviour, values and beliefs. Especially for children it can be very difficult to discern and assess them. Furthermore, what can be more demanding for them is to differentiate between the reality and fiction, between norms and deviations, good and bad behaviour. Giddens [1] points at the fact, that the plural postmodern society does not share one idea, it has finished with the life projects and the stable life points, and has started to stress the plurality, change, movement and liquidity.

In addition, the massive overloading of contemporary children's population by the media requires the new competencies of children that allow them to distinguish and critically evaluate their everyday experience. Together with new approaches to the childhood and children it brings a big challenge for their upbringing and education. In relation to this, their personalities should be formed as independent, self-confident, active and critically thinking. Contemporary children are growing into the society that requires them to orientate in many different impulses whose impact they cannot understand and guess.

Table 1. Classification of countries by children's internet use and online risk (*Source: EU Kids Online, 2009, p. 17*).

Online risk	Children's internet use		
	Low (<65%)	Medium (65%-85%)	High (>85%)
Low	Cyprus Italy	France Germany	
Medium	Greece	Austria Belgium Ireland Portugal Spain	Denmark Sweden
High		Bulgaria Czech Republic	Estonia Iceland Netherlands Norway Polands Slovenia UK

2. New society – new dangers

The impact of various factors in socialization of contemporary young generation is intensified by the influence of new and increasingly mobile communication technologies. According to statistical evidence in recent years, the saturation of households and societies with electronic media has an incredibly growing tendency. The changing family environment has been pointed out especially in last decades in the context of growing number of new modern electronic media that have appeared in families and households [2–6]. According to that, many hidden risks through media content and media messages have entered into the family privacy. In this context, media-rich homes with a number of mobile devices bring new risks for contemporary children and youths. In the Czech society, already at the beginning of the 20th century Sak [7] speaks about high availability of media among the young generation and points at the high saturation (even oversaturation) with these tools. Parent's education and regulation of media activities become more difficult when more media technologies occur in households and influence the everyday family life.

Among the dangers we face today in relation to the new media we can specify especially sexually/violently oriented images, cyber grooming, getting information about self-harm, suicide or anorexia, cyber bullying, social isolation, giving out personal/private information, etc., Kraus [8] points out at the importance of discussion about social risks and social deviations in context of characteristics of contemporary society and family. Otherwise, all these risks have many different types and stages. In relation to the data from the survey EU Kids Online from 2009 [9], we can classify countries by children's internet use and online risk (see Table 1).

According to this overview we can observe that among countries with the low children's internet use and low online risks belong Cyprus and Italy. On the other end of this continuum (which means with high use and online risks) appear Estonia, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and the UK. The Czech Republic has been ranked as the country with a medium use and high risks. It is not the coincidence that the biggest group of countries can be found in the space with high use and high risks. The more internet use we can find in the country, the more risks can occur. This finding supports importance of prevention and treatment with these dangers at various levels in each society. Parental monitoring and parental involvement in media education belong to them too.

Table 2. How do parents try to teach children to cope with media? (%).

	Very often	Sometimes	Never
By giving the exact time or restrict the time they can spend with media	42.8	47.2	10.0
By active interest in the activities of my child	50.9	43.6	5.4
By coviewing, coworking...	17.4	61.8	20.8
By discussion of the media content and activities of my child	49.0	45.9	5.1
I rely on his/her own responsibility	26.3	40.8	32.8

2.1 Parental monitoring – prevention in family?

In this context we can ask questions: “Are contemporary parents aware of risks from virtual environment? What do they usually do to protect their children?” According to the mostly used types of parental monitoring related to the media we can talk about restrictive mediation, co-viewing and instructive/active mediation [10–12]. There are no doubts about the fact that, in reduction of risks, the active mediation is the most effective which also has long-term effects. Parents can influence the children’s access, usage and attitudes toward media tools and media content. In 2008 European parents mostly declared worries about sexual/violent content (65%) and being a victim of online grooming (60%) [13]. Likely, we can conclude that parental worries have been connected with facing some kind of negative content and with a possibility to be attracted by somebody who wants to harm their children.

As with most media, parents reported various strategies for mediating their children’s online activities. These included, first, imposing rules and restrictions, second, social approaches – watching, sharing, talking and third, using technical tools about the internet such as filtering, monitoring [9]. According to the findings in EU Kids Online survey, in high risk countries, parents perceive that children have lower coping skills and vice versa. High risk/low coping countries included Estonia, Bulgaria, Poland and also the Czech Republic. On the basis of these results we could talk about the Czech population as about with high risks and low developed strategies for coping with media effects. In the next part of the text we show the Czech situation from the closer perspective.

