

Media Education from the Perspective of Parents of Preschool Children: Challenges and Trends in Free Time Media Use

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SUMMARY

Research shows that the world's children spend more than six hours per day on media use (Leggett, 2013). If consumed in an appropriate fashion, the media can enrich children's lives, although excessive use of the media from an early age and exposure to violent and other inappropriate content can adversely affect children's development, thinking, attitudes and behavior. Many research studies have revealed that even before they start school, children spend several thousand hours on media use, during which they are exposed to tens of thousands of instances of violent content and hundreds of thousands of advertisements (Strasburger, 2009, Trend, 2007; Story, French, 2004). Precisely for this reason, countries such as Sweden have long ago recognized the importance of introducing media education for children as early as in preschool. A unique characteristic of such education is that it emphasizes the role of parents, whose mediation can significantly affect the program's effectiveness, although there is a general lack of comprehensive research examining the attitudes of parents about the media education of children. In Croatia, children start to learn about the media only in the first grade of primary school, as part of Croatian language courses. Until then, it is up to the parents to teach their children about media content, a process that should start from the very beginning. However, parents themselves often lack sufficient knowledge about the media and their influence on children. Since many parents believe

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that the media cannot harm their children and that exposure to cartoons or video games cannot leave a negative impact, many do not even discuss media content with their children. In the following paper, the results of a research study supporting this claim will be presented. The study was conducted in 2013 using the survey method and it included 837 parents of preschool children in the City of Zagreb. The results revealed how much time children and parents spend on media use, parents' opinions on the quality of content in the Croatian media and the media's impact on children, as well as how parents feel about media education for children, who should provide it and when it should start.

Keywords: Media, media education, parents, preschool children

Introduction

It is difficult to believe that in the last 20 years there has been only one example of scientific research in Croatia on media education from the perspective of parents of preschool children (Sindik, 2012). Furthermore, no reliable and representative data exists on media habits and media consumption of preschool children in Croatia.

In this paper, we see parents as the most important actors and agents for facilitating media education of preschool children in Croatia. This is due to the fact that preschools in Croatia have no obligation or resources to teach media education, which is in accordance with legal regulations and documents such as the National Curriculum Framework (NCF).

Parents ought to be perceived as partners in media education because they “have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 18). “Parents shall bear responsibility for the upbringing, welfare and education of their children, and they shall have the right and freedom to make independent decisions concerning the upbringing of their children” (Croatian Constitution, Article 64). Indeed, according to aforementioned documents nobody except for parents is responsible for the media education of preschool children in Croatia. “The world of preschoolers revolves around the family environment; therefore, to understand their relationship with media it is important to observe family behavior, consumption habits, and how the family uses media in everyday interaction (Souza, Cabello, 2010: 14). But how can parents educate children about media if they themselves are not media literate? Do they have awareness, for instance, of the news selection process, of questionable advertising techniques, of on-line risks or of manipulations with sources of information, and do they have sufficient knowledge to teach others on the matters of privacy in

the media? Family and the media are of great importance. The younger the children the more important family and media influence are.

According to international research, preschoolers and toddlers are spending more time than ever on media consumption (Souza, Cabello, 2010). In Norway, 97% of children in the 0-6 age group are using television at home, 89% use DVD/Blue-RAY, 89% use a computer, 74% use a Digital Camera/Camcorder and 62% use a Game console (Norwegian Centre for ICT in Education in: Bucht, Harrie, 2013: 7). According to the same research, the most frequently visited sites on the Internet for young children (ages 0-6) are: game sites (26%), music sites (21%), information and search engines (18%), TV programs and channels (17%) and social network sites (12%)¹. At the same time, 42% of children do not use the Internet at all. Another study revealed that 38% of children (ages 5-8) play games on their own on the Internet (Norwegian Media Authority, 2012 in: Bucht, Harrie, 2013: 31). In 2012, Norwegian children aged 2-6 spent 91 minutes per day watching TV (TNS Gallup Norway/meianorway's database, MMS, in: Bucht, Harrie, 2013: 39). In Finland, 4-9 year-olds spent 73 minutes watching TV, also in 2012 (Finnpanel and YLE Audience Research, in: Bucht, Harrie, 2013: 39). Among the main family activities of Chilean children (ages 2-5) is watching TV (96.7%) (Souza, Cabello, 2010: 14) and this research revealed even more interesting facts: "Most parents of children two to six (64%) consider the amount of television their children watch to be adequate (...). Young children tend to decide what to watch on television; according to their parents this occurs always (36.2%) or almost always (25.6%), as compared to never (32.1%) or almost never (6.1%)" (Souza, Cabello, 2010: 16).

