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The parental mediation strategies of parents with young children

María Cruz López-de-Ayala-López and Leslie Haddon



THE PARENTAL MEDIATION STRATEGIES OF PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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Abstract

This working paper explores how parents of young children (age from 3 to 8 year-olds) adapt their mediation practices as children have growing access to the internet through touch-screen devices such as tablets and smartphones. One main general finding is that the theory of the detraditionalization of the family, the negotiated or democratic family model, may act as a reference for parents of younger children, but this model at best describes the practices of adolescents' parents. A higher degree of regulation and control by the parents of younger children occurs in part because those children often lack the skills to understand the arguments put forward by their parents. In line with previous research on young children, these parents are less concerned about their children's internet use than parents of older children because that use is limited by the children's lack of skills at this age. Thus, these parents more often set rules relating to the amount of time that these devices can be used rather than about the content the children can access. That said, this study shows that since these technologies help parents to preoccupy their children when needed, the timing of the use of these devices does not have clear and fixed rules.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become an integral part of the everyday lives of families, in which children from an early age, are increasingly using the internet and mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets (Chaudron, 2015; Lauricella *et al.*, 2015; Genc, 2014; Plowman *et al.*, 2008 and 2013; Holloway *et al.*, 2013; Rideout, 2013; Gutnick *et al.*, 2010). In 2016, 64% of Spanish children between the ages of 4 and 13 accessed the internet - that is an increase of seven percentage points since 2012. This rise has been especially experienced among the youngest children, thus 36% of 4-year-olds kids surfed the internet in 2016. Meanwhile, the figures remain more or less stable for children over 9 years old, at 67% (AIMC, 2017). These smaller children access services and online applications through tablets, consoles or their parents' smartphones, with 46% of Spanish households having a tablet (CIS, 2016).

The greater accessibility of the digital world through mobile technologies has raised concerns about growing online risks for children in general (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2014), including specific concerns about younger children in terms of health or developmental problems, inappropriate content or other social impacts (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Kenney and Gortmaker, 2017; Dube *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2017; Bedford *et al.*, 2016; Chaudron, 2015; Radesky *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, researchers have also pointed to the technologies' potential to enhance, for example, young children's emergent literacy skills (Neumann, 2016/2014; Plowman *et al.*, 2013/2012, Cohen and Cowen, 2011). In general, parents develop different parental mediation practices to improve their children's online opportunities and minimize online risks (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017), practices that have a dynamic nature (Symons *et al.*, 2017b), as parents adjust to the changing nature of the internet and mobile technologies and their changing family circumstances. While parents of specifically young children tend to feel less concerned about their children's internet use (Zaman *et al.*, 2016; Holloway *et al.*, 2013; Plowman *et al.*, 2010), a growing body of literature highlights the role of parents as scaffolders who support the learning of children through social interaction when guiding the digital use of their

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children (Troseth *et al.*, 2016; Metzger *et al.*, 2015), even if they are not aware of this fact (Aubrey and Dahl 2014; Plowman *et al.*, 2008).

Although research on parental mediation has grown in recent years, it has focused mainly on adolescents (López de Ayala and Ponte, 2016) while the literature on parental mediation of young children's digital media use being relatively limited (Zaman *et al.*, 2016; Connel *et al.*, 2015; Nikken and Jansz, 2014; Holloway *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, there is a dearth of research that compares the parental mediation of younger children with that of older children. In addition, most research on parental mediation has a quantitative character, which leads to gaps in the in-depth understanding of the motives behind parental mediation practices (Symons *et al.*, 2017b; Zaman *et al.*, 2016; Nikken and Schols, 2015), including parents' beliefs about appropriate parenting and the difficulties that arise in managing that task.

Hence, regarding parents as the constructors of meanings (López de Ayala and Ponte, 2016), this paper examines the mediation strategies of parents of younger children, comparing them to research findings looking at parents of adolescents, and taking into account the different imaginaries that condition their practices, including their own beliefs about 'good parenting' and how digital technologies can affect their children lives (Haddon, 2015).

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2 THE FAMILY AS A CONTEXT FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY USE

Roger Silverstone *et al.* (1992) originally used the metaphor of "domestication" to refer to the assignment of a new meanings to technologies, once they are introduced into a domestic context, based on familial or personal values as differentiated from the values that dominate in the public world³. This early work drew attention to the family context and the family relationships that mediate the consumption of technology, while that context is itself both reproduced and modified through this process. It highlighted the processes of negotiation between the members of the family over the introduction and use of technologies in the home, although less attention was originally given to the active role of children. However, in the literature referring to the detraditionalization of the family, the role of children in family negotiation processes received greater recognition. This theory of the individualization of relationships within the family argues that today this institution is manifested as "an association of individuals, each of whom contributes their interests, experiences and plans, and is subject to different controls, risk and conditioning" (Beck, 2002: 185). Here, relationships and norms of coexistence are increasingly negotiated among all members of the family, including children, through dialogue (Hartmann *et al.*, 2007). In these negotiation processes, the individual wishes and needs of each of the family members are often contrasted with the characteristics of the project of living together (Meil, 2006).

