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Family Dynamics in a Changing World

Support, Challenges and Adaptation



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Support, Challenges, and Adaptation

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The Challenges and Risks of Family Upbringing at the Turn of the Third Millennium as a Result of the Expanding Virtual Threats to Children and Youth (Slovak Republic)

ABSTRACT

The intensive development of information and communication technology at the turn of the 21st century has impacted all areas of social life including the family environment. In the current context of family upbringing, concepts such as digital parenting or parental mediation of children's internet use and contemporary technology are often discussed; their importance is rising along with the expanding phenomenon of online risk behaviour among children and youth. This study aims to reflect the changes in the family upbringing in the context of the virtual threats to children and youth. It presents the results of empirical research conducted in 2022, which involved 2,768 primary school students (grades 6 to 9), focused on the prevalence of selected forms of online risk behaviour (cyber-bullying, excessive internet use, sexting, and FOMO). The findings point out that family upbringing requires updating and emphasize its prevention potential.

Keywords: prevention, virtual threats, digital parenting

3.1. Introduction

Today's generation is growing up in a digital world. However, besides countless advantages, it is also accompanied by a broad variety of threats. Virtual threats to children and youth take many forms and can result in social, educational, and health problems, or even life-threatening situations. This fact has been documented in numerous studies around the world (Emmerová, 2023; Kaess et al., 2021; Hollá, 2016; Defenderfer et al., 2015; Wolak & Finklehor, 2011 and others). The digitalisation and online life as contemporary phenomena create many questions related to family upbringing.

Today's family faces a challenge: how to manage and balance out digital parenting to protect their children without hampering their natural development and socialisation. Undoubtedly, if the family intervenes in a child's free time appropriately and applies suitable parental mediation strategies, it plays a significant role in the prevention of virtual threats. On the other hand, an overly strict attitude to the use of contemporary technology may be counterproductive.

For the first time, children naturally encounter digital technology in the family environment. Kopecký and Szotkowski's research (2018) involving 1,093 parents found that 15% of parents lend their smartphone or tablet to their child during their first years of life, while 21% of parents do it in the second year. Between 6 and 7 years of age, parents stop lending them their digital device and buy their child their own phone or tablet instead. This research shows that the digital technology and virtual environment are a part of family life from an early age. Although it is part of natural development, parents should be properly prepared. It is necessary that parents have digital and computer skills as well as the knowledge of how to develop basic media literacy and critical thinking in their children. They need to understand how important it is to keep investing in relationships and discussing the things their child sees and experiences in the online environment with the child.

Digital parenting and mediation – theoretical background

Mascheroni, Ponte, and Jorge (2018) describe digital parenting as a popular concept referring to the increasing parental regulation of children's use of the contemporary technology (parental mediation), and the way parents integrate the digital technology into their own day-to-day life and parenting practice. Therefore, parental mediation can be considered part of the broader concept of digital parenting. Izrael et al. (2020) have pointed out that in the family environment, children do not come across media or technology on their own – this experience is directly or indirectly mediated by their parents. The parents decide what media children can or cannot use as well as the age at which certain media are made available to their children. Parental mediation refers to the activity during which the parent assumes the role of a mediator and regulates or guides the way their child interacts with the media.

Today's general definition of a functional family involves reasonable demands on the child, clear parenting rules, leading towards independence, sufficient love, understanding, care, recognition, and praise. These aspects help the child develop positive patterns of behaviour. These rules are universal and apply online as well as offline. Livingstone and Byrne (2018) also draw on the general principles in their recommendations for parents regarding digital education, which they categorise as follows:

Connection – a positive, stable emotional bond between parents and children contributes to healthy development of children and adolescents. In the digital world, it means that children who have an emotional bond with their parents are more likely to share their online experience with them without fearing punishment related to their internet use.

Behavioural supervision – parents should supervise and monitor their children’s online activities, set clear rules about time spent online or using digital technology before going to bed and while eating. Parents should know what their children are doing online, who are their contacts, and with whom they share personal information, etc.

Respect for individuality – children and adolescents should be allowed to explore the online space independently just as they should be allowed to explore the real world. Understandably, it is necessary to respect the developmental specificities and abilities of the child; younger children require more guidance than older ones.

Modelling appropriate behaviour – a positive parental model is important in digital parenting. The extent and scope in which parents use digital technology impacts their children’s behaviour online as well. If parents spend a lot of free time online, overshare information, or engage in other risk behaviours, it is likely that their children will follow this example.

Protection – parents (should) play a significant role in online protection of their children. As in the real world, parental influence decreases as the child grows up. This fact must be considered in digital parenting.

