

“Daddy, Your Mobile is Stupid, You Should Put it Away”

Media Education from the Perspective of Professionals

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Abstract

Problems with digital and mobile media are often one of the reasons behind a family's decision to consult a family counsellor. Parents of young children feel quite confident handling the media education of their children. For access to digital media, young children need their parents' help, so they know about the media usage of their daughters and sons. But when kids get older, their media use increases and becomes more independent. Consequently, parents have less control over the media usage of their children. In some cases, they need professional help with media education. According to family counsellors, many issues result from early media education.

Keywords: media education, mobile media, family, educational counselling, perspective of professionals

Introduction

Media habits and the role of media in families have changed a lot over the years. About ten years ago, different devices were used for different purposes. Mass media played an important role for entertainment and information. Computers and the internet were used for gaming, communication, and to search for information. Mobile phones were used for communication, cameras for taking pictures, MP3 players for music, etc. Nowadays, we don't need all these different devices. With the development of mobile devices like the smartphone and tablet, all these media are combined in one device. Since these devices are equipped with touchscreen technology, they are easy to handle, even for young children. The challenges of (parental) media education have changed as a result of this development.

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The most obvious challenge parents name is ensuring children don't use their mobile devices too much. Many parents feel their daughters and sons are on their mobiles almost all the time. Some are convinced that their children do badly in school because of their digital devices. Others are afraid that their children could become addicted. Further problems connected to the usage of digital devices also cause conflicts in families, such as finding the right time for children to have a smartphone of their own. Parents also worry that their children could find "the wrong type" of friends online, or they fear cyberbullying, legal conflicts due to abuse of personality rights, copyright etc. As a consequence, parents would like more insight into their children's media practices and prefer their children to reduce screen time, especially time spent on their smartphones. But children don't want their parents telling them when, how often, and how long they should use their digital devices. Their devices mean a lot to young people, so they want to decide themselves how they use them (Livingstone et al., 2013). They are living in a mediatised world (e.g. Krotz, 2014), in which digital media are part of everyday life, so young people in particular cannot imagine reducing their media usage. Parents often cannot understand the importance of digital media for their children, causing a clash between two different perspectives. At this point, parents need support and some decide to consult a professional educational counsellor.

Media related issues are increasingly becoming a reason why families decide to consult a counsellor. But even counsellors often have difficulties mediating conflicts connected with the media usage of young people and ask for professional support. This article deals with the observations of professional educational counsellors. They identify the problems parents have with media education and try to find ways to improve parental media education.

Family life with mobile media

Since 2015 the JFF – Institute for Media Research and Media Education – researches how family life is connected with mobile media. The aim of the MoFam (*Mobile Media in Families*) study is to discover the attitudes parents have towards mobile media and the mobile internet, the challenges they face, and to find out which support they need in their media education. The study also addresses different professionals (teachers, carers in child care institutions, educational counsellors) and asks what kind of support they need. In the first part of the study, interviews were conducted with parents of children aged 8 to 14 years and group discussions took place with professionals in educational counselling (Wagner et al., 2016).

Below, we focus on these professionals. What are their experiences and what kind of challenges do they observe in counselling situations with families dealing with problems connected to media education? What strategies have they already developed in their work?

Method and sample

We conducted interviews with professionals working in educational counselling or in child and youth welfare service institutions. A total of 35 professionals participated, 24 women and 11 men aged between 21 and 64.

During the first part of the interview, professionals were asked to name media issues related to their daily practice. In the next step, we focused on mobile media and internet in families, to find out how professionals estimate the relevance and influence of children's siblings and peer group. We also wanted to evaluate what they know about and how they assess the media literacy and media educational competencies of parents. The last part focused on needs: what are the needs of parents from the professionals' perspectives and what are the needs of counsellors and educators themselves?

As a first group, we interviewed professional educational counsellors. Educational counselling institutions offer parents, children, adolescents and families counselling and support. They cover a wide range of diagnostic, counselling and therapeutic services. In particular, for families living in challenging conditions or in multi-problematic settings, educational counsellors are important, qualified points of contact.

