

Mladá veda

Young Science

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PARENT STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING DIGITAL DEVICES TO YOUNGER SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

STRATÉGIE RODIČOV PRI SPROSTREDKOVANÍ DIGITÁLNYCH ZARIADENÍ DEŤOM MLADŠIEHO ŠKOLSKÉHO VEKU

Annamária Šimšíková¹, Tebaldo Vinciguerra²

Annamária Šimšíková deals with the risky behaviour of children and youth surrounding the online environment. In theoretical and empirical studies, she has dealt with topics such as the behaviour of Generation Z related to electronic media and socio-emotional well-being, and extreme social withdrawal. She focuses on media literacy, family-school cooperation, pro-social education and socio-educational counselling. Tebaldo Vinciguerra is culture della materia (academic expert) in Economics at LUMSA University in Rome. In 2017, he co-founded a non-governmental organization that seeks to raise awareness about pornography and its repercussions in Italy. He works for the Holy See since 2011, focusing on natural resources and sustainable development.

Annamária Šimšíková sa zaoberá rizikovým správaním detí a mládeže v kontexte online prostredia. V teoretických a empirických štúdiách sa venovala témam, ako je správanie generácie Z súvisiace s elektronickými médiami a sociálno-emocionálnou pohodou, ako aj extrémne sociálne stiahnutie sa. Zameriava sa na mediálnu gramotnosť, spoluprácu rodiny a školy, prosociálnu výchovu a sociálno-edukačné poradenstvo. Tebaldo Vinciguerra pôsobí ako odborný pracovník v oblasti ekonomiky na Univerzite LUMSA v Ríme. V roku 2017 spoluzaložil mimovládnu organizáciu, ktorej cieľom je zvyšovať povedomie o pornografii a jej dôsledkoch v Taliansku. Od roku 2011 pracuje pre Svätú stolicu, kde sa zameriava na prírodné zdroje a udržateľný rozvoj.

Abstract

The empirical and descriptive study focuses on digital devices in families in the Slovak Republic. The aim is to examine the role of digital devices in families with younger school-age children in Slovakia, specifically by examining parents' strategies for mediating their children's use of these devices. The empirical qualitative research employed a meaning-collection method through semi-structured interviews and was conducted from October 2025

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to March 2026. The study involved 415 parents aged ($M=39$) who had younger school-age children from all regions of Slovakia. We processed the data using the Atlas.ti program. Parents' strategies for mediating digital devices for their children vary in the level of responsibility they assign to the child. Strategies are shaped by the parent's attitude toward digital devices and their digital literacy.

Keywords: younger school-aged children, digital devices (IT), parenting strategies, personal responsibility, parental regulation of digital device use

Abstrakt

Empirická štúdia sa venuje problematike digitálnych zariadení v rodinách v Slovenskej republike. Cieľom je zistiť úlohu digitálnych zariadení v rodinách s deťmi mladšieho školského veku v Slovenskej republike, špecificky sme sa zamerali na stratégie rodičov pri sprostredkovaní digitálnych zariadení potomkom. Empirický výskum kvalitatívneho charakteru s využitím metódy zberu významov pomocou pološtruktúrovaného interview, prebiehal od októbra 2025 do marca 2026. Výskumu sa zúčastnilo 415 rodičov vo veku 20-60 rokov, ($M=39$ rokov) spĺňajúcich kritérium – rodič dieťaťa mladšieho školského veku pochádzajúci z regiónov v Slovenskej republike. Spracovanie významov sme realizovali cez program Atlas.ti. Stratégie sprostredkovania digitálnych zariadení deťom ich rodičmi sa líšia úrovňou prevzatia zodpovednosti zo strany potomka. Stratégie sú modelované postojom k digitálnemu zariadeniu a digitálnou gramotnosťou rodiča.

