

Digital Parenting in the Netherlands

Putting Theory into Practice

Jos de Haan, Peter Nikken & Annemarie Wennekers

Abstract

In this chapter, we explore the Dutch situation on parental guidance of young children's media use. Since 2009, several scientific research projects on parental mediation have been supported by our ministries of Welfare and of Culture and produced practical outcomes. The empirical knowledge has laid the foundation for evidence-based parenting support, which contributes to the safe and playful use of the internet and the development of digital skills of children, both at home and in schools and day-care centers. For teachers, librarians, doctors, and workers in day-care centers, training programs are developed to make them more knowledgeable about children, media and parental mediation. As always in an evolving research agenda there are the "known unknowns". Therefore, this chapter concludes with a sketch of the white spots in our knowledge and a brief agenda for future research.

Keywords: parental mediation, digital skills, evidence-based practice, young children, research agenda

Introduction

Nowadays, children grow up in a media landscape that has changed dramatically. Within the time span of a single generation, people's choice for media consumption has expanded from a relative scarce selection of traditional one-way mass media (print, radio and television) to access to virtually all of the world's news and entertainment, anywhere, anytime, anyhow and above all, interactive (Kaul, 2012). As a result, media now play a central role in many people's daily routines, affecting all life domains. Moreover, media use starts at an increasingly early age. In this chapter, we discuss challenges parents face in guiding their young children up to about the age of 7 in this rapidly changing media

environment, as well as the options for practical support they are provided with. Our discussion focuses on the Netherlands, a digitally advanced country that provides a relevant context, because almost all parents and children use the internet, and because media-literacy has been high on the agenda already since 2005.

In the Netherlands, the digitalization took place relatively fast (De Haan, 2010). From the mid 1980's onwards personal computers entered Dutch households, in the beginning mostly used by adults for professional tasks. The internet found its easy way into Dutch houses due to the wide availability of telephone landlines and high cable television penetration. In the period between 1995 and 2010, the internet evolved from a gadget for a small group of users to a source of entertainment and information for almost everyone, with families with children amongst the early adopters. The introduction of routers helped expanding the use of media technology at home and mobile technology even outpaced the internet adoption rate. Smartphones and tablets found their ways into the family, especially because they seem to attract (very) young children (Nikken & Schols, 2015), which is not surprising considering the way the technology fits the developmental attributes of infants and toddlers: "motion with interesting sounds, high-contrast images, new and constantly changing experiences, and instant feedback that fosters a sense of control" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017: 51).

With the expansion of media devices at home as well as mobile technology outside these homes, parental control over children's media use has reached new levels of complexity (Livingstone et al., 2015; Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). That is, parents see several benefits of media use for their young children, who can be avid digital media users, and for themselves (Gutnick et al., 2011; Ofcom, 2016; Plowman, McPake & Stephens, 2010). However, intensified use of new media also comes with increasing risks for children and challenges for parents that are not resolved easily. Moreover, parents are faced with strong opinions in the societal and scientific debate about whether or how very young children should use media (e.g. Radesky & Christakis, 2016).

In this chapter, we first describe current media use of young children in the Netherlands, followed by a discussion of ways in which Dutch parents mediate their children's media use and the problems they face in doing so. Then, we provide an overview of initiatives that have been implemented in the Netherlands in recent years to support parents in guiding their children in the digital domain. We conclude the chapter with a short discussion of unresolved questions and challenges and a brief agenda for future research.

The media life of children

In the Netherlands, as in many other countries, children grow up in media-rich homes and are going online at ever younger ages. As most research has focused on teenagers, little is known about younger children's interactions with those technologies (Cha-

udron, 2015) nor about how parents value the mediation of their children's media use (Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). Research in the Netherlands, nevertheless, showed that quite some 0 to 7-year old children possess their own devices (Nikken & Schols, 2015), whereas the average media consumption from electronic screens varies for this age group between one hour per day in low media use families and about three hours in high media use families (Nikken, 2017).

