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## Family as One of the Key Determinants of Media Education of Young School-age Children

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### Abstract

The attitude of parents influences formation of children's attitude to life. It is even more noticeable when speaking about media. The proposed contribution shows partial results of research carried out as a part of VEGA project No. 1/0913/15: Media literacy of young school-age children in the context of family and school cooperation. The character of the empirical research was diagnostic and quantitative-qualitative. The aim of the research was to examine media education performed in formal and non-formal ways among young school-aged children in Slovakia. 28 schools from all over Slovakia were examined in the presented research. The contribution focuses mainly on findings from questionnaires given to parents and other focus groups, i.e. pupils.

**Keywords:** *media education, family, young school-age children, parents, pupil, Slovakia*

### Introduction

Today there is an easy access of pupils to complex media. Pupils can quickly and easily connect to the Internet from any kind of device. They know what is currently on TV or which computer games are most up-to-date. Habits of young school-aged children and their use of these devices are generally considered a problem. In this respect, parents play an important role and can significantly contribute in order to guide their children to use media and their content in a responsible way.

### Research Focus

Family is one of the most important factors that influences children's habits and their use of media as well as their search for content. For this reason, in this contribution we want to focus on media education. The attitude children acquire to media is greatly affected by the attitude of their parents.

For us, to be able to learn to live meaningfully in the cyberculture it is as important as civilization itself, which is inevitable for every person as an individual. Multiple expansion of the human mind by means of chips and networks in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century gave the power to billions. However, the early years of multimedia production and global information networks made technological enthusiasts unable to cope with such media consumption because, in the meantime, they did not learn how to control the use of media. Obviously, this all affects our communication. Also, it is connected with the fact that meaningful use of the Internet and social media is not automatic. (Rheingold, 2012). Particularly in the case of children, it is important to teach them a wise and responsible approach to media use and its content from the very first experience. "Theory and practice of media education, its paradigmatic background and approaches to its research face an inevitable challenge in order to make critical media theories accessible to masses of people in a sufficiently attractive form, which would clearly indicate benefits and strengths resulting from critical thinking in relation to media and its meaningful use" (Vrabec, 2013, p. 20). In Slovakia, there is not a sufficient amount of research focused on preschool-age children and young school-age children. For this reason, we decided to aim our research at young school-age children. We see the importance of media education of not only the children; we see a great need for the improvement of media education in schools, and, in the first place, in families.

### Research Methodology

#### General Background of Research

Our empirical research was of diagnostic and quantitative-qualitative character. The subject of the research was formal and non-formal media education in Slovakia at primary schools and the level of media literacy of primary school pupils and school (teachers) – family cooperation in media education and formation of healthy habits of young school-age children. In this contribution, we want to focus on presenting results of research on family-media education in the context of children's habits. Among the cognitive goals of the research, we tried to find out

the extent and possibilities of parents in setting limits on media use for children. We posed the following research questions:

- What do parents do in order to control their children's use of media and what rules do they apply?
- Are parents interested in educational portals for media education, which would help them to educate their children in this area?

### Research Sample

28 elementary schools were selected to participate in this research. They were divided into the following categories according to the towns and villages they were situated in: 9 schools in villages with the population up to 1,999 inhabitants; 4 schools in small towns from 2,000 to 19,999 inhabitants; 7 schools in middle-sized towns from 20,000 to 199,999 inhabitants and 8 schools in cities with the population over 100,000 inhabitants. Among the selected schools there were: 9 church schools, 2 private schools and 17 public schools.

The research population included 151 teachers of primary education (5 male and 146 female respondents) and 27 head teachers or their representatives. We conducted 48 focus interviews with 10 third grade pupils in a target group (480 pupils). There were 498 parents (92 male and 406 female respondents) who participated in our research.

### Instrument and Procedures

The method of diagnostic research was used as a fundamental method in the empirical research. We used a questionnaire for the teachers and parents and classified discussions (i.e., in which questionnaires contained the same questions in a specific, unchanged order to be given to the same respondents from the same professional or social group) with the head teachers or their representatives. The focus discussion was used to interview the pupils, where the members of the VEGA research team were the presenters (they are pedagogues, and therefore they are highly qualified for working with children), which influenced the qualitative aspect of our research.