Kľúčové slová: deti mladšieho školského veku, digitálne zariadenia (IT), rodičovské stratégie, osobná zodpovednosť, rodičovská regulácia používania digitálnych zariadení

Introduction

Throughout the text, we refer to digital devices by the abbreviation IT (Information Technology). The digitalisation of society is putting pressure on institutions, including the family. The presence of IT in the family directly impacts family habitus (culture, practices) and its transformation (Šimšíková, Deutscherová, 2025). Today, raising children extends not only to the real world but also to the digital environment in which they are engaged. Consequently, parents “often face the challenging task of safeguarding their children’s digital safety without sufficient resources (including ability or willingness) or guidance” (Frontiers in Digital Child Safety Working Group, 2025, p. 26). This currently places parents in a different position—that of one of several protective factors shaping the child’s attitudes, norms, and value orientation. “A young person guides their behavior according to certain norms, according to something they recognize as a valid criterion. This norm may be an internalized requirement of the environment... or a criterion of behavior formed on the basis of experience” (Gejdoš, 2012, p. 13).

Other researchers have stressed the importance of parental knowledge of children's whereabouts. In today's digital world, knowing about children's online activities is becoming more important. Connections to parental intervention and strategies specifically aimed at kids' use of digital technology, as well as other parenting factors, are not well known (Geržičáková et al., 2023). This said, parents do not remain passive in this regard. In the sense of ontological human existence as a “forgotten problem” according to Heidegger, a person, in an

effort to preserve their own authentic existence, does not withdraw from concrete life in the world, but responds and assumes responsibility, thereby accepting their own existence in unique situations that have arisen within the constellation of time and space (Leščinský, 2013). The family responds to trends and the developmental paradigm of society's digitalisation and strives to maintain a balance. When deciding whether to adopt stimuli related to the digital environment, the family has a choice. Hynes & Richardson (2009) note that the use of IT is shaped by family interactions and the meaning that family members attribute to them. *"It is precisely there that the first ideas and attitudes toward the media and their content are formed... Parents have a significant influence on the formation of a child's values and their understanding of the world—the contemporary world full of technology and mass media"* (Karasová, 2014, p. 148).

For this reason, it is necessary to discuss the strain placed on the family's protective and educational-socialisation functions. It is important to discuss the risks that integration of IT into family life entails.

It is necessary to identify and discuss the functional mechanisms of parenting with regard to introducing IT to children. Given the parenting dimension related to children's use of IT in families, we refer to the concept of digital parenting. This encompasses parents' attitudes toward their children's use of IT, their efforts to understand their children's activities in the digital environment, and the implementation of supportive and regulatory practices. Support and regulation take the form of a set of guiding strategies that reflect parents' digital awareness, cognitive readiness, ethical sensitivity, and the child's relational involvement by the level of shared decision-making regarding IT use. Parents act as mediators in their children's digital activities (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021).

At the same time, the family has the right to support and assistance. As the primary unit of society, the family is protected by law under the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. According to Article (6), *"The Slovak Republic retains its sovereignty, above all, in matters of national identity, which is shaped primarily by fundamental cultural and ethical issues concerning ... private and family life, marriage, parenthood and the family, public morality, civil status, culture, and language, as well as decision-making on related matters in the areas of ... science, upbringing, and education..."* (Constitutional Act No. 460/1992 Coll.). A sovereign state thereby commits itself to the protection and development of the well-being of the institution of the family. In its actions, the state must accept input from families regarding the upbringing and education of children; it must ensure and protect the sovereign space of the family institution so that families are able to maintain their own stability in the face of systemic changes in society, such as the digitalisation of society and the digitalisation of the school system.

The role of the academic community, in line with the state's commitment, is to reflect the needs of families and provide whatever support is possible, whether through public education or universal prevention.

A study was carried out by Vanda et al. (2026) in Hungary focusing on parents of children up to 8 years old, where it was found that parental attitudes directly influence children's use of devices, while the child's individual temperament and behavior, in turn, affect parents' decisions about regulation. Research in the Czech Republic by Geržičáková et

al. (2023) focused on parents of children aged 11-16, finding different levels of parental knowledge depending on the children's online activities and related choices in parental support, active mediation, and technical mediation. The area of families with younger school-aged children is the focus of our research.