In this framework, trust and intimacy are considered to be the basis for the quality of the relationship in the new models of the "negotiated family" or "democratic family". Parents are supposed to intervene in the supervision and control of their children's behaviour, but avoid intrusive interventions that they perceive as threats to that trust and family harmony, especially when children are assuming a more autonomous role with the advent of adolescence (Giddens, 1990/1993; Beck and Beck, 2002). Meil (1999) points out that, in contrast to the model of parental authority of the traditional modern family and in accordance with the social values of self-realization in the societies of late modernity, current paternal strategies should ideally be oriented towards the search for good familial communication, foster the potential and capacities of the children and understand their needs and points of view.

From this perspective, parents must convince their children to fulfil their obligations and carry out the activities that they propose, using various strategies that include rational argumentation and other forms of persuasion. This process is complicated with adolescence

³ Although many domestication studies *have* continued to focus on nuclear families, others have diversified and focused on a range of situations, including influences outside the home (cf. Haddon, 2011)

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when young people may question the decisions of their parents in an attempt to assert their own autonomy, while parents try to maintain peace, avoid conflicts and frequently give in to the demands of their children. One of the general questions in this paper is how much of this account of family interactions, of family negotiations, applies in families with parents of young children.

3 PARENTAL MEDIATION STRATEGIES

Parental mediation is defined as the management and regulation by the parents of the media experiences of children (Clark, 2011; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008), including "any strategy that parents use to control, supervise or interpret the media content for children" (Warren *et al.*, 2001: 212, cited by Nikken and Schols, 2015: 3423), in order not only to limit risk but also to encourage learning (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017, Zaman *et al.*, 2016).

Drawing upon studies of television, three types of parental mediation were cited by most of the authors who study the mediation of online activities: 1) restrictive mediation, which refers to parents setting rules or technical tools to control the time and place of use and content accessed; 2) active mediation, where parents discuss media use and media content with their children; and 3) co-use, when parents and children share activities in front of the screen (Lee and Chae, 2007; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Nathanson, 2001). Building on this framework in the *EU Kids Online* project looking at children aged from 9 to 16 years old, Livingstone *et al.* (2011) outlined five parental mediation strategies that, albeit with some modifications proposed in the items used, have been validated by empirical research (Dürager and Sonk, 2014).

The first of these five, restrictive mediation, usually means that there is a limit to the screen time and places where the online activity can be carried out or that certain activities are banned. Technical mediation refers to the use of software and technical tools to filter, restrict and track online activities. Monitoring is the tracking of online activities after they have been carried out – e.g. checking pages which children have got accessed, their contacts and the content of online conversations. Finally, these researchers differentiate between two types of active mediation. The active mediation of activities includes talking about online content and activities, sitting close by while the children surf and sharing their experiences. The active mediation of children's internet safety aims to warn children and raise awareness about the dangers of the internet or to give advice about its safe and responsible use. Empirical research has shown that European parents of 9-16 year olds prefer active and restrictive mediation strategies, and there is a low incidence of technical mediation (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011). In addition, active mediation of security and monitoring of online use often occurs when the child

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has already experienced an unpleasant online situation in order to prevent future problems (Duerager and Livingstone, 2012).

Clark (2011) argues that parental mediation should cover not just risks, but also interpersonal relationships and collaborative learning. She proposes including participatory learning as a new strategy of parental mediation, involving joint interaction and learning between parents and children through digital technologies that “encourages parents to be listeners and co-creators who invite their young people to serve as leaders and guides into experiences with gaming, mobile phones, and social networking, among other things” (Clark, 2011: 334-335). Based on this, Livingstone et al. (2017) propose including the activities initiated by children when requesting the support of and interaction with their parents. Using a factor analysis, the data from a survey of parents of children aged 6 to 14 years in eight European countries showed two underlying models of mediation strategies that combine strategies already tested in the *EU kids Online* project, including support initiated by children. Enabling mediation combines active mediation of internet use, support initiated by children, active mediation of children’s online safety, the use of technical controls and parental supervision and restrictive mediation.

In other research that included younger children, a study of children aged from 2 to 12 years old, (Nikken and Jansz, 2014) based on a factor analysis of data from a large survey among parents, found two additional parental strategies relating to younger children: supervision (keeping an eye on the child from a distance) and technical safety guidance. These took place alongside ‘co-use’, ‘active mediation’, and ‘restrictive mediation’. But the researchers did not find that parents used monitoring as a mediation parental strategy with preadolescents and younger children.