Notwithstanding the media-rich context in which children grow up and moral concern about children's compulsive use of screens, most children maintain a healthy balance between playing digital games, watching videos and performing other non-digital activities (Chaudron, 2015). As such, for most young children safe and playful use of media technologies contributes to their development and to their digital skills. Both at home and in schools and day-care centres, children learn basic computer skills in games by trial and error, without much instruction from parents or teachers (De Haan & Huysmans, 2002). This learning-by-doing is an expression of a self-confident and fearless manner in which many children go about using media devices and the internet (De Haan et al., 2011). Especially basic operational skills are easily and quickly acquired, together with various metacognitive skills, such as the ability to solve problems and to contextualize knowledge when using media content (Shaffer, 2008). Children, however, are not a homogeneous group and differ in their level of media skills. Children from families with moderate, high and very high levels of media use are more cognitively media-literate than children from low media use families (Walrave et al., 2012; Nikken, 2017). Notwithstanding a general positive image of young children's media use, each child encounters situations for which they lack skills and confidence, and thus have to ask for help (Livingstone et al., 2011). At around the age of 6 or 7, for example, social interaction becomes very important for children, but the quality of their digital interactions can be hindered by their lagging state of cognitive development, and their imperfect reading and writing skills (Chaudron, 2015). At these moments, parents in particular are very important as a source for support, advice and guidance (Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

Mediation strategies of Dutch parents

Being able to access the internet from anywhere challenges parents to stay involved with their children in the digital world. By means of this involvement, also known as parental mediation, they can influence the media practices of their children. Parental mediation refers to the intentional routines that parents use to guide their children's media use, entailing "any strategy parents use to control, supervise or interpret media content for children" (Warren, 2001: 212), but also to creating the media-ecology children are growing up in (Nikken & Schols, 2015). The most common parental mediation practices have been classified as *restrictive mediation* (limiting media use, in terms of time, location or content), *active mediation* (discussing media content with the child,

providing explanations or giving instructions), *co-use* (sharing in the experience of the child's media use), *supervision* (keeping an eye out while the child is using media), *monitoring* (checking the child's online activities afterwards), and *technical restrictions* (using "parental controls" to regulate or block inappropriate content).

The types of mediation strategies parents use have been found to depend on several parent and family characteristics (see for example Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Nikken & Schols, 2015; Sonck et al., 2013). A parent's belief about the effects of media use, for example, is highly important for which strategies the parent applies. A survey in 2013 among Dutch parents of 0 to 7-year old children showed that those who expect positive outcomes of media more often exert supervision, co-use and active mediation, whereas parents who believe children are affected negatively by media content are more likely to supervise, restrict and use technical restrictions (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Furthermore, parents who are convinced that media are too complicated for their child more often use (technical) restrictions, and – with a lower use – also less often supervise and co-use media. Also, parents in larger families apply all mediation types – except co-use – more often than parents with fewer children, and lower-educated parents more often use technical restrictions than higher-educated parents. Finally, fathers are less likely to supervise their child's media use than mothers, and parents with higher levels of media use are less likely to guide their child with active or restrictive mediation.

Parental mediation strategies are also related to certain characteristics of 0 to 7-year old children (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Interestingly, Dutch parents apply all types of mediation more often when their child is a skilled user of media. In particular, active and restrictive mediation and technical restrictions are exerted more often on these skilled children. The child's screen time is not related to mediation strategies, but children are less often supervised when they have media devices of their own in their room. Furthermore, all mediation strategies are applied to children's educational gaming. Parental supervision and co-use are paralleled by more use of entertainment media, and technical restrictions are often applied to children's engagement in social media activities. Finally, parents apply somewhat more active and restrictive mediation on 7 to 9-year old children, but do not seem to vary the type of mediation between their sons or daughters.

Challenges Dutch parents face in guiding their children's media use

The changing media landscape introduces complex challenges for parents. The most common mediation problems that Dutch parents face with children aged 0 to 7-years old are: Concerns about what is a normal amount of time for a child to spend on media; how to recognize appropriate websites, apps, or games; how to best control children's daily media use; how to help a child that is engaged with media; and how to guarantee children's online safety (Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Nikken & Oprea, forthcoming). Most

respondents feel rather competent in their parental mediation, but almost one out of eight parents find it difficult to mediate their child's media use (Nikken & de Haan, 2015). Moreover, if parents are asked more specific questions about their mediation practices they indicate even lower levels of confidence: one in five has doubts about their active mediation/co-use, one in four about restrictive mediation and two out of five about applying technical restrictions (Nikken & Opre, forthcoming).

