



The Interplay Between Family and Media as Socialisation Contexts: Parents' Mediation Practices

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we gave an overview over relevant social contexts in the socialisation of the young people in our study. Here, we will display the context of the parents and their mediation practices against the background of their specific everyday lives. We will present their ways of parenting and their mediation of media literacy on the basis of the focused analysis (see Chapters 4 and 6; see Paus-Hasebrink, 2018a), in which we reflected on the data across all the families in our panel with respect to the three analytical concepts *option for action*, *outlines for action*, and *competences for action* (see Chapter 3; see Paus-Hasebrink, 2018b) in a condensed form. A more detailed in-depth look at these aspects will be provided in Chapter 8 of this book.

In order to show what social disadvantage in the field of mediation means, we will firstly lay out relevant aspects of social disadvantage within a mediatised landscape and the general effects of such disadvantage in everyday life (see Chapter 2). As the present chapter focuses on parents' mediation practices and how they changed over time, we secondly discuss them from two angles: one the one hand, with respect to both the children's age and their media usage and, on the other hand, by considering the changing conditions in the families' conduct of everyday life. We decided to use the term "mediation practices", as they are part of parents' overall parenting practices. Against this background,

we discuss the different mediation practices we observed in the study. Finally, we will discuss and summarise our insights and outcomes relating to parents' mediation practices.

7.2 ON THE ROLE OF MEDIATION PRACTICES AMID SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities affects family life (Jokinen & Kuronen, 2011, p. 45; see Toczydłowska & Bruckauf, 2017), as socially disadvantaged families have to face and particular challenges in their everyday lives, such as unemployment, often interlinked with health problems, and challenging socio-emotional problems (Paus-Hasebrink & Kulterer, 2014; see Chapter 2). Against the background of a rapidly changing media landscape, which can be characterised by a meta-process known as “mediatization” (Krotz & Hepp, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2015), these families—like families in general—are confronted with an enormous amount of media. However, poor or socially disadvantaged youngsters (see also Laubstein, Holz, & Seddig, 2016, p. 67) display different patterns of media usage from children in better-situated families and thus confront their families with a particularly challenging task in supporting them in acquiring media competences. With the internet in particular, we have to keep in mind the relevance of a “second-level digital divide” (Hargittai, 2002), “participation divide” (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008) or “third digital divide” (see also Helsper, 2012; Ragnedda, 2017). Hence, we may view these parents and their children as experiencing a lack of options for participating in contemporary mediatised society in an appropriate and beneficial way.

The large amount of research on parental mediation has produced mediation scales, which differentiate three relevant mediation strategies. Following Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, and de Leeuw (2013), we can distinguish between parents by the mediation strategy they prefer: The first strategy is “restrictive mediation”. Parents who use this strategy, according to Valkenburg et al. (2013, p. 445), “restrict the time that their children spend with media”, the second strategy is “active mediation”; this includes parents explaining media content to their children and conveying their opinions about certain media content. And the third strategy is called “co-viewing or co-use” which “refers to the extent with which parents use media together with their children, without actively engaging in discussion”

(Valkenburg et al., 2013, p. 445). Research that is focused more deeply on transactional aspects such as socio-economic and social-cultural aspects shows an interrelation between the way parents bring up their children, the mediation strategies they apply and, their socio-economic and social-cultural circumstances when managing their everyday lives. Further literature points out that more highly educated parents try to support their children by practices of “active mediation”, for example, by focusing on conversation. Less educated parents apply more restrictive mediation (for example, Rothbaum, Martland, & Beswick Janssen, 2008; Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015; Paus-Hasebrink, Bauwens, Dürager, & Ponte, 2013; Vekiri, 2010). These general findings seem to apply to the usage of the internet as well. As the research of the EU Kids Online network shows, special attention must be paid to socially disadvantaged children, because they are more vulnerable than other children to harm from online media. Furthermore, their parents use more restrictive measures to control their children’s internet use instead of trying to actively support and facilitate a safe and satisfying way of dealing with media (Paus-Hasebrink, Ponte, Dürager, & Bauwens, 2012, p. 267).

