

Empowering Parents in the Digital Age

Strategies and Tools
for Navigating Online with Children

Edited by Paolo Celot



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1 Preliminary Considerations

Observing children playing outside or walking to school on their own is becoming rare. Children represent about one in five of the EU population, one in three internet users, and 90% of them are online. Most school-aged children spend half of their free time in front of a screen. Digital devices are available from a very early age. Social media, video, games and apps are accessed both at home and on the move. As children get excited about new things that they discover online, some parents complain about their inability to focus on one specific task for an extended period of time and sometimes about their struggle to interact in person with other people.

Adults, too, are fully immersed in the digital environment. Rarely though, do young and older people appear to live the same experiences or share the same spaces online and use the media together. It can still happen that a family plays a game in the living room, but the time when we were sitting on a sofa watching a TV programme together seems now gone forever.

Each family member has their own habits and it is difficult for parents to know what their children are doing exactly with their devices. This new incertitude makes parents feel anxious, inadequate and powerless: *“Is it safe? Is it suitable for my child? Is she missing something, not watching the same video as her friends? What should I do?”*.

Incidentally - to be fair to children, when parents were busy and put their convenience first, they did not seem so worried about using screens to keep children quiet and occupied. Nowadays instead, they appear more confused and disoriented in their daily efforts and are not sure where to seek expert guidance and advice.

To fulfil this need, the Safe Online initiative was first established in Belgium¹ back in 2007 and since then has organised more than 1500 training sessions for parents. Our European Safe Online Initiative (ESOI) followed that successful practice with seven partners joining forces across Europe.² ESOI today engages with hundreds of parents across five different countries on how they could better learn to support their children's digital life.

The scope of this book is therefore to illustrate our experience and offer reflections on the broad subject of online media use by children, focusing on the role of parents. Since 2020 ESOI has provided an opportunity for exchanging practices, know-how and opinions with other experts, with relevant organisations and public institutions. Those considerations embraced multiple interrelated dimensions and levels of discussion, and some are reported here.

To facilitate the adoption of our program in more countries, on the one hand we will report on the methodologies and challenges we faced and the solutions we adopted. We hope to inspire and help other organisation to make use of our methodology and experience. On the other hand, to contribute to the debate on digital parenting in particular, the book draws attention to what we found relevant to truly benefit parents and ultimately to make their children's online experience safer, more meaningful and joyful.

As a clarification, although we often refer to parenting, a family is not necessarily just mum and dad, brothers and sisters. We intend families as an inclusive group, any kind and type of family, married or not, single parents, extended to grandparents, uncles or cousins. It could be with adopted children, same-sex parents, or reconstituted after previ-

1 Flemish Safe Online Initiative <https://veilgonline.be>

2 ChildFocus (Belgium), Gezinsbond (Belgium), European University Cyprus (Cyprus), Sofia University (Bulgaria), EAVI Media literacy for Citizenship (Belgium), Athens Lifelong Learning Institute (Greece), University Timisoara (Romania), Ligue de Famille (Belgium).

ous relationships. What is important is to be present and available, depending on everyone's possibilities, for their children.

It must also be clarified that our exploration of parenting in the digital environment was mainly qualitative, and it has no ambition to provide any rigorous conclusion. Indeed, further reflections should also consider more variables, for instance, that parents are different from each other. This diversity is due to differing cultural, economic and social backgrounds as well as individual personalities, experiences, values and styles. For instance, some research suggests that parents of different nationalities react differently to the same online risks and harms.³

Children as well differ from each other by age, gender, attitudes and practices.⁴ Furthermore, the environment they are immersed in is dynamic and unequal regarding the possibility of accessing the internet, the media in general and managing digital devices. This is particularly true for those belonging to disadvantaged segments of the population. For multiple reasons thus, parenting is not one-size-fits-all, and different approaches may work well for some and not for others.

Still, while our conclusions can only be partial, we found that, within the same categories, children in Greece, Bulgaria, Belgium, Romania and Cyprus live pretty much similar digital lives. We feel, therefore, that the reported experiences could be similar to those encountered by many other parents across Europe and will offer useful elements to reflect upon.

3 Views of children and parents and cultural differences across EU countries from Denmark, Hungary and the UK <https://www.childnet.com/what-we-do/our-projects/project-deshame/research/>

4 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/eu-kids-online/eu-kids-online-2020>

Parents

Within the project, parents played a dual role of being both the target and the instrument to reach the ultimate beneficiaries, their children.⁵

It should be noted that our participating parents were very often the mums, rather than the dads. Very rarely did both parents attended together. This would have been the best modality of participation as they would have conveyed a more clear message to their children.

A guiding principle adopted in the project's early stage was to first listen to parents, to their realities, their needs and suggestions. Unsurprisingly we heard them calling loudly to address their concerns. While the rhetoric of risks and opportunities was acknowledged in principle, our parents seemed to be more aware of the dangers rather than the benefits of technology. Real or perceived feelings of a growing wave of risks their children would face daily online were persistently restated. Similarly, the 2023 OFCOM report found that parents of 3-17-year-olds overall felt that the risks to their child of using social media, messaging or video sharing apps/sites outweighed the benefits.⁶

The ESOI project aimed at supporting parents exactly in developing a more balanced approach and in understanding how they could care for their children and how to use technology in a safe, responsible and fun way.

⁵ Following the convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC), everyone under the age of 18. In our project though children were mainly those under 15. It is to be noted that in January 2023 a law proposal in France suggest to fix at 15 the age for a child to use social media https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/textes/116b0739_proposition-loi

⁶ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf

Clearly, while the Internet presents potential risks, it also offers amazing access to information, connection with other people, participation in communities, entertainment and learning opportunities. Indeed the digital world offers many possibilities for children to learn, create, and express themselves in many new ways.

It is to be noted that also scholars – and certainly many media news reports with their sensational approach and dramatic headlines - often emphasise the risks above the opportunities, protection over empowerment. Still, again the two approaches must be balanced, and they go together. Managing both is essential to being a media literate parent, mitigating the risks and benefitting from the opportunities such as fostering children's creativity. Parents can encourage their children to explore their passions through technology and ideally engaging in activities together to create a positive bonding experience. This can provide an opportunity for parents to learn about and understand their children's interests and can also help to strengthen the relationship between them.

In our opinion, therefore, some of the parents' anxieties referred to above were not always well-placed. While every parent should accompany their children in their online discoveries, children are not gullible. Being online is part of their life. Like learning to climb a tree or to ride a bicycle, they must be exposed to it to develop their skills also by trial and error and learn what works better for them.

Having said that, childhood is precisely the period to explore, form an identity and believe in others. Children's innocence should not be exploited for commercial interests. Some boundaries from families and legislative initiatives from public institutions to rule private corporations are urgent.

To sum up, digital parenting involves guiding younger children to use technology safely, monitoring their online activities, setting boundaries

and teaching them to be responsible in a positive and beneficial way. It also includes educating parents themselves about digital technology and providing them with the tools and resources they need to support children when facing risks, to enhance their creativity and learning, and have fun instead.

Policies

When used well, the internet can broaden horizons and stimulate everyone's knowledge. However, both young individuals and adults may be susceptible to dangers, albeit in diverse manners. While ample, deep reflection and consistent scientific analysis should continue, it is clear that children need their interests to be respected and their rights to be better protected. They have the right to access quality content, information and entertainment using their digital media. Adults, too, of course, share with them the same rights including those to freedom of expression and access to information⁷ but children's human rights extend to the right to play and take part in cultural and creative activities.⁸

Our project emphasised educational and awareness measures, particularly media literacy education for parents and their children. As we mentioned already, it is clear to us that to increase the authority, capacity and effectiveness of parental involvement, awareness-raising and media literacy measures are essential but insufficient. To achieve any significant results at collective level and supporting parents effectively, policymakers must take greater responsibilities and do their part.

⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁸ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

Technology's rapid change, together with the powerful lobbying of the media industry, in fact, means that effective regulation and education are constantly lagging behind. This can lead to damaging consequences for children's health and adverse social effects. Some efforts, especially at EU level⁹ but also in the UK¹⁰ and recently in the USA,¹¹ have been noticed. In this respect the new European strategy for Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) by the European Commission¹² is very welcome. The strategy builds on previous work and is built around three topics: Safe digital experience, digital empowerment and active participation.

Incidentally, we note that discussions about policies, including the European Commission's hearings, should involve all actors and experts. For example, it would be desirable to see greater use of humanitarian, social and political science subjects experts such as neuroscientists, psychologists and sociologists to work together with technical and legal experts.

As a brief outline, this book comprises three principles parts: Following some preliminary considerations, the second chapter introduces digital parenting concepts in the context of media literacy. It is followed by a chapter presenting our project, its methodology, its activities and its assessment. Policy recommendations are exposed in the fourth chapter. An appendix includes more detailed information about the specific subjects of the training.

Further information can be found online¹³ and by contacting the authors and the partners.

9 The European Commission attaches a high importance to the protection of minors. Shaping Europe digital future <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en>

10 <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/49376/documents/2822>

11 The California Age Appropriate Design Code <https://californiaaacdc.com>

12 A European strategy for a better internet for kids <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/strategy-better-internet-kids>

13 European Safe Online Initiative <https://europeansafeonline.eu>



Digital Parenting

Parenting in the digital age is a dynamic and continuous process. Digital parenting is about how parents and caregivers deal with the digital environment in their families. How parents communicate, supervise and educate their children about the digital world. In an online environment which has been designed for adults, navigating deliberately towards positive content could be complicated, harmful content is easily accessible, even to small children. Technology moreover is evolving so rapidly that it is challenging for parents to keep updated with trends which impact online children's experiences and family life.

Parents therefore need support in their journey as their task is becoming increasingly difficult. Understandably, often they do not have the possibility, the willingness or the time to do so properly. Even our participants, who came from privileged settings and were ready to engage, lacked sufficient understanding. An average parent struggled to realise, for instance, the full implications of sharing personal information, how profiling works, or the power of disinformation to shape mistaken opinions. They were also unaware of how to access tools to prevent abuse and protect children's physical and mental development and where to find good quality resources to enhance their children's capacities to learn, play and connect in ways that are not available in the analogue world. Moreover, not all parents are capable of being always present and engaging meaningfully with their children.

Experts also signal the limits of excessive, rigid control from parents as being ineffective and sometimes counterproductive, increasing family conflicts and being easily bypassed. Some of our testimonies from parents also go in this direction. Parents' behaviour, including

bad examples, is unsurprisingly reflected in their children's use of digital media. It is to state the obvious, in fact, that digital parenting is a subset of parenting and it is a part of other family dynamics. These recalls recognised pedagogical principles such as building mutual trust, supporting each other, learning together, providing guidance, reassuring and communicating.

Children, especially younger children, indeed need digital parenting more than ever as technology has become integral to their lives. Although some kids now seem to know more than their parents, especially those older than 15 years, digital parenting can help them to develop healthy habits, critical thinking and balance their time spent on digital devices with other activities.