Certain parent, child and family characteristics are found to be systematically associated with the problems parents may encounter when guiding their children's media use, as well as with parents' confidence in their own mediation capabilities (Nikken & de Haan, 2015). The prevalence of mediation concerns is higher among parents who have negative – as compared to more neutral – views on media's influence on children, as well as among parents whose young child is engaged in social media activities, and among parents who also have older children living at home. Confidence in their own mediation capabilities is higher for parents who view media as being positive for children and for parents who have other younger or other older children living at home. Moreover, parents who reported that their child is skilled with digital media are more confident in their own mediation practices, like parents whose child often engages in educational games. Oppositely, parents feel less competent when their young child engages in social media activities (Nikken & de Haan, 2015).

The study by Nikken and de Haan (2015) also sheds light on the factors that enhance or decrease parents' use of non-professional and professional information sources. In general, parents indicate that they are more likely to turn to family and friends than to professional sources when in doubt about their mediation practices. Parents who experience mediation problems are more likely to use both types of information sources. Moreover, professional sources are consulted more often by parents who feel less confident in their mediation, by fathers, parents who do not have older children at home, and parents whose children are engaged in social media and video communicating. Higher educated parents and parents with a negative view on media's influence on children more often turn to family and friends for advice.

These findings have implications for professionals in the area of parenting support. In order to make sure parents are provided with the right information, practitioners might have to reach out to parents more actively – both in person and by means of online support – with attractive and useful information that relates to parents' concerns about children's media use. Specific attention should be given to the role of social media, since parents reported more mediation problems, lower confidence about their mediation, and higher need of support when their young child had an interest in the use of social media. The fact that most social media applications are not intended to be used by young children might be part of the struggle parents have when their young children start using social media. The study also underscores that initiatives aiming at media-literacy and parenting support by professionals should take into account parent's feelings of competence. In most cases, it suffices to provide parents plain information about media use in relationship to children's development, but for parents who are less

confident more practical support in *how* to guide young children's digital media use seems important too to make them more confident. Parents who are well-informed and well-equipped can make better judgements as to which media activities suit their child's development best (Nikken & de Haan, 2015).

Best practices of parenting support in the digital domain

Already in 2005, when internet use by young children was still rather low, the Dutch National Advisory Board on Cultural Affairs (*Raad voor Cultuur*) advised the government to launch a national program aimed at raising public awareness for media-literacy (Raad voor Cultuur, 2005). The advice led to the implementation of Mediawijzer.net, an independent network organization which promotes and facilitates all kinds of initiatives in the domain of media-education, parental mediation, content production, awareness campaigns and research on the literate use of media (Mediawijzer, 2018). The network is financially supported by the ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), and is promoted in local communities mainly by public libraries. In 2017 the network consisted of well over 1,100 members, including libraries, universities, primary and secondary schools, non-profit organizations such as Mijn kind online (*My child online*) and many professionals who as media producers or psychological or pedagogical specialists create materials and provide services for children or parents. In some projects, these members collaborate with industry partners such as Google, Facebook and Solcon/KPN or Vodafone (who also organize activities themselves on issues such as awareness raising, parent support and the development of digital skills). Every year, in November and in April the network organizes national campaigns promoting awareness about parental mediation and media-literacy in schools, welfare organizations, parenting support institutions and libraries. Also, every year Mediawijzer awards interesting co-creation initiatives that contribute to media-literacy and mediation in the Netherlands.

As a result of the above-mentioned advice by the Raad voor Cultuur in 2005, various educational trajectories have also been established to train and professionalize employees of for example schools or libraries on the topic of media-literacy. One of these initiatives has resulted in media-coaches, of which the Netherlands now have about 800 that function as media-brokers in the community and organize parent-teacher meetings or other initiatives that contribute to awareness about technical issues of media use (e.g. Nationale Opleiding Media Coach, 2018). From 2017 on, a special training for library employees in the Netherlands will be organized by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (*National Library of the Netherlands*) in collaboration with the Netherlands Youth Institute. This training is aimed at deepening the knowledge of librarians and media-coaches in the domain of media pedagogical issues, and is largely based on state-of-the-art academic research on children and media. As of 2012, the Windesheim University of Applied Science also offers a unique international minor for students in Social Work, specifically aimed at media use in the family and media-literacy (Windesheim, 2018). Each year,

about 50 students complete this program – which so far is the only full minor in the Netherlands on media and parental mediation, next to four other minors on media-didactics in school – and find employment in education (support) and youth work. The minor is directly connected to a “child and media” professorship at the university, and thus incorporates the latest academic findings on children, media and parenting.