It should be noted here that the term “digital literacy” in scientific literature often encompasses the concept of “media literacy” as well.

Core

Research Problem: Digital devices in families with children of early school age in the Slovak Republic. The research objective is to determine the role of digital devices in families with children of early school age in the Slovak Republic. Among several research questions, we addressed RQ1: *What strategies do parents use to introduce digital technology to children of early school age with regard to its safe use?* We focused on the level of perception of safe use of digital technology by children of early school age in relation to how their parents introduce it to them. We conducted qualitative empirical research. The primary method for data collection was a semi-structured interview with parents of children in early elementary school. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in Slovakia that deals with the issue of using digital devices in families with younger school-aged children.

Methodology

The interviews focused on the topic of parents providing digital devices to children of primary school age. Data collection took place between October 2025 and March 2026. The research was carried out as part of the internal project ROTZA I (internal project number KU: IG-2024-08-PD), which took place from 12/ 2024 to 6/2026 under the auspices of the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia. The ethical aspects regarding the use of grant data are also covered under ethical approval 02247/2026RE issued on 10.7.2026.

The method used to analyse the meanings involved content analysis and coding. The data derived from 415 interviews with parents were analysed using the Atlas.ti.9 software. A total of 89 codes were created and analysed, from which 8 main categories were abstracted: digital devices (IT), content, environment, narratives, cognition, emotional regulation, mental and physical balance, and safe use of IT. The main central category is the mediation of IT. With regard to RQ1, we analyse the selected categories. We interpret the findings using the card-laying technique.

Research Sample

The selection criterion for respondents was: a parent of a child of early school age who is a citizen of the Slovak Republic. In this context, early school age means children in age (7-11) and the mean age of the children in that study was 7.86 years. The selected research sample consisted of 415 parents—136 of parental couples (intact families) and 143 single parents (single-parent families). The respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 60 years ($M = 39$ years). The research sample represents the available pool of respondents from all regions of the Slovak Republic. They were selected and invited for an interview at their place of residence.

In the findings, we present the respondents' statements labelled with "P" (for participant) along with the corresponding participant number.

Region	Žilinský	Prešovský	Košický	Nitriansky	Trenčiansky	Bratislavský	Banskobystrický	Trnavský	Total
man	109	25	17	7	7	4	5	1	175
woman	144	45	21	7	7	8	5	3	240
Total	253	70	38	14	14	12	10	4	415