### Data Analysis

Mathematical and statistical operations of absolute and relative frequency were used to process and analyze results. For the sake of data transparency and clarity, we present data processing in tables. We used the Pearson Chi-square test of good agreement to determine the statistical significance of selected variables and to express correlations.

## Research Results

Young school-age children have an easy access to media (TV, tablet, mobile phone and the Internet). One of the goals of our research was to find out the way parents control their children when using media and what rules they apply. Table 1 shows the results of the research on parents observing the rules.

**Table 1.** Parents' control of observing the rules by children

No. of respondents who expressed their opinion	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
yes	59	213	272
Total	92	406	498

  

CHI-SQUARE TESTS					
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson's Chi-Square	4.119 <sup>a</sup>	1	.042		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	3.662	1	.056		
Likelihood Ratio	4.179	1	.041		
Fisher's Exact Test				.049	.027
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.111	1	.043		
N of Valid Cases	498				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 41.75.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

When speaking about observing the rules by children and their use of TV, Internet, and tablet, we found out a significant difference of the control due to the parent's sex. We found that the female respondents (mothers) tend to control their children more than the fathers and also control whether the children observe rules when watching TV or using the computer (Table 1).

Based on the results obtained from the statistical  $\chi^2$ -test, we can confirm the alternative hypothesis on the independence of the investigated characters at the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$  (the calculated p-value of 0.042 is less than the selected level of significance). Due to the fact that the parents control their children's television watching, statistically there is a significant difference between the male and female respondents. The value of the Pearson Chi-square test is the same and the obtained significance is  $p = .042$

$$\chi^2 = 4.119; p < 0.05 (p = 0.042)$$

Table 2 presents the parents' responses in regard to the established rules for watching TV.

**Table 2.** Established rules from the parents' point of view

Parents' responses to statements	Sex		Total (N=498)	
	Male (N=92)	Female (N=406)	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
We watch family and children TV programs together	62	256	318	63.9
We watch TV series/films for adults together, with particular explanation if necessary	15	112	127	25.5
We watch TV series/films for adults together, I do not consider it necessary to explain anything	1	6	7	1.4
The child is not allowed to watch TV until the homework is finished	30	152	182	36.5
The child is not allowed to watch TV after 10 p.m., I have a parental control lock	33	166	199	40.0
I often control what the child is viewing	31	178	209	42.0
I do not control my child since he/she is educated and knows which programs he/she can watch and how long	17	28	45	9.0
The child is allowed to watch anything and at any time	2	4	6	1.2

As shown in Table, the statement that parents watch family and children TV programs together with their children achieved the highest percentage (63.9%). 42% of the parents often control what their child is viewing. 40% of the parents responded that their child is not allowed to watch TV after 10 p.m., which is secured by a parental control lock. Nearly a quarter of the parents stated that they watch TV series/films for adults together, and, if necessary, they provide an explanation (25.5%). Of all the parents, 9% does not control their child because he/she is educated and knows which TV programs he/she can watch and how long. The smallest number of the parents responded that their child has an unlimited parental permission to watch anything and at any time, which we consider very positive. What is also positive is the statement stating that the parents and children watch TV series/films for adults together, however, the parents do not consider it necessary to explain anything to their child.

We observed a correlation in relation to the parents' sex in the statement: 'we watch TV series/films for adults together, with particular explanation if necessary'.

The correlation was confirmed. There is a significant difference in watching and explaining TV series for adults to children. Based on the results obtained from the statistical  $\chi^2$ -test, we can confirm the alternative hypothesis on the independence of the investigated characters at the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$  (the calculated p-value of 0.025 is less than the selected level of significance).

In regard to explaining TV programs for adults to children, statistically there is a significant difference between the male and female respondents. The value of the Pearson Chi-square test is the same and the obtained significance is  $p = 0.025$   
 $\chi^2 = 5.025$ ;  $p < 0.05$  ( $p = 0.025$ )

Table 3 presents a correlation in relation to the parents' sex. The research shows that there are more females, mothers, who watch films together with their children and, at the same time, they provide them with a particular explanation, if necessary, more often than the fathers.