Due to the fact that preschool children worldwide are to a great extent exposed to and consume media, we follow Potter's (2013) argument that "children's cognitive, emotional and moral reasoning abilities are not developed well enough for them to process (...) messages in a way that it protects them from harm" (Potter, 2013: 416). However, this does not mean that we think parents should become guards, setting clear rules and restrictions, for most of the time without any explanation, in order to reduce risk and harm. As researchers, we are also aware that certain members of the public see no need for media education programs for preschool children, clearly because they are not informed about the constitutional obligations and tasks of parents, as well as the rights of children declared in international conventions. This could be the reason for them to claim: school is the one to educate, not the parents. There are also some experts and public officials who claim that parents are not well educated and empowered to provide media education for their children. "Unless parents themselves are media literate, their help is likely to lead to negati-

ve effects rather than truly helping their children” (Potter, 2013: 74). With this we could agree to a certain extent. But despite all the challenges facing parents, we continue to view parents as partners and we believe that they should be consulted in all matters regarding their children’s education.

Stemming from a strong exposure of children to the media starting already in early childhood, the argument that we shall attempt to further elaborate in this article is that parents should become the first and by far the most important media educators and that their opinion should be requested regarding the best time, appropriate means and most effective approach to the introduction of media education for their children. Their primary task should be not only to limit risks and harm, but also to explain, moderate, monitor and mediate. “Children who experience active mediation in general use are less vulnerable to negative effects of all kinds – cognitive, attitudinal, emotional and behavioral” (Potter, 2013: 412). Simultaneously, “parents need and are calling for guidance from policy makers, public bodies and stakeholders in order to distinguish and apply the most effective parental mediation strategies to their children’s Internet use” (see European Commission, 2008, in: Garmendia et al. 2012: 233). There are many research studies on the role of parents in children’s use of the media (Bybee et al, 1982; Valkenburg et al, 1999; Nathanson 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Garmendia et al, 2012). Although findings of these research studies differ, mediation is seen as efficient and regarded as one of the most effective techniques. However, if we focus on preschool children, we then must take into account that, according to Cantor (2001), “preschool children benefit more from non-cognitive than cognitive techniques” (in Potter, 2013: 413). One also has to be aware of the differences between younger and older children: “Younger children often view parental intervention as positive, or at least do not mind it, whereas older children are more ambivalent and often prefer to talk to their peers. The latter often see parents as invading their privacy, especially when they check the devices they have used” (Smahel, Wright, 2014: 9).

Although the Croatian educational system has thus far failed to provide adequate media education for preschool children, it is parents who could, in the meantime, become the most important actor and partner. “If parents are to be involved, they need to be seen as active participants, rather than simply being told what they should or should not be doing; and any educational initiatives aimed at parents need to take into account both of cultural differences and of the sometimes difficult realities of child-rearing” (Buckingham, 2012: 101). If we expect to empower parents of preschool children through media education, we must start early on. Due to numerous challenges and increased media consumption among our youngest members of

the population, we must gain an insight into the parents' opinions on media education of preschool children and also learn more about the everyday habits of media use in families.

Methodology

The goal of our research study was to gain an insight into the opinions of parents on media education, but also into the habits of children and parents in regard to the consumption of media content. We have set the following hypotheses:

H1: The majority of preschool children are involved in media use.