We also talked to people who work in youth welfare service institutions. These institutions either work like day care services with disabled children who need social and emotional training, as well as learning assistance. Other institutions accommodate children and adolescents permanently, due to substantial, consolidated and non-temporary disorders. Professionals take over educational tasks, they accompany adolescents and help them deal with conflicts in a safe space. In addition, they provide advice and therapy for the families of these children. More than parents, they have to follow the rules of legal protection for children and adolescents. That means the use of media devices like laptops, smartphones or tablets is strongly restricted or even prohibited. From the perspective of the institutional body, these restrictions have a protecting and stabilising function. Adolescents experience them as strong limitations, which keep them at a distance from the normality of their peer group (Kutscher & Krefß, 2016).

Professionals name challenges in media education

Experts for education are looking at media issues

A substantial knowledge of developmental tasks of children and adolescents, including disorders etc., is the working base of all interviewed professionals. In the following section, their expertise is linked with their observations on media and media education. The professionals themselves develop hypotheses to explain specific constellations of problems.

First, professional counsellors note that media related issues are a motivator for attending counselling in most cases. In almost every application and first interview, some relation between media usage and internal family conflicts emerges. In many

cases, there are underlying communicative and relational conflicts between the family members, but these are overlapped by media issues and their impacts. Often parents who are searching for support in counselling have a critical and reflecting attitude, but they worry that the situation could turn. Professionals recognise resignation and excessive demands placed on parents, regardless of social surroundings and socioeconomic status. For professionals in youth welfare service institutions, the setting is different. Counselling parents makes up a small part of their work and media issues are not usually the obvious issue in counselling sessions. Only when professionals ask the parents about available media devices at home, do they talk more intensively about media education and related issues.

Changing media conditions are a challenge for children and young people, but they also change parental media use

In some cases, adolescents ask for counselling. Many issues they discuss are connected with media use. They talk about conflicts they have with their parents related to time spent gaming or to inadequate regulatory measures put in place by their parents. They mention overly anxious parental reactions regarding the sharing of photos or cyberbullying. Furthermore, the adolescents themselves – like their parents – are worried their media usage could be excessive and they could get addicted. They worry that they can't go without gaming or permanent contact with their peers via messengers or social networking services etc., but at the same time, they have a fear of missing out. From a professional perspective, however, it is unclear if these worries of adolescents result from their (worried) parents or by the coverage these dangers receive in the media. It is certainly obvious that there are challenges for children and adolescents at different developmental levels (Eggert & Wagner, 2016) which require appropriate support:

- Young people feel forced and obliged to use some communication tools by their peer group, but also by educational authorities, e.g. teachers who announce homework or relevant information in Whatsapp chats.
- They are challenged by online services and new applications. To gain (structural) media knowledge and to handle media in a competent way, they have to interact with it. They also have to gain insight to make up their own minds and develop an attitude towards these developments.
- Furthermore, even young people are worried about losing control of their media usage.

Even though counselling interviews are normally focused on the media usage of children and adolescents, the meaning of mobile media in the parents' daily life has to be taken into account.

Media can be crucial for stagnation of relational development

Professionals observe young people's increasing interest in media activities and growing usage times. At the same time, they experience that parents on the one hand are overwhelmed with the technical development of devices and apps. On the other hand, parents often do not feel comfortable defining limits for their child. Media issues frequently cause conflicts to emerge. However, quite often a breakdown in the relationship between parents and children underlies the present problems. If these problematic conditions are combined, they restrain and inhibit a stable and trustful relationship within families. Particularly during puberty when boys and girls have to deal with developmental tasks – for example knowing and developing their own identity – they distance themselves from parents and conventional attitudes. Social network applications, messaging services or games offer young people various ways of presenting and arranging their identity. Mobile media devices also have the advantage of expressing all these possibilities ad hoc and in (almost) any place, which also means without controlling parents or adults. The risk of conflicts and the risk to lose contact with one another increase. Professionals mention situations which in their opinion can influence the relationship between family members in a negative way:

- when parents put toddlers to bed: instead of reading to them, they let children watch short videos on a tablet or smartphone
- when a permanently running TV replaces family communication and interaction
- continuing isolated media communication between family members: social interaction within the family suffers. For both adolescents and parents, it is difficult to put their devices away and to get involved in family life.

Concerns of professionals (and parents)

Professionals are faced with diverse media related issues and difficulties. The following section outlines an overview of the mentioned aspects regarding younger children.

