

Leaving young people to their own devices?

Parents need help to develop effective ways to guide their children on the use of media devices and content

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As the year-end examinations draw to a close and the school holidays begin, parents and children around the island heave a collective sigh of relief. But parents may grapple with how to meaningfully occupy their children during this long vacation period.

With media use absorbing a significant share of young people's time, along with the proliferation of personally owned media devices, the likelihood of young people being glued to media gadgets during the holidays is high.

So can young people literally be left to their own devices?

Parents concerned about their children's excessive screen time, or anxious about them being exposed to unsavoury or inappropriate content, need to find ways to manage their children's media use during this period.

Academics refer to parental supervision and regulation of their children's media use as parental mediation, given their roles as intermediaries who provide their children with media consumption opportunities, and offering interpretations of media content children may need advice on.

In a study funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development, we conducted in-depth interviews and observations with 41 parent-child dyads where the children were of secondary school age and played video games such as World of Warcraft and League of Legends.

Our objective was to understand the different forms of parental mediation that families practise with regard to their children's video game play, as well as their other media consumption habits.

We identified four crucial parental mediation activities that parents undertake in the light of young people's growing media consumption, the increasing diversity of media content available and the ease of access to mobile media devices they enjoy.

Our findings reveal that parents



The likelihood of young people being glued to media gadgets during the school holidays is high, as media use absorbs a significant share of their time amid the proliferation of personally owned media devices.
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exercise gatekeeping, investigative, discursive and diversionary mediation.

GATEKEEPING MEDIATION

As parents purchase media devices and pay for services such as cable, phone and Internet subscriptions, they wield considerable influence over which kinds of media their children can access and the quantity of access.

As principal gatekeepers to media access, parents can regulate their children's range and frequency of media consumption.

Although the parents we interviewed did have their reservations about excessive media use by their children, they also recognise that media use is a key constituent of young people's daily lives, and that blocking usage to manage potential adverse media influence is neither productive nor practical. Instead the parents believe in managing their children's media use on a contingency basis, granting access if the children complete their schoolwork or perform other obligations well.

By the same token, withholding media access is often used as a measure to discipline the child for misbehaviour. This dynamic opening and closing of the gateway to the child's media access is thus employed by parents both to manage the child's media use and to instil self-regulation in the child through the setting of household norms. We term this gatekeeping mediation.

INVESTIGATIVE MEDIATION

The sheer volume of media genres across multiple platforms, as well as the emergence of user-generated content and social media, have created a rich and complex media environment that parents and young people alike must navigate.

Parents must equip themselves with information and advice to

effectively guide their children's media use.

Whereas a media environment dominated by traditional print and broadcast media was fairly well confined to a specific body of programmes, the amazing diversity of media content out there today requires that parents engage in significant fact-finding and information-seeking to fully apprise themselves of what their children are exposed to.

For video games, for example, parents must read up on the context of the game, the levels of violence, gore and sexual imagery the child may encounter, and the potential for the child to interact with online players who are unknown to them. Without amassing such information, the parent is unable to comfortably decide whether to permit the child to play the game and, if so, to what degree.

Moreover, the in-game context evolves as the child "levels up" in video games, which requires the concerned parent to periodically monitor the game play.

Similarly, if the child wishes to set up an account in a new social media

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platform, the parent must acquaint himself or herself with the kinds of interaction the child can engage in, how public the child's online profile will be, and the size and nature of the social network the child will be interacting with.

To be well informed, therefore, parents will have to consult multiple sources for advice from media literacy authorities, news articles, advice columns, and tips from other parents. We term this investigative mediation.

DISCURSIVE MEDIATION

After acquiring an awareness of the benefits and risks of different media platforms and genres, it is helpful if parents convey these to their children. With older children in particular, experts advise that parents take the opportunity to draw their children into conversations to explain why they believe particular media content is edifying, and others less desirable, especially in the light of their families' value systems.

It is through such discussions that children can build the moral grounding to develop their own judgment of media content that they encounter independently.

Through such conversations too, parents can foster a relationship of trust and mutual understanding with their children, so that the latter feel confident about approaching their parents if they encounter media content and situations that are confusing or upsetting. Differences between parent and child can also be worked out through such interactions. We term this discursive mediation.

DIVERSIONARY MEDIATION

Finally, even if media dominates young people's lives today, there is a plenitude of other activities they can pursue to seize their time and energies. Our study found that many parents are deeply cognisant of this fact and deliberately steer

their children away from media use, encouraging them to partake in sports, music, hobbies, voluntary work or other activities that are not media-centred. These parents emphasise to their children the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle, and make the effort to create opportunities for their children to be exposed to such activities, thus diverting them away from media use. We term this diversionary mediation.

These different mediation activities are by no means mutually exclusive and the parents we studied use them in dynamic combinations, depending on the situation and their children's media use habits, behaviour and dispositions.

While media use is pervasive and a valuable conduit for young people's socialisation, different parents have varying abilities to engage in these various mediation activities.

Hence we believe there is a need to step up public education efforts to help parents perform these crucial mediation activities both efficiently and effectively. At the same time, we can give young people more affordable channels to participate in activities that are not media-centred, as organisations such as the People's Association and Sport Singapore have done.

Ultimately, parents are the principal architects of their children's media environment and must be well supported in this onerous yet important parenting responsibility.

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