H2: The majority of parents do not monitor their children in their use of the media.

H3: The majority of parents believe that children should be educated about the media.

H4: The majority of parents believe that media education should be introduced in schools as a separate subject.

H5: Parents view preschool and primary school teachers as those most responsible for the media education of children.

H6: The majority of parents are involved in media use on a daily basis.

H7: The majority of parents spend most of their free time watching television.

The research was conducted by using a survey. "Surveys are defined as data collections for which a researcher (1) defines a specific population of people to be described, (2) drawn a systematic and representative sample of members of the population, (3) collects data from those individuals either by asking them questions or by asking them to perform other tasks, and (4) computes statistics that properly reflect the nature of the sampling process used to select the individuals" (Visser et al., 2014: 404) or, as defined by de Leeuw, Hox and Dillman (2008: 2): "A survey can be seen as a research strategy in which quantitative information is systematically collected from a relatively large sample taken from a population." The survey created for purposes of this research study consisted of 30 questions divided into three groups: habits of children in the use of media content; habits of parents in the use of media content; parents' opinions on the need for media education of children. The research was performed in May 2013 on 837 parents of preschool children from 15 urban preschools located in the City of Zagreb². 81.6% of mothers and 18.4% of fathers participated in the research. The majority of parents have a „medium expertise“ professional qualification level (44%), followed by a „high

level“ of expertise (42%) and a „medium-high“ level of expertise (13.3%). 1.1% of respondents are unqualified.

Research results and Discussion

Habits of children in the use of media content

Our research results revealed that the media are an integral part of children’s lives starting at the very earliest age, according to which an overwhelming 98.8% of parents reported that their preschool aged children are involved in some kind of media use. A mere 1.2% of parents reported that their children are not media users.

Table 1 Age at which the children began watching television (N=761)

Tablica 1. Dob kada je dijete počelo gledati televiziju (N=761)

	F	%
Up to one year	36	4.7
1 year	273	35.9
2 years	304	39.9
3 years	129	17.0
4 years	16	2.1
5 years	2	0.3
6 years	1	0.1
Total	761	100.0

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) recommends that children under the age of two should not watch television because this slows the child’s development, weakens the development of vocabulary and affects school readiness (Christakis, Zimmerman, 2013), our results show that 35.9% of parents reported that their children began to watch television at the age of one, with 39.9% of children starting to watch television by their second year (see Table 1). It is particularly worrisome that 4.7% of parents reported that their children started watching television prior to their first birthday. Only 2.1% of parents said that their children started watching television at the age of four, 0.3% said that this occurred at the age of five and 0.1% said that it occurred at the age of six (N=761). In light of the above, our discussion should be directed towards awareness and responsibility of parents to be informed and educated about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that come as a result of exposure to the media at an early age. Education starts in

the family and sometimes educating children is futile if parents are those who often lack the knowledge and experience regarding the media and children. But how can we help children who are exposed to the media already in their very first year? At this early age, it was surely not the child who recognized the relevance of television, nor did it have any prior experiences of media use. Education is the parents' responsibility.

Table 2 Parental control over children's use of the media (N=823)

Tablica 2. Roditeljski nadzor nad dječjim korištenjem medija (N=823)

	F	%
Always	522	63.4
Often	243	29.5
Sometimes	49	6.0
Rarely	6	0.7
Never	3	0.4
Total	823	100.0

In order to protect them from inappropriate content, it is important that parents monitor the types of content their children watch from the child's very first encounter with the media, in order to prevent their exposure to content that is inappropriate for their age (particularly violent and pornographic content). Interestingly, the majority of parents reported that they either always (63.4%) or often (29.5%) monitor their children's use of the media (see Table 2). Six percent (6%) of parents admitted to only occasionally monitoring their children's media use, while 0.7% said that they do so rarely or never (0.4%) (N=823).

