

Managing Belgian children's media use in new family formations



Today, children are growing up in a wide range of family formations such as foster families, stepfamilies, single-father or single-mother families, where children are often required to navigate multiple households. How do parents manage, coordinate and experience children's internet practices? How does parental mediation of the internet work in divorced families when parents are separated? [Lien Mostmans](#), a post-doctoral researcher at [Cemeso](#), Vrije Universiteit Brussel, talked with children and their (step-, half-) siblings and (step-) parents in Belgium, and argues that a new, more 'inclusive' family media research agenda is emerging.

"Sure, I'll show you my box." Denny took me to his bedroom, a tidy retreat with a neatly made bed, closed cupboards and his collection of miniature aircrafts neatly on display in a glass cabinet. In one of the corners, between the door and his clean, empty study desk, I spotted it: a medium-sized plastic, transparent box – for storage and organisation. When I asked him if he wanted to show me its contents, he answered "yes", noticeably puzzled by why I would find it interesting. Denny's box contained a variety of personal items, including his martial arts uniform, a school folder, two miniature aircrafts he took from his collection and wanted to "take home" to his mother and half-brother, a smartphone, a tablet device and the necessary accessories such as a charger and headphones.

Before showing me his box, we had sat in the living room talking about what it is like growing up in a stepfamily, and how media technologies are embedded in his family's life. Since his early childhood, Denny, age 14, has spent every other weekend with his father and stepfamily, and has had to think carefully about the things, including the media devices, he would need, or want, during this time. It all fitted in one box.

New family forms and family media studies

Denny's story was part of a larger ethnographic study into the socio-moral contexts of 9- to 14-year-old children's internet use in Belgium throughout 2013-2017. The doctoral study looked at 10 families who represented a variety of new family forms in Belgium (nuclear families, stepfamilies, single father-headed families, single mother-headed families). The stories collected in this study, including Denny's, raise important questions about children's internet practices and parent-child interactions in multiple households with potentially very different internet regimes. How do parents (co-) parent with respect to internet use when they are separated?

While one-family households remain dominant in Europe, the US and other Western societies, the 'traditional' family model of a married, heterosexual couple providing care for their biological children is gradually being complemented by 'non-traditional', new family forms, including cohabitation, [adoption and foster care](#), single-parenthood and stepfamilies. In the US, fewer than half (46%) of the children under the age of 18 are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage; 34% of children are living with an unmarried parent, who likely is single; and about 6% of all children are living with a stepparent (PEW Research Center, 2014). In the UK, [2011 Census results](#) present a different picture and suggest that 11% of families with dependent children were stepfamilies. Households containing two or more families (multi-family households) were also [the fastest growing household type](#) over the decade to 2017.

Family media studies have paid only modest attention to internet use and parental mediation of the internet in new family forms. [Studies](#) that have included new family forms (mostly one-parent households), all underline the impact of financial, spatial and temporal constraints on media use. [Economic challenges](#) in some families mean that media are adopted as a key entertainment resource, instead of other (more expensive, organised) leisure time activities. Also, a link has been found between parental availability and restrictive mediation [in low-income \(one-parent\) families](#).

Unfortunately, systematic research into parental decision-making and internet mediation in stepfamilies and [other family forms](#) is lacking. Family media studies, including parental mediation research, cannot afford to ignore these families. Not only do they form a social category in their own right, they also help increase and enrich the existing knowledge about parental mediation of the internet and demonstrate different ways to 'parent' the internet. Moreover, looking at a variety of family forms could also make both children and parents more reflexive about the choices that they have made regarding (parenting) the internet.

Navigating different internet regimes

Growing up in different households, with different parents and siblings, often means having to navigate different domestic media environments, with their own media-related customs and rules.

Denny navigated between two households, each with specific rules and agreements about the internet. In the household he shared with his (biological) father, Denny experienced a more 'loose' regime with mostly 'active' forms of mediation, characterised by an emphasis on stimulating [opportunities for learning](#) and mitigating safety risks such as online identity deception. This household's regime was significantly influenced by his stepmother, who had a background in ICT consulting.

