Rules of Engagement: Family Rules on Young Children’s Access to and Use of Technologies

Aims
The project sought to examine young children’s access to and use of digital technologies and to explore how parents mediated this use. It was based on a study funded and coordinated by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission which explores children under 8 and their families’ experiences with digital technologies and considers the policy implications. It reports on the rules that parents do, or do not, impose in relation to children’s access to and use of technologies, reflecting on the effectiveness of parents’ mediation of children’s online practices, and their awareness of the risks/opportunities balance. It considers children’s understanding and management of parental rules, analysing the kinds of negotiations they undertake with family members that shape their engagement with technology.

Key Findings

Rules
- Across many of the families, rules were in place with regard to children’s use of a range of devices. The emphasis was not focused primarily on the content of the devices but on the times, places and situations in which they could be used. Rules regarding time were pervasive across all countries. Restrictive rules appeared to relate to concerns about media effects, with those who expressed the most anxiety about the use of media being most restrictive in terms of time. Rules were not static but evolved over time in response to particular situations, and were often open to negotiation. Few parents employed technical restrictions such as software intended to improve children’s online safety, or positive parental mediation, except for providing access to technology which was perceived as beneficial.

Perceived risks
- Parental mediation of children’s use of technology was informed by their understanding of the risks and opportunities offered by its use. Although most parents discussed risks associated with digital technologies, they seldom believed that these risks applied to their young children, as they felt that they were too young to access inappropriate content online. However, in a few cases children had occasionally accessed undesirable material. Parents thought that as their children didn’t access sites independently they did not need to worry about contact and conduct issues. Little attention was paid by parents to commercial risks.

Children’s understanding
- Children in this age group are fairly compliant with parents’ rules and do not tend to challenge them. They know that if they are well behaved, they may receive a reward in terms of being allowed to use technology and if they are not well behaved, they may well be deprived of its use. Some children are unaware that rules have been set; the rules appeared to be internalised as a set of practices that are not experienced as constraints. For example, children were observed as repeating the views of their parents as their own. They also understood that parents made rules which were appropriate to their
Policy Context
Guidelines could be provided for parents on the positive ways in which children can be encouraged to integrate digital with non-digital activities as they were often unsure of how to maintain boundaries for technology use. Parents would also benefit from the provision of guidelines on communication strategies that could be used to talk to young children about managing online risks, and for information on high-quality apps and websites which could be useful learning resources for their children. These guidelines could be offered by health visitors, pre-school practitioners and the mass media.

Methodology
The project involved seven countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United Kingdom. In each country, interviews and observations were undertaken with ten families in their homes, each with a child aged between 6 and 7, and many with younger and older siblings. Families had at least one child who used a digital technology at least once a week. Each national sample was constituted to try as much as possible to provide variety both in terms of habits in the use of digital technology (distinguishing users of digital device in their frequency of use: “low users”, at least once a week; “medium users”, at least two or three times a week; “high users”, at least once a day) and in terms of family structures (including single-parent families, families with an only child and families with siblings both younger and older than the target child). Data was analysed using a thematic, inductive approach based on grounded theory.

Background
While there have been a few studies so far, little is known about how far parents mediate children under eight’s use of digital technologies, and particularly what responses children have to parents’ interventions and rules that guide their use of digital technologies (Holloway et al., 2013). Existing research focusing on children younger than eight has established that digital technology is an important part of family life, with children’s uses of a range of software and hardware shaped by family values.

Source

Research Team
S. Chaudron, European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Ispra, VA, Italy, et al. [as above]

Contact information
S. Chaudron: stephane.chaudron@ec.europa.eu

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