Table 1 – Distribution of the research sample by gender and region

Source: compiled by the authors

Empirical Findings

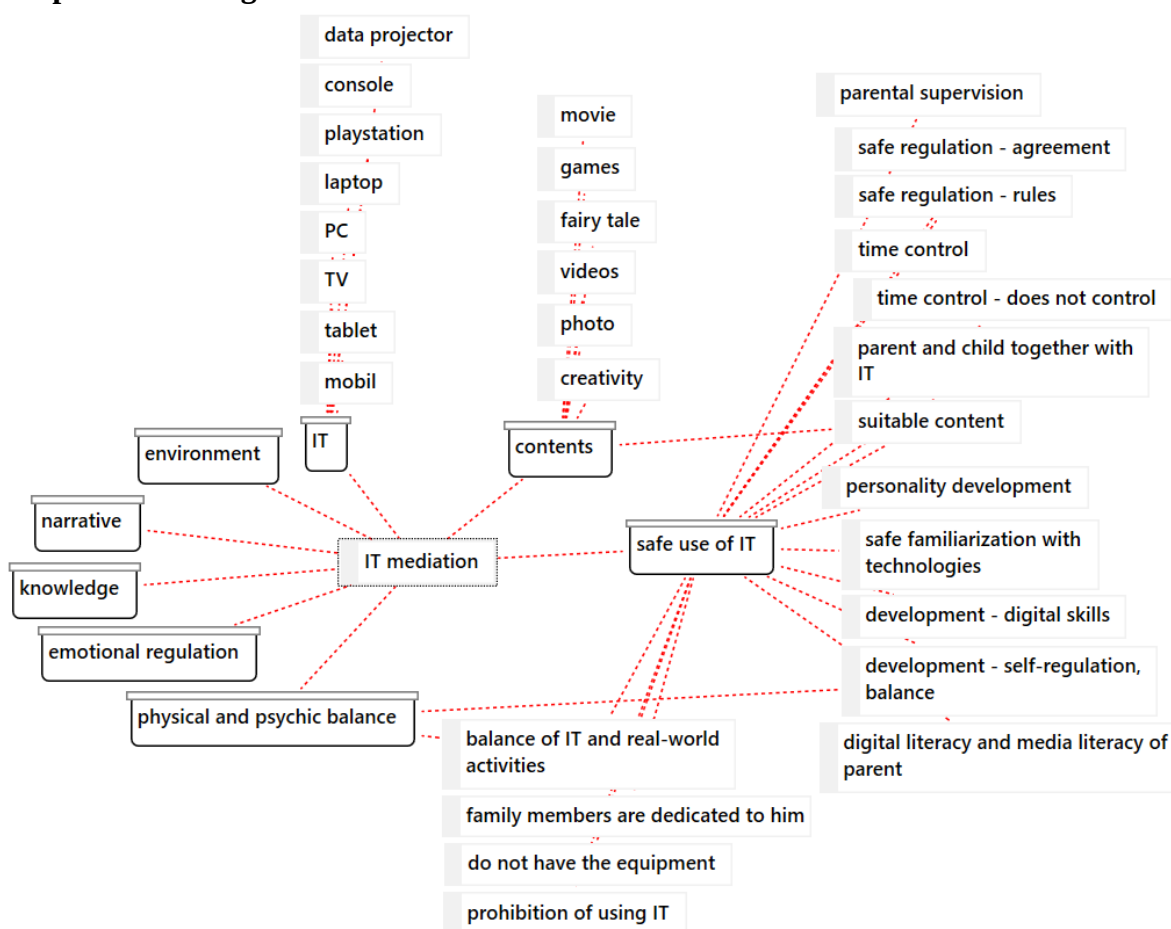


Figure 1 – Parent strategies for providing digital devices to younger school-age children

Source: Atlas.ti, own analysis

In families, children of early school age most often have access to IT for active consumption—cell phones, tablets, computers, laptops, PlayStations, and other game consoles. Passive consumption of digital content takes place via TV and projectors. Passive consumption of content via TV, which was the most frequent family activity carried out using digital devices (Kraus, 2015), began to decline after 2000 (Junová in Kraus, Stašová, Junová, 2020). We find that families also use reflective IT such as cell phones and tablets. This is consistent with the findings of Gužíková and Mendelová (2024), who note that families most

frequently use digital technologies for receptive activities such as watching TV and activities involving the use of cell phones and computers. We also draw on the findings of Tremolada et al. (2025), according to whom parents (49.8%) consider tablets to be the digital technology most frequently used by children.

We also find that IT is provided to children for the purpose of consuming visual and audiovisual content; passive consumption involves browsing images and photographs and watching videos, cartoons, and movies, as well as for the purpose of developing creativity - creating images and videos. Playing digital games using IT is a prominent activity among children, as noted by Šimšíková and Karasová (2025). Parents report that children play digital games primarily for entertainment and education - to develop logical thinking, foreign language skills, or information technology (IT) skills. Of particular interest is the playing of multiplayer games, which require connectivity with members of the broader global gaming community, that is not only with family members and local schoolmates. We observe that children of early school age are exposed to global influences at an early age, in addition to the familiar micro- and meso-environments of peer groups in classrooms and during extracurricular activities. This can contribute to open, assertive communication with people of all ages in both real-world and digital environments. Suler (2004) and Shukla (2020) note that the nature of the digital environment can influence online communication, either positively through benign disinhibition or negatively through risky online behaviour resulting from toxic disinhibition. As the UNICEF stressed, *“Pornographic content can have a profound impact on children's well-being and safety, and we are deeply alarmed by the massive amount of pornography available online, including increasingly graphic and extreme content that is easily accessible to children”* (De Dominicis, 2025). Families typically lack specific knowledge about the disinhibitory effect that shapes children's behaviour in online environments and the risks associated with it.