In this context, parents should not be left alone. Some public provision and support also through civil society organisations is available but only in certain countries. EU funding through programmes such as Erasmus¹⁴ or the European Social Fund could also be accessible.

It must be noted that the ESOI project took place during the pandemic, an exceptional period which led to an unprecedented increase in screen time, also for young people and children. This is on top of figures which already showed that one in three internet users is a child¹⁵ and 50% of children use the internet from the age of seven.

School closures and lockdowns have forced families to turn to digital solutions to keep their children connected to the outside world and to the education system. According to the EU Joint Research Center (2021), children from 11 European countries reported spending 7.5 hours online daily during the lockdown; half of this time was appar-

14 For instance, recently the DigiGen research - working paper on family and ICT <https://digigen.eu/results/childrens-ict-use-and-its-impact-on-family-life/>

15 Statista, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; JRC, 2021.

ently dedicated to school activities but still nearly one parent out of two expressed concerns about their children's online time.

Families

Families as a unit concept are also increasingly using digital media technologies in Europe in their daily lives and routines. European families use digital media technologies for various purposes, such as communication, entertainment, education and information gathering. For example, to keep in touch with friends, access educational resources and stream movies. According to Eurostat, Internet access in Europe is almost universal for households with children (98%). European children and young people are particularly heavy users of digital media technologies, with 96% of children aged 9-16 using the internet regularly and 92% using social networking sites. We all grow up today in a media-rich environment, with access to smartphones, tablets, laptops, and gaming consoles.

Children's and young people's digital and non-digital lives are often strongly intertwined, meaning that digital activities are used to support their non-digital activities and vice versa. Indeed, they seek information online, communicate with friends from their offline worlds via social media, and are often constantly available on their smartphones. This behaviour makes children and young people feel that they are always online and blurs the lines between their online and offline lives¹⁶.

Children and adults obviously also use their digital devices at home, and it is interesting how these technologies affect family life in terms of the communication and negotiation process within the household.

16 As an example, data from Belgium regarding children media usages can be found on Apestaartjaren <https://www.apestaartjaren.be/> and Génération2020 <https://www.generation2020.be/>

It could lead to family members feeling disconnected and less engaged with each other, to conflicts over device usage, or can make it difficult for family members to disconnect and engage in other activities together, such as meals and leisure activities.

Again, while certain habits are quite widespread, the reality that each family is living is different from each other, as it also depends on each one's socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Digital inequalities bring children who live in less educated, low-income families to be less likely to have access to the latest or best devices (Livingstone et al. 2015). There is also an indication that teenagers with higher levels of formal education are more likely to own a laptop by themselves. In contrast, for those with lower levels of education, gaming console ownership seems more common¹⁷.

As said, technology has become more integrated into daily life. In the next few years, we can expect to see even more advanced technologies, such as the widespread of artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things, becoming prevalent in everyday life. Again these technologies have the potential to bring many benefits, such as making certain life activities more convenient and efficient. Still, they also come with the usual risks, such as data privacy, addiction and security concerns.

Media Literacy

The importance of raising awareness and implementing media literacy (ML) initiatives has been dealt with in numerous exchanges and incorporated in both research and policy papers at the international level.

¹⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302370076_Changing_Practices_of_Family_Television_Watching

A vast bibliography of studies and policy papers is easily accessible online.

Those papers conclude that the development of media literacy, therefore developing people's (including parents and children) media competencies, skills and attitudes - certainly not be limited to acquiring only digital technical skills at the expense of more critical questions about how to evaluate media messages - should be considered vital for establishing a knowledgeable and democratic society, thus contributing to enriching progress and advances in society. Research, authors, civil society and high-level international conferences have since long underpinned and requested more and better policies to facilitate that process.

Nowadays, though, defining media literacy's exact objectives beyond general principles can be problematic. ML encompasses different elements, and it applies transversally to many different subjects. Recently it has been recalled frequently about confronting disinformation, understanding how artificial intelligence works and staying healthy with the challenge of the pandemic. It includes topics relevant to digital parenting, such as the following: the impact of digital inclusion; the role of artificial intelligence and algorithms; the protection of personal data, privacy and copyright; proscribing illegal content such as pornography; tackling harmful content, hate speech, cyberbullying; understanding commercial advertising; reducing online addiction to video games, or social media; understanding technologies such as virtual reality and many more.

Moreover, media literacy is a concept in a constant state of flux, depending on contextual factors such as the advance of technology and cultural, economic, social and educational backgrounds. Within the scope of this book, a guiding principle in policy and practice is that initiatives have to be adopted, having first in mind the children as the ultimate beneficiaries.

We note that, while it may be difficult to come to a consensus on what is in the best interests of a child – a primary legal consideration for decisions which affect them - we could immediately take action against what for sure is not in their best interest. As that list is long enough already, it could be easier for policymakers to find a consensus and proceed with regulation.

Some Media Literacy Definitions and Key Properties

Considering different approaches to media literacy and referring to internationally shared principles, it is safe to conclude that the 2007 European Commission's comprehensive definition is appropriate to refer to.

“Media literacy may be defined as the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now confronted with daily and are an essential part of our contemporary culture, as well as to communicate competently in media available on a personal basis. Media literacy relates to all media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies.

“Media literacy aims to increase awareness of the many forms of media messages encountered in our everyday lives. It should help citizens recognise how the media filter their perceptions and beliefs, shape popular culture and influence personal choices. It should empower them with critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills to make them judicious consumers and producers of information. Media education is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the

*world, to freedom of expression and the right to information, and it is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy.”*¹⁸

For two decades the research community has proposed many more definitions and models to describe media literacy. While a shared definition would indeed facilitate policy adoption, it is unlikely to emerge, and it could prove unworkable.¹⁹ Still, worldwide, the experts very much agree about what media literacy is about and what are its constituent parts. In the end, all different models recall the same principles and individual competencies, as follows:

- a) The skills to access first and be able to use technology and media products and services properly;
- b) The capacity of being able to evaluate and understand the information encountered and the context within which the media is produced and delivered, the so-called critical thinking;
- c) The ability to participate with confidence and be well-informed in every aspect of public life, from social networking and other online communities to elections and democratic processes.

In addition to the above individual competencies, a set of contextual factors facilitate or hinder the possibility of developing media literacy in a country. In particular, within (a) formal education (media education), the integration of media education in schools, as a separate or integrated subject, is crucial for the development of capable individual

18. Communication from the European Commission, 2007 A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0833&from=el> complemented by further considerations.

19. Celot P. Perez Tornero et al. (2009). Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels, A comprehensive view of the concept of media literacy and an understanding of how media literacy levels in Europe should be assessed. European Commission https://eavi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/eavi_study_on_assessment_criteria_for_media_literacy_levels_in_europe.pdf

citizens and (b) media policy, lacking coherent policies, sporadic initiatives cannot have a significant impact.

It is becoming progressively more evident that the above individual competencies, defined thus as abilities to develop specific skills (technical, cognitive, and participative) must be reinforced and based on people's capacities to cultivate personal attitudes and approaches.

As the impact of the pandemic crisis has revealed, people's media routines with work, education, exercise and socialising moved more online. To live better with such an amplified exposure to the media, those attitudes should include an increased awareness of how we conduct ourselves online. This would contribute to developing healthier reflexes, observing how our emotions are triggered and understanding how this influences our choices to capture attention and drive revenue or propaganda to commercial and political interests when using digital devices.

This is the reason why, together with the traditional models, we will briefly expose an enhanced perspective designed by one of our partners, which aims to provide insights and gain knowledge about the role of certain additional attitudes that are necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of media literacy.

The Art of Living in the Digital Environment

EAVI, with 20 years of experience and extensive research, has contributed decisively to the above-mentioned current understanding of media literacy, and it feels that these concepts should ultimately be brought back to a more human-based and multi-dimensional perspective. It follows a new vision of media literacy which is not just a set of skills to acquire. Cultivating deeper personal attitudes and approaches

is equally essential. Here is a very brief outline of these concepts and processes. It is structured in four different components that complement each other.

Critical Consciousness

To fully understand a media message, it is not sufficient to read a piece of information critically, nor is it to build a rational capacity to analyse a media message. In order to truly understand media content and the context from which it originated, rational thinking should rest on solid values such as integrity, ethics, empathy and fairness. In essence, what is called here critical consciousness, is composed of critical thinking skills and, as a preliminary condition, of sound personal attitudes and values. The risk is otherwise to acquire, if anything, only empty notions and flat information. Therefore, the term consciousness is meant to provide a much deeper dimension.

Awareness of Experiences

Furthermore, media literacy should not only be about rational, logical thinking. Developing awareness of the emotions that are triggered when encountering media content is equally important. Do we realise that online we are often distracted for a purpose, for someone else's interest? We must be aware that we are subject to propaganda, a state of being emotionally manipulated or that we are spending a certain number of hours online. To become media literate, it is necessary to recognise feelings and understand how this influences our choices and thus learn to develop better reflexes.

Digital Well-Being

Once people have evaluated the benefit and consequences of their media use, they need to be truly capable of using those technologies safely and confidently to their own advantage. With the advent of many mobile equipment, the internet of things, machine learning and artificial intelligence, we need to possess the ability to be in control as much as possible of these technologies. These skills could be anything from simply being able to switch on and off the respective devices, adjusting the privacy settings of social media, avoiding online frauds or refusing consent to third parties to use our personal information and data. We need to know how to do it. This third component further extends the need to acquire adequate technical abilities.

Full Global Citizenship

Once we have matured our respective individual skills, people can be encouraged to learn how to contribute to better communication welfare. In this respect, we can be more capable of either relating to one another or being actively part of a community. In the first case, people learn how to connect and share content with others properly. Secondly, in our capacity as citizens, we should be able to participate and engage in the societies we are part of. Nowadays, this participation is essentially through the media; it spans national borders and is, therefore, global. This participation, to engage in public life using the media contributes to healthier global societies.

Some Other Initiatives to Support Parents

It is now clear that the 21st century of digital parenting needs a new rulebook. As illustrative examples amongst many other initiatives, the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) aims to provide guidance for parents, educators and policymakers on how to support children in the digital age. To ensure children's well-being, the OECD specifies the areas in which parents may need support:

- in fulfilling their role of evaluating and minimising risks of harm and optimising the benefits of the digital environment for their children;
- in being aware of the rights of children in the digital environment, as well as the mechanisms for enforcing those rights;
- in understanding their children's rights as data subjects, as well as how their children's data is collected, processed, shared and used;
- in understanding how to access remedies and services when their children require assistance as a result of harm suffered via the digital environment;
- in having an awareness of online commercial practices that may cause harm to children;
- in fulfilling their role, ensure their children become responsible participants in the digital environment.