Given our focus on how the parents approach the mediation of media literacy/competence, we decided to use the term mediation practices, as they are part of parents’ overall parenting strategies. Against this background, we discuss the different mediation practices we observed. Finally, we will discuss and summarise our insights and outcomes relating to parents’ mediation practices. Our focus is on parents’ mediation practices and how they changed over time, on the one hand, with respect to both the children’s age and their media usage and, on the other hand, due to the changing conditions in the families’ everyday lives.

7.3 SELECTED FINDINGS FROM THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY: FROM KINDERGARTEN TO YOUTH

At the beginning of the longitudinal study, the children were in kindergartens and television was their main media activity, whereas (picture) books, reading to children and listening to radio plays were quite rare. At this time, the parents had some general ideas about mediation practices; most of them remarked that children should not see violent content, but over time it became obvious that this opinion was clearly influenced by social desirability. It was very rare for parents to pick up media-related

topics and talk to their children about them. Only when the children themselves wanted to talk about something on television, parents would respond—to the best of their knowledge. All in all, we observed a lack in parents' media competences to support their children. Only few of them were able to deal with media topics and to communicate with their children, let alone to give them background information about media contexts.

When children went to school, we observed a striking change: all the parents, without exception, upgraded their media equipment. Regardless of their financial resources, they bought computers, because they did not want their children disadvantaged. And in addition, they were afraid to lose teachers' and other parents' respect, if their children were badly equipped.

Apart from providing the equipment, most parents did not give much thought to actually teaching their children how to use the various devices in a responsible way. Mr. Boll said in 2005 that: "It [comment: talking about how to use media (devices)] is not important to me, it's too early for him anyway".¹ He, like many other parents, claimed that his children would know what was good for them and how long and how they could use media anyway, without being able to indicate where that knowledge would stem from. Teaching media competence, both in the technical as well as the social sense, was not something that many parents felt responsible for. Almost all parents of the panel assigned this task to teachers, because of either their own lack of experience and competence in using "new" media or their unwillingness to make an effort and engage with the issue, as Mr. Boll pointed out: "That's [comment: school] where they can learn more about media than you can teach them, because you're lacking the know-how".

This phenomenon held good throughout the study. As the years passed, and the children grew older, the families were still well equipped with media devices; in the third and especially the fourth wave of the survey, most households owned a desktop computer with access to the internet (see also Livingstone et al., 2015, p. 14). As the parents displayed very little knowledge of internet use and any concomitant skills, they evinced an impalpable anxiety about the risks and dangers on the internet, especially concerning the high costs involved and any virus infections. As they grew older, the children found new devices and new services, such as smartphones and, above all, the social media, increasingly important in their media repertoires. This brought new challenges

in media usage and media competence with it, but the development was often only observed at a distance, with hardly any mediation on the part of the parents.

Many parents had a negative attitude towards electronic media and preferred not to look more closely into the content their children used. In some families, issues related to privacy protection were mentioned, but most of the parents did not have enough knowledge and competency to give their children advice and to mediate their internet usage.² Instead some of them revealed themselves as careless in using social media; for instance, putting photos of their children on social network sites like Facebook, and thus embarrassing their children. At the same time, some parents recognised that nowadays the competent use of computers and the internet has become a key qualification for the future career of their children. In these cases, the parents once again relied largely on schools to teach media literacy, especially when it came to the internet (see as well Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012, p. 267; 2013, pp. 122–125). Beyond that, most parents adopted the position that their children were now grown up and, therefore, they could feel even less responsible than in previous years.