Perhaps surprisingly, television continues to have a central role in free time media use among the digital generation of children. Children spend the majority of their media consumption time watching television, as numerous studies have demonstrated (Ilišin, Marinović Bobinac, Radin, 2001; Mikić, Rukavina, 2006; Rideout, Hamel, Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006; Common Sense Media, 2011; Sindik, 2012; Legget, 2013). Research results have shown that children spend long periods of time in front of television, starting at a very early age. Namely, 44.7% of parents admitted that their children spend 60 to 119 minutes daily watching television, while 34.9% of parents reported that their children watch more than 120 minutes of television per day. That their children spend 30 to 59 minutes per day watching television was admitted by 14.8% of parents, while 4.3% of parents replied that their children watch television from 1 to 29 minutes per day (N=745).

Apart from watching television, much of children's time is devoted to the use of new media. According to our research results, 54.6% of parents reported that their children use the Internet. Up to 30.1% of parents said that their children started to use the Internet at the age of four. Over a quarter of parents (25.9%) replied that their children began to use the Internet at the age of three, 23.6% said that this occurred at the age of five, 6% said at the age of two and 2% reported that Internet use by their children began at the age of one. In contrast to television sets, greatly less children have computers in their rooms. Only 14.4% of parents reported that their children have a computer in their room. 31.5% of parents said that their children spend between 60 and 119 minutes per day on the Internet, 26.1% of parents admitted that their children spend between 30 and 59 minutes per day on the Internet, while 12.2% of parents replied that their children spend up to 30 minutes per day using the Internet. Every tenth parent (10.7%) had reported that his or her child spent two or more hours per day using the Internet (N=468).

Habits of parents in the use of media content

It is a well-known fact that preschool children tend to imitate and mimic their parents' behavior, or attempt to play the role of their parents. The type of media used by parents and the amount of time spent on their use also affects their children, suggesting that children perceive their parents as role models. Apart from having an important role in the lives of children, the media are also present in the daily lives of the majority of parents of preschool children. Our research has shown that 90.2% of parents use media on a daily basis, 6.3% use media a few times per week, and 3.4% use media rarely. Only 0.1% of parents have never used any form of media (i.e. have never been in contact with the media) (N=816).

In comparison to children's habits of media use, our research has shown that parents spend the greatest quantity of time per day listening to the radio. Namely, as much as 47.8% of parents reported that they listen to the radio 120 minutes per day or more. Here it is important to note that the majority of parents said that their radio is turned on during the course of their entire workday and that they listen to the radio primarily at work. 22.7% of parents reported that they listen to the radio from 60 to 119 minutes per day, while 15% responded that they listen to the radio from 30 to 60 minutes per day. Only 5.5% of parents listen to the radio up to 30 minutes per day (N=566)³.

Except for listening to the radio, parents tend to spend large quantities of time watching television. Almost one-half of parents (45.3%) responded that they spend more than 120 minutes per day watching television, 37.9% said they wat-

ch from 60 to 119 minutes per day, while 11.7% watch television from 30 to 59 minutes per day. Just 3.5% of parents watch television up to 30 minutes per day (N=781).

Many parents also spend large quantities of time using the Internet. 37.9% of parents use the Internet over 120 minutes per day, 34.3% use it from 60 to 119 minutes per day, 19.6% from 30 to 59 minutes per day, while only 5.8% of parents use the Internet 30 minutes per day or less (N=736).

Parents spend the least amount of time using the print media. 34% of parents read newspapers from 30 to 59 minutes per day, 24.1% from 60 to 119 minutes per day and 23.5% read newspapers up to 30 minutes per day. Interestingly, 13.6% of parents do not read newspapers at all, while 2.3% do so occasionally. The same percentage of parents (2.3%) spends over 120 minutes each day reading newspapers (N=514).

Parents' opinions on the need for media education of children

As much as 91.7% of parents of preschool children believe that being in contact with violent media can have a negative impact on their children. This view is not shared by only 2.8% of parents, while 5.5% of parents said that they do not know (N=815). A smaller number of parents (16.1%) believe that children in the age group of up to six years of age are aware of the positive and negative media influences. The majority of parents (74%) believe that children are not aware of negative media influences. 9.9% of parents did not answer this question (N=787).