From a literature review on the forms of parental mediation in adolescents and younger children and through a qualitative, mixed-method study involving 24 parents and 36 children aged 3 to 9, Zaman *et al.* (2016) also propose a wider range of parental mediation practices aimed to decrease risk but also to foster learning, focusing on the contextual factors that shape parental mediation practices. The authors point to the emergence of new manifestations of parental mediation related to participatory learning and distant mediation. Their typology consists of restrictive mediation, co-use, participatory learning, and distant mediation. In this framework, co-use is in two forms: parents as helper and as buddy. Helper parents guide children when they use a digital medium for the first time or when they encounter problems. This type of intervention decreases when children grow older. Buddy parents share activities online with their children, for family pleasure and recreational purposes. According to Zaman et al. (2016), distant mediation means that parents do not get involved in children’s media

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usage while still keeping an eye on what is happening. Its two manifestations are deference and supervision. Similar to the approach of Padilla-Walker (2012), deference refers to parents deliberately choosing not to intervene because they want to trust their children and give them some autonomy, expecting them to act responsibly – a type of mediation fits in with the negotiated or democratic family model that emerges with the family's detraditionalization (Giddens, 1990/1993; Beck and Beck, 2002).

In short, there is no single consensus about a typology of parental mediation of the internet. The items used in each of these studies differ as they also seek to adapt to a changing reality, such as the emergence of social networking sites or the new devices considered in this paper that alter the circumstances of online and hence mediation practices. The diversity of ages addressed in these studies, ranging from toddlers to late adolescence, is another factor that make agreement difficult. In fact, some recent additions that come mainly from studies with younger children have also revealed new practices of parental mediation hitherto not considered. Hence, one question that this paper asks is how and why the practices of parents of younger children different from those documented for parents of older children. We now turn to consider what has been said about the age of children in this respect.

4 PARENTAL MEDIATION AND THE AGE OF THE CHILD

A growing body of literature has emerged examining the factors that influence parental mediation practices and strategies. The age of children has been noted as being a key determinant of parental intervention (Connel *et al.*, 2015; Nikken and Schols, 2015; Nikken and Jansz, 2014; López de Ayala, 2013; Lee, 2012; Livingstone *et al.*, 2011; Valcke *et al.*, 2011; Livingstone *et al.*, 2011; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Rosen *et al.*, 2008; Eastin *et al.*, 2006). More specifically, active mediation and supervision have been found to be more common among families with younger children (Nikken and Jansz, 2014; Sonck *et al.*, 2013). The data analysed by Livingstone *et al.* (2011) also show that restrictive mediation declines with the age of the child, as does monitoring (Padilla-Walker *et al.*, 2012). And, among children aged 8 and under, Connel *et al.* (2015) found that parents were more likely to engage in co-use with their younger children.

It should be added that those strategies of parental mediation do not depend on age of the children in a simple and direct manner but rather in a complex interrelationship with other factors (Talves and Kamus, 2015; Nikken and Haan, 2015). Thus, various studies have focused their attention on aspects that are closely linked to this variable such as parent's perception of the level of internet use of their children (Valcke *et al.*, 2011; Nikken and Schols, 2015), their level of online skill and competences using the internet (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Paus-

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Hasebrink *et al.*, 2013), their self-control (Lee, 2012; Padilla-Walker and Coyne, 2011) and the reactions of children to mediation (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2013).

That said, it seems that parents' attitudes and perceptions do change with the age of the children (Plowman, 2015; Lauricella *et al.*, 2015; Álvarez *et al.*, 2013; Plowman *et al.*, 2010a). So "parents became more aware of potential problems as their children got older" and "of educational potential as their child's transition to school became imminent" (Plowman *et al.*, 2010a: 68-69). Thus, many parents of young children are not worried about the risk of online use as they think the young children's use is very limited (Chaudron, 2015).

5 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to examine the parental mediation practices of Spanish parents of young children and to explore the meanings that the parents give to these practices. It examines how parents of young children (here from 3 to 8 year-olds) adapt the practices and strategies of digital technology mediation, especially of mobile devices such as the tablet and smartphone, to their particular conditions, taking into account how these parents perceive the importance of the internet and ICTs in their children's lives and their effects. We consider three factors here: 1) parents' perception of their own role as socialising agents, 2) their assessment of the risks and opportunities that mobile digital devices present to the children and 3) the difficulties and constraints they encounter in their mediation role, including those relating to parents' perception of the degree of maturity of their children. This will cast light upon the research question of how and why parental mediation strategies differ from parents of older children, while more generally reflecting on the applicability of the negotiated family model described by Giddens and others.

In-depth interviews were chosen as the research method for this qualitative research in order to explore the parents' interpretations of their socialising role in relation to their children's use of the internet and mobile devices as well as their own personal experiences of parental mediation in this area. In contrast to focus groups that often examines social representations, such in-depth interviews allow us to obtain information about "how diverse subjects act and reconstruct the system of social representations in their individual practices" (Alonso, 1994: 226). In this sense, the experiences and opinions of each social subject, individual or family, are contextualised within the collective experiences and discourses of their social reference group (Dijk, 2003). In addition, the in-depth interview allows us to create an intimacy and trust that facilitates access to lived experiences, beliefs, values and decisions made by parents regarding their mediation practices.