Our ESOI initiative also developed some recommendations reported later in this book. On the ESOI project website,²⁰ one can also find the five modules in four languages that parents can follow about the following: internet and privacy, cyberbullying, social media, online games and relationships. Experts' advice and research is also available

²⁰ <https://europeansafeonline.eu/>

at a national level. Many networks such as the European Safer Internet Centres²¹ and Inhope²² and very valuable experts and researchers can be consulted. As for resources, many are available. For instance, on www.betterinternetforkids.eu parents can find pedagogical material in several languages to accompany their children online; on Webwise.ie²³ information, advice and tools to parents to support their engagement in their children's online lives. Other resources include the following:

- information about the opportunities and risks of children accessing the Internet and using mobile devices, with tips and tricks for parents;²⁴
- maintaining open communication with the child and handling difficult or risky situations the child encounters online in a calm manner, avoiding blaming, shaming or blaming the child;²⁵
- adopt a balanced behaviour in the use of the Internet and mobile devices to serve as a model for the child;
- negotiate and establish rules for Internet use and behaviour with your child;
- Offer children alternatives in their leisure time.

21 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/safer-internet-centres>

22 <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/policy/insafe-inhope>

23 <https://www.webwise.ie>

24 <https://safelyonline.eu/#Start>

25 <https://safelyonline.eu/socialmedia/#Start>



The European Safe Online Initiative

The European Safe Online Initiative (ESOI) was established to address the challenges reported in the previous chapters. It is the brainchild of the Flemish Safe Online Initiative applied to the larger context of the European Union and, specifically, by representatives from five countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania. It is therefore a collaborative effort between various associations and educational institutions to educate parents and educators about the opportunities and potential risks associated with their children's media use. Building on the diverse expertise and knowledge of these organisations to help parents and educators become more aware of the digital landscape and how to navigate it in the best interest of their children.

This chapter focuses on the description and evaluation of the program and how it has been put into practice in five distinct national contexts. It outlines the challenges and opportunities the partners encountered and how they dealt with them. It discusses parental needs, their participation in the programme, and how partners ensured to accommodate the former and secured the latter.

In doing so, this chapter allows for a close examination of how the know-how from the Flemish Safe Online Initiative translated into the European Safe Online Initiative in practical and tangible terms.

The project was informed by global research in the field and adhered to widely recognised media literacy principles. The ubiquity and pervasiveness of media in the contemporary world and the reciprocal relationship established between each individual's online and offline realities have been at the core of media research for many years. The need for media literacy and its positioning as a high-priority contem-

porary skill has repeatedly been highlighted in the literature and media summits.²⁶

The European Commission has also paid attention to this need. It has prioritised the promotion of media literacy through various legislative acts, initiatives and funding opportunities over the last years, allowing for research in this field to develop further²⁷ (EU Digital Priorities in G20, Bali, Indonesia 2022; European Media Literacy Week; Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28, among others).

Although much of the discussion and initiatives here inevitably revolve around the topic of safe internet²⁸ especially when it comes to children and adolescents, such efforts to address the core issues that directly relate to online participation and its offline counteraction, fall short of addressing the core of the issue at hand, which is the education of users on the sociological aspects of life online and the offline phenomena that are both the direct consequence as well as the cause of our online activity and presence.

Moreover, when it comes to children's online participation, many efforts focus on addressing this dimension separately. It assumes their lack of experience and maturity, which would conduce to finding themselves in dangerous situations. This approach disregards the fact that these young users form part of a more comprehensive social

26 Among many more policy documents at the EU level: The European Commission recommendation on media literacy in the digital environment (2009); the Paris Declaration of EU Education Ministers (2015); the European Council Conclusions on Developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training (2016); the European Commission High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Online Disinformation (2018); the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018); The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (2018); the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) (2018); the European Council Conclusions on Media literacy in an ever-changing world (2020); the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027); the Digital Services Act (2021). It should also be acknowledged the extraordinary work that UNESCO has been done in the last decades on media information literacy.

27 Developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training (2016); Alvares, C, Cardoso, G, Dahlgren, P, Erstad, O, Fornäs, J, Golding, P, Nieminen, H, Sparks, C, Splichal, S & Xinari, C (2015); Mari, Sol Pérez Guevara (2017). EU policy and actions related to media literacy, in Wadbring, Ingela and Pekala, Lars. (eds.) Citizens in a mediated world: A Nordic-Baltic perspective on media and information literacy. Göteborg: Exacta print; European Commission (2018). Media literacy for all and many more.

28 <https://cybersafety.cy/>; <https://saferinternet4kids.gr/>; <https://saferinternet.org.uk/>

network built by adults in which school and family education also constitute an essential part.

Thus, to promote media literacy initiatives, digital literacy and internet safety, the majority of the efforts consider their primary target audience the children or the educators.²⁹ Many have highlighted the importance of going beyond the concept of ‘e-safety’ or simply limiting screen time (Kellner, 2007) and the importance of the involvement of parents in the process of development of media literacy skills in children (Pareira, 2015; Verbist, 2017).

As the majority of media education occurs where the children live, at home with their families, or for some in institutions with caretakers, the ESOI project emphasises other critical aspects of the online presence and participation of young digital citizens, such as the role of parents in acting as media coaches for their children. By building trust and good communication, parents can engage better with their children and build together knowledge and media literacy skills. Thus hopefully, playing a better role model at home and within the family.

Although the situation changes in different cultures and countries, including the concept of family, we found that in a world where digital technology is becoming widely accessible, offering guidance and quality digital parenting is more effective than attempting stricter monitoring and surveillance to support children.

The Flemish Safe Online Initiative has proven to be successful in this regard in its native Belgium. It has gained European recognition and credibility by receiving the award for best practice in the prestigious #SaferInternet4EU Awards by the European Commission in 2018.

29 for example, <https://saferinternet.org.uk/> or <https://mediacoacheurope.com/>, www.betternet.be

This is one of the reasons the ESOI project aimed to replicate that initiative in more countries. Nonetheless, this required an adapted approach in both methodology and content to suit the needs of different national contexts.

This effort and its results were also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exploded in the middle of our project and presented new challenges. The subsequent increased use of the internet, including by children, further highlighted the need for a better understanding of how the online and offline worlds could interact and the necessity for more media literacy programs.

Overview of the Methodology

The original Flemish initiative used a combination of online platforms and face-to-face seminars for their training. When replicating that practice, we drew from their expertise and experience and used the same approaches. Therefore, the project's partners used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous engagement and used the information and resource materials stocked on the platforms and available to parents.

Each implementing country developed their platform in their national language. As a result, four platforms were developed in Bulgarian, Romanian, French and Greek (actually two versions in Greek, one for Greece and one for Cyprus).

The platforms offer access to materials covering the five envisaged modules of the training. They include various interactive activities that parents can use to engage with their children, information for each module, and testimonials from children, teenagers, parents and experts. Translations of the content already developed by the Flemish

partner were organised first in English and then in the respective national language.

Partners themselves were encouraged to adapt the content and add further information to serve the needs of the seminars. The video testimonials were recorded by each partner in their national context, aiming to offer a feeling of ease and familiarity as well as access to first-hand accounts from their national context and in their language. This is important as, during the seminars, parents were encouraged to learn from their peers, share concerns and experiences, and discuss alternative approaches used by other parents.

As well as being available to the parents anytime they wish, the content on the platform is also picked up and used as training material during the face-to-face two-hour seminars. This provided parents with information, valuable tips, and examples and prompted discussions among the participants. Each partner aimed to train five hundred parents on all five modules. Plans were developed to identify and invite participants in each local community. Partners either approached parents' associations and schools directly or launched open calls for participants. Training consisted of two to three hour seminars delivered face-to-face to groups of approximately 20 parents.

While partners were in the middle of this exercise, the COVID pandemic impacted the activities planned. While the need for the training was reinforced by the new realities that parents and children were living, it required a revision and obliged to adopt alternative approaches such as online webinars for the train-the-trainers as well as for the training for parents.

The training was delivered by national trainers (and not by the partners). Those selected participated in five online seminars to get familiar with resources and methodology before three trainers from each country eventually were able to meet in person and follow the train-the-trainers

seminars in Brussels. Some partners organised a few online interactive training sessions. In these online workshops, the interactive methodologies were simulated online (e.g., via breakout rooms). Once the situation across Europe allowed, national face-to-face workshops were implemented.

The consortium held regular monthly meetings via teleconference calls with the participation of representatives from all partners. In these online meetings, they could discuss the progress of the various tasks and ensure that the flow of work continued despite any challenges posed by the pandemic. Sessions were organised in situ at schools or other convenient spaces. In some cases, it was still considered beneficial to offer some seminars online as it was not possible for some interested participants to travel long distances.

Parents' Concerns and Needs

Assessment of parental needs was an essential part of the project implementation. In this respect, the leading organisations, Child Focus & Gezinsbond, offered the experience they gained over the years and the model they developed to gather parental needs assessment. Partners still used different methods, such as surveys around the training sessions or discussions with parents organised during events. This was particularly the case for the partners familiar with another EU project, the European Media Coach Initiative. Their experience has helped the parental needs assessment considerably. This expertise and the pre-training input collected have ensured tailor-made training content. Feedback shows to have satisfied parents' expectations to a considerable extent. In the end, parents across countries expressed similar concerns.

Regarding Module 1: Social media, those needs include the demand for knowledge of how specific applications work and why children and teenagers like them so much, what level of security they can provide; what dangers and risks users can run into; the time spent online by children and teenagers; and what type of connections with other people they make through these apps.

Regarding Module 2: Internet and Privacy, the concerns expressed related to what personal information children share online, how online privacy works, what types of photos are appropriate for sharing, and what content may be dis/liked publicly. A central question was how to explain to children what online identity is and how it should be safeguarded.

Regarding Module 3: Online Gaming, parents were mainly concerned about issues such as why gaming is so attractive, how games are made to make you play more and the long time spent gaming; possible gaming addiction; how to build and establish trust between children and parents regarding their online behaviour; the inability to control or set limits to children's gaming activity; fear related to gaming content such as violence; moreover risks of emulating behaviour and poor school performance.

Regarding Module 4: Cyberbullying, partners mention this issue as the parent's primary concern. It includes a lack of clarity on how to react if parents realise that their children are being bullied online or have taken the role of online aggressors, how to improve children's trust in their parents and how to cooperate with school authorities regarding cyberbullying.

Regarding Module 5: Online relations and Sexuality, parents expressing a lack of comfort, uneasiness and even shame in discussing children exploring their sexuality online seem to be the main problem. Parents do not know how to approach those issues and take a passive

role even during the training, relying mainly on trainers' input. The problem seems to be further accentuated by the fact that, in countries such as Greece and, to some extent, Bulgaria and Romania, the school programs do not provide a good place for discussing sexuality.

In order to provide information and teach skills that matched parents' expectations, we first explored their main concerns and needs. In an increasingly complex digital environment continuously changing, we felt that it was necessary to start validating our assumptions and adapting the training developed by Gezinsbond and Child Focus in Belgium. While parents represented our most immediate beneficiaries, children would ultimately benefit from their accrued knowledge. Other carers, such as teachers and educators, were also kept in mind during the process.

