RSC, Volume 16, Issue 1, p.1-11
ISSN: 1855–4202

Original scientific article
Published online: May, 2024

TRENDS IN MEDIA EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN SLOVENIA

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to present and discuss trends in parents' media education of preschool and primary school children in Slovenia. Our conclusions are based on empirical findings on parents' media education practises from surveys conducted in 2015 and 2022 among a representative Slovene sample of parents of preschool children and from surveys conducted in 2016 and 2023 among a representative Slovene sample of parents of primary school children (1st – 6th grade). We confirm that patterns of children's screen exposure are changing. Larger screens such as TVs or computers are no longer as popular as mobile phones, whose use is increasing significantly, especially among primary school children. The trends in parental involvement in their children's media education varies depending on the age of the children. For preschoolers we can see that there is no significant decrease either in limiting their screen use or in parents being present when the children are exposed to media. However, a decrease in parental involvement in media education of primary school children in Slovenia is evident.

Key-words: media education, parents, screen exposure, family media use plan, media literacy

1. Introduction

The abilities to use digital media, to critically analyse and understand media messages (received and generated) and to develop a meaningful and realistic response to the changeable complex digital environment, have become indispensable competences in a digital age. Societies and individuals are massively faced with the question of how to keep pace with the rapid changes of digital media and how to shape upbringing and educational processes, both in the context of primary and secondary socialisations, and in the context of lifelong learning, which will enable people to form useful digital media habits, norms, values and digital-related professional and life-related competences. A meaningful media education promotes the socially beneficial use of new digital technologies, conveys relevant skills, competences and motivation for active participation in the economic and political processes. It guides people to active, responsible and competent use of the digital media and teaches them how to avoid the pitfalls and dangers that lurk in the digital environment (Rek 2021, Livingstone 2016, 2017, Buckingham 2020, Mascheroni 2018).

Due to the rapid and large-scale development of digital media and its increasing presence in our lives also a need for collecting fresh information, data and other research infrastructure informing us about people's digital media habits, media education and literacy is increasing. The ability to use digital technologies, the ability to analyse and evaluate digital media content, together with the ability to generate digital messages effectively, have become even more important during and after the COVID 19 epidemic due to ubiquitous digitalisation. Policy documents and strategies like "Europe's Digital Decade: Digital Targets for 2030" testify to the fact that the accelerated

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digitization of society is not a one-day fad but a strategically directed process, which very quickly changes the ways of communication and relationships between people. Despite the fact that the use of digital devices brings numerous benefits many of the adverse effects of excessive or inadvertent use of the digital media have lately become very visible: lets mention for example non-chemical addictions; variety of peoples' mental and physical health problems related to their digital habits; media use and digitalisation-related social inequality; the protection "1q2wertyuio n and inclusiveness of vulnerable groups; security, surveillance and freedom issues in the digital reality etc.

Digital media have also become an important agent in primary and secondary socialisation processes and at the same time a new challenge for other socialisation agents, like family, schools or peer groups regarding their role in raising and educating children to use digital media wisely, to make informed choices about media use and live with consequences of such choices (Rek 2019). Socialization is the process through which children are taught to be proficient members of a society. It refers to the ways that people come to understand societal norms and expectations, to accept society's beliefs, and to be aware of societal values. Socialization helps children learn to function successfully in their social worlds. At an early age of child's development, which is a focus of our research, parents play a significant role in socialising, upbringing and educating children about various aspects of life. They also significantly influence a child's knowledge of the digital media through examples, conversations and experiences. They themselves are role models that children imitate (Rideout 2014). However, as the digital environment is a relatively recent development, parents cannot rely on certain traditional already established fixed patterns of behaviour, norms or values, passed down from generation to generation, in upbringing and educating their children about digital media. In current fast-paced processes of digitization that are radically changing the communication of people and social groups adults themselves are often faced with figuring out and adopting new ways of digital media related behaviours and attitudes (Golob et al. 2023).