2.2 Czech situation in parental mediation

The data presented in this text come from our quantitative research carried out among the Czech families with children aged 6–17 in the year 2012. We used self-administered questionnaires and tried to involve both parents in families. Finally, our sample included 523 mothers and 439 fathers. We also asked the children for their views regarding their parental activities and attitudes. Older children completed a questionnaire, younger school children were asked by an interviewer who wrote the responses down in the form. We obtained data from 466 children (233 boys and 233 girls) and afterwards could compare parents’ and children’s answers.

As noted earlier, we wanted to answer questions related to the activities parents do to protect their children and to show them how to cope with media. Interviewed parents declared that the most used way was to be active in asking child about his/her activities and to talk with him/her about the media content. Furthermore, it was also frequently mentioned to give the exact time or restrict the time children can spend with media. Almost one third of parents never rely on responsibility of their children. This was especially linked to parents with smaller children.

Table 3. Discussion about media use in family.

	Parental perspective		Children's perspective	
	About time (%)	About content (%)	About time (%)	About content (%)
PC	68.0	68.5	65.2	50.6
TV	60.8	73.3	56.2	58.6
Video and PC Games	61.0	54.8	xxxx	32.6

Table 4. Frequency of discussion about media topics in family.

Discussion in family about what the children have watched on TV, done on PC, etc.	Children's Perspective (%)	Parental perspective (%)
Every time	4.7	4.2
Very often	26.0	38.2
Sometimes	39.1	45.4
Rarely	21.0	10.4
Never	8.8	1.6

As a result of that we tried to find out how children reflect activities of their parents. When we asked children about this topic, we could observe some discrepancies in their answers in comparison to their parents. Parents were significantly more persuaded about talking with children about the media content (regardless the type of media) than their children declared (Table 3). Distortions could be found on both sides. Parents could overestimate their efforts due to the desire to be seen as “a good father/mother”. Contrary to this, children could underestimate the efforts of their parents just because they do not pay attention when parents try to talk to them about these matters. In any case, some space for supporting efforts of contemporary parents could be seen. The data showed that almost half of them (or even more of them), never discuss content of video and PC games with their children. Secondly, also discussion about PC content seems to be at the low level and there is still much to do for the improvement. When we compared answers of parents and their children, we could find a gap between them at about 10%.

When we measured the level of discussion about media in families, we were also interested in findings about a frequency of these discussions. This question was more connected with every day routines in families. Almost one third of children declared that their parents rarely or never discuss with them what they have watched on TV, done on PC, etc. A surprising finding could be that nearly 5% of children and their parents demonstrated the same level of discussion at every time. We could somehow call these families “intensive families”. Another research could find out that families that tend to do their activities together also tend to communicate more frequently.

Moreover, we asked the question of whether parents talk to children about their activities on PC, programs on TV, etc.; 4.7% of children said that parents always ask them, while 8.8% of children said that they never ask them.

Next, mothers turned out to be the main initiators of the discussions (51.6% of cases). This was confirmed by parents' data. Children initiated discussions less often (18.9%) and fathers did that very rarely (9.9%). Further, there were various combinations of participants in the family discussions (me and my mom, me and my dad, parents together, etc.). In addition, children and parents view the extent to which they talk about the content of TV programs differently. Children mainly feel the absence of discussions about the TV content; nearly 30% of children reported that their parents seldom or never talk to them about this matter.

When an inappropriate scene appears on the TV, parental reactions were described as follows: children said that 12% of parents usually cover children's eyes, 12.9% of parents turn off the television, 26.5% of parents do not react in any way, more than a third (33.5%) of parents send the child away and 17.2% of parents choose another solution. Only 17% of parents talk regularly to their children about what they should not see on television or do on computer. 19% of children responded that their parents never talk to them about these matters, which is alarming. The relation of the issue to the age of children is apparent. The older the children, the lower the frequency of discussions about media contents in the family (chi-square = 55.299, $p < 0.001$). Gender differences between children were not found.

In our survey we also tried to show the situation that parents, when they are not at home, do not allow their children to watch TV or PC. Children were asked what their parents would do when they come home. 57% of the interviewed children responded that their parents would not check if they had watched. Checking declared almost one third of children (34.4%). If parents realise that children have not kept to their prohibition, they would talk to the children about this matter. Secondly, they would punish their children and nearly 13% of them would not do anything. Overall, we could assume that parents rely on active monitoring and try to instil their children values and attitudes they confess. On the other hand, what should not be forgotten are the liberal attitudes of a part of contemporary parents who do not apply any kind of monitoring and mediation.

3. Conclusion

Parental monitoring and parental mediation in active way together with other ways and tools that can be used create a good basis for a family to prevent media risks. However, importance of being involved in children's lives and share everyday activities and thoughts of children, communicate and discuss media content with them, could be perceived as a very good way for prevention. All the dangers that could harm contemporary young population can be weakened by active interest of their social environment. A high level of responsibility of today's parents is without any discussions. What is also important is the support from other social actors and the social system that allows them to spend their energy and time in their family activities and that supports their knowledge and availability of information as much as possible.

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