

PARENTAL MEDIATION IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: HOW TO PREVENT A CHILD BECOMING CYBERBULLYING VICTIM

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The issue of protecting children from Internet abuse cannot be viewed outside the importance of the parental role in that process. In this paper, we investigate the relationship between parental mediation and child abuse through digital technologies. The aim of this paper is to examine whether parental mediation is a factor in reducing the risk of child abuse in the Internet space and whether intervention programs are designed to meet the needs of different categories of parents. The results have shown that parental mediation is a factor in preventing and reducing the risk of children online abuse. The extent of its success, among other factors, depends on the parental style and parental warmth. Furthermore, the data we have obtained suggest that it is necessary to deepen the current research on parental mediation in order to create better policies and program prevention.

KEY WORDS: cyberbullying / children online abuse / parental mediation / parental control / family support

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological changes in the modern world have led to the increased use of new technologies - the Internet as well as mobile and digital devices. Thus, the use

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of information and communication technologies in business and private contexts have become an integral part of everyday practice, and the transition from offline to online communication has particularly expanded during the COVID-19 crisis (Rodríguez-Rivas, Varela, González & Chuecas, 2022) establishing new rules in various spheres of life, work, and even parenting.

In addition to the positive changes brought about by technological innovations, we shouldn't overlook the negative impact caused by the abuse of the opportunities they provide. The data indicates that children, even at a younger age, are users of the Internet and online platforms, and the use of digital technology often takes place without parental control. Leaving children in an uncontrolled digital space without parental control carries numerous risks – therefore, such behaviour can result in their abuse in various ways. The spectrum of risks is large, as we are witnessing different types of fraud and criminal activities mediated by internet technologies. However, studies have shown that the extent of children's use of the Internet and the prevalence of risks have not yet been sufficiently investigated. To date, the data are fragmented and do not offer a large amount of opportunities for comparison between countries (Ivanović and Marković, 2017).

Nevertheless, what the authors do agree on, and what numerous studies point to, is the fact that violence against children in the digital environment can have considerable consequences for their mental health. The consequences of violence can be insecurity, withdrawal, increased anxiety, symptoms of depression, and even the risk of suicide. A worrying discovery is that there is a significantly higher risk of self-harm among children who have in some way been part of online abuse compared to children who have experienced other forms of violence (Rodríguez-Rivas et al., 2022; Nguyen, Nakamura, Seino & Vo, 2020).

One of the ways to act preventively and avoid negative consequences of children's communication on the Internet is parental mediation. It has been shown that the issue of violence on the Internet, whether children are victims or perpetrators of violence, cannot be viewed outside of parental control, partially due to its complexity and partially due to the fact that it involves the inclusion of a systematic approach to problem solving.

By internet, cyber and online violence we refer to all forms of violence that arise from the use of digital technologies. It takes place via computers, Internet, social networks, messaging applications, gaming platforms, mobile phones and other electronic devices. The characteristic of such a deliberate pattern of aggression is that it is repetitive and aims to frighten, anger or embarrass those who are attacked (Rodríguez-Rivas et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021).

Parental mediation or parental intervention is defined as “different ways in which parents / guardians try to influence how and for what purposes their children use digital media” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016: 9).

2. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

According to the data available to us, it can be seen that, in general, the number of Internet users is increasing rapidly. It is indicated that by December 2020, 55% of the world's population and 85% of Europe's³ population had access to the Internet. One third of those who are Internet users are children and young people under the age of 18 (Kuzmanović, Zlatarović, Andjelković and Žunić Cicvarić, 2019a). Recent research shows that in the United States, almost all young people have access to the Internet, meaning that 95% of adolescents in the United States are in the digital space between the ages of 12 and 17. They spend a large amount of their time (as much as 7.5 hours a day) using various digital technologies, out of which one quarter of the time is spent utilizing several forms of media at the same time. Furthermore, 74% of them access the Internet via mobile phones, tablets and other mobile devices (Elsaesser, Russell, Ohannessian & Patton, 2017). At the same time, the limit determining the appropriate age when children can start using the Internet has lowered, meaning that children at an even younger age use the Internet, often without parental mediation (Kuzmanović, Pavlović, Popadić and Milošević, 2019b).