7.4 PRACTICES OF PARENTAL MEDIATION

The parents mostly showed little competence when it came to issues of mediation, often due to their own deficient *options for action*, and their deprived social situation due to unemployment and so on, which often left them preoccupied with a lot of problems, while coping on multiple levels of everyday life with challenges, such as a lack of time for their children, a lack of leisure time for themselves, worries about the future and so on. These factors closely interacted with parents' *outlines for action*. They were often severely limited in building and organising *outlines for action* (such as dealing with media offerings and motives to use; dealing with conflicts and proximity; interacting within family, neighbourhood, peer-groups, friendships, kindergarten or class; preferences, goals, plans and motives for action in general, plans for their future in special), as they were not often able to define goals for coping with problems in everyday life. Many of them had difficulties in forming their own plans and fulfilling their wishes and desires, both as couples and as parents, and as families as well. All of our families had an ideal image of themselves and of family in general—and there was scarcely anyone

for whom this did not include caring for their children per se. But the interplay between deficits in *options for action* and *outlines for actions* often induced developing or blocking adequate *competences for action* to manage the challenges of everyday life—all in all, they did not have the needed resources for supporting their children as they grew up, including their media usage in general, and even less with their internet usage. Against this background, one has to bear in mind that the parents were less educated and had little or almost no knowledge about all aspects of using the internet, whereas the technical operation of so-called “old media”, such as television, was no great problem for them. Their awareness of media contents and their backgrounds meant they were not competent to support their children.

In the following, we will look deeper into the specific mediation practices identified in the families over the study’s entire duration (see Chapters 5 and 8).³

We identified five dominant mediation practices: *laissez-faire*, *unmethodical restriction*, *arbitrary control and exploitation of dominance*, *amicability* and *child-centred practices*. These practices closely interacted with the parents’ specific palette of *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*. These practices do not always occur exclusively and separately from each other, often we could identify a mixture of practices that were used depending on the situation (also because parents were often insecure about how to react in certain situations or because they had no coherent approach to parenting), with one practice that could be seen as dominant, however, or we could observe that the dominant practice in a family changed over time.

7.4.1 *Laissez-faire*⁴

The majority of parents espoused *laissez-faire*-practices, as they did not cope well with everyday challenges and accordingly showed either little or no interest in their children’s media usage, or they were even prepared to declare that children had to learn that life is, to express it informal, not good but evil. In our interviews, some mothers did say that children had to learn that life is not uniformly benevolent, but that bad things can happen as well, something they could learn best by using media, something that for example Ms. Stab believed in the first waves of the study when she used media to show her children the “harsh reality” of the world (2007). Another example is Ms. Holzner, who, in 2007, watched

reality shows together with her children for educational purposes, in a way as a “worst practice”—example of what happens when children don’t behave: “What we watched, what we really watched was this show ‘Teenagers out of control’. On RTL [comment: a German commercial television station], because I, that was something for them, because I told them: when you keep behaving like this at home, that’s where you will end up. I’ll kick you out, I’m telling you, I’m not interested in this anymore, if the police starts calling every other day, because I have to come pick you up, or because you are loitering or if one of you is hiding out somewhere, I don’t care for that”.

Some of the parents believed that there was no need for media education or communication about media in the family after their children went to school. The opinion was that they should, by then, be old enough to at least learn about life using media in a sort of trial and error approach.

Often, different media, mostly the television, were used to keep children occupied when the parents had other things to do, as was the case in the Boll family at the beginning of the study. Since the parents were working a lot on the farm, their children were left to use media entirely unsupervised claiming that “they pretty much know” (2005) what and how long they were allowed to use media, resulting in some of the children using the television excessively even though the parents claimed that the children would spend more time outside.

Many parents gave the impression that schools are seen as better places for learning media competence. This was often implied by referring to their own limited knowledge about the matter and also because, as some parents like Mr. and Mrs. Landinger saw it, especially at the beginning of the study, children spent more time in school with their teachers than at home with the parents, thus taking themselves out of the responsibility. Interestingly, towards the end of the study, many parents complained about the poor media education classes in school or did not sign their children up for special (free) programs offered by the schools.