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In our study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 families with children of three to eight years old who had access to tablets and smartphones. In three families, children had younger siblings about whom information was also collected. The families in our sample lived in Madrid, the Spanish capital, and in several municipalities in its metropolitan area. They were contacted through the snowball sampling technique, as friends of acquaintances. The interviews were carried out between July and September 2017 in the interviewees' house, except for one that was conducted in a separate room appropriate for a conversation at the interviewee's workplace. When it was possible, both parents (2 families) were interviewed, but in most cases, and due to family responsibilities, only the father (3) or mother (5) was interviewed. The ages of parents ranged from 27 to 46 years and the level of education ranged from primary education to postgraduate certificate, covering General Certificate of Education, vocational education and training, and a university degree. Most were nuclear families, but two single parent families and a family with stepchildren were included.

The interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper who is a native Spanish speaker. The duration of interviews ranged from 33 to 70 minutes. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the goals of the study, the participants' rights, and confidentiality. The participants were asked to fill in an information sheet to provide the following data: parents' age and gender, family structure, parent's level of education and employment, nationality, earning range and the age and gender of each child.

The interviews were semi-structured, using a topic guide and broad guiding questions. An introductory question concerned the devices through which the family, and especially the children, could access the internet and which ones they owned. Attention then focused on tablets and smartphones, with questions about what kind of application and services the children used, how the families acquired the devices, where and when the children use them and how they learnt to use them, what kind of things they liked to do and how this changed as the children grew older. The other group of questions concerned parental mediation practices, including rules about use, technical mediation, co-use, dialogue, participative mediation and also parents' opinions about the importance of the internet in their children's lives, their concerns, the perceived benefits for their children and how they envisaged their children's future use. Finally, parents were asked about the role of parents as socialising agents and their difficulties in mediating, controlling or guiding their children's use and how the parents are prepared to manage these tasks.

The interviews were recorded and the data were transcribed. The data were labeled, organised and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2013) according to the different elements in the

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research question about the specific practices of parents of younger children, while new themes were also identified. Quotations from interviews use fictitious names.

6 THE ROLE OF PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

To set the scene, it is important to appreciate how parents of young children in particular see their role and look ahead to when their children grow older. For example, Baumrid (1978) argues that the ultimate goal of socialisation is that immature, dependent and young children should become mature, independent, and competent. In fact, that is a reasonably good characterisation of what the parents in this study feel: their long-term goal in relation to technologies is to teach their children to self-regulate, to transmit values to them so that they are able to decide for themselves as they grow older and expect more autonomy as opposed to control by the parents. For example, one mother expressed this:

Parents should provide a basis so that as adults they can differentiate what is right and what is wrong. They must educate children when they are young so that when they are a certain age they know when they do right and when they do wrong. And when they are 16 or 17 year-olds, they won't learn from you. They will learn when they are wrong. They will not be guided by you (Paula, parent of 8 and 13 year-olds).

Education during young childhood is seen as a key experience that will produce results in adolescence – when the parents perceive greater risks for children who will at that stage act with greater freedom. For example:

And I tell you that it scares me, you know? Because in the end the kids, however much you control them, when they reach an age they are a little independent, they have their room, they have their technologies there and you have to rely on their good work and that your education has paid off (Paco, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds).

In other words, these parents can foresee that when their children reach adolescence their parental influence will be more limited, transforming their role from controlling parents to supervisors at a distance who may at that stage choose to intervene less because they prefer to trust and give autonomy to their children – if they act responsibly that is (as also noted by Padilla-Walker *et al.*, 2012). In many ways the vision of that future parental role fits in with the ideal of the negotiating or democratic detraditionalized family (Giddens, 1990/1993).

In keeping with that, the ideal for the parents in this study is to have worked beforehand to create a climate of trust, so that when their children reach adolescence and are no longer under the close watch of their parents, they will have learned to act appropriately and would feel

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comfortable to spontaneously tell their parents about their concerns and about the things that happen to them,

I would like my girl to be informed and that if she has any doubts she has will speak with me about them. It is always necessary to create that trust with children, that the children know you are there for them to trust. If you do not really talk to your children, your children will never trust you to tell them anything (Carmen, parent of a 4 year-old).

However, despite that vision of future parent-child interactions, the reality is that 'negotiation' works less well with very young children who, from the parents' perspective, are less able to control themselves and understand the arguments put forward by the parents. Hence, at this age, the responsibility of the parents is to regulate their younger children's use of digital devices, monitoring and controlling them. This sentiment is captured in comments such as "the child is not supposed to have the power in his hand to choose when he sees something or does not see it or stops seeing it" (Sofía, parent of a 6 year-old), and parents must "guide and tell them how they have to use things" (Isabel, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds). In fact, some parents also mention that children have to learn to be accustomed to being supervised since they are young, across the board: "If they see that you do not control them, they may think they can do what they want them" (Carlos, parent of a 7 year-old) and "then it is more complicated to go back" (Isabel, parent of 3 and 6 years-olds).