The aim of this article is to present and discuss trends in media education of preschool and elementary school children in Slovenia. Our conclusions are based on a.) 2 surveys conducted on a Slovenian national representative sample of preschool children's parents in 2015 and 2022 and b.) 2 surveys conducted on Slovenian national representative sample of primary school children's parents in 2016 and 2023 (Rek et al. 2015, 2016, 2022 and 2023). As the same questionnaires were used years apart on a national representative sample, this allows us to discuss trends in parents' media education in Slovenia. We look at trends in children's screen exposure times for different digital media and ownership of digital devices by children. Trends in parents' media education practice are discussed, focusing on various practices, like 1.) setting rules and restrictions about digital media; 3.) being present when children use digital media; 3.) monitoring digital media use; and 4.) discussing media content and use with children.

2. Materials and methods

For the purpose of this article, we are using the data collected from a Slovene national representative sample of parents of the pre-school children aged from one to six years in the year 2022 (Rek et al. 2022). The sample consists of 1987 survey responses. This survey was a repetition of a survey on media education of preschool children we conducted in 2015 (Rek et al. 2015) that included 1087 parents of 1-to-6-year-old children, using the same questionnaire and sampling method. The survey was administered on-line with the help of Slovene kindergartens. The parents have been sampled through a stratified random sample: for each of the ten Slovenian statistical regions, one predominantly urban and one predominantly rural kindergarten was randomly selected.

Also, we are using the data collected from a Slovene national representative sample of parents of the primary school children aged from seven to twelve years in the year 2023 (Rek et al. 2023). The sample consists of 2.825 survey responses. This survey was a repetition of a survey on media education of primary school children we conducted in 2016 (Rek et al. 2016) that included 2303 parents of 7-to-12-year-old children, using the same questionnaire and sampling method. The

survey was administered on-line with the help of Slovene primary schools. The parents have been sampled through a stratified random sample: for each of the ten Slovenian statistical regions, one predominantly urban and one predominantly rural primary school were randomly selected. Data collection process in all cases was supported by Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, in the framework of Infrastructure program on Media literacy in Slovenia. Among others we have asked the parents to report on:

- their children's screen exposure time for different digital media
- ownership of digital devices by primary school children
- their practices of media education in terms of (1) setting rules and restrictions; (2) accompanying their children while interacting with the media; and (3) discussing the media content with them
- various activities of parents of primary school children regarding the child's use of media and his/her exposure to media content.

3. Trends in children's screen exposure in Slovenia

In case of preschool children's access to different media devices, parents were asked to provide an estimate of the average time (in hours and minutes) that their child spends doing the following activities on a typical day: a) watching TV; b) watching DVD or taped videos on TV; c) listening to the radio; d) using the computer or tablet; e) playing video games f) reading magazines, newspapers; g) using the mobile phone (also yours) without calling.