In contrast, when Denny lived with his (biological) single mother Nancy, he was not only faced with more (strict) parental mediation; there was also a different focus. Here, he experienced active forms of mediation – mostly in the form of conversations, interactions and questions about Denny's internet use – but there was more emphasis on restrictive measures (rules, instructions, prohibitions) and practices of internet co-use (including 'hanging around', monitoring and surveillance). For example, stemming from a broader concern over Denny's [online safety](#) and wellbeing, Nancy put a lot of effort in starting conversations about his online activities, during which she would systematically bring up the risks and consequences of posting personal information online.

Nancy also set various restrictive rules about the types of videos and websites Denny could visit or share, the social networks he could engage in, and the online games he was allowed to play (and with whom). When asked, Denny said he accepted and 'understood' his mother's stricter mediation strategies, an attitude, also found in wider research in one-parent households, in which perceived limitations in parent resources can generate an [ethics of care](#) in children's relationships with their parent.

While for Denny, switching between different household internet regimes seemed relatively easy and stress-free, his stepbrother Vincent found it more difficult. Vincent, also 14 years old, used the internet significantly more than Denny. In contrast with Denny, much of Vincent's social life and friendships were extended online, which resulted in a more intense use of the internet and internet-connected devices, and which in turn impacted family life. As a result, Denny and Vincent's parents, Julia (Vincent's biological mother) and Walter (Denny's biological father), said they "felt the need" to set different rules for the boys. They admitted that they were more lenient about Denny's engagement with screen media, whereas Vincent was considerably more restricted from using his smartphone in various situations (during homework, in his bedroom, etc.) and was discouraged from bringing his laptop into this household. This negotiation of rules did not come easy. Walter expressed his hesitation:

“We realise that this is not fair to Vincent. But, on the other hand, we know that Denny needs his laptop less and still spends less time on it in general. Also, this household is not Denny's natural environment, and we try to compensate this by allowing him to bring his laptop”.

While the differences did not cause tension between the stepbrothers, for Vincent, this difference in parenting seemed to be a recurring motive to challenge and resist parental mediation in this household, and it strained the relationship with his mother and stepfather.

Parenting the internet in new family forms

In new family forms, internet mediation can be different from ‘traditional’ nuclear families where parents tend to communicate directly with each other about parenting approaches and decisions. Delicate post-divorce living situations may complicate communication and coordination between households regarding parental internet mediation as the participating families strived for a post-divorce *modus vivendi* that is free of conflict. For example, in some of the families I spoke to, parents limited or avoided communication about child-related matters, because it caused turbulence in and between various households. In family studies, this type of post-divorce parenting has been called [‘parallel parenting’](#), or when divorced parents parent ‘next to one another’ by disengaging from each other, and having limited direct contact.

It is not hard to imagine how parallel parenting can create gaps in parents’ awareness of children’s online activities and experiences, and how it can be challenging for parents who want to actively mediate their children’s internet use. Family researchers have suggested that some degree of communication between parents in regard to the well-being of their children is necessary, for instance through a [‘parent communication notebook’](#) that passes between the parents. This notebook could also include information about the child’s internet activities, what’s upset them, and how they were calmed. Also, digital (online) communication tools such as e-mail and text messages allow for quick and effective communication. Setting up a digital communication plan may include a specific timeframe that requires a response to an email or text message, even if it is just to acknowledge its reception. Today, several (free) [online communication tools](#) for co-parents exist, that systematise and record co-parenting communication, and they may also include information about the children’s internet use and experiences.

Today, children grow up in a wide variety of family media environments. More systematic research and attention is needed into the communication and coordination of parental mediation between former partners distributed over different households, and how new partners co-parent the internet. A new family media research agenda is emerging and confronts researchers with new questions and dilemmas. If one thing is already clear, it is that these too do not fit in one box.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.