Because these young children are less able to understand rational argumentation parents use other strategies to get their children to stop playing with tablets or smartphones: warning them to stop, saying that "the cartoons are sleeping" (Lucía, parent of a 6 year-old and 22 months), saying the devices does not work, (Carlos, parent of a 7 year-old), offering them other activities, such as going for a walk (Isabel, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) or, as mentioned by most of parents, simply taking the device away from the children.

However, some negotiation processes are still attempted, even by these young children. Isabella notes how her 6 year-old daughter tries to persuade her that she should use the device for longer – with the mother replying that she can use it for short time and after that she will have to do something else. José mentions how his 8 year-old son tries to convince him to allow him to play a game for a little longer in order to be able to move to a higher stage. The older these younger children are, even in the 3 to 8 year old age band, the greater their ability to try to influence parental decision-making. Meanwhile even parents of these younger children sometimes take into account their children's tastes and interest when they choose their games, even letting them choose their games as they get a little bit older.

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7 BENEFITS AND CONCERNS

These parents of younger children take for granted the use of digital technologies and the internet at home. They assume that the internet is an integral part of their children's daily lives and it will be important for the future of their children who should learn to manage it. At this age, parents value digital devices as “babysitter”, as expressed by Carlos:

At some ages digital devices will serve to educate children but at certain ages and at certain times [i.e. younger children] I believe that the technologies serve the parents so that the children are entertained and don't disturb them. (Carlos, parent of a 7 year-old)

That said, some acknowledge the educational value of the devices in terms of improving children's spatial awareness, their hand-eye coordination, and as a fun way to acquire skills (e.g. learning to write, developing reading abilities, learning maths, history, etc.). However, most of the parents refer to their children's use at home as only being for entertainment and sometimes that they are a waste of time.

Parents express some concerns regarding their young children's use of the technologies, but to put this into perspective, they are more worried about the future, when the children grow up, and especially when they reach the adolescence and what might happen when they access social networking sites and use WhatsApp. At this stage, their concerns mainly relate to time spent using the devices and questions about what content children encounter through them, explored below.

8 CONTROL OF TIME SPENT ON DEVICES

Similar to parents of teenage children (Symon et al., 2017), the first concern of the parents that were interviewed in this study related to their children's potential overuse of the devices and how that use of these technologies may affect other types of activity. As Haddon (2014) notes, for older children the goal is usually for children to achieve a balance between their activities online and offline so that these devices do not capture all their leisure time. In this study, this was expressed as they might be “missing doing other things that they should do at their age” (Isabella, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) and affecting the development of their general social skills, creativity, imagination and health. A more extreme time concern is that their children may develop an addiction in the medium to long term.

However, this concern does not usually stop parents from using the technologies to entertain these younger children, or at least pre-occupy them, in order to achieve some peace of mind, to relax or to find time for other tasks (as also noted in Haddon and Holloway, in press). As

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Carmen (parent of a 4 year-old) says, “we take advantage of that - when we do not want to be disturbed we give them the terminal to be quiet”. Carlos (parent of 3 and 7 year-olds) adds: “we see that he is entertained with them, but we do not know the effects that can have in the long-term”. Hence, this can lead to an ambivalent assessment of the use of technologies in the home, producing a certain feeling of guilt, as when Isabella reflects on possible negative future consequences:

Maybe initially for your own benefit you let them use it much of the time. And, of course, in the end when they are older they will have accustomed to using it. And when, perhaps, you want to limit its use you will have to fight with them - and it is hard to go back (Isabella, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds).

However, some parents say that they do not have so many concerns about time issues. The parents of the youngest children, three or less, say that at this age the children, some still toddlers, do not yet ask to use the devices. Other parents point out they will consider setting rules in the future as if they observe that their children use these devices more and more but at the moment their children are simply not using the technologies enough to justify such regulation. “She goes well in school and she does her homework... [the amount of device use] does not generate [...] anxiety or a stress” (Carlos, parent of 7 and 3 year-olds). Or else parents consider that their children are “too young to trigger an addiction” (Rosa, parent of 6 and 8 year-olds). In addition, the time available to use devices is simply constrained by the children’s other time commitments and interests, such as their daily obligations and routines like homework, eating, or going out to the park.

Where parental do control time use, approaches vary. For example, in relation to the duration of time spent using technologies, many parents say that the children are in general not allowed to use digital devices for more than half an hour or once a day, but such time rules are clearly flexible, depending on many factors such as the weather, if it is a weekend or holiday, or if the parent is familiar with what the child is doing:

As far the games she plays have been downloaded by me, I already know them, I know what they are (or....) I know what she has downloaded, what she is playing, and then, she is allowed more time (Isabella, parent of a 6 year-old).