To obtain relevant information, the partners of ESOI deployed several actions about parents and digital parenting in general. The following was arranged: The Ligue des Familles, Sofia University, Gezinsbond/Child Focus used the information from local e-safety helplines that provided helpful insights into the concerns of parents. Ad hoc research was also conducted by Gezinsbond, Sofia University and the West University of Timisoara. Furthermore, the findings of a large-scale biennial study³⁰ about the digital world of Flemish children and young people between 6 and 18 years old were rendered available by Gezinsbond/Child Focus.

In Bulgaria, the Sofia University research was conducted by Safe Net Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Media Literacy Coalition, and by media literacy PhD students. The West University of Timisoara conducted more desk research. Many other ESOI project partners, such as the Athens Lifelong Learning Institute and the European University of Cyprus, also held questionnaires for parents, interviews and focus groups.

30 <https://www.ugent.be/mict/en/research/projects/2020/apestaartjaren>

During this process, we took the opportunity to investigate broader issues affecting the parents and their children's digital life. This included information about their social and economic background and the platforms, tools and devices they use. Moreover, insights about their initial media literacy competencies were collected and information on their children's media behaviour and fears. They were asked to report about their media life and their communication with their children on those issues.

For example, questions included the following: *Have you put any restrictions on your children's internet use? How much time do your children spend online? What are your views on the games your children play online? Which social media platforms do your children use? To what extent are you aware of whom your children are talking to online? Are you aware of cyberbullying incidents among children?*

Analysing all the collected information enabled us to understand the broad spectrum of questions parents were facing and revealed some prejudices and misunderstandings. Some relevant issues could be grouped into the following categories:

Rapid technological development: Parents struggle to stay updated with technology and their children's tools and platforms. They usually recall their time as a child when technology was not so widespread. Many believe that it was easier to be a parent back then. Parents seemed to have some basic technological knowledge and skills but needed more information and training. This lack of knowledge creates anxiety because they feel powerless to prevent what they consider risky situations for their children.

Screen time: Parents worry about how much time their children spend in front of the screens. They worry about their children feeling isolated and not spending time with friends in a more 'traditional' way, about the content they come across and their possible related health problems, such as issues with their eyesight and orthopaedic issues.

Some try to monitor and set rules about the time their children spend in front of a screen. Still, they feel unsatisfied with the results they achieve, wondering if there is a rule that experts suggest for a reasonable amount of time children should spend online.

Cyberbullying: Parents seem aware that cyberbullying incidents happen. They are highly concerned about the associated risks their children may face. They are worried about their children being threatened, harassed, humiliated and exposed. Many of them have heard in their social environment of incidents that have happened amongst children, and they are unsure whether they would be able to detect similar events, for instance, if their children would be bullied or if they were those harassing others.

Online sexuality: Teenagers use the internet to interact with peers and meet new people. Parents are concerned about the content their children share, whom they are talking to, and about any threat of sexual exploitation, including revenge porn. Parents sometimes feel very uncomfortable discussing such issues with their daughters and sons and would like to know how to approach this subject.

Games: Parents worry about the time their children spend gaming online and the kind of content they interact with in these games. They are concerned about violence and aggression in some videogames and their impact on children's behaviour. Issues of addiction to videogames, personal isolation and neglect of their school responsibilities are among their concerns.

Disinformation: Parents worry about the false content their children may find online and how to support them in critically approaching it. They find that fake news would mislead their children's correct understanding, and they want their children to get information from reliable resources, especially on essential issues. Fake news may include news

considering politics, science, show business, etc. Reliable sources may be regarded as academic sources or from verified media.

Privacy: Parents report that children's extensive use of social media brings risks to the content and personal information they share. Parents need to know how to support them to avoid violation of privacy. Some are aware of certain restrictions they could modify in each platform's settings but are not sure if this is effective.

Communication within the family: Parents express more general worries about lack of communication with their children; they are unaware of the right age to talk about specific issues or to use a digital device, how to reach out to their children, and what matters to discuss to support them in their online behaviour. Parents are eager to communicate and discuss those issues with their children, but many seek guidance as sometimes their efforts have led to opposite results.

Children's needs: Parents say that they wish to explore their children's needs to support them fully. They have discovered that nowadays, the internet is also a necessity and a need of their children, but they are uncertain how to address it. They cannot stop the use of the internet, but at the same time, they do not want to leave their children on their own.

Aggressive behaviour: Parents report that when they try to monitor their children's online behaviour, some children react aggressively, tension rises, and ultimately, this is not a practical way of dealing with the matter. Parents, though, have different styles in approaching this issue. As illustrative examples, we report some quotes that emerged during our talking with parents during the interviews, the focus groups and the training itself:

"I am worried I will not have a clue how to guide my son through the technological maze."

“We should certainly not wait until the children are 10 or 11 years old to communicate about dealing with online media. This foundation must already be laid in the upbringing of (very) young children.”

“I usually check, at the end of the week, the time my child has spent online and sometimes I am worried about it.”

“My child is always on the screens.”

“I do not understand any of this.”

“There is a lot of tension at home around internet use.”

“In our day, there was not all that and it was easier”

“Gaming is addictive and violent”

“I am highly concerned about my child seeing social media as a need.”

“I explain to my daughter that the photos we upload could deliver the wrong message.”

Is this Anxiety Justified?

We should first say that parents seem to focus much more on risks rather than on opportunities their children may find to learn and connect with others. From our investigations, it emerges that parents seem aware of particular risks their children may face and of some strategies and tools they could use to control their internet use. They appear, for instance, to set restrictions based on the content children could access or the time they may spend online.

Using restrictions in children's best interest without causing further problems is not easy.³¹ The goal of any restriction should be to protect the child's best interests, promote their healthy development and help them learn to make good decisions for themselves.

Parental concerns seem justified when considering young people's widespread use of the internet. Still, their anxieties may also lead to unnecessary panic and behaving erroneously as they are often not sure of how exactly to approach the issue. Parents want to protect their children from possible risks without considering that their uncontrollable actions may cause even more harm to them (Boyd, & Hargittai, 2013). Intensive parenting is quite common nowadays and may lead to over-parenting creating negative consequences considering children's mental health. Parents' concerns result in tight monitoring of children's everyday lives and may also violate their right to privacy (Bernstein, & Triger, 2010). Banning internet use is not a solution and we cannot overlook the benefits children may get. The Internet provides an excellent opportunity for communication, information, education, entertainment, creativity, and civic participation. It is all about learning how to use the internet wisely so as to be able to enjoy its advantages (Çankaya, & Odabaşı, 2009).

Different parenting styles significantly influence children's behaviour and play a vital role in their development. Some scholars define parenting styles as authoritative, positive authoritative, authoritarian and uninvolved. Authoritative parents seem to have more positive outcomes (Kuppens, & Ceulemans, 2019; Spera, 2005). They report that, in general, parenting consists of two main dimensions, namely parental support and parental control. Parental support relates to a healthier relationship between parents and children, allowing parents

31 For instance Shefali Tsabary, a clinical psychologist encourages parents to move away from a punitive approach to discipline and instead focus on building a strong relationship with their children. Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist emphasises the importance of understanding the child's brain development and emotional needs when setting limits and boundaries. He encourages parents to be empathetic and to help their children learn to regulate their own behaviour.

to be available to their children. It leads more often to a more responsible use by children. A stricter parental control, such as spending limited time online, may also be linked to some positive results, but only if it is well-informed. Excessive control instead seems to result in a number of behavioural and psychological issues (Kuppens, & Ceulemans, 2019).

We also notice that parents deploy a form of media parenting based on their own fears and base their advice on the risks that they imagine their children could encounter online. In reality their children's real use of media is often significantly different and probably safer. It would be good to align parental guidance with the real digital practices of their children and build bridges between parents' perceptions and their children's real needs.

Supporting the Parents

At this stage of our Safe Online Initiative, the ESOI project, it was clear that parents needed support to improve their digital parenting. Through delivering face-to-face seminars addressed to parents and resource materials, the project aimed to support them and their children and improve more effective communication between them.

Training sessions, therefore, were designed also following the Flemish Safe Online Initiative and consisted of five thematic fields:

1. Internet and Privacy;
2. Social Media;
3. Online Gaming;
4. Cyberbullying;
5. Online Relations and Sexuality.

Further research has been carried out for each thematic field, and educational resource material has been designed for the training sessions. The trainers were free to decide in which order they should use the resources and facilitated fruitful discussions between parents. The flexibility of the methods ensured better connections and kept the participants attentive, thus ensuring a valuable transfer of knowledge.

Keeping in mind that online media are part of our children's daily lives, we usually start setting a more positive mindset focusing on the possibilities and opportunities of online media rather than just on the risks that may be encountered. The sessions highlighted the importance of establishing good communication with children, listening to them and agreeing to boundaries without excessive criticism, possibly avoiding judging them. The focus was, therefore, on providing practical support for parents based on a more realistic vision and constructive attitude. The sessions also leave room for the exchange of experiences between parents themselves, so that they could be inspired by and learn from each other.

We felt it essential to bring closer the bubbles within which parents and children live. Often perceptions about children's media use could prove incorrect. The pathway to an open, non-judgmental, and caring dialogue must be kept open. Parents should support their children by looking at their media use with an attentive mind and attitude, asking first themselves open questions such as: *How do children and young people behave online? What do they do online? Which apps do they use, why, and what for? How do I set limits that are understood and respected about their media use or screen time? What is more important? What should I pay more attention to?*

The five national teams adapting and implementing the program in Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania and French-speaking Belgium have chosen to adopt the same topics and replicate the material and resources in their platforms and audiences. The reasoning behind this choice is multifold. To begin with, the relevance of these topics to the

target audiences has been tried and tested via their successful implementation in the Flemish context. In deciding to adopt and adapt the Flemish Online Initiative and make it available to five different national contexts, the project consortium examined the topics and considered them important and suitable for their national contexts based on existing research and previous experience.

Of the five countries involved in the adaptation, Francophone Belgium was culturally less diverse than Flemish Belgium, which made transferring the same topics an obvious choice. Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania had evidence that these topics/modules were relevant to the target audience's needs through their recent successful participation and completion of another KA3 Erasmus+ co-funded project, The European MediaCoach Initiative (EMCI). In the context of EMCI, educators and youth workers were trained on ten topics/modules. These five were common to all training programs, even though each country had based their selection of issues on an Environmental Assessment and collecting expert opinion conducted before the passage of the problems. Interest in these five topics was high among that target audience - many of whom were also parents - proving that these topics were high on the agenda of those directly interested.

Moreover, other projects in the field of media literacy have addressed similar topics and raised the issue of the importance of these topics as a concern for parents.³² Another advantage of selecting the existing modules used by the Flemish Initiative was that these were already available, built gradually over the years and offered a solid basis for the other national teams to work on. They considered that the national teams already had experience and significant background knowledge in media literacy. Adopting the existing topics allowed for the possibility and potential of enriching and updating them accordingly while adapting them to each respective national context.