“At what age does it make sense for my child to have her/his own smartphone?” is a pervasive question in families with younger children. Many parents think about giving children their own smartphone when they move from elementary to secondary school. Professionals observe that the age of ten years seems to be a “magical barrier”. From this age on, “a mobile phone is necessary for the existence as a human being”. The importance of communication within the peer group increases. For young people, it's important to belong to a particular group and to share preferences e.g. on Youtube. For parents, it is most important to be in contact with their child – and vice versa – in case of problems or to make arrangements. Most children in primary school do not have smartphones, but professionals expect this to change, which means an increasing number of primary schoolers may soon have an internet enabled mobile device. Possible problems forecast by professionals are:

- As soon as children have their own device, there is no further discussion in families about the usage; not about content, nor usage time or rules regarding how to use it.
- In many families, parents pass their old devices on to their children. But only in rare cases are parents aware of available age-based adjustments. Most parents and even some professionals don't know about the possibility to impose limits through the operating system, or to install specific child protection software.
- Parents are more likely to be worried about financial and technical aspects. Purchasing a smartphone forces them to decide between different contract options: they see the advantage of prepaid (the cost is easier to control), but they are worried that in an emergency, a child cannot call. On the other hand, contracts enable permanent online access.

One of the most alarming observations made by professionals is that more and more parents pass their mobile devices to their toddlers. For some mothers and fathers, it is standard practice to give their child a smartphone or a tablet to play with. Parents use it to distract or calm the child, so they can work, make a phone call or check emails. New and crucial from a professional point of view is the fact that touchscreen technology makes handling a smartphone easy, even for the youngest kids. Furthermore, mobile devices can be used everywhere. In this context, professionals are also worried that parents might be less aware of the needs of their kids – particularly toddlers – when they themselves are distracted by excessive mobile media use. They describe situations when parents are on their smartphones using headphones while making a phone call, texting messages, checking emails, etc. In these situations, the mother or father is not in tune with the needs of the child and might not be aware that the child has hurt itself on the playground or lost its pacifier etc. In the professionals' point of view, young parents have quite an uncritical attitude towards the media use of their toddlers. In particular, they neither reflect developmental issues regarding media usage, nor have they engaged with age appropriate content. They notice that many parents don't have a critical view of their own media usage either, or of how their young children perceive the presence of media in everyday family life. There are some parents of young children who need help with their media education, but only few make use of counselling services, asking questions like, "At what age is it appropriate to use a mobile device with my child?" or "How do I teach responsible use of mobile media?" In the professionals' opinion, parents don't visit counselling services until difficulties arise, by which time it is often already too late.

In their daily consulting and educational practice, professionals experience a lot of situations where a lack of awareness of parents' function as a role model becomes apparent:

- Parents playing online games extensively at night were not aware of the manifest conflict with their daughter, who displayed inappropriate smartphone use. When

it was discovered, the parents did not even consider how their own behaviour was related to the issue.

- Professionals see parents playing on their smartphones extensively, but trying to hide it from their children. However, children see through this easily and become aware of their parents’ duplicity.
- During sessions with their clients, like a family breakfast, professionals gain an insight into media related interaction in families and see how parents are using their devices. They observe children complaining about their parents because they are occupied with their devices all the time. For example, a little boy told his father: “Daddy, your mobile is stupid. You should put it away!” Professionals frequently experience parents who are permanently on call, even in counselling interviews.

The described situations have one thing in common: parents are not conscious of the part they play in shaping the dynamics of family life and there is a lack of a critical view of potential risks in the context of media use. Some professionals assume that parents using mobile devices and online applications intensively and without inhibitions see themselves as competent and do not question risks or whether a controlled intervention may be necessary. Regarding the parents’ function as role models, a counsellor said: “It is a matter of fact that parents are not very conscious of their influence as role models for their children. They use media without realising that their children observe all their behaviours – even the smallest action.” At the moment of conflict resolution, when professionals try to develop common rules with all family members, parents are fine as long as these rules aim at regulating the child’s media usage. When it comes to their own media usage and the need for awareness and changed habits, parents are immune to feedback and do not want to abide by rules.

