

FAQ 24: What's the best way to ask about parental mediation?

What's the issue?

Various types of mediation activity are practised by many parents. Developed originally for parental mediation of television, these are now being extended to parental mediation of the internet, games, and online technologies. Since parental activities in the home are subtle and complex, it can be difficult to ask about them in surveys or interviews.

Common practice

A consensus has developed that three main kinds of mediation are practised:

- restrictive (setting rules about time, location, or content, limiting time or other activities, banning certain activities or websites)
- active (discussing media content, guiding choices, instructing interpretation, critiquing media content, making evaluative comments)
- co-use (co-viewing, sharing the activity, being present but not commenting).

These are all social forms of mediation. Additionally, for the internet, you could ask about the use of filtering, monitoring, or other technical forms of mediation.

Pitfalls to avoid

- In designing a survey or interview schedule, you cannot ask about just one type of parental mediation (e.g. "Do you have rules for your child?"). Answers to these different types of mediation are not generally highly correlated; indeed, subtypes emerge from factor analyses conducted on answers to multiple separate items in a survey.
- It is also clear from research that children and parents answer these questions differently – generally, parents claim more mediation and children claim less mediation. Ideally, both parents and children should be interviewed.
- A rule of thumb would be to take parent and child estimates as specifying the likely upper and lower bounds of parental mediation. If only parents, or only children, are asked, the interpretation of the data must recognize that the source questioned is likely to under- or over-estimate actual practice.

Examples of studies asking about parental mediation

The SAFT and the UK Children Go Online surveys asked parents and children the same questions. For example, to ask about active and co-use forms of mediation, the questions to parents (with equivalent questions to children) were:

Do you (or your spouse/partner) do any of these things nowadays? (tick all that apply):

Make sure you stay in the same room or nearby when your child is online

Sit with your child and go online together

Help your child when he/she is on the internet

Ask/talk to your child about what he/she is doing or did on the internet

Keep an eye on what's on the screen while your child is online

The Norwegian SAFT Survey (2006) asked children: 'When you go on the internet at home, do any of your parents often, sometimes or never do each of the following?' (Response options: often, sometimes, never, don't know):

When I am on the internet at home, my parents sit with me while I surf

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check in on me

When I am on the internet at home, my parents use filters to block sites they do not want me to go to

When I am on the internet at home, my parents check to see which sites I have visited

It isn't easy to ask about parental control tools, as neither parents nor children may be clear about what exactly these are. The 2005 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Survey (Finkelhor, 2006) asked children this way: 'Is there any software on this computer that blocks pop-up ads or SPAM email?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. Also: 'Is there any software on this computer that filters, blocks, or monitors how you use the internet (besides software that blocks pop-ups or SPAM)?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable.

Their questions to parents were more explicit: 'At any time in the past year, has there been software on the computer your child uses at home that filters, blocks, or monitors what your child does or sees online?' Yes/No/Don't know/not sure/Refused/not ascertainable/Not applicable. And: 'I have some questions about what types of blocking, filtering, or monitoring software have been on the computer your child uses at home, including software you may have stopped using. In the past 12 months, has there been software that...' (READ) [1 = Yes, 2 = No, 97 = Don't know/not sure, 98 = Not ascertainable/refused, 99 = Not applicable]

Blocks SPAM email?

Blocks pop-up ads?

Filters sexually explicit images or websites?

Blocks or controls your child's use of chat rooms, email, newsgroups, or instant messaging?

Monitors your child's online activities?

Limits the amount of time your child can spend online?

Blocks personal information from being posted or emailed?

Uses a browser or search engine just for children?

In qualitative work, parental mediation is easier to ask about, because you can follow up to be sure you know just what children mean. The Eurobarometer qualitative study asked, in focus groups, 'Can you use the internet as you wish and as often as you wish, or do you have any limits, rules or recommendations given by your parents – or anything you think your parents would like you to do or not to do although they may not really have told you?' The UK Children Go Online project asked older teenagers, 'Are there rules for using the internet at college? What do they say? What about at home? Do you stick to all of the rules or do you try to get round some of them?' (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

Finkelhor, D. (2006). *The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (2005-2006)*. Crimes Against Children Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.