**Table 3.** Parents watching TV with children and their willingness to provide explanations to the child, if necessary

	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Yes	15	112	127
Total	92	406	498

#### CHI-SQUARE TESTS

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson's Chi-Square	5.025 <sup>a</sup>	1	.025		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	4.449	1	.035		
Likelihood Ratio	5.421	1	.020		
Fisher's Exact Test				.025	.015
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.015	1	.025		
N of Valid Cases	498				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 23.46.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

We also investigated the parents' reasons for their lack of control over their children's viewing. From their point of view, it is because their children are well informed and educated as to which programs they are or are not allowed to watch. The correlation in relation to the parents' sex was confirmed again. There is a significant difference in the mothers' and fathers' responses and their reasons

for the lack of control over their children. It is based on the fact that from their perspective, the children know which programs they are or are not allowed to watch (cf., Table 4).

Based on the results obtained from the statistical  $\chi^2$ -test, we can confirm the alternative hypothesis on the independence of the investigated persons at the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$  (the calculated p-value of 0.000 is less than the selected level of significance). Due to the fact that the parents do not control their children's television watching because in their opinion the children know what they are or are not allowed to watch, statistically there is a significant difference between the male and female respondents. The value of the Pearson Chi-square test is even and the obtained significance is  $p = .000$

$$\chi^2 = 12.240; p < 0.05 (p = 0.000)$$

**Table 4.** I do not control my child because he/she knows which programs he/she can watch

	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Yes	17	28	45
Total	92	406	498

#### CHI-SQUARE TESTS

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson's Chi-Square	12.240 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	10.871	1	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	10.328	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.002	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.215	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	498				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.31.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Table 4 presents the correlation in relation to the parents' sex. The research shows that there are more females, mothers, who are of the opinion that their child is adequately educated and knows which programs they are allowed to watch than fathers.

With regard to parental control and rules, we observed some interesting distinctions. We found out a significant difference in the fact that the mothers tend to

control their child more than the fathers in order to see whether the child observes the rules. We also discovered that there are more female respondents, i.e. mothers, than fathers, who watch movies together with their children, and who, at the same time, provide the child with adequate explanations. At the same time, we found out that there are more female respondents, i.e. mothers, than fathers who are of the opinion that their children are adequately educated and know what they are or are not allowed to watch.

#### Computer use

We also monitored setting time limits to children's use of the computer. We tried to find out ways the parents use to control the time their children spend using the computer. The parents could choose from multiple choice options (cf., Table 5).

**Table 5.** Control over children's free time using the computer

Ways parents use to control their children's free time using the computer	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
We play computer games together with the child, especially computer games for children	78	15.7
Along with our children we try to find out web pages and games which develop children's knowledge	134	27.3
We buy our children computer games	24	4.8
Our child is not allowed to play computer games with violent content	289	58.0
Our child uses the Internet in order to communicate with friends	92	18.5
Our child is allowed to use the computer while completing school projects	156	31.3
I do not control my child because he/she knows what is permitted	63	12.7
I do not control my child because I have a parental control lock	12	2.4
I do not control my child because I do not consider it necessary	6	1.2
Others	54	10.8

As presented in Table 5, the majority of parents do not allow their children to play computer games with violent content, i.e., killing, drug abuse, etc. This was reported by up to 58% of the parents. Among other frequently answered questions, there was one in which the parents along with their children try to find suitable web sites and games for their development. Only 4.8% of the parents stated that they buy computer games for their children themselves and only 1.2% of the parents stated that they do not control their children using computers at all.

Based on focus groups analysis from the pupils' point of view, in connection with the stated limits to media we obtained the following results:

- Among the fundamental rules concerning watching TV, the children first had to tidy up the mess, do their homework and after that they were allowed to watch TV. Likewise, they were not allowed to watch TV if they got a bad mark at school or did not listen to the parents.
- The time limit to the children's use of computers and screens was one of the most common rules applied by the parents. The children were allowed to use computers and screen from 0.5 to 1 hour a day maximum, or when they finished their homework.
- The parents whose children attend church schools were more likely to establish rules. Some children have rules established in relation with content, not time. Some rules were related only to weekdays.
- Some parents applied so-called "occasional rule". This means that parents state time limits with regard to the situation, or, when they find it convenient. When they assume their child used the computer for too long, the child is told to turn it off.
- There are only a few pupils whose parents set up parental control.
- The parents stated, predominantly in public schools, that they do not control their children or establish any rules. Some pupils even said their parents lie. This means that the parents ban their children from playing some game, however, the children still continue (e.g., tanks game online, unsuitable games, etc.)
- With regard to setting time limits for computers and screen, there was an interesting group of pupils. Almost 5% of them stated they did not need to use the internet. Formerly, they were from private schools, church schools, or pupils from villages who spend their time outdoors, or, do not have access to the Internet.