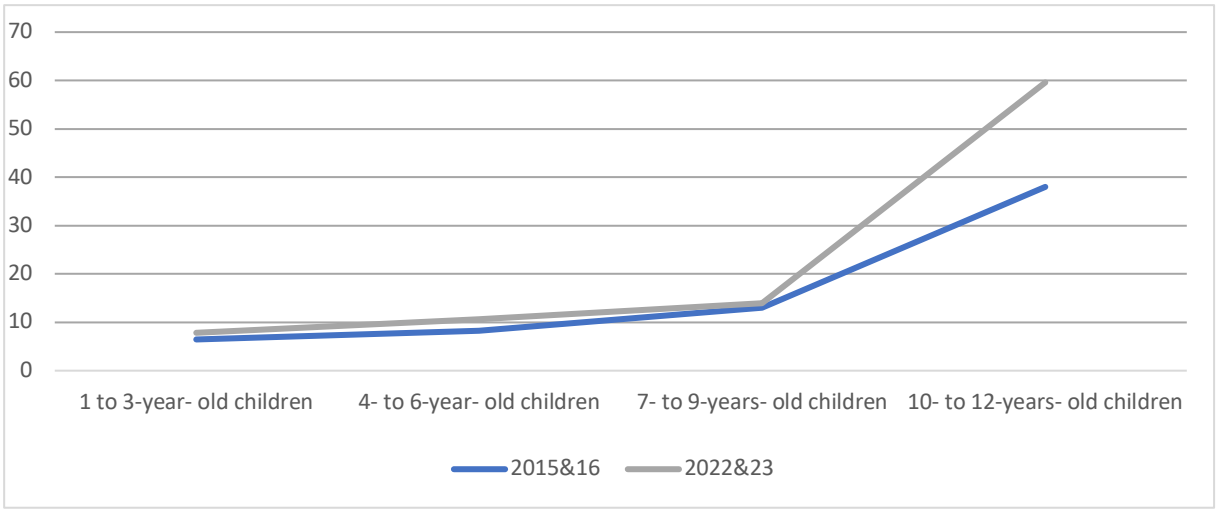
Table 1. Average screen exposure times of four age groups of preschool and primary school children (in minutes daily)

	1 to 3-year- old children		4- to 6-year- old children		7- to 9-years-old children		10- to 12-years-old children	
	2015	2022	2015	2022	2016	2023	2016	2023
Live TV	29,91	25,95	44,9	37,69	66	57,35	78	67,59
Radio	30,6	28,02	25,06	20,28	21	14,06	26	13,87
Computer/tablet	9,1	6,57	17,27	13,91	29	21,22	43	34,4
Video games	4,25	2,49	12,1	10,63	4	5,37	9	10,25
Printed media	18,36	13,77	20,23	14,39	23	14,03	25	16,2
Mobile phone without calls	6,45	7,83	8,29	10,7	13	14	38	59,67

Sources: Rek et al. 2015, 2016, 2022 & 2023

As in past couple of years the digitalisation processes and presence of digital media was accelerated due to the COVID 19 pandemic, we assumed, before conducting this trend analysis, that the exposure time of children to digital screens will be higher compared to pre-epidemic times. Collected data does not reflect this very popular assumption. It does however point to changing patterns of children's screen exposure. Larger screens like TV or computer are not as popular any more compared to mobile phones, whose use is growing significantly especially in primary school children group aged 10-12 years, as it is evident from graph below.

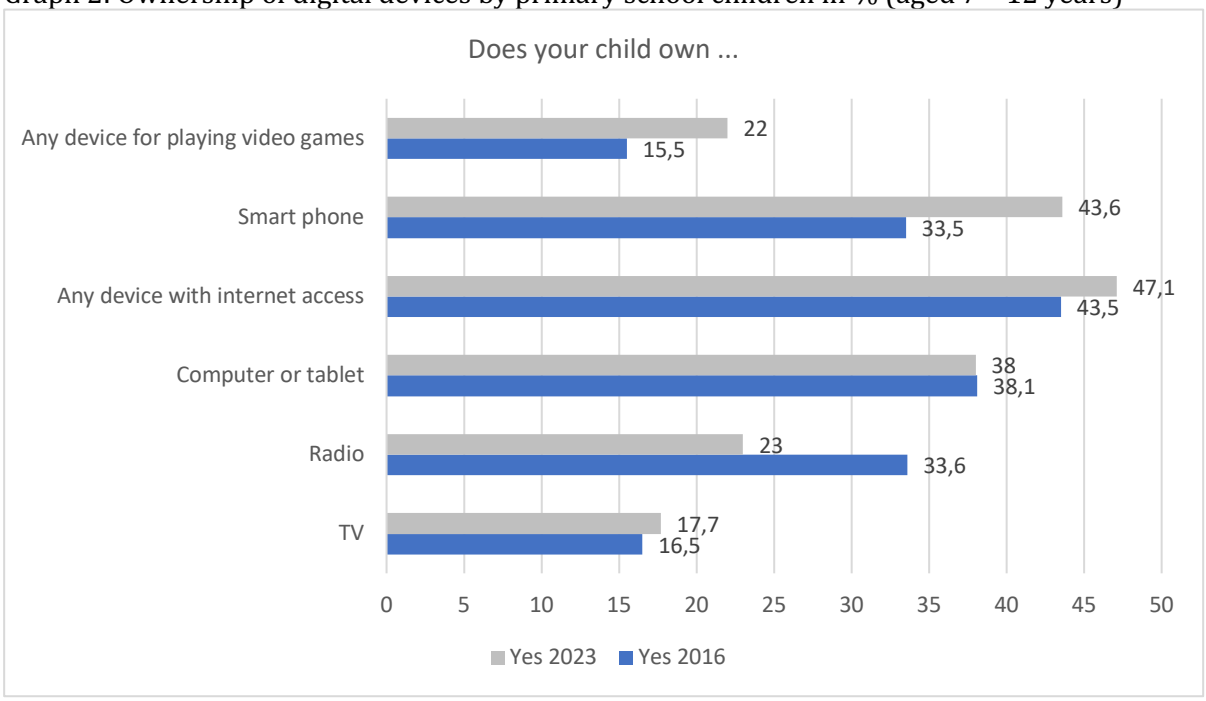
Graph 1: Childrens' average mobile exposure time (in minutes daily)