Hosany et al. (2022) implicitly suggest that parents play a significant role in shaping children's sustainable behaviour, as behaviour is shaped both within and outside the home. At home, parents are responsible for selecting and implementing strategies to protect their children and for guiding their digital engagement in a conscious, intentional, and safe manner (Wilson et al., 2025). Parents strive to balance the role of technology in their own lives and in the lives of their children (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

With regard to RQ1, we examine parents' initiatives to safely mediate IT use for their children. We found the same strategies in parental behaviour identified by Livingstone & Helsper (2008), which include limiting interaction, monitoring, active shared use of digital technology, and technical restrictions (e.g., parental controls). The main finding is that the use of IT in parental mediation is regulated by a range of mechanisms—from strict guidance by an external authority to the child's self-regulatory mechanisms, supported by the development of digital—and, more specifically, media—literacy in both parents and children.

Strategy	Number of respondents	Percent
Parents make an agreement	199 agreement 303 rules	47,95 73,01
Software to control contents	114: 92 – what they're watching, 11 – what content, 11 – what they are looking for	27,47
Software to control time	50	12,05
Reliance on child's self-regulatory mechanisms	19 independent responsible behaviour	4,58
Discussing content parental	168: 158 we're talking, 10 discussing	40,48
Limit access to IT	325: 242 – restricts in any way; 83 – setting limits	78,31
Do not provide access to IT	41 doesn't have a device	9,88
Permissive stance – don't see the issue	95 not sure, do not know	22,89

Table 2 – Distribution of the responses (a single respondent can give multiple responses)

Source: compiled by the authors

We present the empirical findings as follows:

Parental supervision - control exercised by an external authority - is a form of external protection. Parents make an agreement with their children regarding when and for what purpose they may use digital devices. *"We gradually realized that she was starting to use it more than we wanted, so we agreed on some rules and restrictions"* (P78). Parents set boundaries and rules for IT use. *"Of course, I'm starting to notice that she's getting more and more hooked on her phone. When I take it away from her, she gets a little angry or sad, but it has to be done, because if we let it go on, she'd get out of hand. We have to set clear boundaries; otherwise, it wouldn't be good"* (P104).

Kuru & Eryaman (2024) mention a strategy - monitoring the time children spend using digital technology - and highlight the need for time limits and supervision regarding digital media use. Similarly, we found that parents regulate the time their children spend using IT; the allowed time for IT use varies by household - from 20 minutes to 2 hours. *"I monitor device use, set time limits, and select appropriate content"* (P338). Parents in the study by Tremolada et al. (2025) reported an average daily tablet usage time of 22.86 minutes. Regarding the regulation of children's IT usage time, we find that the inability of parents to adhere to agreements and rules poses a risk. *"I try to regulate their free time on their phones, even though I'm not always successful"* (P315). A lack of enforcement of rules has a similar impact to the absence of rules altogether.

Stašová et al. (2012) that there is a decrease in restrictions on electronic media use and a more lenient attitude toward the need to limit media use in families with an older sibling. We observe analogous behavior in parents. *"Well, when it comes to digital devices, most often (we allow it) if the older kids are visibly having fun, the younger daughter also wants to laugh"* (R40). *"The younger son wants to match his older sister in technology"* (P324). Parents also ensure safety by sharing IT with their children, for example, by choosing a movie or game together. *"...time spent together playing cooperative versus similar two-player games on a game console"* (P392).

Parents also mention monitoring digital content, striving to ensure that children view age-appropriate and safe content.

