Parents' regulation of teenagers' screen time in Norway

Home   About   On our minds   From our notes   Around the world   Publications   Resources

Subscribe

Good old-fashioned sports vs gaming online? What would parents prefer? And their children? Ingrid Smette, Kari Stefansen and Øystein Gilje report on research exploring these different attitudes. Ingrid and Kari are both based at NOVA (Norwegian Social Research) and Oslo and Akershus University College, while Øystein is based at the Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Norway. [Header image credit: One Tonne Life, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]

With the emergence of digital media, parents assume new responsibilities. While we know from previous studies that parents mediate teenagers' online activities in different ways, few studies have explored how parents ascribe meaning to media use relative to other activities young people engage in. And few studies explore in what ways this connects with broader trends in parenting ideals and practices.

During 2012-15, the research project KnowMo (*Knowledge in motion*),[1] set in a medium-to-large Norwegian town, investigated how teenagers and their parents engage with knowledge and learning across different arenas – interviews were conducted with parents of more than 40 14-year-olds.

Contrasting media activities with sports

The parents were asked how they considered their child's experience of school, sports and other leisure activities, as well as their own views of their involvement in their child's different activities. One observation is that parental involvement differs according to the activity in question. We have analysed, in a recent article, the substantial increase in parental involvement in youth sports over the last generation. Parents value sports because they associate it with healthy lifestyles and positive peer sociability. They also see organised sports as an arena where it is possible for them

to bond with their child, even in teenage years, a period often associated with growing autonomy and separation.

Parents' positive evaluation of sports has a counterpart in their view of media activities. They describe such activities – leisure-oriented screen time – mostly in negative terms and as involving risks, although they don't mention the risks of encountering unsuitable content or ill-intentioned people, risks commonly discussed in media research. Instead, they are worried about media activities distracting teenagers from worthwhile past-times, such as physical activity outdoors, or on the sports field, or homework. We may think of this as risks of 'negative socialisation', and as far as these risks are concerned, computer games are the prime suspect, and teenage sons the most likely victims.

Indirect and direct regulation of screen time

There is a difference between parents' indirect and direct strategies for regulation. Indirect strategies refer to parents limiting their children's media use without defining explicit rules or regulations. One such indirect strategy was that other activities, and primarily sports, restricted the time a child had available for screens. In the parents' opinion, too much spare time was a potential problem because spare time tended to mean screen time. Some had seen this happen, when their child had had a 'time gap' between stopping one organised activity and starting a new one.

Some parents also described direct strategies of regulation, such as defining rules and limiting children's opportunity for media use in other ways, although they rarely used strategies such as controlling access to computers or tablets or setting up filters, common approaches with young children. Direct strategies for this teenagers thus mostly consisted in shutting off routers after a certain hour, and occasionally confiscating phones at night. Parents' justifications for such methods were mostly related to their child's sleep and wellbeing. The parents felt that these were legitimate areas in which to intervene, including for teenagers.

While most parents had some kind of strategy to limit screen time, two examples illustrate the range of variation among the families. One mother saw her son's extensive gaming as unproblematic – he had become good at solving particular technical problems in the game, and other gamers therefore sought his assistance. The mother considered gaming an activity that enhanced her son's self-confidence, and also acknowledged the social aspects of gaming. However, her relaxed attitude appeared dependent on her son's current involvement in a sports activity, and the fact that he received reasonably good grades at school.

From the opposite end of the spectrum, another example was a family who completely banned computer gaming for their son, at home as well as when visiting friends. They experienced their son as uninterested in organised leisure activities, including sports. However, they were now wondering whether they had been too strict and had deprived their son of an important social arena. At the time of the interview, he rarely visited friends or received visits at home. This illustrates the delicate balancing acts that may be involved when parents try to regulate what is also indisputably an important social arena for children.

Parents' mixed feelings about media activities

Overall, the parents had mixed feelings about leisure-related media activities. Too much screen time was undesirable, but what parents defined as 'too much' depended – as illustrated above – on a number of factors.

Parents' concern about screen time in quantitative terms reflects their preoccupation with their child's ability to self-regulate. They worry that their son or daughter will not be able to strike a balance between doing what parents consider useful activities, and activities that are only for pleasure. For the generation of parents interviewed, sport represents their idea of a useful activity, while excessive media use represents the opposite. Parents believe that sport teaches self-regulation and discipline, whereas media activities represent endless temptations.

Home   About   On our minds   From our notes   Around the world   Publications   Resources

Subscribe

It's not always that his world connects with me. It's a bit difficult sometimes to identify with his world with computers and games and all that. So I feel quite a distance there. It's more an irritant that creates a bit of distance between us I feel. But now that I have been at his training I experience somehow that we have more rapport. When we have been to trips and done things together, it's been more chummy.

This finding, that children's media activities represent a generational division between parents and children, may be about to change. The parents we interviewed talked about their own experiences in organised sports as something that their parents had not been involved with at all. For them, having grown up with organised sports made involvement in their child's sporting activities natural and genuinely meaningful. Given the omnipresence of digital media in youth culture today, and the pleasures young people derive from it, we may hypothesise that the next generation of parents will ascribe more positive meanings to their children's media activities.

NOTES

[1] The KnowMo project is funded by the Norwegian Research Council, and further findings will be published during the next two years.

March 30th, 2016 | Around the world, Featured | 0 Comments