Meanwhile some parents are stricter than others, including within families. Rosa and her husband (parents of 6 and 8 year-olds) feel overwhelmed by the child’s response if they try to curtail their children’s time on the device: “We have to allow them (more time) because in the end they get enraged sometimes ... but (only) a little more time”. At the other end of the scale,

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Sofía and her husband set rigid time rules for because they are very worried their child was becoming addicted:

We had to set a schedule about using the tablet and the TV because if not, there was no limit and he demanded them constantly. And also when it was time to turn them off it was a major problem. (Sofia, parent of a 6 year-old)

In addition, any time rules can be overridden by other considerations. For example, all the parents in this study said that they sometimes banned tablet use for a period as a punishment when their children misbehave. As Carla (parent of a 5 year-old) said “The tablet is a punishment and prize, because it is very attractive, just like television”.

The other time control relates to particular situations, in the sense of occasions. For example, Isabella mentions that she does not allow her 6-year-old daughter to use the tablet when she is with friends, when they are meeting other family members, when partaking in activities such as going to the countryside or during meals. But here the picture is mixed. While José (parent of an 8 year-old), also takes it for granted that technologies are not allowed during meal, Carlos, Sofía and Paco (parents of 6 and 7 and 3 and 6 year-olds, respectively) use the tablet and Smart TV to distract their children during meals at home in order to get them to eat more. Yet some of those same parents, like Sofía, do not allow their children to use the tablet when they go out with friends to restaurants. As Paco (parent of 6 and 3 year-olds), explained “we have to distinguish the first few years, when they already have some ability to reason and you can say: ‘Hey we are dining out. We will speak like civilized people. We are not going to look at the gadget’”. The other control over the timing when devices could be used depended on the time of day – for example, Carlos (parent of a 7 year-old) had read that using the technology at night was not good “because children need to relax”.

Finally, some parents have set up passwords to access mobile devices in order to make it easier to control the time their children’s use while others have simply set the rule that children have to ask to use the technologies in the first place.

9 CONTROL OF CONTENT ACCESSED

Research on older children (Symon *et al.*, 2017) has suggested that adolescents’ parents are concerned about children’s exposure to violent or pornographic content. In contrast, as in other research on younger child (Haddon and Holloway, in press), the parents of young children in this study were in general not very worried about the content on digital devices because they think that their children’s use is very limited. The younger children usually access videos or educational games while the slightly older ones may also access YouTube and

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games, but often this is supervised, and the parents do not feel that their children are in danger. For example, Sylvia (parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) point out, “[w]e are really unconcerned because, they don’t have access to the internet to download anything or to watch any video that they should not watch”. Paula (parent of an 8 year-old) adds, “[w]e are not worried because he doesn’t usually search in Google and if he does it is for very specific things”; while Paco (parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) says “they do not yet use it independently, they use it with us”.

These parents usually know the contents of the videos or games that their children are using because they chose or downloaded them themselves. In addition, these young children use digital devices in the ‘public’ spaces of the home, close to their parents. That way the parents are able to supervise what their children are doing. Although Paula points out that her 8-year-old son prefers the tablet to the computer because he can put his earphones on and so enjoy more privacy, she adds that he also likes to use it sitting on the sofa in the living room so “you always see what he is watching”. Carlos’s 7 year-old daughter, who sometimes uses the tablet in her bedroom, is the exception since all the other children use them in the living room where their parents are able to keep an eye on the child. But even Carlos says that he has some idea what his daughter is doing because the bedroom door must remain open so that he can hear what is going on.

Similar to adolescents’ parents (Symon *et al.*, 2017), parents of younger children are worried about advertisements. When it comes to younger children, parents such as Carlos are worried about children’s inability to understand the boundaries between the virtual and real world. Then there was also concern about inappropriate content; José (parent of 8 to 15 years-old), for example, was concerned about music videos: “the content does not seem to me the most appropriate for a child of 6 years”. As children grow up, other concerns emerge. Most parents require their children to ask them for permission to use the devices, but also specifically for downloading games or apps – especially because they are worried about children incurring expenses by downloading items that cost money. The content of the games or accessing social media can also be considered problematic. For example, Paula and her husband (parents of 8 to 13 year-olds), whose older child had a bad experience with social networks, banned their youngest child from accessing social networks and violent games.

Looking at various forms of parental mediation, the parents in this study did not use any form of technical monitoring or surveillance (e.g. checking histories of use.) They associated this form of monitoring with older children who might be experiencing cyberbullying when they start using social networking sites or WhatsApp on smartphones. Only two of the parents in this study used filtering software although all of them anticipated that they might do so when

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their children grow up and have more access to the internet. One of the parents that uses filtering software said she started using them after her husband attended a presentation by the police about internet security. The rest of the parents whose children use YouTube consider that in general it already operates much like a content filter at this age: “It is a way to control as YouTube only generates certain videos” (Carlos, parent of a 7 year-old).

Some parents had observed their children’s YouTube use and decided it was safe; “I see it on the tablet and I see the videos below and then she is always selecting the same ones ...until now nothing odd has come up” (Lucía, parent of 3 and 6 year-olds). In contrast, Isabella who is one of the two using Kids YouTube and content filter explains her decision:

Before setting the parental control, usually on YouTube, we put on a video, and as the videos that then come up there are related, you can get to things he should not see (...) he has never seen any such thing ... but now with this [filter] which is for children, then yes. He can select them (Isabella, parent of a 6 year-old).