Inspired and supported by the Mediawijzer network, the Netherlands Youth Institute in 2015 launched the Toolbox Mediaopvoeding (*Toolbox on parental mediation*), an information set with about 20 fact- and tip sheets about children and media for professionals in healthcare, parent support, or education (NJI, 2018). In contrast to the usual parent advice, this information is age specific – keeping account of child developmental characteristics between 0 and 18 years. Furthermore, it is validated by academic knowledge, addresses both negative and positive outcomes of media use for children, and specifically also addresses children with a mental disability. It also offers hands-on suggestions for organizing an effective parent meeting. At the moment, the toolbox is extended with additional information on parental mediation in families with a non-Dutch cultural background or functional illiteracy. The toolbox, which is financed by the ministry of Welfare, has been heartedly welcomed by professionals in the field who can now support parents with validated information about children and media. These professionals emphasize the importance of parental involvement in shared media usage and their consistency in guidance. They also give parents more insight into how young children experience media so they can make deliberate choices for what does (not) fit their level of development. Thirdly, they emphasize a healthy balance of activities throughout the day.

Other interesting Dutch initiatives which are directly aimed at parents, rather than at professional workers, are Mediaopvoeding.nl and Kijkwijzer. The former consists of a website where parents can post questions about children and media that are answered by professional pedagogues, psychologists or other experts in parental mediation. The conversations are placed anonymously on the website and attract many interested visitors who may have the same concerns in their family situation. The website was created and launched as a cooperation of three non-for-profit organizations with a grant from Mediawijzer and attracts about a few thousand visitors per month who mostly are reading texts.

Kijkwijzer is the national rating system for almost all audiovisual productions offered in television, cinema and on DVDs (Kijkwijzer, 2018). Like PEGI which was developed for video games on the basis of Kijkwijzer, the rating system informs parents and children about potential harm of the content for children under specific ages (6, 9, 12, and 16 years) and indicates which type of content may induce these negative effects (violence, fear, sex, alcohol/drugs, discrimination, and rude language). The system is based on both scientific literature on children and media (Tan et al., 2002) and on regular surveys among parents tapping their needs for information and support. The age classifications and content indicators are provided in television-guides, newspapers, film posters, film- and DVD-boxes and via apps and websites. Kijkwijzer is the joint enterprise of three

ministries (Culture, Welfare and Justice), the media industry (public and commercial television, retail, and cinema) and academic advisors specialized in child development and communication studies. It was launched in 2001 and has been highly appreciated by the Dutch population right from the start.

A shared element in almost all initiatives mentioned above is the strong cooperation between organizations from different domains. In doing so, commercial and non-profit foundations work together with the government and with research institutions to reach a common goal: to inform or empower parents and/or children in families.

Conclusion: The future of digital parenting

The media landscape will continue to change. In the near future it is likely that virtual reality, augmented reality and the internet of things will become entangled with the media practices of young children. It is important to keep a close watch on these practices and their additional opportunities and risks. This will also call for new initiatives for guidance and support by parents and teachers. In the ever-changing media landscape there is never a final answer to what the best practices are for parental mediation. It is therefore important to further develop our shared knowledge in order to provide solid guidelines on what parents should or should not do. Notwithstanding the many initiatives that have been taken in the Netherlands in the domain of media-literacy and families with young children, we would like to indicate three gaps in our knowledge. First, reliable measures of young children's media use in relation to their non-media activities are scarce, specifically regarding non-traditional Dutch families. Secondly, it is important to know which parenting support initiatives make a significant contribution to parental mediation, and specifically under which circumstances, and for which parents or children. Finally, we need more insight into how media devices and modern technology can assist young children's development and how the school and home environment can best contribute to make a difference.

References

- Chaudron, S. (ed.) (2015). *Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology: A Qualitative Exploratory Study Across Seven Countries*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at <http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC93239>. [Accessed 8 August, 2017].
- De Haan, J. (2010). *De trage acceptatie van snelle media. Tiele-lezing 2010* [The slow acceptance of fast media. Tiele lecture 2010]. Amsterdam: AUP.
- De Haan, J. & Huysmans, F. (2002). *Van huis uit digitaal; verwerving van digitale vaardigheden tussen thuismilieu en school* [Digital from the home; acquisition of digital skills between the home and school]. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- De Haan, J., Kuiper, E. & Pijpers, R. (2011). Young Children and their Digital Skills in the Netherlands. *International Journal of media and cultural politics*, the commentaries section, 6(3), 327-333.
- Gutnick, A. L., Robb, M., Takeuchi, L. & Kotler, J. (2011). *Always Connected: The New Digital Media Habits of Young Children*. New York, NY: Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.