Source: Rek et al. 2015, 2016, 2022 & 2023

The collected data also testify to the increased ownership of mobile phones by primary school children. The ownership of mobile devices of preschool children aged up to 6 years is scarce. But with age also the ownership of digital devices, especially of mobile devices increases significantly as it is presented in graph below.

Graph 2: Ownership of digital devices by primary school children in % (aged 7 – 12 years)



Source: Rek et al. 2016 & 2023

4. Trends in parents' media education practices in Slovenia

With the rapid changes of the presence of digital media in young children's lives, expert guidance has been adopted in many national states, following well known guidelines of World Health Organization (WHO) and American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP), to support parents and other stakeholders involved in primary socialisation processes in their efforts to deal with a new digital reality of children's upbringing. The AAP calls for children up to the age of 18 to 24 months to have no screen time at all, except for video chatting, and suggests that children aged 2 to 5 years should get no more than one hour of screen time a day. The WHO also recommends that children under

the age of 2 should not use screens and children between the ages of 2 and 5 should get less than one hour of screen time per day (Papps 2020). For children of 18 to 24 months of age, it is suggested, in case parents start to introduce digital media, to choose high-quality programming and use media together with their child. Solo media use should be avoided in this age group and parents should be present, when such a young child is exposed to digital media content. For children aged 2 to 5 years, it is suggested to limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programming, to co-view selected content with children and to help children understand media messages they are seeing and help them apply what they learn to the world around them (Hill et al. 2016).

If we compare the results from 2015 and 2022 survey (see the Table 2 below) among preschool children's parents in Slovenia, we can see that there are some differences in the media education practises (like presence, restriction or interaction), but no major deviations can be observed. The presence of parents when children use media is regular, but as expected slightly declining with children growing up. Setting rules and restrictions is a comparatively most common aspect of preschool children's media education – as it characterises most parents. The more interactive and time-consuming activity of media education, which involves talking to the child about what they see in the media, is less present and there is also a trend towards a slight decrease in parents' reports of carrying out this activity. As children are growing up, also their use of digital media increases significantly. Their life experiences get increasingly shaped by such digital media exposure. Digital media offer a wealth of opportunities to learn, create, socialise, play and have fun. However, extensive, intensive, reckless or uninformed use of digital media can also have a negative impact on children and young people.