In addition to external forms of regulating children's use of IT, parents consider developing their children's own ability to regulate their use of IT. When teaching their

children about appropriate behaviour regarding IT, parents view these devices as tools for their children's personal development. Parental guidance consists of advice and recommendations for the child. *"Yes, definitely advice on which videos not to watch because they're nonsense and won't teach them anything, and also that they should keep track of the time they spend on these devices"* (P79). Dankiewicz and Kotowicz (2025) found that fathers' accepting attitudes and support for the child's autonomy (an autonomous attitude) were associated with greater involvement in preventive measures.

Parents mediate IT use when they want to safely introduce their child to aspects of the digital society. IT is used to develop digital skills. *"...they broaden their horizons, become digitally literate, and will be able to navigate current developments in the field of technology"* (P52).

Parents also implicitly support the development of their children's media literacy and work to foster their self-regulation when using IT. They support their children's ability to control their use of IT. *"We also made her aware of what kind of online behavior we expect from her until she is old enough"* (P88). *"Yes, we explained to our child that digital devices can be bad for them if they use them more than they should. We explained what they can and cannot watch and play on their phone. We explained to them that if they spend too much time on their phones, they might lose their friends and won't spend much time outside with them"* (P24). The Holy See's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (2026, p. 49) poses the question, *"Does moderation in computer and internet use allow us to better appreciate relatives and friends?"*, thereby highlighting the risk of jeopardizing real interpersonal relationships - specifically, the issue of prioritizing or replacing real relationships with digital ones - while noting that *"virtual connection... cannot replace the physical experiences of togetherness"* (Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2026, p. 74).

It is also important to mention parents' digital and media literacy. When deciding how to introduce their children to IT, parents base their decisions in part on the expert information available to them. Parents do not always have access to comprehensive information on the subject, nor do they always interpret the available information correctly. It is important to recognise that, given the tendency for intergenerational transmission of knowledge, parents' level of digital and media competence serves as the foundation for the development and support of their children's digital and media competence. Banić & Orehovački (2024) state that digital parenting encompasses a parent's digital literacy. According to Reche et al. (2026), the factor of family education is key to the development of digital competence in children and their families. As of 2025, 50%–60% of the population in the Slovak Republic aged 16–74 possesses basic digital skills (across five competency areas: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, problem-solving, and safety skills). As part of *the Digital Decade* initiative, the EU has set a target for 2030 to ensure that 80% of the population has acquired basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2026).

In addition to the aforementioned options for the safe use of IT, we have found that in some families, parents deliberately and significantly limit their children's access to DT, or do not provide it at all. Family members find alternative opportunities in the real world for the child's self-fulfillment during free time. In some families, close relatives help out with the

child. *“Fortunately, my in-laws live with us, so when my wife wants to rest or do some chores around the house or in the garden, they’re happy to take care of the little one”* (P282).

It's also important to point out families with children who have special needs, as they face tough living conditions. Kováčová (2009) highlights a key fact – the lack of opportunities for leisure activities in the real environment for this specific group of people. We note that this creates a basis for escaping into the digital world as a possible alternative to meet higher needs.

We have also identified families where IT are not provided or are prohibited. Parents consider allowing DT use when the child is older. *“He wants a cell phone, but he doesn’t need to own one yet”* (P243). Restrictive mediation characterised by strict limitations can disrupt family relationships and trust between parents and children (Lee and Chae, 2012). Denying access to digital technology without providing meaningful alternatives or guidance risks limiting children’s opportunities to develop digital literacy (msca-participate.eu, 2025).

Based on our research findings and drawing on the classification by Nikken and Schols (2015), we argue that parents employ a restrictive strategy - which involves limiting the time spent on and content related to digital media - and an active strategy - in which they actively involve their children in media activities and discuss the content. A passive, or permissive, strategy - in which parents intervene minimally in media use - was not identified among the parents; they had a clear stance.

