

Parenting in the Digital Age

The Challenges of Parental Responsibility in Comparative Perspective

Sonia Livingstone & Jasmina Byrne

Abstract

As children in high, middle and even low-income countries gain access to the internet via a range of digital devices and services – most often via a mobile phone – parents are feeling challenged in their competence, role and authority. In response, parents draw on their available resources – socioeconomic and cultural – and their preferred parenting styles as well as some of the principles of positive parenting. In high income countries, a shift is underway from restrictive towards enabling forms of parental mediation. In middle and low-income countries, the evidence suggests that restrictive mediation is generally favoured by parents, although this brings costs in terms of children's opportunities online, especially for girls. In all countries, the rapid pace of technological innovation undermines parental competence, this is in turn undermining children's willingness to turn to parents for support. We conclude with suggestions to support parents in meeting the growing challenge of empowering their children online in diverse contexts.

Keywords: positive parenting, parental mediation, digital media, Global South, Global Kids Online, cross-national comparisons

Introduction

Who is responsible for enabling children's internet use and protecting them from risks? Generally, the first answer is parents, especially when it comes to keeping children safe. Parents are held responsible for teaching their children about values, social norms and accepted behaviour. They are also expected to enable their children to study, help in the family, keep healthy, cross the road, and make good judgements about people, places and information. In enacting these responsibilities, parents – we include here

step parents, grandparents and any other adults and older siblings taking on a caring role – have always been able to draw on their own life experience and the traditions and knowledge of their community.

But as children in high, middle and even low-income countries gain access to the internet, parents are feeling challenged – especially as their children use mobile devices that are difficult for parents to supervise, and technologically complex services that parents may not understand. They are also influenced by popular worries about screen time, internet addiction, stranger danger and so on. So whatever is *normatively* expected of parents, there are *practical* limits to what they can do. No wonder that, in whichever country has recently gained widespread internet access, there is a groundswell of concern – *from parents* as they struggle to enact their responsibilities and *about parents* as governments worry about the digital divide, child protection and cybercrime, on the one hand and, on the other, the digital skills of the future labour force.

Also under pressure are schools, expected to teach the digital literacies needed for children to benefit from the expanding digital opportunities; welfare and mental health services, now expected to address problems children face in proprietary online services; law enforcement, dealing with networked crimes involving child victims at considerable scale; and businesses, striving to expand into digital markets but undermined by issues of consumer literacy and trust. From the perspective of these organisations, the more that parents can take on to prepare their children for the digital age, the less the burden on them. Conversely, the less able parents are to enable and protect their children, the greater are the calls for appropriate education, regulation, public expenditure and corporate social responsibility.

Parenting offline and online – how do they relate?

What kinds of parenting styles are likely to be effective in relation to the digital environment? There is a growing body of evidence, especially from high and middle-income countries, that demonstrates the importance of positive parenting for child development, including early childhood physical, cognitive and emotional development, educational outcomes, improved communication and trust, reduction in risk taking behaviour among adolescents, improved social competence of adolescents and reduction of violence (Daly, 2007; Knerr, Gardner & Cluver, 2013; Moore, Whitney & Kinukawa, 2009). What is often considered “positive parenting” includes “stimulation and affection, clear and focused praise, supporting increasing autonomy, encouraging healthy habits, goal setting, establishing firm rules and consequences” (De Stone, 2016: 10). However, when children enter adolescents from around the age of 10, there are also changes in parent-child relationships with adolescents seeking more autonomy and independence (Patton et al., 2016), and parenting styles must adapt.

In 2007 the World Health Organization (WHO) developed a framework that examines key dimensions of parenting or parental roles that positively affect adolescent

well-being: connection, behaviour control, respect for individuality, modelling appropriate behaviour, and provision and protection (WHO, 2007). These parental roles can be easily applied to all situations and environments, including to children's digital world, as follows:

