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Family Dynamics in a Changing World

Support, Challenges and Adaptation



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Current Threats to the Family – Current Issues and Problems

ABSTRACT

The study aims to analyse and reflect on the current problems in the family, taking into account the new risks in the context of information and communication technologies and the Internet. The study aims to present an overview of current research investigations and existing facts using research methods of theoretical analysis. The study is built on synthesising findings from secondary analyses and original research results of selected authors to define further research problems. The subject of the content analysis was studies published in Slovak. The research set was selected based on keyword assignment: family, online risk behaviour, and online risks. The selection of the research set was narrowed down to the period 2019-2024 to reflect current issues in the family. This pilot monitoring exercise stimulates more profound interest in the issues addressed.

Keywords: risky online behaviour, family, children, digital technologies

2.1. Introduction

The current era, also called the information age, is related to the development of digital technologies and the Internet. Digital technology and the Internet have become an everyday part of children and their families. Parents are the first agents of experience with digital technologies for their children. The parent's role is to integrate digital technologies into normal activities (play, entertainment, learning, eating) to encourage constructive and, above all, safe use of technology. In addition to the many benefits that technology brings us, it also opens the door to the risks that come with it. One of the risks is the prevalence of online risk-taking behaviour, which is currently on the rise. These are inappropriate behaviours transferred from the real world to the virtual

environment – cyberspace. Risky online behaviour is characterised by the following features: the environment of the Internet, anonymity, and the absence of direct communication without personal interaction.

M. Čerešník and M. Čerešníková (2019) found that low levels of parental stimulation, as well as parenting in a low-stimulating environment, are to be expected in adolescents with problem behaviour. On the other hand, the authors also see the risks of problem behaviour in overstimulation, e.g. by frequent contact with modern electronic media (increasing the activation level of the brain and searching for exciting stimuli, and the like). The authors looked at various characteristics of the family environment and parents that may be the cause of risky behaviour in children and adolescents (death in the family, conflicts, economic level of the family, parenting styles – inappropriateness of authoritarian and benevolent ones in particular, and the like), or protective factors that do not induce such behaviour (good family relationships, open communication, non-authoritarian upbringing, consistency in values, and the like), but also factors that are not conducive to such behaviour (good family relationships, open communication, non-authoritarian upbringing, consistency in values, and the like).

R. Tomšík and M. Verešová (2019) investigated the relationship between different parenting styles and selected areas of adolescents' risky behaviour (substance use, bullying and violence, inappropriate eating habits, negative relationships with school and classmates, negative family relationships and family rituals). In all areas, a democratic parenting style, mutual family communication and a supportive family environment proved to be the most appropriate. These are the most important protective factors of children's and adolescents' risk behaviours.

Digital technologies are also increasingly impacting the quality of family relationships, as highlighted in a report published on www.commonssensemedia.org entitled *The New Normal: Parents, Teens, Screens, and Sleep* (2019). Research findings show that up to 52% of parents admit to spending too much time using digital technology, with 62% of parents using digital technology in the late evening, which also determines poorer sleep quality. Dwyer et al., (2018) found that engagement on social media is associated with lower-quality family relationships, as indicated by studies by several authors. Similar research findings have been identified concerning leisure time and digital technologies that reduce parent-child interaction (Lemish et al., 2020).

New forms of family-based risky online behaviours include sharenting and phubbing. Sharenting represents the sharing of photos and videos of children by their parents. Sharenting is a form of digital parenting (Kopecký & Sztokowski, 2018). Digital parenting involves parenting practices to support and regulate children's activities in the digital environment.

The essence of sharenting is that a parent adds photos or videos to a social network or sets up a social network profile for their children, despite the young age of the child. Parents do not realise that they are leaving a digital footprint that is virtually indelible. The risk of sharenting arises when parents post a childhood photograph of their child (often of an intimate nature) on the internet, which can later result in the child becoming the target of bullying, for example, in the form of various nicknames or comparisons. It is also a kind of identity theft of the child, which can result in problems with the child's own identity, self-esteem problems, and the like. Shared childhood photographs can be misused for child pornography (Nikodymová, 2022).