Moreover, we tried to find out whether the parents were interested in media content related to computer games. Their attitudes to particular types of computer games, suitability or unsuitability for the children are presented in Table 6. The reason for our interest in the parents' attitudes was that if parents consider some unsuitable games as acceptable, it can cause contradiction in their children's education concerning their attitudes towards the teacher. Also, it can be difficult for the children to distinguish between what is suitable and unsuitable. According to our opinion and based on our experiences, parents' habits and attitudes are related to their children's adopted habits and attitudes. Therefore, we see great importance in and need for media education for parents.

**Table 6.** Parents' attitudes to suitability or unsuitability of computer games for children

	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
	Not considered suitable	Not considered suitable	Considered suitable	Considered suitable	I don't know	I don't know
Action games	433	86.9	20	4.0	43	8.6
Adventures	205	41.2	149	29.9	142	28.5
Strategic games	123	24.7	236	47.3	138	27.7
Role playing games (RPG)	275	55.2	54	10.9	166	33.3
Simulations	164	32.9	180	36.1	150	30.1
Educational games	25	5.0	437	87.8	36	7.2
Games for girls	145	29.1	254	51.0	92	18.5
Others	18	3.6	25	5.0	36	7.2

As shown in Table 6, the parents have different attitudes to each type of computer games. They consider action games, adventure games and role playing games as unsuitable. On the contrary, the parents consider strategic games, simulations, educational games and games for girls as suitable. In the case of action games, there is a significant number of responses stating that action games are not considered as suitable for children. A striking number of parents stated that educational games are most suitable. For some types of computer games, it is evident that despite the given examples the parents do not comprehend the type of game as described in terms of categorization and characteristics.

There is an interesting finding concerning a relatively small difference between suitability and unsuitability of simulations from the parents' point of view. It is evident that the parents are of a different opinion on a particular type of computer game, and, thus, on a given game as such. This was expressed in the parents' understanding of some types of games and in regard of the parent's sex (e.g., the right understanding of games such as arcades, games for girls, etc.). Unfortunately, we are unable to deal with this issue in detail in our contribution.

In line with these findings, we were interested in whether the parents feel the need for available educational portals that would provide them with valuable advice and information in the field of media education, which would help them to educate their children in this area. The results are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Parents' need for available educational portals for media education

		Not expressed	No	Yes	I don't know	Total
Sex	Male	0	14	47	30	91
	Female	5	28	227	147	407
	Total	5	42	274	177	498
CHI-SQUARE TESTS						
		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)		
Pearson's Chi-Square		6.752 <sup>a</sup>	2	.034		
Likelihood Ratio		5.860	2	.053		
Linear-by-Linear Association		.436	1	.509		
N of Valid Cases		493				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.75.

As shown in Table 7, up to 55% of the parents expressed their need for creating an Internet website providing some advice and tips on how to use media effectively. When comparing the parents' answers to this question based on sex, we found a significant difference in the parents' opinions on the need for educational portals for media education. Based on the results obtained from the statistical  $\chi^2$ -test, we can confirm the alternative hypothesis on the independence of the investigated characters at the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$  (the calculated p-value of 0.034 is less than the selected level of significance). With regard to the parents' need for education portals, statistically there is a significant difference between the males and females.

The value of the Pearson Chi-square test is  $\chi^2 = 6.752$  and the obtained significance is  $p = .034$

$$\chi^2 = 6.752 ; p < 0.05 (p = 0.034)$$

As shown in Table 7, we observed a correlation in relation to the parents' sex. The research suggests that there is a significant difference in responses. There were more female than male respondents expressing their need for educational portals for media education.

## Discussion

We found a significant difference in approach based on the parents' sex concerning whether to control the child due to the fact that the parents consider their children capable of discerning what programs they are or are not allowed to watch. The research shows that there are more females (mothers) than males who think that their child is adequately educated and knows what programs are or are not permitted.