1. Connection – a positive, stable, emotional bond between parents and adolescents is an important factor contributing to child and adolescent health and development. In the digital world that means that a child or an adolescent who feels connected with their parents is more likely to share their offline and online experiences without fearing their access will be blocked. Our Global Kids Online study shows that where children say they have positive relationship with parents in general (manifested through support and praise) they are more likely to share with them when negative things happen online (Georgiev et al., 2017; Logar et al., 2016).
2. Behaviour control – this includes “supervising and monitoring adolescents’ activities, establishing behavioural rules and consequences for misbehaviour, and conveying clear expectations for behaviour” (WHO, 2007: 11). When it comes to children and the digital technologies, this could include rules about time spent on the internet, use of digital devices after bed time, in children’s bedrooms, during meal time, as well as understanding what children do online, how they set up their privacy controls, with whom they share personal information etc. South African parents surveyed through Global Kids Online on average exhibit the digital skills of 12 to 14-year olds, making it relatively difficult for them to support and supervise their children’s online behaviour (Phyfer et al., 2016). The Bulgarian Kids Online survey shows that parental engagement in children’s online activities declines with children’s age, with 44 per cent of parents engaging with 9 to 11-year olds and only 30 per cent with 12-year olds and older (Kanchev et al., 2017).
3. Respect for individuality – this means allowing the adolescent to develop a healthy sense of self, apart from his or her parents. This includes listening to what adolescents have to say, trusting them to complete their responsibilities or to take on new roles in the family. In the digital domain this means allowing children and adolescents to explore the internet independently in much the same way we would allow them to explore the physical world. The age and capacities of the child matter, as younger children will clearly need more guidance than the older ones. The Global Kids Online research shows that the 9 to 11-year old group finds it particularly difficult to know what information online is true and what is not (Byrne et al., 2016).
4. Modelling appropriate behaviour – children and adolescents identify with their parents, absorb the values and norms established in the home and try to emulate parental behaviour. If parents spend most of their free time online, there is a strong likelihood that the children will do too. If parents share too much information

online, will that affect how children share their own personal information or information about their friends? Through development of their sense of agency children may depart from the established norm in the family and decide to take a different approach to that of their parents. We have seen examples of children disagreeing over “sharenting” or parental sharing of content and images of their children online (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

5. Provision and protection – parents cannot meet all the needs of the growing adolescent. Their role is also to seek the resources for their children that they cannot provide or to ensure that they have access to appropriate services. When it comes to protection of children online parents still have an important role to play. But so do peers, teachers and other adults in children’s lives. When asked who they turn to if they experience something hurtful online, children would turn to “peers” first and then “parents” second, as we show below (Byrne et al., 2016).

To what extent these parenting roles will be fulfilled, what parenting style will be adopted and what parenting practices will prevail will depend on many factors including parental education, beliefs and culture as well as the individual and institutional support available to parents. As we discuss in what follows, this varies in different parts of the world.

In high income countries

In the early days of internet access in Europe and North America, many children became confident and competent internet users before their parents and teachers. This resulted in a considerable generation gap – parents underestimated their children’s use and the risk of harm they encountered online. As a consequence, few parents supported their children’s internet use beyond the fact of providing access. By the same token, few children turned to their parents for support when they encountered a problem on the internet. A culture rapidly developed in which, to generalize, many parents felt disempowered – ignorant of their children’s experiences online, susceptible to media panics about internet predators or pornography, and therefore restrictive in managing their children’s internet access.

But the situation is now changing. A recent survey of 6,400 European parents of children aged 6 to 14 (in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Italy, Sweden and the UK) found parents to be fairly concerned about their children’s online experiences – especially exposure to violent images and being bullied online, but also about their children being exposed to data tracking, digital identity theft and advertisements for unhealthy lifestyles (Livingstone et al., 2017a). However, analysis of what parents said they actually did to manage their children’s internet use revealed two styles of parental mediation:

1. Restrictive mediation: Parents restricting or banning or insisting on supervising any of a long list of online activities
2. Enabling mediation: Parents undertaking active strategies such as talking to a child about what they do online or encouraging their activities as well as giving safety advice; also activities that might seem restrictive (use of technical controls and parental monitoring) but are better interpreted as building a safe framework precisely so that positive uses of the internet can be encouraged.