When it comes to Serbia, the data has shown that in December 2020, there were 73.7% of Internet users, which is close to the European average⁴. The majority of the youth population in Serbia (86%) uses the Internet on a daily basis. At the age of 15-17, young students⁵ access the Internet every day from their smartphones (98%), while the percentage for children aged 9 to 10 is lower – 65% (Kuzmanović et al., 2019b). Young people in Serbia spend about 3 hours on average on the Internet; those in an older age (up to 17 years) spend 4 and a half hours a day, and on the weekends up to 7 hours (two thirds of them), with content mostly being related to entertainment, communication and social networks. Children and youth in Serbia are present on social networks in high percentage (74%). Of concern is data implying that 41% of children aged 9-10 and 72% of children aged 11-12 have an open account on social network(s), regardless of the fact that the age limit is regulated by social networks in a way that only makes it possible to open an account from the age of 13. What is interesting is that social networks among young people are not used for any form of civic activism, campaigns promotion for the youth and the like (ibid.).

³ See: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>

⁴ See: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#rs>

⁵ Students participating in the research

In Europe, 46% of Internet users aged 9-16 have at least one risk of online violence in their experience. At the age of 9-10, this risk was at 17%, and with older age, the risk of violence on the Internet has increased accordingly to as much as 69%, for children aged 15-16 (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012). According to Elsaesser et al. (2017), many studies have shown that online violence is widespread among young people, with 75% of school-age children experiencing online bullying at least once a year. In Chile, a sample of students from sixth to eleventh grade have shown that 8% of them suffered 9 or more types of aggression, with this type of violence being defined as poly-victimization of the victim. Among this group, 69% of them stated that they suffered from cyberbullying (Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022). Kuzmanović et al. (2019b) state that their research done in Serbia found that during one year, every third child experienced some form of harassment on the Internet. Most often, it was children aged 13-14 who had disturbing experiences.

Research has shown that young people exhibit risky behaviour online by sharing their personal information with strangers, making friendships from online ones to the ones in person, and by hiding behind personal profiles. In addition, they are exposed to sexual and pornographic contents, and data suggest that every other student has accessed sexual and pornographic content during the year. A large percentage of children were exposed to harmful content on the Internet (over 50%), such as those portraying violence against people, animals, hate messages, hate speech, self-destructive behaviours, content that encourages anorexic and bulimic behaviours, different ways of using drugs, and even contents that show in which way is it possible to commit suicide (44% of girls and 36% of boys were exposed to such contents) (Kuzmanović et al., 2019a and Kuzmanović et al., 2019b). Examples of direct violence in the Internet space to which children and young people are exposed include spreading untruths or false information, posting private photos and videos of someone on social networks (often sexualized), making threats and blackmailing through digital platforms, or false representation and harassment through sending inappropriate messages to others in someone else's name.

In summary, according to the authors, risky behaviours in the digital space can be divided into 3 groups: "content that children may be exposed to while using the Internet, which is unpleasant, disturbing or intimidating for the child; contacts with unknown people via Internet that can abuse a child in various ways and the child's behaviour in a digital environment that can endanger primarily personal safety, but the safety of family members and other persons (eg peers) as well" (Kuzmanović et al., 2019: 30-31).

Abuse on the Internet does not exclude real life violence, and they can often happen in parallel. According to some authors, violence in real life and internet violence have similar negative psychological and health consequences for victims over time, while others believe that the consequences of cyber violence are more adverse due to special hotspots of this phenomenon (Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022). However, one of the differences is that “violence on the Internet leaves a digital record that can serve as an evidence whilst in the process of putting an end to it” (UNICEF, 2021)⁶. The consequences of violence can last a long time and manifest themselves in different ways. Representations of these consequences can be feelings of threat, anxiety, depression, increased destructiveness and self-destructive behaviour, feelings of shame, physical symptoms of illness, health problems and chronic stress. Exposure to digital violence is associated with depression and low self-esteem (UNICEF, 2021), and among the most serious consequences of digital violence are suicides among young people. This has been reported by various studies; thus, it is suggested that the consequences of internet violence are related to the increase of suicidal ideation among young people (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010 according to Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022).