- Kaul, V. (2012). Changing Paradigms of Media Landscape in the Digital Age. *Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism*, 2(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2165-7912.1000110>
- Kijkwijzer (2018). Home. Available at <https://www.kijkwijzer.nl/english>. [Accessed 26 September, 2018].
- Livingstone, S. & Helsper, E. (2008). Parental Mediation and Children's Internet Use. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 52(4), 581–599.
- Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. & Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and Safety on the Internet: Full Findings. The Perspective of European Children*. London, UK: EU Kids Online
- Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., Dreier, M., Chaudron, S. & Lagae, K. (2015). *How Parents of Young Children Manage Digital Devices at Home: The Role of Income, Education and Parental style*. London, UK: EU Kids Online.
- Mediawijzer (2018). About Mediawijzer.net. Available at <https://www.mediawijzer.net/about-mediawijzer-net/>. [Accessed 26 September, 2018].
- Nationale Opleiding Media Coach (2018). Home. Available at <https://www.nomc.nl> [Accessed 26 September, 2018].
- Nikken, P. (2017). Implications of Low or High Media use Among Parents for Young Children's Media use. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychological Research on Cyberspace*, 11(3), article 1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2017-3-1>
- Nikken, P. & de Haan, J. (2015). Guiding Young Children's Internet use at Home: Problems that Parents Experience in their Parental Mediation and the Need for Parenting Support. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychological Research on Cyberspace*, 9(1), article 3.
- Nikken, P. & Jansz, J. (2014). Developing Scales to Measure Parental Mediation of Young Children's Internet Use. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 39(2), 250-266.
- Nikken, P. & Oprea, S. J. (forthcoming, 2018). Guiding Young Children's Digital Media Use: SES-Differences an Mediation Ease and Competence. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.
- Nikken, P. & Schols, M. (2015). How and Why Parents Guide the Media use of Young Children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(11), 3423-3435.
- NJI (2018). Toolbox Mediaopvoeding. Available at <https://www.nji.nl/nl/Kennis/Dossier/Mediaopvoeding/Toolbox-Mediaopvoeding-Media-Gewoon-opvoeden>. [Accessed 26 September, 2018].
- Ofcom (2016). *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. London, UK: Ofcom.
- Plowman, L., McPake, J. & Stephen, C. (2010). The Technologisation of Childhood? Young Children and Technology in the Home. *Children & Society*, 24(1), 63-74.
- Raad voor Cultuur (2005). *Mediawijsheid: De ontwikkeling van nieuw burgerschap* [Media-literacy: The development of new citizenship]. Den Haag: Raad voor Cultuur.
- Radesky, J. & Christakis, D. (2016). Media and Young Minds. *Pediatrics*, AAP News and Journals Council on Communications and Media. 138(5).
- Shaffer, D. W. (2008). *How Computer Games Help Children Learn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sonck, N., Nikken, P. & de Haan, J. (2013). Determinants of Internet Mediation: A Comparison of the Reports by Parents and Children. *Journal of Children and Media*, 7(1), 96-113.
- Tan, E.S.H., Beentjes, H., Nikken, P. & Valkenburg, P. (2002). Kijkwijzer: The Dutch Rating System for Audiovisual Productions. *Communications*, 27(1), 79-102.
- Valkenburg, P. M. & Piotrowski, J. T. (2017). *Plugged in: How Media Affect and Attract Youth*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Walrave, M., Heirman, W., Mels, S., Timmermans, C. & Vandebosch, H. (2012). *eYouth, Balancing Between Opportunities and Risks*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang.
- Warren, R. (2001). In Words and Deeds: Parental Involvement and Mediation of Children's Television Viewing. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 1(4), 211-231.
- Windesheim (2018). Study Programmes. Available at <https://www.windesheim.com/study-programmes/exchange-programmes/health-and-social-work/children-media-and-culture/>. [Accessed 26 September, 2018].