The majority of parents of preschool children (68.1%) believe that media education is needed for children starting at a very early age, in order for them to learn how to use the media and how to separate positive media content from the negative. Only 17.4% of parents do not agree with this view, while 13.5% said that they do not know (N=771). Despite the high percentage of parents of preschool children who believe that children need media education, 46.1% think that a separate course dealing only with media education should not be introduced in schools. Less than one-third of parents (28.2%) believe that a separate subject dealing only with media education should be introduced in schools, while 25.7% of parents said that they do not know (N=813). If a separate subject dealing only with the topic of media education would be available as an elective course, 42.1% of parents of preschool children would enroll their child in such a course, 21.7% of parents would not do so and 36.2% of parents said that they do not know (N=807).

Table 3 When should media education start in the school system? (N=756)
 Tablica 3. Kada bi trebalo započeti s medijskim odgojem u obrazovnom sustavu? (N=756)

	F	%
In preschool	511	69.1
In grades 1 to 4 of primary school	214	28.9
In grades 5 to 8 of primary school	26	3.5
In secondary school	2	0.3
At university level	3	0.4

As much as 69.1% of parents of preschool children think that media education should already start in preschool (see Table 3). Many parents are of the opinion that media education should begin in primary school, in the “one-teacher education stage”. This view is held by 28.9% of parents, while 3.5% believe that media education should begin in primary school, in the “subject teaching stage” (in which teaching is performed by several teachers, depending on the number of subjects). Only a small number of parents believe that the onset of media education should be in secondary school (0.3%) or at the university level (0.4%) (N=756). Finally, the majority of parents (72.9%) believe that it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to educate children about the media. However, almost one-quarter of parents (23.3%) think that this is solely their responsibility, while just 1.1% of parents view media education as the exclusive responsibility of preschool and primary school teachers. 4.2% of parents think that media education should be the responsibility of others, in which case they most commonly proposed experts in the field.

Conclusion

Of the seven hypotheses that were proposed in this research study, three were confirmed and four were denied. Our research results showed that the vast majority of preschool aged children use the media (98.8%). The research also showed that the media have an important role in the lives of parents, who engage in media use on a daily basis (90.2%). The hypothesis stating that the majority of parents spend most of their time watching television was denied, whereas the hypothesis stating that the majority of parents believe that children should be educated about the media was confirmed (this claim was supported by 69.1% of parents). However, the hypothesis stating that the majority of parents believe that media education should be introduced in schools as a separate subject was denied. This claim was supported

by only 28.2% of parents. Parents recognize themselves and teachers (72.9%) as those most responsible for the media education of children. Our research results showed that the majority of parents either always (63.4%) or often (29.5%) monitor their children's use of the media.

Carenzio and Aglieri (2011) stress that parents must be taught not to prohibit their children from using the media, nor should children be controlled or (only) protected, but rather they should be accompanied, while parents acquaint themselves with the media and grow together with their children in the process of their upbringing. This is why in many countries media education exists as "a tradition of thought, but also of practice", which allows new parenting challenges, stemming from the digital media, to be addressed with an effective media education strategy.

Our research has identified a new challenge for parents of preschool and primary school teachers and Croatian society in general. We bear witness to huge media consumption on the part of both parents and preschool children, but neither group has many opportunities to participate in media education programs through the educational system.

This is precisely why it is necessary to create concrete media education policies, with the goal of developing educational programs that are specifically geared towards parents of preschool children. Such an approach would be unprecedented in Croatia and would require the involvement of all stakeholders: educational institutions, family centers, civil society organizations, responsible agencies, schools, preschools and also the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. At the same time, an entirely new challenge stands before us: to educate parents, of whom we expect to educate their own children about the media.

The experiences of civil society organizations have demonstrated that it is possible to provide effective and appropriate programs in preschools, in which case the role of the teacher is crucial. While some preschools have already held parent education workshops, most other preschools in Croatia showed little interest for such programs. Therefore, the resulting conditions are ripe for the introduction of a long-term and systematic approach to the education of parents – together with the support of preschool teachers, expert associates, media education experts and civil society organizations – as the initial form of media education policy in Croatia.