The quality of social relationships is also reduced by a type of social exclusion called phubbing. The phenomenon of phubbing is related to the so-called ignoring of interaction between people at the expense of using digital technologies (Roberts, J. A. & David, M. E., 2016). The study of family communication in the context of using digital technologies has been addressed by the authors Procentese et al. (2019). Their findings show that parents use social networks to communicate. However, at the same time, they are concerned about negatively affecting family relationships, for example, through phubbing (ignoring someone or interrupting a conversation or meal to check a smartphone). Phubbing reduces the quality of social relationships and is a type of social exclusion. According to family systems theory, parental phubbing can significantly affect children's feelings, induce feelings of loneliness, and cause them to be ignored or even rejected (Stockdale et al., 2018).

Another phenomenon related to digital technology in families is technoference. It represents the constant interruption of interactions between family members or limits the time spent together due to digital technologies (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Technoference that is associated with family is referred to as parental technoference. Parental technoference involves the distraction of mobile devices during social interactions between household members. Negative consequences can be considered as children experiencing a lack of love from parents, developing behavioural problems, or developing negative behavioural patterns learned from parents. Parental technoference decreases adolescents' satisfaction with family life and the quality of their relationships and increases family conflict (Meeus, Coenen, & Eggermont, 2021; McDaniel, 2019).

Adolescent technoference in the family can result in parental technoference, as pointed out by Stockdale, Coyne, & Padilla-Walker (2018). The phenomenon mentioned above is related to the lack of attention of the parent towards the child, resulting in an absence of interpersonal communication and a reduced quality of relationships, leading young people to use the internet more often, which immediately saturates these needs (Abeeel, Schouten, & Antheunis, 2017). Technoference can be seen as

a 'problematic' use of technology by parents, resulting in irregular interactions between parents and children. Selected scientific studies indicate that parents' use of digital technology with children is associated with fewer parent-child interactions (Radesky et al., 2015).

Children who spend much time using digital devices are less attentive and unfocused, mainly because of their dependence on technology. On the other hand, there is also the problem of what children see on the Internet, including inappropriate content and interactions with strangers, as monitoring becomes more and more of a challenge for parents. In 2016, the European Commission published the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, which addresses the importance of digital skills and competencies. It describes a digitally skilled person: "Being digitally skilled is much more than just knowing how to use the latest smartphone or computer software – it is about the ability to use these digital technologies critically and creatively".

2.2. Methodology

The research aimed to investigate the prevalence of risky online behaviour in families. A partial aim of the research was to find out what research has been conducted on the issue at hand. The aim of the research was focused on families and family settings. The subject of the content analysis was studies published in the Slovak language. The research set was selected based on keyword assignment. These keywords were family, risky online behaviour, and online risks. The selection of the research set was narrowed down to 2019-2024. Clear inclusion criteria within the research procedure characterised the articles analysed. These were attributes such as the research group or sample having to be family-related, the measurement having to include family issues, and the research having to describe the results. Failure to meet these requirements resulted in excluding the text from the systematic literature review procedure. The selection of the research object, i.e., the research articles, was done using a search engine for scholarly texts, namely, Google Scholar because the database indexes the most significant number of online journals.

Based on the text selection procedure of the systematic discourse analysis, 1,480 scientific articles containing the keywords were identified. The specific number of texts included in the analyses i.e. met the criteria listed for studies or monographs published in Slovak language and digital versions. Each article that met the search criteria was analysed in terms of the selection of methods, techniques and research tools for the research variables. Both quantitative and qualitative strategies were included in the text selection criteria.

2.3. Results

Table 2 presents a detailed overview of the selected research studies, including authors, year of research, number of respondents, description of the research instrument used, psychometric characteristics, theoretical framework and study results.