In terms of outcomes, more enabling mediation by parents was positively associated with children's experience of online opportunities, but also with more online risks. Conversely, more restrictive mediation was associated with fewer online risks experienced by children, but also they enjoyed fewer opportunities. This makes it problematic if policy-makers concerned with risk urge parents to restrict children's internet use without recognising the costs to their online opportunities. But also problematic is the tendency of educators to urge parents to enable children's internet use without recognising that this may bring more risk. In addition, both parents and policy makers need to be aware that risks do not necessarily translate to harm and that enabling mediation helps children to build resilience and adopt strategies that can help them stay safe both offline and online.

Further analysis of the European parent survey showed that parents prefer a risk-averse restrictive strategy for their less skilled children, presumably doubting their child's ability to cope with risk if they encounter it, while being more encouraging of if their children, or they themselves, are more competent internet users. Thus in the Global North, it is time to recognize that many parents are also gaining digital skills and they can use these to enable their child online. However, parents who are less confident of their own or their child's digital skills take a more restrictive approach, keeping their child safe, but at the cost of online opportunities – so, to avoid a vicious cycle of disadvantage, parents as well as children could be provided with digital literacy education.

To sum up, what we learned in the Global North suggests the value of an open dialogue between parent and child so that each comes to understand and respond to the online experiences, competences, and concerns of the other. However, insofar as parents or children lack digital skills, inequalities in children's online opportunities may open up. EU Kids Online research shows other ways in which disadvantages in home life offline may extend online: children more vulnerable to risk of harm offline also tend to be more vulnerable online; also, around one in eight parents does not provide supportive or safety mediation; last, around half of parents whose child has encountered an online risk is unaware of this – and this in countries where two-thirds of children say their parents know a fair amount about what they do online.

So even in the Global North, many parents and carers lack time, knowledge or other resources to manage their children's internet use as well as they would wish, either to promote opportunities or minimize risks. And their responses both reflect and reproduce socio-economic inequalities in children's life changes, now online as well as offline.

Moreover, the continual flow of technological innovations further destabilizes parental competence and confidence while placing children at the cutting edge of experimental forms of technological innovation (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Add to this the contradictory exhortations on the one hand to minimize “screen time” and, on the other, to buy the latest device to ensure children “keep up”, and parental anxieties become intense (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, this book).

In low and middle-income countries

It seems likely that the above problems are exacerbated in low and middle-income countries for several reasons (UNICEF, 2017). First, even though close to 4 billion people – mostly in the Global South – are not connected, of those who are, young people below the age of 25 are nearly three times more likely than the general population to be using the internet (ITU, 2013). So while children are often “pioneers” in exploring the internet, they may lack support from knowledgeable adults. As Gouws (2014: 14) comments about South African teenagers’ use of technology, although “perceived to be street-smart, arrogant “know-it-all” and technological experts, they are also young, lonely, insecure and find themselves in a life period of major developmental challenges”.

Many children in developing countries are brought up by a single parent or even by relatives, often grandparents. In Central/South America and sub-Saharan Africa, children are more likely to live with either one or neither of their parents than children in other regions (Child Trends, 2017). Factors such as migration, illness, parental death, poverty affect these family units’ functioning and parents or caregivers are often left with little resources and time to help with their children with the digital skills. The digital divide between children and their grandparents is even more pronounced and it is hard to expect that a 70-year old will be able to monitor his or her grandchild’s internet use or support them with the development of digital skills.

Sometimes, parental mediation techniques are based on the cultural norms prevailing in society, tending to restrict children’s digital use even further (Bulger et al., 2017), which may in turn lead to children hiding from their parents what they do online. For instance, Davidson and Martellozzo (2013: 1456) found in their study in Bahrain, that: “Young people use digital media in much the same way regardless of the social and cultural contexts, but that culturally gendered perspectives place restrictions upon usage.” Specifically, they note that parental expectations about girls’ use of digital media led girls to conceal acts that would be judged unacceptable (such as communicating with boys online) or that would be harshly punished if discovered.

Indeed, parenting restrictions can fall particularly heavily on girls (Livingstone et al., 2017b). As Porter and colleagues (2012: 159) note in their study of three African countries: “These constraints [on girls by parents and communities], often imposed at least in part from positive welfare motives, can be a substantial barrier to accessing education and improved livelihoods, especially (but not only) in rural areas.” A study

of parental mediation practices in South Africa found that girls received less parental mediation with regard to their internet use, which was associated with fewer online risks but also with lower levels of digital skills and fewer online opportunities (Phyfer & Kardefelt-Winther, forthcoming).