10 MEDIATION STRATEGIES

As noted earlier, although dialogue may be perceived as the ideal mediation strategy, these parents of young children are also aware of the limitations of this: “At the moment it is not possible to reason with them [...] dialogue is necessary but with rules as well” (Lucía, parent of a 3 year-old). For example, Sofía (parent of a 6 year-old) tried to make her son understand that watching screens for a long time is not good for children; she even bought him a children’s story on the subject. However, while her son lost control when the screen was taken away, she adds that “later you can talk to him and he understands it”. Carlos (parent of a 7 year-old) also tried to explain to his daughter that what she is watching on YouTube is fiction. Meanwhile Paula and José (both parents of an 8 year olds) explain to their children why they set certain rules and boundaries and José adds “it is not a question of just prohibiting but of arguing”.

Somewhat different from parents of adolescents (Nikken and Jansz, 2014), these parents of younger children used technologies with the children more. Although the parents admit they do not share a lot of time using technologies with their children they recall playing together, sometimes as ‘family time’. Furthermore, while at first they often said that their children learnt to use the devices by themselves they later admitted that to some degree they taught their children.

For example, Isabella at first says her 3 year-old son does not use the tablet alone, but then notes that “[b]ecause if he uses it alone, there is a danger that it will get broken”. When she is questioned about his learning, she adds, “well with the puzzles, you have to look for the one

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that is the similar [to ones they know]. Because you click here and drag, and many times they see how you do it, quickly assimilate it and quickly start to pass they finger [on the screen]". In a similar way, Paula (parent of an 8 year-old), showed her son how to look up information for his homework on Google. Carlos (parent of a 7 year-old) showed his child how to look for videos on YouTube, guided her through the menus of games and explained how to use the computer, while José (parent of an 8 year-old) showed his child how to send a WhatsApp, voice message and how to know the message has been read. In other words, they teach their children "the basics" in order that they can then play with or use the technology independently.

Sylvia (parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) encourages her child to tell her if she gets stuck, so that "she does not get frustrated [...] because sometimes she gets angry if something does not work". In fact, co-use often starts when the child does not know how to achieve something. Sometimes the parents ask them what they are doing. On other occasions the children show their parents what they are trying to do. For example, Sofía explained:

Maybe he's ever watching the drawings and we get close him and he makes a dramatic, clear indication. He grabs you by the neck. He puts you in his film and explains (Sofía, parent of a 6 year-old).

However, it is worth adding that parents sometimes decide not to help or actually avoid teaching their children certain things. For example, Paula does not teach her 8 years-old son to print because she does not want him to print out a lot of material. Meanwhile, Lucía say she does not help her daughter (3 year-old) when the tablet is blocked because

I prefer that she does not know [how to sort it out]. When she [says]: 'It no longer works, it no longer works, the internet is broken' [...] she will go and have a snack or whatever.

And sometimes the children want to be independent – as when Lucía notes that her daughter does not ask her about managing WhatsApp but she indicates to her mother that she wants to sort it out by herself.

Finally, Paco (parent of 3 and 6 year-olds), Isabel (parent of 6 and 3 year-olds) and Paula (parent of 8 to 13 year-olds) refer to themselves as role models for their children. "It's just that I do not know, we try to make them see that we use it responsibly, that we are not on it for twenty hours", with Paula adding that parents cannot set rules that they do not follow themselves.

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11 FACTORS AFFECTING AND OBSTACLES TO PARENTAL MEDIATION

Regarding the factors that influence their mediation practices, parents firstly mention the child's personality. In relation to the concrete experiences of her children, Paula and Sofia attribute the intensive use of their children, both 8 year-olds, to their personality:

He is a long time [with the tablet] ... On the street, he is very shy and making friendships is not easy for him. As he is so introverted and so timid, he feels overwhelmed a little more by the rest of the children and I think that's why he does not like going out so much ... he feels like he is exposed. It is his personality (Paula, parent of an 8 year-old).

All the parents also pointed the importance of children's level of maturity for their age, as José noted: "access is granted to new services based on age and if we see that they do not use it in a bad way". Paco and Carlos (parents of 3 and 6 year-olds and 7 year-old, respectively) mentioned gender as a factor: specifically as girls "are growing up and having relationships". Having siblings can also impact on parental rules. Thus, Rosa (parent of 6 and 8 year-olds), when referring to time rules, said "we try to make equitable use by the two brothers" or, as noted earlier, Cristina banned her younger child from accessing social networks as consequence of a previous experience with her older son. Finally, the influence of friends, parents and the neighbourhood were also mentioned.

Sometimes the response of young children themselves to parental mediation influences what parents subsequently do: for instance, if the children get angry, yell and cry when time-rules are applied. Some parents feel stressed out by this reaction and allow the children to play with the devices for longer. Nevertheless, most parents said that children are easily controllable in that they usually accept their parents' wishes or parents simply take the devices away.