32 For instance "Parenting for a Digital Future" on <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/>

It is important to note that, in adopting the existing topics and module content, the national teams fully recognise the need for constant updating of information and of materials as well as the value of localisation when it comes to producing testimonial videos featuring local people or providing information or examples from the local community to give the content credibility and make it more relatable to the target audience. Finally, it is worth noting that constantly updating these modules is necessary to follow research findings and contemporary theories on related issues.

Patterns of Involvement and Commitment. A

Guiding Principle: Peer-Learning

The learning experience is better when parents can discuss with each other and share their views, experiences, and concerns. Facilitating interactions between the participants is critical during a training session. The trainer has the vital role of initiating it and guiding the parents in this process. The exchange of ideas and good practices (and even not-so-good practices) allows parents to share and critically approach their preconceived ideas and attitudes when handling challenges relating to their children's participation in the online world and their relationship to the mediascape.

The methodologies used in the Safe Online training stimulate and support this peer-to-peer learning process. Different methodologies are used to stimulate this interaction. The trainer also provides insights and more extensive information about specific topics. The participants learn not only from the information provided by the trainer but also from each other (peer-to-peer learning) by sharing their respective experiences. This creates a sense of involvement. Parents feel they are being listened to, and their questions and concerns are addressed.

Peer-to-peer learning, in fact, allows learners to observe the strengths and weaknesses of ideas from multiple perspectives and facilitates their participation in communities as factors of exchanging knowledge and experience (Guldborg, 2008). A sense of belonging is formed as peers realise that they share similar experiences and concerns and try to critically analyse the situation and find solutions (Nind, 2021). The participatory approach enables learners to interact with one another and get more involved in the educational process. They become more active, discuss, cooperate and eventually learn better. Technology may also facilitate the process by using valuable tools and devices (De Pietro, 2013).

Various tools and methods were implemented for this purpose by the ESOI partners in their respective training sessions to stimulate this interaction, such as the following:

- Icebreakers and energisers (e. g. showing pictures to discuss);
- Quizzes (interactive, playful) to give parents basic information about each theme (using, e. g. online modules, Kahoot, Slido, Mentimeter, Jamboard);
- Infographics;
- Group conversations, free exchange of opinion;
- Testimonials of children of young people about what they do online, why they like it and why it is essential to them;
- Testimonials of parents about how they deal with their children and how they approach each topic in the family (good practices);
- Testimonials of experts who provide simple explanations and tips on a specific theme;
- Statements with a concrete opinion on a theme (to be discussed) that are not right nor wrong, but there is an underlying vision (agree/disagree);
- Facts (yes or no);
- Open-ended questions;
- Parenting tips on the theme.

Offering and discussing the direct testimonials of children, parents and experts, which are part of the educational resource material and are presented during the training sessions, gives a chance to the participants to reflect, think critically, recognise their own or their children's behaviour, and express their views. That is also part of the peer-to-peer learning process to facilitate learning.

The significant differences between adult and children's training are the degree of motivation, their experiences, the level of engagement in the learning process, and the learning approach used. Each adult brings to the learning experience preconceived thoughts and feelings that will be influenced by each of these factors (O'Brien, 2004). To respond to this, the ESOI project uses the approaches mentioned above (peer-to-peer learning, participatory approach), which have been considered successful.

Parents Participation

Response from parents has been truly encouraging. For instance, training dates were filled up in Greece as soon as they were announced for the first few weeks of the seminars; several private schools expressed a remarkable interest in Athens. In Cyprus, responses from parents' organisations and associations from public and private schools also confirmed the need for these seminars. At the same time, meetings were offered to parents via the European University Cyprus LifeLong Learning program targeted at alumni of the university.

Even though the training was still ongoing at the time this chapter was being written, the consortium could report some estimated numbers from the seminars that had already taken place. The Ligue des Familles, in French-speaking Belgium, for example, reported 10 sessions had taken place since September 2022 with an average of 15 participants

in each session. They also benefit from their ongoing collaboration with BSF (Libraries Without Borders), an NGO that organises media education sessions for children and teachers in schools. They have used similar methods of promoting these seminars as European University Cyprus, by distributing information via email and attending events such as teacher's fairs or symposia to promote their activities. European University Cyprus expects to have completed a total of 25 seminars with an average of 20 participants per seminar before the end of May 2023 to reach the goal of 500 trained individuals by the end of the project. The Athens' Lifelong Learning Institute in Greece also reports that they expect to have completed an equal number of seminars and participants between December 2022 and February 2023.

It is worth noting that in Romania, where seminars started in January 2022 and were completed in October 2022, the number of participants exceeded the target of 500. The Romanian partners offered these both face-to-face and online and reached 696 participants (575 parents and 121 teachers). Forty-six seminars which varied from groups of 9 to groups of 25-30 individuals, were offered. Three trainers who were employed in the project were involved in these seminars, which covered Timisoara and Brasov (West and Centre-South Region of Romania), and even though seminars run for 10 months, ending in October 2022, the trainer in Brasov offered to run more seminars if there was continued demand by parents. In a similar manner, the Bulgarian project team succeeded in organising 20 face-to-face and six online training on the five modules, completed by over 450 participants in 2022. It is anticipated that those numbers will increase further by March 2023.

Both the final numbers from some national contexts, as well as the projected numbers by others at the time the book was being written, are truly encouraging and show that such initiatives are both needed and well received. However, it is important that partners ensure that the information for the seminars reaches the target groups and that the seminars are adequately promoted in the community.

Parents' Satisfaction with the Content and Delivery of the Training

Parental satisfaction was assessed using a questionnaire completed at the end of each workshop. Parents participating in the training have declared high satisfaction with its outcome. Most probably, this is due to the preparatory work conducted by all partners and made good use of the experience of Child Focus and the modules of Gezinsbond. National partners agreed that they were adaptable to each local context. In other words, it can be concluded that the training content offered, discussed and analysed has been entirely appropriate and addressed the parental needs expressed by the participants in the training.

When it comes to cultural differences, although such exist, they seem to have brought about only a few significant changes in the delivery of the training content. This also indicates the great adaptability of the model and suggests that it could be used in other countries.

Some Problematic Issues

In the process of implementation, some problems were identified. These concerned especially the functionality of the platform, the relationship with trainees, false expectations by the trainees themselves and, in some cases, reaching out to parents.

Platform Functionality

Despite alleged improvements and public announcements that schools in many countries were equipped with better, faster internet, this was not necessarily the case, nor was the equipment available at locations technically adequate to allow for proper interaction with the platform.

In the pilot phase of the seminars, trainers reported that Internet speed and accessibility at home and training locations were not always adequate for the platform to be used during the workshops.

Sometimes alternatives were found to deliver the courses offline with backup video and information resources material.

It also needs to be considered that not all households have computer access. Although navigating the platform from home was possible using a smartphone, the experience and quality were compromised.

Trainers and Trainees

The trainer's capacity and profile are essential for the training seminars' success. Parents are a heterogeneous category. Sometimes, the only common denominator in a group is that they share similar concerns and challenges. Even within a group of twenty parents whose children may attend the same school, the parents presented different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds and parenting styles.

The trainer needs to address all parents' needs. They need to be good educators, sympathise, be non-judgemental and inspire trust so that the parents feel comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of being criticised for their practices or parenting style.

Moreover, as the ESOI program works on the principle of peer learning, parents must be enabled to share and learn from each other, and the practices shared during the seminar. Although tips and advice are offered during the workshops and via the platform, these are for discussion with the parents so that they learn how they can be helpful to themselves and their children. In short, it is essential that parents experience the seminar as a safe space and that the trainer functions as a facilitator, not simply a teacher.

Developing a good relationship with the parents is thus essential for the seminar's success. Trainers need to demonstrate that they master the subject and that they are also open to listening from the parents and together identify both the threats and their possible solutions. In other words, trainers need to support parents having strong communication and mediation skills on top of their technical knowledge.

Wrong Expectations

Parents could attend the seminars with the wrong expectations. Group discussions at the beginning of the workshop showed that sometimes parents participate, hoping to get a practical solution for their children's media use. Some parents expected a straightforward answer to their parenting problems, difficulties and concerns. Therefore, they were disappointed to discover that the seminar only offered knowledge and resources for them to apply and that there is not a 'manual' or a straightforward recipe for media parenting.

It was also clear that parents are sometimes poor models for their children when it comes to using their own mobile devices and social media. They may conduct themselves online contrary to how they would like their children to behave - for instance, sharing extensively photos and videos of their children on social media without asking their permission, having themselves an unhealthy relationship with

video games, and spending long hours with their smartphones. Being such a bad example affects their children's attitudes and learning.

Sometimes we found that parents were resistant to the suggestions of the trainers. These were judged too liberal or progressive and conflicted with their parenting styles. Our trainers were told not to force any teaching but only offer widely accepted indications to be reflected upon.

Finally, at times we found that parents have already taken some initiatives, sometimes in line with our trainers' suggestions and often those that are easier to apply, such as confiscating their children's devices or forbidding them to play video games. Not having noticed immediate positive results, they have quickly discarded them as ineffective practices.

As it is crucial to building trusting relations with their children and other variables such as time and consistency play a role, this was not surprising.

Attracting Parents and Securing Their Participation

Although both our research data, experience from previous research projects on the topic, and informal data (informal discussions with parents, educators and school administrations) have made clear that parents were concerned about the unhealthy and risky relationship their children develop with the internet, in the beginning, they found difficult to commit to following the seminars. It has also been observed that attendance in face-to-face seminars decreased following the pandemic. This was probably due to the fact that many adults found it more proficient to stay at home and also do other activities while participating in a seminar online. This was certainly the case during the days of lockdown and many appreciated the benefits of participating in a seminar without having to leave the comfort of home. Generally

speaking, in all countries, participation increased when the seminar was offered online, but at the same time, the active interactions declined. In some cases, parents simply wanted to receive straightforward tips and advice and not be involved much and share their own experiences.

Moreover, schools (and parents and educators) were overwhelmed with many offers of post-covid seminars, making it difficult to accommodate every opportunity, and again when they did, their participation was quite poor. Factors such as national holidays, school exams and unusual weather conditions also affected attendance and participation in all our national contexts. Parents' associations also report that although parents were given the possibility to choose the topic to follow, often their attendance was low, especially if the seminar was only offered in person.

In many cases, educators who were also parents themselves were among those more interested in the seminars on media literacy, possibly because they could also benefit professionally. In this respect, issuing certificates of attendance for participants proved useful. This was indeed a crucial objective, to attract as many individuals as possible in order to improve their skills so that they could, in turn, serve as better examples to the children and help support them in becoming autonomous users. Overall, sometimes granting active participation was a challenge, but in normal conditions, the classes were filled quickly enough.

Addressing Those Most in Need

The predecessor of ESOI, the Flemish Online Initiative, emphasised the need to reach out to parents most in need. Underprivileged families based on socioeconomic criteria, single parents, immigrant families, and members of communities with fewer opportunities for media

education. They were reached in Flanders by working together with organisations that support these more vulnerable parents;

The partners recognise that those who are needing media literacy skills the most have little access to information and education. But reaching out and offering seminars to these population segments was only rarely possible for ESOI.