The degree to which parents and carers are often reluctant to discuss sexual matters with teenagers can leave them vulnerable to online and offline risks as they search for answers online, potentially finding problematic content as a result (Nwalo & Anasi, 2012). No wonder that girls themselves call for efforts to educate parents, teachers and communities on the importance of their access to the internet, and to having ICTs better integrated in the curriculum (de Pauw, 2011). Parents may also not understand the nature of the risks online. In Turkey, a small-scale survey of 12 to 19-year-olds found that “the most reported form of exposure to cyberbullying students experience is being insulted and being threatened” (Aricak et al., 2008: 259) yet that parents and teachers tend to see verbal threats as less serious than physical bullying face-to-face, notwithstanding research which shows harms from cyberbullying (United Nations, 2016).

In South Africa, parents do worry about children experiencing of bullying online yet a sizeable percentage of children (40%) said they experienced bullying in person which parents did not mention as a concern. Such one-sided worries stem from the lack of parental knowledge of both digital technologies and their children’s life experiences, so their mediation practices may go “from total restriction and no access to a device, to access to a device with little guidance on how to use the internet safely” (Phyfer et al., 2016: 15).

In addition, since in the least developed countries school attendance is low, pupil/teacher ratios are high, and the overcrowded classrooms and untrained teachers are common (UNESCO, 2016). It seems fair to conclude that in many countries, children lack a supportive and/or informed adult in their lives who can teach them to navigate the internet safely or offer support when needed.

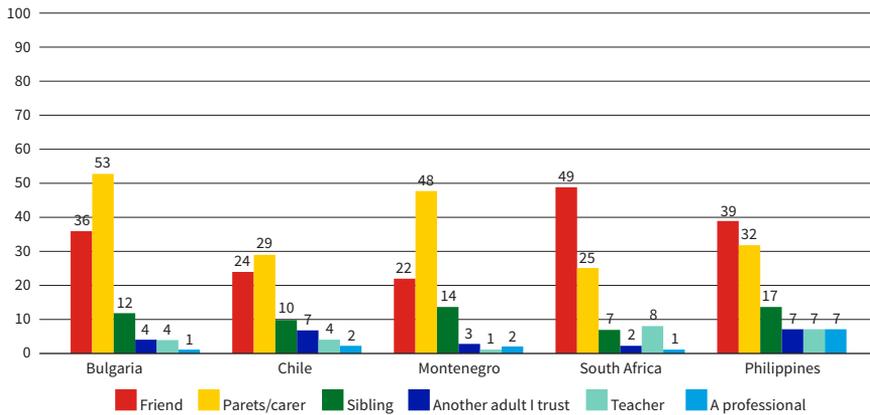
What is being done, what can be done?

Policy and practice must respect the different conditions that apply in different parts of the world. The Global Kids Online (GKO) project is interviewing and surveying parents and children (aged 9-17) across different continents to benchmark and track children’s online access, skills, opportunities, risk and safety – and the skills and protective actions of their parents. Recent findings from partners’ research reveals the different sources of support that children themselves turn to in different contexts (Byrne et al., 2016; Cabello et al., 2017; Georgiev et al., 2017; Kanchev et al., 2017; Logar et al., 2016; Phyfer et al., 2016; Popadić et al., 2016).

Figure 1 shows that in Bulgaria and Montenegro parents are more likely to be children’s first recourse for help when something is problematic on the internet, compared with in the Global South countries surveyed. In Chile, children seem less likely

to tell anyone at all, while in South Africa and the Philippines, friends are preferred over parents, though both are helpful. In no country do children turn to teachers or other professionals in significant numbers. This suggests that it is difficult to provide alternative adult sources of support to parents, but that children might be supported by peer-based mentoring systems.