Table 1. Overview of research over the defined years

Year	Authors	Research set	Research tools	Results
2021	M. Kubiátko, K. Balátová, N. Tomčanová	N = 269 secondary school students	questionnaire	The results show that the level of cyberbullying in secondary schools is at a low level. The results show a correlation of cyberbullying with the gender and education of the parents of the students. There was a significant correlation between cyberbullying and family or emotional loneliness.
2020	M. Šavrnochová, J. Holdoš, A. Almašiová	N = 1062 primary school pupils	questionnaire	The results focus on identifying risk groups and risk predictors of excessive Internet use. They also mention respondents at risk of excessive Internet use whose social support from their mother is inadequate.
2021	S. Lovašová	N = 511 students aged 14-21	questionnaire	The results point to the identified risk factors from the parent/parental side, which were addiction, criminal conviction, presence of depression or mental illness, and parenting style.
2020	M. Janková	N = 533 primary and secondary school pupils	questionnaire	The results confirmed that bullying and cyberbullying are among the common socio-pathological phenomena in the school environment. The author points out the obstacles in detecting or eliminating bullying, which are also family problems or unwillingness to communicate on the part of the aggressor's family.
2024	K. Šiňanská, L. Tóthová	N = 100 adolescents	questionnaire	The authors' findings suggest that family support is an influential factor in preventing risky behaviour and highlight the importance of interventions and prevention, the lens of which should be family-centred.
2020	T. Turzák, V. Kurincová, K. Hollá	N = 790 adolescents aged 12-19	questionnaire	A key finding is the increased admission of peer-sexting by adolescents whose parents do not monitor their online activity and warn them about the pitfalls of the Internet. According to the authors, a stable family environment is a significant protective factor against peer sexting.
2022	P. Babinčák		theoretical research	The findings of the theoretical work were a review of the consequences of the pandemic on the mental health of the population, which were mainly depression, anxiety, fear, or anger.

Interesting research findings include the fact that the correlation between loneliness and cyberbullying, as between their respective dimensions, was significant. The aforementioned condition indicates the feeling of loneliness as a significant predictor of the occurrence of cyberbullying. The greater the respondents' feelings of loneliness, both familial and emotional, the higher the level of cyberbullying towards them. Social loneliness was significantly correlated with both cyberbullying and its dimensions. Based on the results, it can be confirmed that if students do not fit in with the group, cannot establish camaraderie, and act lonely, then the level of cyberbullying, whether general, ethnic, or sexual, against them increases (Kubiatko et al., 2021).

Research dealing with disorders related to excessive Internet use points to poor family functioning and family disharmony. A negative correlation between computer gaming-related disorders and the quality of the parent-child relationship was identified in a study by Kwon et al. (2011). However, the role of parental supervision and parental restrictions on adolescents' gaming behaviour is still unclear. Considering that excessive Internet use and computer gaming often lead to conflicts with other family members, interventions should not only focus on the adolescent suffering from Internet use-related disorders but should also involve the family system (Šavrnichová et al., 2020). An interesting finding in the family context is the research of K. Hollej et al. (2020). The implementation of self- and peer-sexting can also be seen as part of the natural process of adolescence in the current „online“ era. Therefore, the need for parents to communicate openly with their adolescent children on topics of intimate life, pedagogising parents, and the whole household environment stands out as being all the more critical. A stable family environment in which good mutual relations prevail is thus an important protective factor against a higher frequency of self and peer sexting and teenage involvement in this area of the virtual world.

In conclusion, we can state that modern phenomena such as sharenting or technoferencing are not sufficiently elaborated or empirically investigated in Slovak conditions. Research has rather pointed to families as a predictor of the emergence of online risky behaviour. The research limitations present in the study are mainly related to the inclusion of only those articles that were published in the Slovak language. Scientific journals and monographs that are only in print were not included in the selection of texts.