Parents who work long hours do not have the time to attend. Those members of underprivileged communities or on the fringes of society may never hear about our seminars. Although efforts were made by taking the discussions everywhere, we relied on a proactive interest shown by those who have already attempted to address these issues.

In Cyprus, for example, it was observed that many of the parents participating were highly educated, had read around the subject and had already attended other seminars on similar topics organised by the school or other fora. In Greece, there was significant interest from private schools, which suggests that many of the parents came from the higher levels of the socioeconomic spectrum. In Bulgaria the problem to reach underprivileged parents was partially solved by organising face-to-face training in the country-side, as well as by including such parents in workshops conducted online.

The Need for Constant Evaluation of the Project

The mediascape is fast-changing. Developments in technology continuously create both positive and risky engagement. Society evolves and forms new attitudes and ways of relating to the media and each other. Therefore, any media literacy training program must remain up to date and allow for continuous evaluation of its content and methodological approach.

A reflective evaluation should also consider the project's impact and results and ways to improve while ensuring that work that began in the context of this project may continue after funding is completed.

To this end, evaluation questionnaires completed by the participants at the end of each session give implementing countries an insight into the programme's main components, including the current needs of parents, their expectations, and how the seminars have supported them. The collection of such data will enhance the program's quality in the future. It will ensure that the program remains current and relevant to societal needs and responds to the needs of parents and children for a safe and healthy relationship with the online world.

4 The ESOI Recommendations

Considering the pace of digital transformation and the exposure of young children, including toddlers, to technology and digital tools, it is crucial to provide parents with effective tools and sound knowledge to respond to new challenges and to empower them to accompany their children in the digital environment. Before providing further elements for reflections, it may be useful to clarify certain principles and concepts as we used them within our ESOI project.

Some General Principles Used in the Project

1. Digital Parenting Is First and Foremost (Simply Parenting)

It refers to the approach, attitude and style adopted by parents in relation to the media use and the digital experience of their children. It is intended as an attentive behaviour to care about the needs of the children when confronted with media and digital experiences. As it has been mentioned, media or digital parenting does not stand on its own. It is embedded in the global parenting process, so the same set of skills, competencies and values apply to it. By strengthening parents in their educational role in general, media parenting will be supported

and vice versa. See for instance the European Pillar of Social Rights.³³ Overall, it is important to help parents to build on the same values valid to acquire other skills and attitudes also to this specific part of their parenting role.

2. Parenting as an Inclusive Concept

Not all children have two biological parents. Not every child lives full-time with both parents. Not everyone accompanying a child is a parent. Grandparents, step-parents and other adults such as carers, guardians, social workers, teachers and the community as a whole can play an important role in the everyday parenting of children and young people. However, they may not identify themselves as parents. We should therefore refer to a wide set of family systems.

We see parenting as the raising of children and all the responsibilities and activities involved in it, regardless of whom takes this role up. Campaigns, tools, resources, policies and other initiatives should adopt an inclusive approach. Media parenting therefore is a process where different actors cooperate to ensure the (digital) well-being and development of the child into adulthood with digital and other media.

Policy Recommendations

Many children are accessing content online that is not designed for them. Data report, for instance, a high number of children watching adult-only pornographic videos, being overexposed to video games, intense social media use, online hate speech, disinformation, being

33 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

bullied and harassed.³⁴ It is also clear that children are drawn to dramatic content on purpose.³⁵ They may all cause mental disorders and disturbing experiences.

Moreover, social media and video-sharing platform companies are actively creating ways to track children's behaviour that reveal their interests, illnesses, views, mood and financial status. These companies seem to know our children better than ourselves, their parents.

As mentioned, it is not easy for parents to find guidance and resources to protect children and manage their digital devices and online experiences. Moreover, different parents have different needs and styles. For instance, they could embrace or reject technology, depending on their personal understanding and attitudes. This, in turn, could result in restrictive or permissive rules for their children. Both approaches providing uncertain results as a perfect recipe does not, and cannot, exist. In such a multifaced environment with social, economic and cultural components at play and a continuously changing media use landscape, it is not surprising to notice that even if some policymakers are making intense efforts to manage digital parenting, it persistently escapes them.³⁶

Nevertheless several policy measures have already been adopted, and more are currently being discussed at international and national levels.

34 O'Neill, B 2023, Research for CULT Committee – The influence of social media on the development of children and young people, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels

35 OFCOM. Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2023 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf

36 Sonia Livingstone Parenting for a digital future, Oxford University Press 2020

The EU Legal Framework

The EU framework relevant to digital parenting is multifaced and still fragmented. While International Treaties and Fundamental Rights Declarations refer to applicable general notions and principles, an increasing number of legislative acts address specific issues and set suitable rules across Europe. Policies follow several notions, one of which is the kind of content encountered online. Different sets of provisions depend on whether addressing illegal or harmful content.

The European Commission defines illegal content as any material that is in violation of law, including the sale of products or provision of services, which is not in compliance with EU law. The EU Digital Service Act,³⁷ for instance, applies to all kinds of illegal content (as diverse as hate speech, child sexual abuse material, revenge porn or infringement of intellectual property).

Harmful content refers instead to any material that has the potential to cause harm to individuals, including bullying, self-harm and suicide promotion. It can be legal, but it is still considered harmful and should be removed from platforms to protect users.

That distinction has also informed the comprehensive approach of the Better Internet for Kids initiative of the European Commission published in May 2022,³⁸ which in turn follows the principles set in the EU Strategy on the Rights of Child³⁹ and builds on previous work reaffirming the protection and promotion of the rights of the child

³⁷ The Digital Service Package (DSA and DMA) entered into force in November 2022 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>

³⁸ <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu>

³⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2021) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0142>

and the ambition to build the best possible life for children in the European Union and across the globe.

The Better Internet for Kids strategy structures the envisaged actions around three main pillars:

1. Safe digital experiences to protect children from harmful and illegal online content, conduct, contact and risks as young consumers and to improve their well-being online through a safe, age-appropriate digital environment created in a way that respects children's best interests;
2. Digital empowerment so all children, also those in situations of vulnerability, acquire the necessary skills and competencies to make sound choices and express themselves in the online environment safely and responsibly (i.e. media literacy);
3. Active participation, respecting children by giving them a say in the digital environment, with more child-led activities to foster innovative and creative safe digital experiences.

Again, we stress here that point (1) protecting children online and point (2) empowering them, must go hand in hand, as neither of the two is sufficient by itself. To do so, it is crucial to us to adopt both mandatory regulations to combat illegal and harmful content while also promoting self-regulation and codes of conduct to encourage media, video-sharing and social media broadcasters to subscribe and act responsibly towards their more vulnerable clients.

Referring to the latter, we note that the adoption of a new code of conduct on age-appropriate design is currently in discussion at the EU level. The envisaged code should provide a higher level of privacy and verify children's age before they can access online content. Although some initiatives have been noticed, such as YouTube for Kids, platforms are not currently verifying the age of their users. It is likely that things

will be different soon. In this respect, it is particularly valued the work published in March 2023 by the Digital Futures Commission.⁴⁰

With reference to the third pillar of the BIK initiative, while it seems obvious to many that the views of parents and carers should indeed be part of the debate on the media use of their children, we notice that often this is not the case. It is therefore an additional important principle as it recalls a more positive understanding of media literacy encompassing the promotion of media use when it comes to creating and sharing content and connecting with others online. Thus both promoting children's participation for positive effects such as obtaining information or making new friends as well as protecting them from accessing harmful content online and giving them a voice about what matters to them.

The BIK strategy also calls on Member States to prioritize digital resilience for children. This is to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge to make informed choices and communicate safely online. To achieve this, Member States should cooperate with Safer Internet Centres conducting media literacy campaigns for children, teachers and parents and use those networks to support vulnerable children and reduce the digital skills gap. We are of the opinion that EU Member States should be obliged (not just advised) to support the Safer Internet Centres financially as a one-stop source of information on media literacy and online safety for children, their families and teachers.

As we near the end of this section, it is important to remind other existing EU rules such as the provisions within the Audiovisual Media Services Directive,⁴¹ which among others, lays down rules on the protection of minors and human dignity; the mentioned Digital Services Act package to better regulate the digital environment and

40 5Rights foundation <https://digitalfuturescommission.org.uk>

41 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/audiovisual-and-media-services>

make it compliant with child rights by design, ensuring that online platforms and services are held accountable for the illegal content on their platforms and services, and that sets out rules for the removal of such content; the General Data Protection Regulation⁴² on the collection and processing of personal data, including those of children; the Communication on Tackling illegal content online, which was published in 2018; the Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, also updated in 2018; the Code of Practice on Disinformation,⁴³ updated in 2022 which includes provisions to help users (including young people) to evaluate the credibility of the information they consume; the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan⁴⁴ to address digital deprivation and ensure support to families and the Education Action Plan,⁴⁵ aimed at fostering digital skills and competences, to ensure that all citizens, including children and young people, have the digital skills and competences they need to participate fully in the digital society; the 2021 Artificial Intelligence Act,⁴⁶ to regulate new AI systems to be safe for all, including children, to use.

Although this list is not even complete, it shows the strong intention of Europe to provide essential principles and provisions affecting children's online experiences.

Specific Recommendations Emerged from the Project

In addition to the principles which led to the adoption of EU policies as previously described and as an outcome of our specific experience

42 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>

43 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

44 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

45 <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

46 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-approach-artificial-intelligence>

both as individual organisations and as a consortium within the ESOI project findings, we wish to offer reflections about the importance of those principles.

Therefore, we invite relevant EU institutions, the European Commission, European Parliament and European Council, as well as its organs and agencies linked to these institutions to draw attention to the topic of media parenting subject and call on policymakers to consider the following.

1. Allocate Funding to Support the Needs of Vulnerable Parents

Notwithstanding some legislative efforts, support for vulnerable parents is often offered by small, local grassroots. By making financial support more accessible to grassroots organisations that support vulnerable parents and carers including for instance parents or children with disabilities, migrant or low social-economic background, LGBTQI+ communities, their digital inclusion would be strengthened. This would contribute to reducing the digital divide between the haves and have nots by providing access to tools and guidance and thus allow the most vulnerable to participate more and benefit from the impact of the digital transformation. When parents don't proactively show interest, information should be provided via integration, social services and cultural organisations.