Single-parent families and extended families were particularly prone to this practice, in particular those living in severely deprived socio-economic constellations, without any hope that things might improve, and, in this connection, also stressed by difficult socio-emotional situations and excessive demands almost overwhelming them (see also Nikken & Oprea, 2018, pp. 1844 & 1855). These families had substantial problems in coping with everyday life challenges. Single mothers espousing these practices

had extreme difficulties in *doing family*, partly because of their experience of being abandoned. When life situations changed, because a new partner came into the family, and problems occurred over a child from an earlier partnership, we noted this practice again. In the cases of extended families with more than five—in some cases even up to nine or ten children—parents could not manage all the everyday tasks, so that their stressful everyday context left them no resources to support their children's growing up.

As their children grew older, other families, who had previously displayed different attitudes, also started to indicate a more *laissez-faire* stance towards their children's media usage. They were convinced that their children were old enough to use media without any rules or mediation from their parents.

7.4.2 *Unmethodical Restriction*

The practice of restrictive parental mediation includes proscriptions and limitations, in order to control their children's—often extensive—media usage. However, parents did not apply these rules consistently, and they did not monitor compliance. On the contrary, parents sometimes undermined their own regulations, either by allowing media as reward or banning it as punishment. As with *laissez-faire*, we observed this practice in extended and in single mother families. When the children were young, parents wanted time for housework, business or just for themselves, so they frequently used the television as a baby-sitter—often without looking at the content.

Unconsidered use of media to keep their children occupied was frequent and extensive in these families, reflecting their individual contexts and their insufficient *options for actions*. It precluded building and performing *outlines for action* among parents showing problems in coming to terms with their lives. This practice was particularly prevalent when children were younger. The studies by Valkenburg et al. (2013) and Livingstone et al. (2015) display similar results. By mid-childhood, or in adolescence, this practice had become rarer, because parents believed their children would not need mediation anyway.

7.4.3 *Arbitrary Control or Exploitation of Dominance*

This heading describes practices ranging from arbitrarily controlling children to dominance with a certain degree of violence—on the level, for example, fathers who physically beat their children, or exerted

psychological pressure. Such parents were trying to discipline their children, in order to treat their own, rather crude, problems (see examples of the Landinger family, the Rohringer and Weiss family in Chapter 8). This practice identified dysfunctional partnerships between parents as also affecting relationships with their children. Mr. Landinger used physical violence to end unwelcome discussions with his son Timo:

Interviewer: Do you talk about this with your father, or?

Timo: No, because if I keep bugging him, he becomes aggressive, and I don't like that.

Interviewer: What does it look like when he becomes aggressive? What does he do then?

Timo: He slaps me.

Interviewer: You? How do you react?

Timo: I'd like to hit him back, but he is my father, so I can't do that.

[...]

Interviewer: Is it a a dab or does he really heit you hard?

Timo: He hits me really hard [...] That always brings me into an angry phase." (Interview in 2014)

In some cases, parents' massive dissatisfaction over their *options for action* and their *outlines for action* led them to overestimate their *competences for action*. This, in turn, provoked negative feelings projected onto their children. These parents' arbitrary practices of control or even dominance displayed their actual lack of parenting skills. For example, Timo Landinger's father used violent computer games, rated as only for adults, to calm his son down by offering them, among his mediation practices, as reward. Mr. Landinger justified his approach (2014) because they had hardly any free time and a lot of stress and when Timo entered puberty, Mr. Landinger talked about tensions that could best be resolved if Timo stayed in his room, playing video games or watching television. If the tensions became too much, he would exert violence and humiliation to reinforce his dominance in the household.

Timo was almost addicted to video games as an avenue for coping with his own aggressions caused by his father's violence.

Mrs. Rohringer is an example for a mother who exerts an extraordinary amount of control over her daughter's media use. She works at home and thus has almost total control about what the children do after school. At age 15, her daughter was not allowed to have her Facebook account to herself, her mother had access to it on her own phone and

kept following her daughter's doings. If things happened that she did not approve of, she disconnected the wifi, she also controlled her daughter's WhatsApp messages, exerting dominance by stating that "she knows I am her boss" (2014).