We found out that the female respondents (mothers) tend to control their children more than the male respondents (fathers) whether they observe rules. Based on our research, there are more females than males who control observing rules.

Much research refers to a strong relation between children's and parents' attitudes to watching TV (Jago, Stamatakis, Gama, Marques, Noqueira, Mourao, Padez, 2012; Jago, Sebire, Edwards, Thompson, 2013). Our research presents the same observation, as parents' attitudes and habits significantly influence their children's attitudes and habits.

*Parents' evaluation of the suitability and game selection of their children* varies. They have a different attitude to each type of computer games. Statistically, there are also significant differences between the fathers' and mothers' approach in determining which game is suitable for their children. The parents consider action games, adventures and role playing games as unsuitable. On the contrary, strategic games, simulations, educational games and games for girls are considered as suitable.

The parents are inevitable media socializers. There is great importance of parental intervention in the case of little children who have just been introduced to media. In some families, media hold the primary position. Direct and emotional contact is very rare, which is being replaced by virtual relationships, such as phone calls, text messages, e-mails, and watching TV. It is necessary to talk to children about what they saw and heard in order to help them to evaluate and comprehend the importance of moral teaching and the character of the content presented in different types of media (Petani, Brcic, 2014). Also, it is important to realize that forms of media, including symbols that we converse with, do not convey specific and definite statement about the world. These forms of media are "rather metaphors, which inconspicuously and modestly, but effectively impose their definitions of reality. Whether we perceive the world through speech, print, or television camera, our media-metaphors pre-classify it, categorize, delimit, expand, reduce, and probe" (Postman, 2010). In a special way young school-age

children may consider virtual reality more realistic than the real world. Therefore, parents should be aware of such risks.

For parents to be helpful to their children, it is necessary to constantly develop their competences in the field of media education. In this context, the parents showed their interest in developing self-learning competences from educational portal. More than a half of the parents expressed their need for creating an Internet website providing some advice and tips on how to use media effectively. The research results show that the female respondents more often than the male ones expressed the need for creating an educational portal.

Like adults, also children are more and more exposed to short, impulse information in the form of advertising, commands, theories, and segment messages which relatively easily fit into our mental files. It helps the recipients to receive a countless number of information in a short time. However, it is more difficult to put information into a comprehensive form. This causes an increase in the amount of information (Toffler, 1981), which causes problems particularly when speaking about children. Also for this reason, it is necessary to respond to changes introduced to us by the informational society and to teach children a responsible approach to media in order to be enriched, grow, and learn to critically evaluate all the content they encounter on a daily basis.

Access to media enables children to create opportunities for education in early childhood, expand the world of children; it allows them to explore and stimulate their thinking (Juszczyk, 2004). Parents are role models for their children with regard to all areas of their development. Sometimes parents themselves are distracted by media and they do not pay enough attention to their children, as a result of which children lack opportunities for their emotional development (Jago, Thompson, Sebire, 2014).

## Conclusions

Our research shows a need for education in the field of media education for not only pupils, i.e. young school-aged children, but also their parents, who expressed the interest. Nearly a half of the parents prefer gaining competences in a given area through self-study, i.e., a website. During research implementation, we found that the parents were not interested in training or professional lectures due to a lack of time. However, we see the need for school and family co-operation, which can bring a significant change by mutual interaction in order to improve the quality of media education. Parents cannot rely on teachers – school, as well as school

cannot substitute the irreplaceable position of parents. Our research shows that the mothers are more interested in the responsible use of media than the fathers, therefore, it is necessary to focus impulses as well as content of websites for parents in an attractive and adequate manner, especially for males – fathers, which would encourage them to consider changing their attitudes.

It is necessary to provide media education for young school-aged children with regard to the media education of their parents. Parents should be aware of the negative aspects of media and see the need for the regulation of their children's use of media, as well as reasonable time limitations to virtual activities. Young school-aged children need balanced activities, such as physical and sports activities, but also activities which develop their competences through skills, experiences, or by shaping a positive attitude to reading books, which is not preferred among children in comparison with audiovisual information they receive on television and the Internet. So much of such information deprives children of creativity, as well as imagination development and fantasy.

The proposed contribution shows the partial results of the research carried out as part of VEGA project No. 1/0913/15: Media literacy of young school-age children in the context of family and school cooperation.

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