A lack of media parenting is contributing to children's vulnerability. For children who are already living in vulnerable situations, media parenting is even more critical. Research shows that an offline vulnerability often translates into an online vulnerability, influencing one another. A recent UK study showed an increase to seven times higher

risk ratio for vulnerable children and young people online than for mainstream young people.⁴⁷

Education and mediation by parents concerning digital environments are considered important and decisive ways to promote responsible media use. Mediation by families is part of the educational process. In discussing world affairs with children and deconstructing daily life events, families play a mediating role. As media are part of children's everyday life, it is crucial that parents include explaining how and why the media works in their mediation process. Thus, helping them to understand media messages and to develop a healthy and safe relationship with them. Children need to be offered guidance through autonomy-supportive parenting so that they are empowered to benefit from the opportunities that the media provide. At the same time, they also need to be protected with respect to their rights, such as their right to privacy and their right to express an opinion.⁴⁸ Combining the existing vulnerability with a lack of media parenting leads to an increased vulnerability with more exposure to risks related to harmful contact, conduct and content, combined with not having learned ways to mitigate them or where to seek help.

In this context, media literacy education needs to consider the primary educational player: families, parents, grandparents and other carers. In this respect, parents and grandparents play a crucial role since a lot of learning occurs within the family. Thus, media literacy programmes aimed at improving parents' critical thinking about media are probably the most effective way to improve children's responses to media exposure.⁴⁹

47 Adrienne Katz & Dr Aiman El Asam (2021). *Refuge and Risk: Life Online for Vulnerable Young People*, Internet Matters.

48 Sara Pereira (2015). *Why Parental Media Mediation is Important? Media Literacy in Europe: Inspiring Ways to Involve Parents*. The Evens Foundation.

49 Rasmussen, Eric E.; White, Shawna R.; King, Andy J.; Holiday, Steven; and Densley, Rebecca L. (2016) "Predicting Parental Mediation Behaviors: The Direct and Indirect Influence of Parents' Critical Thinking About Media and Attitudes about Parent-Child Interactions," *Journal of Media Literacy Education*

Therefore, we recommend making EU funding available for small grassroots organisations that work directly with vulnerable children, parents and families that often do not have the capacity or expertise to respond to EU calls of proposals. Significant representation and consultation of parents from different vulnerable backgrounds play an important role here and are essential in creating programs that address them effectively.

2. Adopt a Comprehensive Approach to Practices and Policies for Parents

Access and adaptation to the digital environment should be granted to all parents by providing them with tools and knowledge to build strong skills and expertise throughout the whole digitalisation process.

Parents require easy-to-access devices, tools, educational programs and appropriate information. Generational and economic gaps render this task more difficult for them. People involved in parenting should be given the means to understand both the technical and educational challenges linked to their children's use of digital devices. Providing access to digital platforms, tools and resources are essential but insufficient. Without teaching and granting knowledge, it could even be counterproductive. Often, in fact, digital inclusion focuses solely on access or merely on technical how to use aspects. More advanced competencies such as risk identification, risk mitigation, how to stay safe and responsible or how to act when something goes wrong are also essential skills for both parents and children. We find that nowadays, different programs, policies and players tackle these aspects in a very disjointed way.

Therefore, programs that promote digital inclusion should be complemented by social and educational policies to empower everyone to build comprehensive expertise, stimulate their critical thinking and

enable them to respond better to the challenges that the digital transformation poses. In doing so, parents will be helped to respond more appropriately. They will be able to educate, transfer knowledge and guide their children towards developing their own digital competencies in a positive, wiser and creative exploration of the digital world.

In the context of digital parenting, the so-called Matthew Effect⁵⁰ also applies. Many existing tools and campaigns aimed at educating parents about the safe and responsible use of media, in fact, tend to only reach those parents who are already involved with media parenting, and not those who need it the most.

This can create a gap where the parents who are already engaged with media parenting are better equipped to navigate the challenges of the digital age, while those who are not engaged are left behind. This can perpetuate the digital divide and make it harder for the most vulnerable children and families.

It is, therefore, important to ensure that digital parenting tools and campaigns are designed to reach all parents, including those who may be less engaged or who may face additional barriers to accessing resources. Within this effort, we also call for the role and responsibility of the media industry to offer more opportunities and create spaces to encourage those processes.⁵¹

3. Involve Parents in the Policy-making Process

Parents should be actively consulted and invited to participate in policy-making and programs that concern them. Notwithstanding the

⁵⁰ Matthew Effect, also known as the “accumulative advantage” or “rich-get-richer” phenomenon, refers to the idea that small initial advantages or disadvantages tend to compound over time, leading to larger disparities in the long run.

⁵¹ See also https://digigen.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/DigiGen_7_2_Final.pdf

proclaims, for instance, the EU open consultations only reach a few stakeholders and civil society organisations. More detailed, open, and accessible consultations should be organised, providing opportunities for all parents to give feedback and provide input. By taking steps to ensure that the consultation process is inclusive and reaches all categories of parents, digital parenting policies, tools and programmes can be designed to be more effective and responsive to the diverse needs of all parents and families.

4. Improve Cooperation between Professional Educators and Parents

Parenting is not only the business of parents. It concerns a larger set of actors. Even children who live in traditional families with their biological parents have more than just these two educators in their lives, teachers, for example. We find it essential that parents and professional educators actively cooperate and align in the education of a child. When parents are not on the same page as other educators, children move through the chiaroscuro of misaligned home and school life, receiving conflicting messages. When school, family and students are aligned instead, the chances of reducing communication noise and working together for more meaningful learning outcomes are greater. Especially in media education, there is a clear co-responsibility between parents and professional educators such as teachers. Some topics are better addressed in schools than at home and vice versa. As digital media is omnipresent in the lives of our children, it is important that media education is provided on both fronts, in informal and formal settings, at home as well as at school. Such shared responsibility would also lead to more frequent communication and concertation.

Governments, policymakers and schools should therefore ensure that the link and connection between these key actors in the life of a child become structural and systemic, promoting meaningful exchanges between them.

5. Promote Peer-Exchanges to Develop Parents' Skills

Parents should be given the concrete possibility to express themselves freely and share experiences with peers, ideally without feeling judged and schooled in their way of parenting. Most training and related initiatives are one-directional towards parents: an expert provides instructions, a video, course or book and parents are expected to follow that advice. This approach entails consequences which are not always beneficial. For instance, believing that following a given recipe would solve all problems of media parenting. Instead, media parenting depends on additional factors that are often neglected such as the character of the child, the family values, more practical issues and the way to look at the world. Therefore, it is important to support and sustain lifelong learning courses and initiatives such as our open approach at the ESOI programme to offer tools to empower parents to accompany their children better online. Facilitating the discussion among peers, taking into account that proposed solutions need adaptation to the parenting styles. Accessible and adaptable resources should be made available to parents. Enhancing cooperation with parenting associations, media literacy organisations, lifelong learning institutes, universities and other relevant actors is also essential.

We found that peer support among parents is also fundamental, as it can help parents navigate systems more effectively, learn from the experiences of other families, feel less isolated and share ideas and

information. This support can help parents meet their children's needs more efficiently, with greater confidence and hope. In complex topics such as media and digital lives, where value-based questions and anxieties are overwhelming, this parents' peer support could significantly enhance the quality of media parenting.

Appendix The ESOI Modules: The Five Pillars

The ESOI Modules: The Five Pillars

The Safe Online training is organised within five main subjects: *Internet and Privacy, Social Media, Gaming, Cyberbullying and Online Relationships and Sexuality*. Among many other possible themes, they have been selected to contribute to improving the media literacy of children and young people in general through delivering media literacy education to their parents. This is, in fact, the main objective of the ESOI project. As mentioned at the beginning, parents' needs and concerns were collected and analysed. Therefore, parents could discuss their concerns, discover other possible risks for their children, and develop some knowledge to support their children.

Subsequently, each partner developed specific resources and training material for each subject. The trainers then used this material to suit the training advance.

The chosen subjects cover a wide range of the digital media environment, and research shows a need to address them.

1. Safe Online: Internet and Privacy

What could be found online? What can be considered to be truly private? How do children deal with this? What are phishing, pharming, and sharenting? What about security login and passwords?

The Internet provides many opportunities for communication and collaboration but also risks to consider. Children might be digital natives, but they still need assistance to discover the right and efficient

way to use the internet (Young, 2014). Their digital footprint exposes personal information they might not want to share. Even if someone believes they have deleted something uploaded online, it would remain there and could be copied, pasted, and shared with thousands of people. Content published may also be retrieved years later by classmates, teachers, colleagues, friends and future employers and cause inconvenience (Martin et al., 2018). Digital footprint contains not only what someone has uploaded and shared but also their digital behaviour, the websites they have visited, the places and locations they have been and the goods they have purchased online (Weaver & Gahegan, 2007).

Most students use the internet daily via email, social media, websites, music, videos and games. Usually, they need passwords and usernames to access their accounts. Personal private data could be easily accessed and spread if passwords are not strong enough. Information could be used for illegal actions such as stealing money and other frauds using the victim's identity, also called phishing (Martin et al., 2018). Phishing represents a significant concern and is one of the most frequent types of fraud, with many users falling victim to it. Users usually receive a link, mainly through e-mail, which seems trustworthy, but by clicking on it, personal information is stolen (Alkhalil, 2021). Illegal actions might also occur when perpetrators detect someone's location, either shared by the user or stored in their mobile applications, e.g., GPS applications (Weaver & Gahegan, 2007). When downloading and uploading content, one should also be careful about permissions, copyrights, plagiarism and creative credit policies (Martin et al., 2018). Pharming is another risk. It is a form of deception through software that misleads the user, leading them to fake websites. The users think they are in a secure digital environment, for instance, their bank website, and enter their passwords, but all these actions are recorded by the perpetrators (SaferInternet4Kids, 2019). Sharenting is a risk that children could face caused by their parents. Parents may not be aware of the drawbacks of sharing their children's online pictures and other content, often without their permission (Ranzini et al., 2020).

Parents should discuss with their children the potential risks related to their privacy online. They may remind them that everything they share, even deleted, could stay there forever and that they should be careful about what they post, on which posts they react, and in which photos they have been tagged. They should always check the privacy restrictions on the settings of each platform they use and take care of whom they are sharing their login passwords with.

2. Safe Online: Social Media

Many young people are continuously online and connecting with others. They chat, click, like and tag. How much do we know about it? How about digital identities, how do social media affect a family and how to establish boundaries?

Social media, here as something in-between the traditional broadcast and private in-person communication, provide scalable sociality so that people can be relatively private or particularly public, communicate in small groups or a very large one (Miller et al., 2016). Social media contributes to a digital environment defined by constant sharing. This sharing may help create communities but can also affect privacy (Claypoole, 2014). Communicating and connecting to a public community are the main characteristics of a digital citizen, but safety should be considered (Young, 2014).

Nowadays, more and more children in middle school age and even younger are using social media (Gleason & von Gillern, 2018; Martin et al., 2018). They are using social media to connect with friends, explore what others are doing and share photos. Undoubtedly, social media provides excellent communication, creation, knowledge and civic participation opportunities. Students could collaborate after school, consider assignments and projects, get informed about local and worldwide news, or find volunteer opportunities, entertainment, etc.

(Martin et al., 2018). However, parents seem to have concerns considering risks such as inappropriate posting, fear of missing out (FoMo), peer pressure, creating a digital identity different to the real one, and difficulty in adherence/impulsivity (Aboujaoude, 2011; Martin et al., 2018; Mishna et al., 2009).