However, in the context of children’s development and their socialization, we believe that it would be beneficial to consider the findings of the *Children of Europe on the Internet* study, which, according to the authors, has shown that risks for children present in the digital space do not always result in negative consequences (Kuzmanović et al., 2019). That is, isolating children from the digital space, which is inevitably surrounding them, can have an impact on preventing the development of digital skills, as well as creating resistance to dangers in the digital space. Due to its complexity, this particular issue of risky behaviour should be approached very carefully without taking extreme positions in the form of banning the use of different types of digital technologies or absolute concessions and non-selective approach to the use of digital technologies. In fact, it would be extremely important to work on prevention (ibid.).

3. PARENTAL MEDIATION AND PREVENTION OF THE RISK OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE INTERNET SPACE

Parental mediation is an integral part of planning activities aimed at protecting children in the digital space. It is not a one-dimensional concept and includes both oversight and support. In the literature, various terms are used for this pro-

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/zaustavimo-digitalno-nasilje>

cess, such as: parental mediation, monitoring, supervision, control, however, they mainly refer to the parents' behaviour aimed at protecting children from violence in the Internet space. Literature describes parental mediation as different types of parental behaviour that have an impact on the way children will use digital media (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016) or is defined as "different ways parents try to influence on how and for what purposes their children are using digital media" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016: 9). Parental supervision is seen as a combination of rules, monitoring, communication and control of children when accessing Internet content and is primarily understood as a protection measure (Martín-Criado, Casas and Ortega-Ruiz, 2021). Some authors state that parental control involves behaviours used by parents to reduce inappropriate or risky behaviours of children and youth, including involvement in violence and victimization (Beck, Boile, & Boekeloo, 2003; Lac & Crano, 2009 according to Elsaesser et al., 2017). European Commission's documents which provide recommendations for the use of parental control tools on the Internet, define parental control tools as activities that increase the safety of children on the Internet, blocking, preventing, filtering and reporting on certain behaviours of children in the digital environment (European Commission, 2017). However, the recommendations emphasize that parental control tools cannot replace communication with children and youth and should be used in partnership with children through open dialogue and transparent communication (European Commission, 2017:5). Moreover, the document states that different functionalities of parental control tools are only part of the solution, so the focus should be on properly informing and educating young people, as well as children-parents cooperation in terms of spending time together in different types of activities.

Therefore, by parental mediation we do not refer to the literal use of a set of measures and mechanisms which would limit the Internet for children and youth, a restrictive, technical control, but rather child care in a way that allows mutual communication, preventive action and reducing the risk of harmful consequences in the digital space for children and youth.

The "warmth" dimension of parental mediation has been shown to be positively correlated with a reduction in risky online behaviour (Elsaesser et al., 2017; Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022) – thus, it is said that parental acceptance have shown a significant association with absence of self-harm and suicidal behaviour (Nguyen et al., 2020). In general, parental warmth and support are fundamentally important for the development of children and young people and they are positively correlated with their later achievements (academic, drug abuse, greater psychological adjustment) since they create a sense of security and safety for children (Elsaesser et

al., 2017). Similar observations have been found in other studies that emphasize the importance of family emotional support which makes the child feel protected and cared for (Arato et al., 2021; Rees et al., 2020; Fanti et al., 2012; Kovalski et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2009 according to Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022). From the perspective of cyber violence level, this leads to decrease in cyber-victimization, greater ability to balance emotions and resist bullying on the Internet, as well as lesser participation in cyberspace violence (Georgiou, 2008; Ok, Melahat Halat, & Aslan, 2010 according to Elsaesser et al., 2017).

Martín-Criado, Casas and Ortega-Ruiz (2021) state that some studies have addressed the issue of parenting style and online violence and have concluded that those in families who nurture open communication with children provide security and build a relationship of trust with children, therefore reducing the possibility of children's risky Internet communication on the Internet. On the other hand, children living in families with an authoritarian and careless parenting style, especially if there is an element of corporal punishment, are at higher risk of violence in the digital space and are more likely to become the perpetrator. The authors add that victimization is associated with a permissive parenting style (*ibid.*).