Kopecký and Szotkowski (2018) have pointed out that digital parenting plays a vital role in the primary prevention of online risk behaviour in children. Their research involving 1,093 parents has focused on the forms of preventive activities preferred in parental mediation; 76.5% parents have instructed their children about the dangers of the internet by discussing them. The second most frequent alternative has also involved discussion, but in this case, children have taught their parents about these dangers (e.g., the child talked about their online activities and the content followed, and the parents asked more). Their results have also shown that 15% of parents do not address online risk behaviour in children at all.

In general, digital parenting has a powerful prevention potential. An appropriate parental approach reflecting the challenges of today’s virtual world and digital technology is becoming increasingly important. Children need to develop digital skills and critical thinking to be able to protect themselves in the virtual environment. The increase in online risk behaviour in children and adolescents represents a contemporary social and educational challenge, which requires constant search for

new solutions. To demonstrate the importance of digital parenting and its prevention potential, the results of this empirical research focused on the online monitoring of online risk behaviour in children at the second level of primary schools will be discussed.

3.2. Method and research file characteristics

The presented empirical research was conducted from September to November 2022, and it involved primary school students (grades 6 to 9). The goal was to identify the prevalence of selected forms of digital vulnerability among children and youth. The research file consisted of 2,768 students with an average age of 12.7 years; their ages ranged from 11 to 15. There were 1,356 girls (48.99%) and 1,412 boys (51.01%). Convenience sampling was used to select respondents for the research sample. Data were collected via an online questionnaire created in Google Forms.

For the purpose of this study, the descriptive analysis of the following forms of online risk behaviour will be presented: cyber-bullying, excessive internet use, sexting, and FOMO. The forms of online risk behaviour were identified using the following scales in the questionnaire battery:

Cyber-Bullying Victimization Scale developed by the author – consists of 17 items measuring different forms of student cyber-bullying during the last three months. The reliability of the measuring instrument was determined by Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = 0.876$.

The Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS) (Meerkerk et al., 2009) is a 14-item instrument measuring the symptoms of excessive internet use. The Cronbach's alpha for the CIUS scale was 0.876.

The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013) is a 10-item instrument measuring negative experiencing, more specifically, fear of missing out on an important online event. The internal reliability of this measuring instrument was determined by Cronbach's alpha: $\alpha = 0.868$.

The Sexting Scale designed by the author consisted of three items, which measured the prevalence of sexting among students during the last month. The internal reliability of this measuring instrument was $\alpha = 0.786$.

3.3. Research findings and discussion

The virtual threats to children and youth represent a dynamically developing and expanding phenomenon, which makes it increasingly difficult to address all its forms. The presented empirical research was focused on the selected frequent forms of this phenomenon occurring among children and youth.

The identification of the cyber-bullying victim number in the research file drew on the average values in the Cyber-Bullying Victimization Scale. Students who achieved an average score of $AM \geq 1.4$ on the 5-point scale for the period of the last three months were considered victims of cyber-bullying.

This instrument showed that 322 (11.63%) students in the research file were indeed victimised. The demographic structure of the cyber-bullying victims can be seen in Table T1.

Table 1. Gender and grade of the primary school cyber-bullying victims

Year	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
Grade 6	29	17.47	18	11.54	47	14.60
Grade 7	48	28.92	45	28.85	93	28.88
Grade 8	48	28.92	60	38.46	108	33.54
Grade 9	41	27.70	33	21.15	74	22.98
Total	166	51.55	156	48.45	322	100

Source: own elaboration of the research results, based on the data collected during the study.

These findings indicate that the victimisation tendency among students increases along with their age. While there were 47 victims (14.60%) in Grade 6, their number almost doubled in Grade 7 to 93 (28.88%) and culminated in Grade 8 with 108 (33.54%) victims. Although the number of victimised students fell by 10.56% in Grade 9, it is necessary to point out that on the other hand, the frequency of contact with cyber-bullying among these students increased. No significant differences were found between genders except for Grade 8 in which girls were victimised by cyber-bullying more frequently than boys ($n = 60, 38.85\%$ vs. $n = 48, 28.92\%$).

Subsequently, the prevalence of excessive internet users among primary school students was identified. Excessive internet use is defined by spending so much time doing certain online activities that it results in personal or relationship issues, or neglecting responsibilities. It is often a temporary period in an individual's life, however, in some cases, it may lead to the development of an online addiction. For the purpose of this research, the threshold of excessiveness was determined based on the cut-off score for the CIUS Scale according to Meerkerk et al. (2009), which equals 28 points. Ultimately, as many as 1,567 students (56.61%) in the research file reached this score. The demographic structure of the excessive internet users can be seen in Table T3.