Education on the subject is essential to reflect the identity of the digital citizen who knows the norms of appropriate and responsible digital behaviour. Children should learn how to leave a positive digital footprint, protect personal information and privacy, respect others and form a positive online identity that would not cause problematic situations in real life (Martin et al., 2018). It is essential to develop skills in using and sharing information online responsibly, engaging in safe conversations, and participating in online communities responsibly (Gleason, 2018). Considering privacy, it is essential to learn techniques to protect social media accounts, for example, by using strong passwords and checking privacy settings (Martin et al., 2018). The constant sharing of content offers the platforms the opportunity to learn about their users, profile them and use micro-advertising and monetise (Claypoole, 2014).

As children's use of social media increases, parents should learn how to monitor how much time they spend online, the kind of information they are accessing and sharing, and the friends they are connecting with. Parents are often unable to do so effectively. They may try to see their social media friends, but they need many more skills to tackle the problem (Martin et al., 2018). The decision on whether a child should have an account on social media should be made after investigating the social and emotional experiences of the child. The same applies to the purchase of a smartphone or other device. Parents should discuss with their children about content they post on social media. When children's image and identity on social networks differ substantially from reality, parents should intervene and explore what needs are being met through this different identity. If that identity could cause

excessive harm to their children, they should immediately act (SaferInternet4Kids, 2019).

3. Safe Online: Gaming

Gaming. A favourite activity for many youngsters. And a source of frustration for many parents. What makes it all so attractive and fun? What do parents need to know about the pitfalls and risks, and how to keep them within limits?

Videogames and online gaming are nowadays widely present in the culture of children. New computer networking technologies have led to the creation of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), a popular gaming category, increasing the time spent in gaming, even leading to addiction. For game developers, that addiction of players, children in our case, is positive to grant their products a profit (Holt & Kleiber, 2009).

Video games could affect players in various ways, both negatively and positively, depending on the time they spend playing, the content, the context, the structure, and the mechanics. The more they play, the more possibilities they have to underperform at school and experience health disorders, such as obesity and cognition issues (Bavelier, 2011; Gentile, 2011). Considering the content, educational games could, under certain conditions, promote knowledge and skills. Violent games could lead to aggressive behaviour and bad feelings. Thus, there is a continuing concern around them (Ferguson, 2007; Gentile, 2011). Game context refers to rules, goals, and interaction with other players; game structure refers to how information is provided; and game mechanics refers to the type of controller used, such as a mouse, keyboard, game control pad, balance board, or joystick. Context, structure and mechanics could promote skills development under certain circumstances or lead to an unsatisfactory gaming experience (Gentile, 2011).

Parents may consider playing online games with their children. It would offer the opportunity to discuss what exactly they enjoy and why. It will then be easier to suggest other activities that could work as a counter-balance. By participating in the game, parents can discover whether it is dangerous and provide concrete support rather than theoretical advice (SaferInternet4Kids, 2019).

4. Safe Online: Cyberbullying

Being bullied can profoundly affect the life of a child. This is also true online. How exactly does cyberbullying work? Who are the perpetrators, who are the victims and who is watching? How to tackle this? Why is talking about it essential? Moreover, how to do so?

Cyberbullying is a repeated and on-purpose cause of upset and harassment in a digital environment (Martin et al., 2018; Young et al., 2009). It could contain sharing rumours, personal information, photos, and humiliation publicly through SMS, emails, social media posts, and fake profiles (Martin et al., 2018; Sullivan & Marjon, 2017). It is also related to sensitive issues such as sexual orientation, physical characteristics, and popularity (Mishna et al., 2009). It is not easy to detect the phenomenon and protect the victims because of the wide use of the internet (Sullivan & Marjon, 2017).

The consequences of cyberbullying are as significant as those of traditional bullying and can affect academic performance and mental health (Schneider et al., 2012). Victims of cyberbullying are more likely to express suicidal thoughts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Research at 396 Greek schools has shown that parenting practices are responsible for the abusive behaviour of their children on the internet (Makri - Botsari & Karagianni, 2014).

Cyberbullying can be categorised into 13 forms, which fall as follows into one of three broad categories, defamation, harassment and deception:

- 1. Flaming:** Online rivalries via e-mails with harsh and vulgar language;
- 2. Online harassment:** Repeatedly sending offensive messages;
- 3. Cyberstalking:** Online harassment through threats of harm or excessive intimidation;
- 4. Cyberthreats:** Generic hateful statements, which usually make the author of the message emotionally upset with the possibility of either harming themselves or considering suicide;
- 5. Denigration:** Sending other people harmful, untrue or cruel statements about a person or publishing such material on the Internet with the intent to harm;
- 6. Impersonation:** Assuming another identity and posting harmful material with intent to harm;
- 7. Outing:** Sending or publishing personal information about a person that contains sensitive personal or embarrassing information, including the forwarding of private messages or images;
- 8. Trickery:** Tricking a victim into revealing secret and embarrassing information;
- 9. Exclusion:** Brutal and harsh exclusion and expulsion of someone from an online group on the Internet;
- 10. Bash boards:** Internet bulletin boards with salacious and malicious hateful publicity;
- 11. Happy slapping:** A personal attack on an unsuspecting victim, which is filmed or photographed and then distributed electronically (as a prank);
- 12. Text Wars/Attacks:** Creating a “gang” by targeting and sending hundreds of harmful messages resulting in emotional distress;
- 13. Online polls:** Voting on harmful and derogatory topics by the readers of the page in question (Bauman, 2015; Social media victims law centre, 2022).

Parents should be their children's first contact when something happens to them in the natural or online world. However, children often avoid reporting or talking to their parents. This may be due to several reasons, including the fear of their overreaction or thinking that parents could not fully understand what happens online. Parents, moreover, sometimes do not take seriously a first incident of bullying in which their child may be involved as either the victim or the perpetrator. Parents instead should be supportive and make children feel safe. Their reactions should be proportionate to the events (neither excessive nor indifferent). If there is a risk of physical violence, then their intervention should be direct. If children are experiencing problems with classmates, they should contact their teachers (SaferInternet4Kids, 2017).

5. Safe Online: Online Relationships and Sexuality

They were flirting, seducing, falling in love, or being dumped. Experimenting with online relationships and sex could be part of growing up. Young people send selfies, do sexting, and watch porn from the smartphone they have in their pockets. What should parents know, and when should they intervene?

Young people use the Internet to communicate more than any other medium. It allows them to communicate instantly through text, audio or video messages and social media and engage from home or school. They seem to consider online relationships as authentic as those in their 'real' lives. However, the accessibility and anonymity that the Internet offers could cause risks considering online connections. Cyber abuse involves aggressive online activities, including bullying, stalking, sexual abuse, and pornography. Fake accounts are also considered an issue (Mishna et al., 2009).

Sexual behaviour in the media is a highly accessible way to learn about and see sexual behaviour. Young people, including children, spend a considerable amount of time online where sexual content is available, and they come across sexualised images, videos, advertisements, songs, etc. (Brown, 2002). Intimacy has a new digital definition. In general, the internet contributes to shaping the sexual culture with a new language (e.g., cybersex) and new spaces where sexual activities take place (Ross, 2005).

Adolescents may choose behaviours such as mediated flirting and digital sexual relationships because they are less emotionally demanding than direct interpersonal interaction (Davou, 2005). The rapid physical and emotional changes typical of adolescence may cause anxiety about specific images, and unfamiliar stimuli may cause instability in behaviour and emotions. The digital world enables safe experimentation that allows individuals to reconstruct and present themselves as they wish constantly. Media offers adolescents a space that will allow them to play with their identity (Buckingham & Bragg, 2007). Children have now been exposed to digital interactions from infancy and are familiar with their possibilities. Consequently, they include it in their choices.

Sexting, i.e., exchanging messages with purely sexual content (text, photos, videos), is common among adolescents. Instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Viber and Messenger have enabled this practice to become established, as they allow for the rapid transmission of messages to individuals or groups via mobile phones. Snapchat seems particularly attractive to teenagers, as each photo shared stays published only for a few seconds. Consequently, it gives the user the feeling that the image will quickly disappear (Tamari et al., 2021).

Sextortion refers to cyber-harassment of sexual nature. It relates to blackmailing, using sexual content to manipulate the victim or force them to act in a way that would benefit the perpetrator. Children are

usually easier targets, as they may not fully understand the implications of publishing personal data online (Patchin, & Hinduja, 2020; Tamarit et al., 2021).

Grooming is the process by which adults, pretending to be teenagers, use chat rooms or other social media platforms to attract children. Chat rooms are hosted on the Internet and can easily be accessed by anyone from anywhere. They may be considered a safe place because of the public nature of the conversation and because they usually believe that they could keep their anonymity there. Adults sexually attracted to children (paedophiles) initiate conversations with potential victims to develop a friendly relationship with them and obtain personal information. Conversations of a sexual nature are initiated, and sharing pictures of child pornography may give the impression to victims that this is acceptable and normal behaviour (SafeInternet-4Kids, 2019).

Once again, the key to protecting children is communication. When parents discuss with their children from a very young age for sexuality issues, children understand that it is not something they should be ashamed of. When children feel that they have a safe space to talk within their family, it is more likely that they will share their feelings and concerns and ask for advice.

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Over the last twenty-five years, Paolo has accumulated a considerable international experience in media, working for long periods in London, Milan and Brussels. He is an economist from Pisa University, and he has a sound knowledge of European affairs. Founder and Secretary General of EAVI, active in the interrelated fields of media, education and citizenship, he follows high-level international fora such as the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society at the Council of Europe, the UNESCO MIL Alliance and various Expert Groups at the European Commission. He is also a member of the Advisory Board of the European Audiovisual Observatory in Strasbourg. Paolo has authored books, articles, audiovisual productions, policy papers and four different European-wide research studies covering 27 countries on media literacy and citizens-related issues. He often speaks on media-related subjects at conferences across and beyond Europe. He previously worked for both private and public broadcasters, including advising the BBC and RAI. He has also worked for television advertising agencies and collaborated with other public bodies, including advising governments on their media literacy strategies.

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In today's digital age, children use a variety of screens and devices at home, in schools and on the move. Within this context, parents need support in understanding how to care for their well-being.

To address this issue, the European Safe Online Initiative, first established in Belgium, expanded to engage with thousands of parents and other carers across five different countries, helping them to develop media literacy skills.

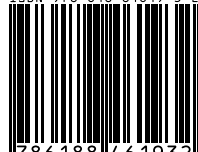
Empowering Parents in the Digital Age documented the challenges and successes of the three-year-long project. With a focus on the role of parents, the book discusses a wide range of subjects related to children's online media use, offering considerations that embrace multiple interrelated dimensions and levels of discussion, including policy recommendations.

The book may serve as a wealth of insights for organisations, policymakers and experts involved in the digital parenting field. It emphasises the critical role of media literacy and also provides some guidance on where parents can find advice and resources to navigate this new environment with greater confidence.



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