Changes within the context of new media policies are therefore also needed in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), as well as in other key documents. However, it is important to highlight the responsibility of one additional partner: the local Government. By way of a systematic approach in developing media education programs, educational workshops for parents of children who are entering the edu-

cation system for the first time need to be organized in collaboration with the local authorities.

In light of the disturbing data on the media exposure of children aged one to two years, we believe that there is an urgent need for implementing effective activities and awareness-raising campaigns in order to emphasize the possible risks and challenges of media exposure at an early age. Finally, there is one more challenge: to educate parents and enable them to become the primary media educators of their preschool children, until the overall educational system changes its current media education policies, while taking into account the results of this and many other research studies indicating a critical need for introducing media education programs lasting from early childhood until our children become parents themselves.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ FB allows subscription only to users that are 13 and above.
 - ² Parents from 15 urban City of Zagreb preschools (DV) participated in the research: DV Različak, DV Medveščak, DV Iskrice, DV Trnoruzica, DV Cvrčak, DV Utrina, DV Trnsko, DV Zvončić, DV Jarun, DV Petar Pan, DV Kolibri, DV Jabuka, DV Malešnica, DV Vrapče, DV Sesvete.
 - ³ Parents were able to select more than one answer.
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Medijski odgoj iz perspektive roditelja predškolske djece: izazovi i trendovi korištenja medija u slobodnom vremenu

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Istraživanja pokazuju da djeca više od šest sati dnevno provode uz medije (Leggett, 2013). Mediji, ukoliko se koriste na pravilan način, mogu obogatiti dječje živote, ali pretjerano korištenje medija od najranije dobi te izloženost nasilnim i drugim neprikladnim sadržajima, može negativno utjecati na dječji razvoj, razmišljanja, stavove i ponašanje. Mnoga istraživanja pokazuju da će djeca prije nego krenu u školu provesti nekoliko tisuća sati uz medije, da će biti izloženi desecima tisuća nasilnih sadržaja i stotinama tisuća reklama (Strasburger, Wilson, Jordan, 2009; Trend, 2007; Story, French, 2004). Upravo su zbog toga neke države poput Švedske davno prepoznale važnost medijskog obrazovanja djece još od dječjeg vrtića. Specifičnost takvog obrazovanja jest naglašena uloga roditelja koji svojim posredovanjem mogu značajno utjecati na učinkovitost programa, iako općenito nedostaju sveobuhvatna istraživanja u kojima se ispituju stavovi roditelja o medijskoj pismenosti njihove djece. U Hrvatskoj djeca o medijima uče tek od prvog razreda osnovne škole u sklopu nastave hrvatskoga jezika. Do tada je podučavanje o medijima prepušteno roditeljima koji bi od samih početaka trebali razgovarati s djecom o medijskim sadržajima. No često i samim roditeljima nedostaje znanja o medijima i njihovom utjecaju na djecu. Mnogi roditelji smatraju da su mediji bezazleni i da izloženost crtanim filmovima ili videoigramama ne može na djecu ostaviti negativan trag te stoga mnogi s djecom ni ne razgovaraju o medijskim sadržajima. Pokazali su to i rezultati istraživanja koji će biti izloženi u ovome radu. U istraživanju, koje je provedeno metodom anketnog upitnika 2013. godine, sudjelovalo je 837 roditelja djece predškolske dobi na području Grada Zagreba. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su koliko vremena djeca i njihovi roditelji provode uz medije, što roditelji misle o kvaliteti sadržaja u hrvatskim medijima i njihovom utjecaju na djecu, te što misle o medijskom odgoju, tko bi trebao medijski odgajati djecu i kada je idealno vrijeme za započinjanje s medijskim odgojem djece.

Ključne riječi: mediji, medijski odgoj, roditelji, predškolci