Table 2. Preschool children parents' presence, interaction and rules (average value of answers on a scale 1-5) – research conducted in 2015 and in 2022

Question	Parents of 1- 3 years old children		Parents of 4-6 years old children		Both groups (1-6 years)	
	2015	2022	2015	2022	2015	2022
Are you present when your child uses media?	4,41	4,5	4,15	4,14	4,28	4,32
Do you set restrictions/rules about what children should watch?	4,53	4,56	4,5	4,43	4,52	4,49
Do you talk with your child about what you see in the media?	3,88	3,73	3,89	3,73	3,88	3,73

Source: Rek et al. 2015 and 2022

Parents activities related to their children's habits start to change when their children are growing up. American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) has developed a Family Media Use Plan for older children that involves creating guidelines and boundaries around the use of digital devices and media to promote healthy and balanced screen time. Parents are encouraged to take a participatory approach to creating a media use plan, involving children already in the creation and not just implementation of the plan. This encourages children's agreement and helps them to understand the reasons for the guidelines or limitations in digital media use, they should introduce in their daily lives.

The family rules of digital media use should be clear. Specific time limits for different type of media use (for instance watch TV, play video games, spend time on social media etc.) should be clearly determined and specific times, when media can be used should also be clearly specifies (no media before homework is finished, during meals or after bedtime). Many studies highlight the great role of limiting screen time in creating healthy and beneficial digital habits (see for instance Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2016, Parent et al. 2016, Radesky et al. 2016). However, media education effort of parents should reach beyond just limiting screen time. A very important element of parent's media

education in this age is wise interaction with children about digital media content they see or listen to (Tommasi et al. 2023, Tan et al. 2023). Even though some content (like videogames, videos, chats ect.) may be uninteresting or seem even irrelevant to parents, they should still be interested in the content a child is using and talk to a child about it and get engaged in an open interaction about ways of understanding certain digital contents and consequences of its use. Communication channels should be kept open regarding media use and possible concerns, limitations or any adjustments to the family plan should be ideally freely discussed.

Parent should also monitor the implementation of the Family Media Use Plan. There are many tools of parental control available that enable monitoring of childes online activities. Like with other areas of upbringing, it makes sense to use positive reinforcement, rewording good behaviour. The whole planning and implementing of digital media plan should however be flexible. It is difficult to be perfect as a human, so also when working on healthy and useful digital media habits parent are suggested to be open to adjustments, considering specificity of circumstance, individual needs or interests of family members. A media use plan for family is not about strict rules, but about promoting responsible and balanced media behaviour, considering the developmental needs of children. It should encourage healthy choices while leaving room for growth in discovery.

In Slovenia, we also have our own guidelines for the use of screens by children and young people (Vintar Spreitzer et. al 2021). They closely follow international trends in the field of children's media education. These guidelines aim to strike a balance between using the benefits of technology and mitigating the potential negative effects of excessive screen time, such as physical interactivity, disrupted sleep patterns and potential developmental issues.

Ideals of media education for older children and adolescence in Slovenia also include strengthening of critical thinking skills and analysis. Emphasis is placed on teaching children how to critically analyse media content, including identifying biases, evaluating sources and understanding different perspectives. Parents and teachers in schools should introduce digital media industry to children, so they will better understand its functioning and media influence on themselves, their relationships and society. Children should also be though practical digital skills crucial to smartly navigate digital media skills in online safety and privacy protection or fact-checking as well as understand why such skills and actions are beneficial for them. Responsible and polite behaviour online should be promoted also addressing phenomena like cyberbullying, plagiarism and respecting others and self online (Rek 2021).

