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Playing games together or hiding the tablet in the cupboard: What works when managing kids' media use?



Alicia Blum-Ross is a researcher at the LSE's Department of Media and Communications. She is interested in youth media production and is part of the Parenting for a Digital Future research project. Alicia presents five parental strategies to manage children's media use. She discusses what works, deconstructs some common myths and highlights that there is no perfect answer to family's questions around media use.

As technology changes, and families' attention has shifted away from one big screen towards multiple small screens (although families do still **watch TV together while also** staring at their phones and tablets), what's the best strategy for parents? Are they no longer able to guide or manage or limit their children's media use, **as they used to**? Should they keep it simple by discouraging screen media entirely for under-twos and **limiting for older children** (as the **American Academy of Pediatrics recommends**), or tailor their approach to their own family's needs?



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l, personalised screens provide new challenges king about how to manage (or indeed, encourage) their children's media use. For example, knowing how and when to set limits or point towards engaging opportunities looks quite different when children are on SnapChat in their bedroom than it does Home About On our minds When they're watching TV in the lounge. From our notes Around the world Resources

Research shows that parents generally select **a mix of approaches**:
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1. *Active mediation.* Parents talk directly with their children about the media they're encountering, for example, asking them about the websites they access or who they are talking to on social media. Research shows that 80% of parents in the UK already talk to their children about the websites they visit, and suggest ways to use the internet safely.
2. *Co-use.* Rather than just co-viewing, parents today are likely to take part in all kinds of **shared activity** with their children, for example, playing video games together, building family blogs, using an app etc.
3. *Restrictive mediation.* Parents set rules either in terms of what content the child can watch, or the amount of time (or time of day) they can access a tablet. With mobile media this also includes things like restricting whether a child can bring a tablet into their bedroom.
4. *Technical restrictions*, i.e. filtering software to block certain sites.
5. *Monitoring.* In some cases parents **use digital technology to monitor** their children's activities, sometimes letting them know that they're doing this, **and sometimes not...** For example, parents may check internet browser histories, use geo-location apps on phones, or look at children's Facebook pages.

Of course, parents often **give their children media access** for reasons that are nothing to do with technology directly – a mobile phone so they can walk home from school by themselves, a games console in their bedroom in **preference to letting them play outside** in the street. Whatever the reason, children are getting more and more digital media at home, so parents want to know what works in restricting, or encouraging, their media use.



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What works?

It's a little hard to say for a few reasons:

1. What parents want from their children's media use might be **really different** from one family to the next.
2. If the idea is to prevent 'risk', it's hard to know whether something is '**risky**' or actually '**harmful**' (e.g. is seeing sexual content **harmful**? Perhaps only if the young person changes their behaviour some years later as a result?).
3. Can you really isolate out parents' mediation **strategy** from all the other ways that **parents interact** with their children?

But there are a few things we *do* know:

1. *Restrictions do reduce exposure to risks*, but they also **reduce opportunities**. Children whose parents put in filtering software or who don't let them go online for as long or as frequently do encounter fewer kinds of unwanted content, but they are also missing out on a range of opportunities that their peers are accessing.
2. *Being overly or arbitrarily restrictive can do as much harm as good*. When children do not **feel consulted in setting rules**, they may not see the logic in them, or **may think of the banned media as more attractive**. Some organisations advocate **writing a family 'media contract'** together (although this may mean parents will end up with rules about their own media use too!).
3. *No single digital activity is going to 'ruin' a child*. More recent research shows that older theories (like the '**couch potato hypothesis**' that watching TV *causes* obesity) were a little quick to blame screen media for every bad outcome. **New recommendations** are a bit softer on things like 'screen time', and suggest that digital media use isn't harmful if it is *one of*

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4. Rather than worrying about risk, let's talk about resilience. It may be nearly impossible to prevent children from ever coming across something online that might be upsetting or hurtful, kind of like how they will inevitably fall over in the playground! But what parents can do is help their children build resilience through creating supportive relationships. Then, when children do come across something that worries them (and they will), they can find resources (whether through parents or friends) to help them deal with it.
5. Parents and children can learn together, on- and offline. 'Participatory learning' is a way of suggesting that adults (including parents, teachers and mentors) and children can together explore, discuss, play and experiment with digital media. In this model, no one is the expert, and no one is in need of protection, but both adults and children are learning together and, importantly, having fun.

Remember that amidst all the hard sells about educational apps and filtering software, there's no 'perfect' answer to what to do about managing children's media use. Most parents actually feel pretty confident about their children's lives online, recognising that there are as many possible benefits to engaging with digital media as there are risks.

In the end, it seems that the majority of children share many of their parents' hopes, fears and annoyances about digital technology – like their parents making judgements (although not always with the same outcome) about what is worthwhile and what is 'wasting time', appreciating the ability to connect to friends while feeling bothered by the constant buzzing of WhatsApp. Perhaps 'what works' might be to recognise that children and young people are already making those calls, and use that as a starting point.

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