Figure 1. The last time something happened online that bothered or upset you, did you talk to anyone of these people about it? (per cent yes, by country)



Comments: 9 to 17-year olds in all countries. In Bulgaria, Chile and Montenegro, representative national samples are used. Caution is needed for the findings from the Philippines and South Africa, which are based on pilot data; in the Philippines, the sample is very small. For methodological details, see www.globalkidsonline.net/results

Multi-stakeholder discussions often express the hope or expectation that parents will take primary responsibility for child safety online. Parental mediation can be tailored according to the age, maturity, cultural or psychological circumstances of each child. It doesn't limit adults' freedoms online and it is cheap. Moreover, parents are already on hand, willing to play their role. But they also expect that their child's school will offer them advice and safety education, and that the government will "police" the internet so that parental lapses in effort or effectiveness don't have disastrous consequences.

In Europe, Insafe¹, is the awareness-raising network for national centres that coordinates the annual Safer Internet Day and provides parental guidance regarding the latest popular site or newest online fashion among children. Furthermore, there are numerous multi-stakeholder initiatives that draw together the combined expertise of educators, parenting groups, child welfare bodies, industry, and law enforcement (see, for example, the work of the ICT Coalition in bringing together the internet industry; Croll, 2015).

Coordinated, accessible, parent-focused efforts in the Global South are few and far between (Livingstone et al., 2017b). Although there are many parenting education programs in this region, very few address children's online experiences. Integrating online issues into existing programs may be a way to reach more parents and address their needs holistically. Also likely to be useful is peer mentoring, given children's preference

to turn to a friend for a support, especially when it comes to marginalized groups of children, e.g. children with disabilities or adolescent girls in societies where gender inequality undermines girls' opportunities to benefit from ICT use. For instance, in Iraq provision of online resources allowed adolescent girls to access information, also linking them to peer-to-peer support networks where they could discuss issues usually considered private or taboo in their society (UNICEF, 2013).

Conclusion

We have drawn on the available and new research to argue that, in both the Global North and the Global South, while it is entirely appropriate to call on parents to play a key role since they are ideally positioned to address the particular "best interests" of their child, policies which leave the bulk of the responsibility to parents will find that this works better for relatively privileged families than for the majority, including for those particularly vulnerable or at risk, thereby leaving many challenges for the rest of society to address. The problems are multiple. First, parents are usually not the first people children wish to tell about their relational, emotional, or sexual concerns. Second, the internet is hugely complicated and fast-changing, making it difficult for a busy parent to grasp what children need to know. Third, some parents do not take on this responsibility, and they are "hard to reach" by awareness campaigns. Fourth, small minorities of parents are truly neglectful of or abusive to their children, making it inappropriate to rely on them to ensure their child's safety. However, for those seeking to prevent or manage the risks of harm to children, it is important to empower all parents and to provide a safety net for circumstances of childhood vulnerability.

Some trends in the Global North have implications for experience in the Global South. For instance, the growing understanding and willingness of parents to engage with their children's internet use as they catch up with their early adopter children. Some trends in the Global South have implications for experience in the Global North. We can point the trend towards "mobile first", replacing first use via desktop or laptop computer, which is now also spreading in the Global North, reducing parents' ability to monitor their child's internet use (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2015). Other trends invite us to recognise that, also in the Global North, some children escape parental oversight by going online outside the home, or lack reliable parenting or adult figures in their lives.

The WHO five parental roles have resonance for families everywhere, for most parents struggle with the tension between protecting their children versus giving them the freedom to explore, learn and grow independently. In addition, most parents can be encouraged to draw on what they know about their child and the wider society, as often this knowledge is also applicable in the digital domain. Therefore, in considering the stakeholders supporting parents, there are questions about balance. In future, it will also be critical to include parenting in the digital age as a component of parenting programmes currently being offered in the North and the South and to evaluate them

for impact. Such examples of evidence-based programmes include Triple P or Sinovuyo Teen parenting programme (Haggerty et al., 2013; Cluver et al., 2018), indicating the positive impact of specific interventions in relation to parenting support.

In seeking answers to these dilemmas, we would refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which clearly specifies that parents have the primary responsibility for childrearing, but it also places obligations on states and communities to support parents in these endeavours. It seems that the old saying “it takes a village to raise a child” still applies in a digital world. It’s just that the village is now both local and Global.

Note

1. www.saferinternet.org

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