Table 3. Primary school children (ages 7-12) parents' presence, interaction and rules (average value of answers on a scale 1-5) – research conducted in 2016 and in 2023

Question	Parents of primary school children (ages 7-12)	
	2016	2023
Are you present when your child uses media?	3,9	3,22
Do you set restrictions/rules about what children should watch?	4,48	3,89
Do you talk with your child about what you see in the media?	4,02	3,49

Source: Rek et al. 2016 and 2023

Table 3 shows that setting rules and restrictions is most used aspect of parents' media education activity also in case of primary school children. Again, similarly to the media upbringing of younger children, more interactive and time-consuming activity of interaction, which consists of talking to the child about what he or she sees in the media, is less present and we can also see a decrease in parental reports on the performance of this activity over time. Parents of children aged 7 – 12

years (first and second tirade of primary school) are less present when their children use digital media compared to preschool period.

Setting boundaries is an important part of media education for children and young people. Boundaries create clear rules and guidelines for children in terms of screen time, content consumption and online behaviour. These guidelines often include time limits of digital media use, the type of content allowed and appropriate online interactions. They encourage children to engage in different activities beyond screens, such as physical activities, reading, hobbies or face-to-face conversation. By setting boundaries children learn self-regulation and time management. They understand the importance of balancing screen time with other activities, which is crucial for their overall wellbeing. Limiting the media content children watch is also common practise to ensure they are exposed to age-appropriate and useful content. Limiting media content helps to ensure that children are exposed to materials that is appropriate for their maturity level and prevents them from being exposed to potentially harmful or inappropriate content.

Monitoring child's online activities can be an essential aspect of media education and responsible parenting. By reviewing a child's online history parents can identify potential risks, which allows for timely intervention. Controlling a child's online activity is not just meant to be about control but also about teaching responsibility. Monitoring is not intended only for control and punishment in case of unwanted behaviour but can provide a chance for guidance. Parents can discuss the content the child is dealing with and offer explanations or answer questions and offer alternative if necessary. Talking to children about various aspects of digital media consumption is key element of media education. Conversations about children's media use gives parents an opportunity to understand what content their children are exposed to. This insight allows parents to give their children better guidance. Talking which children about media use can also develop child's ability of critical thinking. Parents can encourage children to analyse and reflect on what they see. This helps them to deal with credibility issues in digital media and to understand the influence of media on attitudes and behaviour. Open discussions about media use build trust between parents and children. If children feel comfortable talking to their parents about their virtual experiences, they are more likely to seek advice and share their concern. Regular conversations about media use also allow parents to keep up to date with current trends and popular digital media culture embraced by children (Hill et al. 2016).

Table 4: Activities of parents of primary school children (ages 7-12) regarding the child's use of media and his exposure to media content

	2016	2023	Difference 2016-2023
When my child stops using the web, I check the history of his online activities	2.59	2.18	-0.41
I talk to my child about posting information online	3.63	3.34	-0.29
I talk to my child about the inappropriate content I see in the media	4.08	3.66	-0.41
I use parental control services online or on TV (blocking access to inappropriate content)	3.22	3.06	-0.16
I limit media use to children's programs	3.56	3.00	-0.56
I restrict content with violence	4.58	3.83	-0.75
I limit content where cursing and bad words are present	4.3	3.60	-0.7
I limit content with nudity and sexual content	4.61	3.99	-0.62
I check what the child watches/listens to in the media	4.12	3.46	-0.66
I allow use without the presence of an adult	2.7	2.29	-0.41
I only allow content/video games, if I've seen them myself	3.7	3.12	-0.58

Source: Rek et al. 2016 and 2023

From data provided in Table 4, the trend of decline in parental involvement in media education of primary school children in Slovenia is obvious. This can be a cause for concern, as important habits

and values that guide children's digital media behaviour are formed during this period of growing up.

Conclusion and discussion

Among key findings we would like to point out that collected data does not reflect a very popular assumption in Slovenia that screen exposure of children has risen significantly in past couple of years, especially after the COVID 19 pandemic. It does however point to changing patterns of children's screen exposure. Larger screens like TV or computer are not as popular any more compared to mobile phones, whose use is growing significantly especially in primary school children group. This change poses new challenges for parents.