2.4. Conclusion

Parents and children are currently exposed to excessive use of digital technologies, unaware of the risks to the family that can result from their use. Nowadays, parents need to take an interest in what their children are doing in the digital world and on

the Internet. The above research findings suggest that parents' digital competence is a predictor of the development of desirable mediation strategies. Therefore, increasing parents' digital literacy is essential. New societal challenges and relevant findings indicate low media literacy and critical thinking skills of adult Slovaks. It is also essential to strengthen the prevention of risky online behaviour in families, as K. Zošáková (2022) pointed out. Parents and children are currently exposed to intensive, irrational and excessive use of digital technologies. They are more aware of the benefits these technologies offer and unaware of the risks that the family may suffer due to their use. It is important to be interested in regulating the behaviour of children and young people in the digital world to prevent them from the risks that this world entails and to adapt to the parenting style and approach of parents in the context of digital parenting (Kollárová, 2023).

According to the UNESCO *Working Group on Education, Digital Skills for Life and Work*, Digital technologies support effective participation in many aspects of daily life and work. The skills and competencies needed to use digital technologies and harness their growing power and functionality have never been more essential (Working 2017). Research documents that a new kind of social cleavage often occurs against the backdrop of the processes of computerisation and digitisation of society. Into those who have and do not have access to modern digital technologies and simultaneously possess varying levels of digital literacy. Lack of digital literacy leads to digital exclusion and is at the heart of the new phenomena of the digital divide and the digital divide (Hrdináková & Fázik, 2019).

Digital literacy for children and young people refers to using digital technologies effectively and responsibly. It encompasses technical skills, such as working with a computer or using the Internet, and the ability to think critically, navigate the online environment, communicate well and search for information effectively. Digital literacy is important in today's digital age, where digital technologies are part of everyday life and work. Children and young people who are digitally literate have a better chance of success in school, work and life. They can make effective use of available resources and information, critically evaluate online content, protect their privacy and security, and communicate effectively through digital media. Digital literacy education should be part of school curricula and programmes to prepare children and young people to use digital technologies comprehensively and rationally. In addition, it is important that parents and guardians also support the development of digital literacy and provide children with an environment where they can safely and responsibly learn and experiment with digital tools and media.

Media literacy is inherently part of the competencies essential for life in the 21st century. Experts agree that media literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to work with information sources, search for and analyse information, understand the

information obtained, critically evaluate it, distinguish between critical and distorted information (true and false information, misinformation, and the like), and compare news from different sources in order to form one's own opinion or take a position on a particular issue.

In some countries, the Safer Internet Centre (SIC) provides information, advice and educational materials for children, parents and teachers on safe Internet use. The centres organise workshops and webinars and provide materials to improve digital literacy and online safety. Sometimes, programmes focus on creating safe community and school environments by implementing educational programmes on digital literacy and safe online behaviour. Interactive courses and games that emphasise online safety are designed to teach children and youth about safe Internet use, including cyberbullying, privacy, and respectful online behaviour. Some programmes aim to provide support and education for parents to help them better understand online risks and improve communication with children about safe internet use. Initiatives work with social media platforms and technology companies to improve the safety and security of children and young people online. These programmes and initiatives aim to provide children and young people with the tools and knowledge to behave safely and responsibly online and improve their digital literacy.

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The topic of this book is both serious and highly relevant. The lives of contemporary families are marked by numerous factors and a high degree of dynamism, which places them in very challenging situations. Most studies highlight these issues and attempt to contribute to their resolution. I believe that the findings presented in this publication may be of interest not only to specialists and students but also, and perhaps most importantly, to teachers, school principals, professionals involved in the practical aspects of prevention and organization, as well as those working with families. Therefore, the contents of this book may also serve as a source of practical suggestions for actions in this area.

Z recenzji

Prof. PhDr. Blahoslav Kraus, CSc.

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