Another factor affecting mediation strategies is the cognitive limitations of younger children, as Lucía laments:

They do not understand. Even if you tell them to use [the devices] for a little while or ten minutes ... they do not have a conception of time and no, you cannot negotiate time with them. So you have to distract them or do something else because it does not matter that you tell them ten minutes or half an hour or fifteen minutes (Lucia, parent of 3 and 6 years-olds).

Meanwhile, other parents' or agents' practices could make parental mediation difficult. At regards the last point, discussing the inappropriate lyric of the song, José (parents of 8 and 13 year-olds) points out this kind of music was played at school and you have to act like "bad cop".

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Parents are sometimes worried about the appropriate age to speak to their children about some risks, as expressed by Paula:

Maybe you are saying something and maybe they still do not have a clue [what you are talking about]. Or he is telling you: 'my mother is crazy' or 'you are too late, I already know everything. What you are telling me' (Paula, parent of 8 and 13 year-olds).

Lastly, some parents value courses and presentations aimed at parents teaching how they can mediate their children's technology use. And Carlos (parent of 3 and 6 year-olds) asked for a guide or advice for fathers, especially time controls and filtering software. In contrast, Paula expresses a dissenting view:

[Courses tell you that:] 'you have to do this, this and this', but they do not tell you how to do it. Because they say the best thing a mother can do to a child is not to hit a child, not to scold him. Then, how do I do it? (Paula, parent of 8 and 13 year-olds).

12 CONCLUSIONS

One of the most dramatic changes in the media ecosystem is the explosion of mobile and touch-screen devices, as well as applications that enable children to access the internet at a much younger age. This qualitative study contributes to the limited amount of research that is available on the parental mediation strategies of parents of young children in the context of these new technological developments.

One main general finding, not in itself dependent on these new digital devices, is that the theory of the detraditionalization of the family, the negotiated or democratic family model, may act as a reference for parents of younger children, but this model at best describes the practices of adolescents' parents. A higher degree of regulation and control by the parents of younger children occurs in part because those children often lack the skills to understand the arguments put forward by their parents.

Parents of younger children, like those of older children, perceive both benefits and risks relating to the use of these new digital devices by their children. As found by Chaudron, (2015), and absent from the literature on parents of older children, the parents in this study value these digital technologies for their children's entertainment at home and as a babysitter that allows them to do their other tasks or to have a rest when they are tired, even if they also believe the devices have some educational benefit for the general development and learning of youngest children.

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Also in line with previous research on young children (Haddon and Holloway, in press, Holloway *et al.*, 2013; Plowman *et al.*, 2010b), the parents are less concerned about their children's internet use than parents of older children because that use is limited by the children's lack of skills at this age. Thus, these parents more often set rules relating to the amount of time that these devices can be used rather than about the content the children can access. That said, this study shows that since these technologies help parents to preoccupy their children when needed, the timing of the use of these devices does not have clear and fixed rules. Rigid rules are only set when parents are worried about excessive use.

The particular strategies and parental mediation practices of different parents reflect the different circumstances of families and children. The child's personality, the sex of children or the presence of siblings – in addition to age – all influence both the children's use of digital devices and parental mediation. Even at this stage, adolescence is more generally foreseen as being the more difficult period for parental mediation, while younger children are easier to manage. Nevertheless, some parents feel overwhelmed with the task and so sometimes they give in to the screams and tantrums of their children.

As with adolescents, a low incidence of technical mediation has been found among younger children (Livingstone *et al.*, 2011). But some parents are already anticipating that they will install filtering and monitoring software when their children get older. Currently, they think their children are safe using YouTube because they are only able to look for other children's content displayed on the adjacent screen.

Although the parents in this study think that their young children are less capable of understanding rational argumentation, they still make an effort to try to explain rules as they are set or applied, adapting their explanation to their children's capacity to understand. And while many claim that they do not spend so much time using technologies with their children, they nevertheless teach their children how to use these new digital devices so that they can become independent and entertain themselves. Moreover, a certain amount of interaction happens as children ask for help when they try to achieve something or show the parents what they are doing and parents themselves also ask the children what they are doing. The parents in this study also encouraged their children to report when they get stuck so that they do not get frustrated. In contrast to older children more capable of using devices in isolation, being physically close their children while they are using the portable technologies also allows parents to monitor what they are doing on them and helps to make them feel that the children are safe. In fact, there is a close relation between supervision, co-use and participative learning, as Zaman *et al.* (2016) suggested. That said, some parents avoid teaching their children certain things about how to use the technologies works for various reasons.

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Overall, this study has found much that confirms the few previous study of the parental mediation of young children. Although there is some overlap with the parental mediation of older children, there is much that is different, reflecting these parents' perceptions of their parenting role at this stage, their fewer concerns about digital risks and the capacities and responses of young children. More generally, although the negotiated or democratic family model described in Gidden's account of the detraditionalized family may seem a future ideal to parents in this study, it is less applicable as an account of their interactions with children of this young age.

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Media@LSE Working Paper #50

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