Trends in parents' involvement in children's media education differ according to the age of children. In the case of pre-school children, we can talk about the increasing awareness of parents about the dangers of children's exposure to screens (see Rek 2023) and we can see that there is no major decline in either in limiting their pre-school children's exposure to screens or being present when children are exposed to media. However, a decline in parental involvement in media education of primary school children in Slovenia is evident.

Some other studies also point to the conclusion that parents of older children and adolescents face many challenges in upbringing their children to be smart about using digital media (Fidian 2022, Elias 2019, Sanders 2016, Anderson et al. 2018, Auxier et al. 2020; Choi et al., 2024). Previous studies have also shown that parents have difficulty setting and enforcing rules, such as removing technology from children's rooms (Buxton et al. 2015). It is important for parents to have a higher level of understanding and familiarity with the application or technology that their children utilize.

Changing patterns of children's screen exposure can contribute to this decline in parents' involvement in media education of their children. Larger screens like TV or computer are not as popular any more compared to mobile phones. Mobile phones are perceived as more private, persona digital devices. Their screen time and the content used by children can still be very easily monitored by parents, however due to this perception monitoring of mobile use is more easily associated with breach of privacy. Parents might feel hesitant to monitor their children's online activities due to concerns about invading their privacy, causing trust issues and friction in their relationships with children. Fast technological advancement and high diversification of digital media use can also contribute to this decline in parents' involvement in media education of their children as it is difficult to keep up with ever emerging new apps, digital tools, trends of digital popular culture. For many parents there is just not enough time in a day to perfectly follow well-structured guidelines provided by experts about ideal ways of media education as they have busy schedules, juggling between jobs and household and many demands of both, leaving limited time for active engaging in their children's media education. This can result in less supervision and guidance regarding online activities. On the other hand, socioeconomic differences can also play a role (Rek and Kovačič 2018, Papadakis et. al. 2019, Wang and Wanli, 2018). Parents without access to resources or internet connectivity might have limited opportunities to engage in media education with their children. Parents might also rely on formal educational institutions to provide for sufficient media literacy of their children (Ciboci and Labaš 2019, Patrikakou 2016, Hornby and Blackwell 2018). To counter the decline in parental involvement in media education, we need to raise awareness of the importance of media literacy, provide resources and support for parents, encourage open communication within families and offer guidance for ever-changing digital landscape. Collaboration between educational institutions, communities and parent is crucial to ensure that children receive a comprehensive media education.

In the past decade in Slovenia, we have seen a significant increase in projects, workshops, trainings, events, mobility opportunities designed by various stakeholders of civil society as well as media producers or educational organisations, aiming to raise awareness and provide media literacy competences amongst people. Many are intended for parents aiming to support them in their quest for guidance in digital upbringing and educating their children (Rek 2023). Our analysis of trends in parents' media education practices point to a conclusion, that such support is

needed. Further engagement and open dialogue with parents about their concerns, experience and challenges regarding their children's digital habits should be continued. Workshops, where parent could learn how to set boundaries, use parental control settings, strategies to foster critical thinking in their children etc. or just have conversations about challenges they face in dealing with their children's media use, be it lack of time or child's resistance, could be beneficial for parents to feel more empowered in facing vast digital reality. Schools should include more media education content for children and influence also their peer digital media habits development, since in the digitally intensive world numerous parents are under a lot of time pressure and stress, and the consistent implementation of media plans and media education of children, as suggested by professional guidelines, seems to many parents both time-, content- and value-wise a distant ideal rather than a possible real practice.

Supporting parents in media education is an ongoing process, as popular culture, technology and media landscape are constantly changing. Collaboration among various entities can create a more comprehensive support network for parents seeking guidance on media education for their children. Providing ongoing support and resources to parents by formal institutions like schools and health professionals or civil society organizations, governmental initiatives as well as many stakeholders involved in media production like media companies, content creators or influencers, could be a good investment in the future of our societies, as parents are obviously an important factor of upbringing digital generations.

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