4. PARENTAL STRATEGIES IN THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

Parents use different strategies to control what their children do while they're being online. Some research indicates that more active parental involvement in controlling children's behaviour on the Internet is associated with more frequent restrictions, although these findings vary depending on the country and culture to which they belong. That is, the northern European countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands) actively mediate and control children's behaviour on the Internet, however, their control style is not restrictive, on the contrary – it is below average. On the other hand, the countries of Eastern Europe (Lithuania, Estonia and Romania) are characterized by below-average active and restrictive mediation. Furthermore, in Austria, Italy and Belgium, the style of parental control is restrictive with less active participation in monitoring children's behaviour in the digital space compared to the European average. Parents in some southern European countries and the largest European countries (Portugal, Spain and Greece, France, Germany and the UK) use highly active and highly restrictive mediation, i.e. control (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012). Research has shown that parents in Serbia rarely use child control mechanisms online and to a lesser extent

than in other countries. Less than half of the sample of children and young people aged 9 to 17 (44%) say that their parents often explain how to use the Internet safely, and slightly more than a third of children said that their parents talk to them about what they do online (Kuzmanović et al. , 2019).

According to the authors, in a large number of studies, parental mediation focuses on its four forms: active (parents are actively involved in children's activities on the Internet); restrictive (parents restrict the use of Internet) and parental supervision or monitoring (parents monitor what children do in the digital space) (Kuzmanović et al. 2019a).

The risks that children may be exposed to while they are online can be reduced by using active parental mediation, using open communication with children about these topics while they are offline, or by being close to children while they are online. Additionally, restrictive mediation has been shown to be associated with risk reduction, while technical mediation shows no effect in reducing online risk at any age (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012).

Studies have shown that parental behaviour can be related to certain characteristics such as education, age, ethnicity, digital competence, parents' knowledge of online bullying, parental competence in this regard, attribution of parental responsibility, parental perception of online risk, or family supervision. When examining the reliability of instruments that measure parental awareness and supervision to prevent cyberbullying, it was found that there were differences relating to parents' age, child's school level and parents' level of education for the dimensions of parental competence and parental supervision (Uslu & Durak, 2022). Martín-Criado et al (2021) assessed positive parental involvement through several variables: parents' knowledge of online bullying, perceptions of parental competence in this regard, parental perceptions of online risk, and attribution of parental responsibility in digital education. Hereby, the results have shown that positive parental involvement can be predicted if parents are more aware of online violence, if parenting competencies are stronger, when there is better risk adaptation and if they accept parental responsibility (Martín-Criado et al., 2021). In addition, lower levels of parental awareness regarding the importance of communication relating to children's behaviour in the digital space are associated with greater inactivity or neglect (ibid.)

5. DISCUSSION

The Internet space, apart from the regular ones, is sometimes overloaded with various security-problematic and criminal activities. Such digital space is availa-

ble to children who are not able to recognize the risks they may face, and, as a consequence, they become involved in a network of online violence, either as a victim or a perpetrator. At the systemic institutional level, ways to protect children from online violence are regulated by numerous legal solutions and documents adopted at national and international levels. It should be noted that they are only part of the solution to this problem.

As mentioned, numerous research and studies addressing the topic of violence through digital technologies that affect children and youth, have shown that there is no comprehensive solution to this issue without involving parents in the process. As we have previously stated, literature most frequently describes parental behaviour in this process as parental mediation. However, there are often different terms in the literature that are used to describe the same parental behaviour, such as: parental control, parental supervision, parental mediation, parental monitoring. The impression is that there is still a terminological inconsistency when it comes to the behaviour of parents whose goal is to protect their child from the potential risks in the Internet space. Additionally, different terms are used in digital literature, so cyberspace, digital, online, virtual, internet, etc., usually refer to the same space online. In this paper, we have used these terms as synonyms, since defining them individually in the theoretical sense would not be relevant for the purpose of this paper.

In an attempt to answer the central question in this paper, which refers to the actions parents can take to protect their children from becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of violence on the Internet, we had some interesting findings. Namely, as suggested by research data, basic principle in preventing children from becoming victims or bullies, and which refers to parents is: their awareness and knowledge about this problem as well as emotional warmth (Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022; Martín-Criado et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020; Elsaesser et al., 2017). Studies have shown that parents of adolescents who did not use restrictive mediation underestimated the extent to which their child witnessed violence in the digital world – because of this possible underestimation, the importance of parental knowledge and awareness of negative online behaviour in childhood and adolescence is particularly emphasized (Caivano, Leduc & Talwar, 2020). Parents' knowledge of the ways in which internet violence is perpetrated and their concerns could be the drivers of parental mediation.

If there is sufficient support, care for the child and sense of security and safety in the parental atmosphere and family overall, the chances to avoid risks are higher.