Table 2. Gender and grade of the primary school excessive internet users

Year	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
Grade 6	189	24.74	148	18.43	337	21.51
Grade 7	228	29.84	256	31.88	484	30.89
Grade 8	199	26.05	270	33.62	469	29.93
Grade 9	148	19.37	129	16.07	277	17.68
Total	764	100	803	100	1,567	100

Source: own elaboration of the research results, based on the data collected during the study.

The highest prevalence of excessive internet users was identified among students in Grades 7 (N = 484/30.89%) and 8 (N = 469/29.93%). On the other hand, the lowest prevalence was identified in Grade 9 (N = 277/17.68%). The difference between the students at the highest risk (Grade 7) and those at the lowest risk (Grade 9) was 13%. From the viewpoint of age, it can be stated that students aged 12 to 14 are at the highest risk. Family prevention focused on the safe and responsible use of the internet and social networks is particularly important in avoiding multiple forms of online risk behaviour at the same time (phishing, deepfake and other frauds, cyber-grooming, etc.). Raising awareness about the risks of posting information, photographs, or data on the internet is of key importance because children and young people live a parallel life on the social networks. Moreover, it is important to be familiar with the secure setup of social network accounts, secure password creation, or proper behaviour in contact with strangers on the internet.

The issue of excessive internet use is often linked to the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) syndrome characterised by fear or worries related to the possibility that an individual might miss out on a positive experience available to everyone else.

Table 3. Description of the FOMO syndrome prevalence among primary school students

Year	Boys		Girls	
	AM	Me	AM	Me
Grade 6	18.7	17	20.9	20
Grade 7	18.5	18	22.2	22
Grade 8	18.7	18	23.8	23
Grade 9	19.5	19	24.4	24
Total	18.79	18	22.76	22

Source: own elaboration of the research results, based on the data collected during the study.

The evaluation of the FOMO syndrome investigation involved an analysis of the average raw score and median since there is no cut-off score based on which the respondents could be categorised. The results show that Grade 9 students are at the highest risk of FOMO. As for the gender differences, girls in all grades scored higher than boys.

The key to prevent the excessive internet use and FOMO syndrome as a family is to lead students towards behavioural self-regulation, but also regulate children's internet use. The ability to self-regulate one's behaviour related to the use of the internet and social networks is extremely important for maintaining both physical and mental health, therefore children should develop this ability. However, it is incredibly difficult to make children alternate between different activities and regulate their screen time in this digital era, and this task is rather challenging for any family. The *Prevention* document published by the Safer Internet Plus community programme calls for clear rules regarding the use of the internet to be set up for children and parents.

Another investigated area was the prevalence of sexting among primary school students. Hollá (2016) has defined sexting as creating, sending, and receiving of sexually explicit content using electronic devices. According to the research findings, as many as 566 (20.45%) students participated in sexting, which makes up for one fifth of the respondents. Students' sexting took the form of sharing or receiving sexually explicit photographs or videos during the last calendar month. This kind of behaviour is extremely risky and may lead to further danger, e.g., this kind of content may end up in a third persons' hands or facilitate cyber-grooming.

Table 4. Description of sexting prevalence among primary school students

Year	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
Grade 6	53	19.70	28	9.43	81	14.31
Grade 7	63	23.42	74	24.92	137	24.21
Grade 8	81	30.11	122	41.08	203	35.87
Grade 9	72	26.77	73	24.58	145	25.62
Total	269	100	297	100	566	100

Source: own elaboration of the research results, based on the data collected during the study.

The research findings indicate that girls participate in sexting more than boys. It is alarming that the average age of students participating in sexting was just 13 years. Sexting was the least prevalent among Grade 6 students (81/14.31%) and the most

prevalent among Grade 8 students (203/35.87%). The presented investigation of the online risk behaviours revealed an interesting phenomenon – all its forms except for the FOMO syndrome escalated in Grade 8 and significantly receded in Grade 9.

3.4. Limitation

The research is significantly constrained by the sample selection. A random sample would have been more representative. Furthermore, the limitations of the self-constructed sexting scale, including its brevity and poor internal consistency, restrict the depth of the sexting measurement.

3.5. Conclusion

Under certain circumstances, the intensive digitalisation and connectivity of today's world may trigger health, social, and educational problems in children and youth. Current generations come into contact with smartphone, tablet, or notebook screens from an early age. This increases the possibility that, besides the numerous benefits provided by digital technology to both individuals and society as a whole, today's children and adolescents will come across its darker aspects, risks, and threats. In this context, parental approach and correct education leading to safe, responsible, and beneficial use of the virtual environment and contemporary technology are extremely important.

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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

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