Effective digital parenting involves guidance in supporting and regulating children’s digital activities (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). Digital parenting integrates several dimensions: cognitive (awareness), behavioural (monitoring and setting rules), affective (trust and empathy), and ethical (privacy and responsibility) (Yildirim et al., 2025). We conclude that mix and a gradual transition across these dimensions, based on the criterion of a child’s level of self-regulation, may represent an appropriate parental mediation strategy. Younger school-age children still necessarily require external regulation, which inherently includes supervision; as Livingstone & Blum-Ross (2020) note, a behavioural approach (involving rules, limits, and parental control) appears appropriate. This is especially true for young children who rely on their parents to guide them and establish rules (Stoilova et al., 2021; Soyoof et al., 2024). We add that for children of such a young age, it’s at least necessary to monitor the software; there are apps available – parental controls. Parental control can ease off depending on the child's ability to responsibly use IT. At the same time, open communication, trust-building, and emotional bonds - that is, attributes of a relational approach - are necessary (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Toran, Kulaksız, & Özden, 2024). Parents realise that *“...it is necessary to have a close relationship with children so that they will tell us if they are in danger”* (P383). Banić & Orehovački (2024) note that families are currently shifting toward more effective strategies.

Appropriate types of mediation include those that encourage the mutual involvement of parents and children - active mediation, participatory mediation, and combined mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Plowman et al., 2012; Lauricella et al., 2015; Nikken and Schols, 2015; Zaman et al., 2016). A participatory approach provides space for the development of self-regulation and a responsible approach to IT on the part of the child. Meyer (2025) recommends providing alternatives that address children’s basic needs:

- a) Offer specific alternatives that address their basic needs, such as contact with friends (scheduled video calls on a family device or regular in-person play).
- b) Set aside “tech time” during which children can use family devices under supervision.
- c) Involve the child in developing their own “digital readiness plan”. This should include clear, manageable goals (milestones) leading up to owning a cell phone.

Meyer (2025) also recommends fostering digital literacy, which can be supported by: learning about internet safety through age-appropriate activities, the responsible use of IT shared by family members, and discussions about both the positive and negative aspects of using DT based on real-life examples.

Families also have discretionary authority in light of the influence of societal trends. A new phenomenon is emerging worldwide - the first supportive community groups formed by proactive parents who take a collective approach, based on general agreement, to issues of IT regulation, such as the purchase of a child’s first mobile device (Banfield-Nwachi, 2024). We note that these groups could play a role in bringing about a paradigm shift in the digitalisation of society.

Conclusion

The systematic digitalisation of society should take into account the specific needs of the groups it affects and identify the burdens that arise during the implementation of these processes. The family unit, as an institution, also reflects the rapid changes in society brought about by digitalisation. The burden on families does not stem from the physical provision of IT, but rather from societal trends - online communication, socialisation, education, and the potential for IT to substitute for basic and higher-level needs. The stimuli and possibilities of the digital environment influence the family’s parenting system. Thus, during family time spent with their children, parents strive to regulate their children’s use of IT. According to our research, parents in Slovakia have a general awareness of the need to protect children in the digital environment. During the early school-age period, parents transition from restrictive mediation to forms such as active, participatory, and combined mediation - that is, from mechanisms of controlled guidance to the transfer of responsibility to a child capable of self-regulation.

It has already been stressed that parents need a “*multistakeholder approach to equip them adequately. Supporting parents/caregivers with specific knowledge and skills can strengthen their ability to safeguard children’s digital safety, as well as their rights, agency, and well-being*” (Frontiers in Digital Child Safety Working Group, 2025). However, we think that there should be a fairer share of the burden between parents and the broader ecosystem especially regulators, business, and Internet service providers.

Future avenues of research

Similar studies shall be replicated on regular basis (every few years), in order to assess the evolution of parents’ behaviors and strategies in this field. Moreover, ideally, additional research could focus on the impact and efficiency of specific parental strategies. Based on our findings, further research could take a closer look at the connections between parenting

strategies and the development of digital and specifically media skills in younger school-aged children.

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