Furthermore, a key point in parental mediation is preferred parental style. The best results are given by the type of monitoring which includes conversation and open supportive communication, as well as parents' active participation and supervision of children's online activities.

Parents are mostly educated about the use of technologies for the purpose of restrictive action, thus, it may be said that they have limited knowledge regarding digital violence and the techniques they can use to prevent it. Parents who have higher digital competencies do not achieve particularly positive effects in terms of child protection, since it is considered that solely technical restrictions without an open access show either minimal effects or none at all. According to researchers, parental competence is the most important and influential factor for involvement in parental supervision; greater involvement can generally be expected in situations where a parent has knowledge of cyberbullying.

“It must be understood, consequently, that a positive parental involvement can be predicted from high scores in knowledge and perception of competence; from a parental adjustment in the appreciation of online risks and from a suitable attribution of parental responsibility to assume guidance and control in this new field of digital education. On the contrary, the attribution of the responsibility exclusively to the school, together with the ignorance or alienation of the social–digital life of their children, seem to be indicators of risk. It follows that families need to deepen their knowledge about online relationships and the risks they imply, but also to assume their own responsibility to intervene in this area of education. These conclusions are in line with current research that points out the importance for parents to know strategies of positive and safe parental mediation in the digital education of their children (Martín-Criado et al., 2021:11).”

6. CONCLUSION

With respect to the above, there is no doubt that parental prevention is extremely important when it comes to protecting children from the violence mediated by digital technologies and preventing violence against children and youth in the Internet space. However, as we have shown, there are certain limitations in terms of insufficient research data exploring the extent to which parents have knowledge and awareness of what Internet violence is and how they can protect their children from it.

There are only a few studies in the literature that have investigated this issue from the parental aspect in terms of their competencies, awareness of the importance of the problem, the prevalence of the phenomenon, their value orientations and their attitudes on this issue. In that sense, it is necessary to further investigate this phenomenon. As some authors say, “for a whole generation of parents, cyberbullying prevention is a new educational task to be developed at home. Today, given the current levels of connectivity, this task has taken on renewed urgency” (Martín-Criado et al., 2021: 11). Accordingly, the data obtained from the research could serve to better predict family involvement in the prevention of digital violence, create mechanisms to measure their involvement in prevention and assess the current quality of interventions, as well as develop more concrete measures for intervention.

Additionally, to date, studies have shown that parental involvement in prevention and their interventions can vary according to their education, age, ethnicity, and the characteristics of the culture to which they belong. It is recommended to deepen current research in order to assess how can these factors shape parental behaviour related to internet violence.

Lastly, prevention programs rich in technical guidelines for controlling children’s behaviour on the Internet can be frustrating for parents of lower education and could be a factor in giving up involvement in the process of parental mediation – instead, they can be supplemented with other interventions that will be more receptive to parents and which would help them “educate and protect their children” (Martín-Criado et al., 2021: 11). In this sense, it is necessary to supplement the existing policies and programs with new, adapted education programs for parents that will be designed in a way that is accessible and understandable to them.

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RODITELJSKA MEDIJACIJA U DOBA DIGITALNIH TEHNOLOGIJA: KAKO DA DECE NE POSTANE ŽRTVA NASILJA NA INTERNETU⁷

Pitanje zaštite dece od zlostavljanja u internet prostoru, se ne može posmatrati izvan značaja roditeljske uloge u tom procesu. U ovom radu se bavimo odnosom između roditeljske medijacije i zlostavljanja dece putem digitalnih tehnologija. Cilj rada je ispitivanje da li je roditeljska medijacija faktor smanjenja rizika od zlostavljanja dece u internet prostoru i da li su programi intervencije osmišljeni tako da odgovore potrebama različitih kategorija roditelja. Rezultati su pokazali da roditeljska medijacija jeste faktor prevencije i smanjenja rizika od zlostavljanja dece na internetu. U kojoj meri će biti uspešna, između ostalog, zavisi od stila roditeljstva i roditeljske topline. Takođe, podaci do kojih smo došli sugerišu da je potrebno produbiti dosadašnja istraživanja o roditeljskoj medijaciji kako bi se kreirale bolje politike i programi prevencije.

KLJUČNE REČI: zlostavljanje dece na internetu / sajber nasilje / roditeljska medijacija / roditeljski nadzor / porodična podrška

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