Not so long ago, family counselling was focused on media content, but educational counsellors are noticing a change. Parents don’t seem as concerned whether their child encounters harmful or shocking online content, e.g. videos showing violence against humans or animals, unwanted or uncomfortable contact requests. The duration of media usage seems to be most important problem. The interviewed counsellors notice that children consume non age appropriate or harmful content that is linked to online streaming platforms, films in general or games. Usually, male family members or older siblings enable access to children or toddlers. Mobile devices are preferred because they offer largely uncontrolled usage. Let’s Play videos on Youtube are an easy way to find out and learn a lot about games – what they look like, what are appropriate tactics. This form of access offers children in particular the possibility to gain insights into non age appropriate games. Furthermore, counsellors state that few parents try to control their children’s devices by child protection programmes or set up an account on the devices their children use with (age) appropriate programmes and applications.

Further concerns of professionals

- In many families, media access is used as reward or punishment in situations not linked with media. Parents prevent children from using their devices to assert themselves. It is problematic when these acts show parental overload and provoke conflicts that often intensify. In effect, instead of resolving the problem, it intensifies the conflict.
- Counsellors see a tendency for children of families with multiple problems to use mobile media to escape from their daily lives or to find distraction in digital worlds. Media related difficulties are not recognised in these families because they are already overwhelmed with other challenges, like organising and structuring their everyday life.
- If the parents are separated, inconsistency in media education is observable. Children, especially younger ones, are faced with different rules because parents fail to reach an agreement on their media educational aims and how to implement them.
- Professionals observe that parents are under social pressure. They are competing with other parents all the time, which makes it hard for them to figure out what is best for their family.
- Finally, in many families who make use of counselling, the parents have a problem setting rules and boundaries. Either their rules are unrealistic and unsuitable for the family's situation or the parents are worried that they might jeopardise their good relationship with their children.

Requirements for good media education

For educational counsellors, it is obvious that media education is a difficult field for parents. But it is also an educational task that parents have to face from the first day. Problems in media education can be summarised as follows:

- Lack of knowledge about media: Most parents cannot keep up with the speed of technical development. They feel badly informed about new devices and tools and they find it difficult to find and install the right tools to protect their children. Furthermore, they don't know what apps and programmes exist for children and how to decide if these are appropriate for the age and developmental stage of their children.
- Lack of interest in what their children are using: Many parents do not know what their children are using, which tools and functions are most important for them, what their favourites are and what is hip in their peer group.

- Lack of consciousness of role model function: Many parents are not aware of their importance as role models. Children watch and try to imitate the way their parents handle media from the first day on (see also Livingstone, 2016).
- Lack of universally valid rules for media education: Parents complain that there are no generally accepted rules for the regulation of the usage of digital and mobile media. Therefore, they have to make up their own rules, but they are always in competition with other parents and their methods.

Conclusion: Media education from the start

Professionals in the field of family counselling see that media education is a big challenge for many parents and they observe that more and more parents are overwhelmed with this task. From their perspective, it is a problem that many parents start thinking about media education too late; only when they are facing problems related with the media usage of their children. Parents must understand that media education is a task from the first day on. There are a few points that are crucial for successful media education to help children use media in a competent way to fulfill their needs:

- Awareness of being role models: Parents are role models for their children. During the early years, children try to imitate what their parents are doing because this is the normal and the right way to do things.
 - Parents have to reflect and use media consciously.
- Knowledge about development of children, connected tasks and competencies: Parents have to understand that specific cognitive, motor, as well as social, emotional, and moral skills are required to be able to use media.
 - Parents need knowledge of the developmental stages of children and how these are related to media educational tasks.
- Knowledge about media and media content: Parents cannot keep up with the technical developments of media. But they need to be up to date to a certain extent about the tools and apps that are on the market for the age group of their children or that are used in the peer group of their daughters and sons (see also Bartau-Rojas, Aierbe-Barandiaran & Oregui-González, 2018). Furthermore, they should be able to install a safety programme on the devices that are used by their (younger) children.
 - Parents need basic knowledge about technical developments, safety programmes and tools, but also about content that is popular amongst young people.
- Solidarity amongst parents: Parents need orientation on rules and strategies of regulation. Sharing knowledge and cooperation between parents could be one solution.
 - Stronger solidarity amongst parents would be helpful.

- Cooperation between families and educational institutions: For successful media education, it is necessary that families and educational institutions cooperate and reach agreement as much as possible.
 - Media education should be part of the educational concept in all educational settings.

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