Young Children’s Engagement With Digital Technologies in the Family Context: A Case of Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

Although more and more children engage in daily online activities with digital technologies, the roles that online technologies play in children’s lives are still understudied. This article aims at identifying the role of digital devices as well as practices in which young children are engaged at home. It also strives to explore digital literacy practices and to research how these are embedded into the family context. The case study of Lithuania discussed in this article contributes with new knowledge about the local contexts and may help to understand the main problems to be further worked upon with on a global and European scale. The research of young children and their engagement with digital technology in Lithuania comes as part of the EC JRC project “Young Children (0–8) and Digital Technologies.” The findings reveal that although children perceive online technologies and the use of smart devices as entertainment and relaxation, they are not addicted. Several factors affect young children’s uses and skills of digital technologies, including family constitution and parental styles.

KEYWORDS

Digital Literacy, Digital Technologies, Family, Lithuania, Young Children

INTRODUCTION

The results of EU Kids Online in Lithuania show that 86% of children go online every day. According to the report, 9–16-year-old children seem to have developed a wide range of skills and are good explorers of the internet (EU Kids online, Factsheet Lithuania 2014). However, Lithuanian children report a higher percentage of risks than the average of their European peers (LSE Media and communication. Lithuania, 2016). Lithuania also belongs to the “unprotected networkers” group of countries, which calls for a deeper study of the youngest children (0–8) and the context in which their first encounters with the digital technologies happen. The EU Kids Online project director, professor Sonia Livingstone, is the one who has been conducting, coordinating, updating this comparative 25-country pan-European quantitative and qualitative research since 2006. In-depth interviews have targeted mainly 9- to 16-year-olds in 9 countries (EU Kids Online 2014). EU Kids Online survey, the Net Children Go Mobile project (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014) as well as numerous other studies (Dervin, 2018; Garvis & Lemon, 2016; Marsh et al. 2017; O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016; Stephen & Edwards 2018) show that children go online at an increasingly younger age, with tablets and smartphones highly contributing to the overall online socialisation process. This is in line with a recent report by OfCOM (2016) which shows that the use of the tablet is increasing rapidly among UK children aged between 5 and 7 years old. Younger children are also particularly vulnerable to

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online problematic experiences, since their “lack of technical, critical and social skills may pose [a greater] risk” (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 3).

In spite of the substantial increase in usage of digital technologies by very young children and the increasing amount of research on the 0–8 year age group all over Europe (Chaudron et al., 2015, 2018; Daniela & Rudolfa, 2018; Dias et al., 2016; Marsh et al., 2017a, 2017b; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014; Stephen & Edwards 2018), the youngest children and their engagement with digital technologies in Lithuania are still not sufficiently researched. Therefore, the case study of Lithuania to be discussed in this article will add new knowledge about the local context as compared with global and European trends and will help to understand the main problems to be further worked on and the main trends to be followed.

This research of young children and their engagement with digital technology in Lithuania came as part of the European Commission Joint Research Center project “Young Children (0–8) and Digital Technologies”, which has assembled a large data set built on 234 family interviews in 21 countries, reported by each national research team (Chaudron et al., 2018). Although the project was initiated in 2014, Lithuania has joined it only in the last stage, since 2016 to 2018; thus, the findings of the national research study have not been previously published. Moreover, engagement of young children (0–8) with digital technologies has not been properly researched in Lithuania until now: therefore, the findings of the study are relevant not only to the general context of cross-European research, but particularly to Lithuania.

Contrary to most European studies, which to a large extent focus on parent mediation and the risks as well as safety issues related to the excessive internet usage at a young age (Dias et al., 2016; O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016; Smahelova et al. 2017), this study concentrates on the position of a child, taking into account the home and family context, which delineates “the child – online technology” level of engagement. Thus, from the general research aim, addressed in EC JRC survey, which strived to generate data on the overall question, in what ways, if any, children and/or their families are empowered by the use of new (online) technologies, this article focuses on two research questions, namely:

**RQ1:** How do children under the age of 8 engage with new (online) technologies?  
**RQ2:** What role do these new (online) technologies (smartphones, tablets, computers, video games, apps, etc.) play in the children’s and parents’ lives (separately and in relation to family life in general)?

**BACKGROUND**

The pace with which young children are gaining access to online, mobile, smart and networked technologies is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation. The benefits are to be found in developing the skills of digital literacy from the young age, but there are also a lot of risks and security issues that should be considered and eliminated. Children are already immersed in the online world via their smartphones, tablets, personal computers and laptops.

Contrary to Lithuania, where research on children representing the 0–8 age group and digital technologies is relatively scarce, there are numerous studies in Europe which concentrate on the use of touch-screen technology by 0–3-year-olds. Jane O’Connor and Olga Fotakopoulou in their study make a point that, at least in the UK, the issue of touch screens replacing traditional play and learning is challenging “accepted middle-class constructions of being a ‘good parent’, which has very much focused on encouraging children to read/be read print books and express themselves through physically creative and/or outdoor activities” (O’Connor & Fotakopoulou, 2016, p. 245). Touch screens are seen as the devices that threaten the traditional concepts of play and learning, and parents become anxious as to the consequences of the devices for their children’s development, especially their ability to develop interaction and communication skills. The same study draws attention to the fact that “the
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