7.4.4 *Amicability*

Some parents, especially single mothers, showed a high level of amicability where they used media together with their children. However, this was, above all, a strategy for spending time with their children, and mostly not for showing active engagement or any other mediation practices. This practice is quite similar to co-viewing or co-use (see Valkenburg et al., 2013). As children, and particularly daughters, grew older, these mothers valued media usage with their children. They practiced an amicability, blurring the lines between parent-child roles, as was especially the case in the Öllinger family. These mothers, like Ms. Öllinger, had massive problems coping with limited *options for action* (in Ms. Öllingers case her illness and the inability to leave the house much, leading to massive reliance on media as entertainment and connection to the outside world) and unfulfilled *outlines for action*, especially because of loneliness and the lack of a partner to share their worries and problems. So they compensated by explicitly using media together with their daughters or using media to keep a connection to their daughters outside of the house as well, while, at the same time, almost completely disregarding their children's wishes and interests, constraining them to a certain extent. In these families, mothers did not, in fact, apply mediation practices at all and merely talked about interesting content.

7.4.5 *Child-Centred Mediation Practices*

We rarely observed these practices in our panel. Child-centred mediation occurred in some cases of *better-doing family*. We observed this especially in families with upgraded *options for action* and, in connection with this, settled *outlines for action*, which led to more scope for adequate *competences for action* where parents did have the resources to focus on their children's interests and needs like the Dornbacher family (see Chapter 8). This practice was rather found in nuclear families with improving finances through new employment, better-salaried jobs or a double income. A similar result concerning income features in the study from Livingstone et al. (2015, p. 10). These families succeeded

in creating more relaxed environments for all family members: a better socio-economic, and hence a better socio-emotional situation, gave parents the opportunity to cope better with everyday challenges. Furthermore, where mothers married a new partner, who was better off and able to be a good and caring stepfather, improved circumstances meant *doing family* worked well.

7.5 CONCLUSION

Given the correlation between parents' socio-structural background and their specific ways of interacting, our long-term study showed that parents' resources shaped their competence in supporting their children (see Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2013). Based on the three central analytical concepts, *options for action*, *outlines for action* and *competences for action*, parents' and children's practices, including parents' mediation practices, become understandable and comprehensible as relating to the links between subjective perception, orientations driving action and everyday life practices, all against the backdrop of socio-structural conditions.

With respect to specific forms of interaction between the three analytic concepts, *options for action*, *outlines for actions* and *competences for action* (see Chapter 3), parents' resources dictated how they either succeeded or failed in their everyday lives. With parents' specific *options for action* in mind, the longitudinal study emphasises the importance of interaction between family members (see Goldberg, Grusec, & Jenkins, 1999), especially in parent-child relationships, where the degree of proximity, trust and reciprocity parents were able to build up with their children had relevant consequences for their parenting ability and for family communication. We observed that the parents' mediation practices via the specific ways they interacted with and monitored their children were highly relevant to the children's socialisation (Paus-Hasebrink, 2017; see as well Schofield Clark, 2013; Smetana, Robinson, & Rote, 2015). Our qualitative and long-term perspective allowed insights into the interplay of the dynamics between the children's age, the parents' individual conduct of everyday life, the context of their socio-economic and socio-emotional situation, as well as their coping practices with everyday challenges in *doing family*. Studies (for example, Van den Bulck, Custers, & Nelissen, 2016) show that the parent-child relationship is bidirectional and that children themselves also determine what pedagogical practices their parents will use, however inconsistently they may apply them (see Chapter 8).

NOTES

1. The original data is in German, all direct quotes that are used in this chapter were translated into English by the authors. In order to make the text more reader-friendly we did not include such a reference for the individual quotes.
2. Festl and Gniewosz described “that the parents’ co-use of ICTs was a significant mediator for the middle- and lower-educated families, precisely for lower-educated fathers” (2017, p. 2).
3. Knop, Hefner, Schmitt, and Vorderer (2015) identified similar mediation practices in their research on children’s and adolescents’ use of mobile phones and internet.
4. Livingstone et al. (2015, p. 10) use the term “laissez faire”, in order to describe a special “mediation strategy”, which can be characterised as “warm and supportive but non-demanding”.

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