University of Southern Denmark

Contesting digital leisure time

Parental struggles in relation to young children's play with tablets at home

Lundtofte, Thomas Enemark

Published in:
Nordicom Review

DOI:
10.2478/nor-2021-0043

Publication date:
2021

Document version:
Final published version

Document license:
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Lundtofte, T. E. (2021). Contesting digital leisure time: Parental struggles in relation to young children's play with tablets at home. *Nordicom Review*, *42*(Suppl. 4), 94-106. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0043

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark.
Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving.
If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim.
Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

Download date: 29. Feb. 2024

Contesting digital leisure time

Parental struggles in relation to young children's play with tablets at home

Thomas Enemark Lundtofte

Department of Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark

Abstract

Young children's practices with tablet computers has been a topic in parenting discourses for several years, drawing on earlier debates over technologies and media in children's lives. In this article, I analyse data from a video observation–based media ethnography of seven Danish children (aged 4–6) and engage with the research tradition attributed to parental mediation. The analysis suggests two major paths in the struggles that stand out from the discourses and in situ practices of parents and children in the empirical data. These paths encompass struggles in relation to supporting and directing children's play activities and setting boundaries in their use of tablets and content. The nuances and implications of both paths are analysed and discussed in terms of strategies that emerge to support children's agency and rapport with parents, as well as what this means for future research.

Keywords: young children, digital media, tablets, play, parental mediation

Introduction

In the last decade, tablet computers (tablets) have become a staple technology in the homes of young children in Denmark, in line with many countries of the Global North. In fact, research suggests that Danish children live in some of the most (digital) media-saturated homes in the world (Johansen et al., 2016). Although this may suggest a cultural willingness to adopt new technologies, the issue of how parents should mediate children's practices with these devices is debated frequently in mainstream media. Two recurring figures, or caricatures, of children's practices with digital technologies include that of the child who has mastered the technological properties via programming skills and the like, and in contrast, the child who is being led deeper into the proverbial rabbit hole due to seductive design. It is an image of empowerment versus powerlessness. In this article, I present microlevel data from a media ethnographic study of seven young children's play practices with tablets in the home. Data were gathered using a video observation method in combination with collection of audio data and field notes, and the analysis departs from intersections between observed play practices with children,

Lundtofte, T. E. (2021). Contesting digital leisure time: Parental struggles in relation to young children's play with tablets at home. *Nordicom Review*, *42*(S4), 94–106. https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0043

interactions between children and parents, and conversations with parents that took place during my visits.

I present an overview of research on parental mediation relevant to the present analysis and depart from there with a description of the theoretical perspective of practice theory, media play, and the child perspective, which has informed the study. For this reason, as well as because the research design centred on a different interest from previous work, the analysis does not follow the path of previous research. However, the many conversations with parents, as well as the observed interactions, led to findings that may inform the understanding of in situ parental mediation and the nuances of how parents operationalise their parenting values, bearing the aforementioned caricatures in mind. The analysis suggests two major paths of parental struggles in relation to children's tablet play. The first deals with practices related to a parental desire to keep children "on the right track" in terms of how they play. This encompasses expressing opinions on what would be a "good" activity, as well as helping children figure out difficult aspects of a game or overcoming software glitches. The second path concerns the struggle of setting boundaries, similar to the notion of restrictive mediation, which I return to later. In relation to this path, parents talk about how they limit their children's time spent with screens and how they sanction content differently, especially in terms of its perceived potential towards learning.

Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings in relation to future research. While the methodology of this study does not permit generalisations, tendencies from the observations point to some important features of practices that support parent–child rapport, as well as agency, in play with tablets. The discussion also touches on some current ways of dealing with boundaries, which can seem rather unnuanced, as is the case with the operationalisation of so-called screen time. Instead, in line with previous research, I propose that we favour an approach where family configurations are considered (Marsh et al., 2017) and certain modes of interaction with children are suggested.

The struggle at large: Parenting for a digital future

Parenting for a Digital Future is the title of the influential research blog edited by Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (LSE, 2021); the blog is dedicated to many aspects of childhood and parenting in a society permeated by digital technology. I have chosen to refer to this phrase as it reflects the complex motivations felt by parents in terms of *how* and *why* they reflect on their children's practices with digital media. Previous research related to parental mediation has focused on the strategies employed by parents and what sort of values they communicate by their mediating practices. Historically, such research has focused on children's viewing habits and parental mediation in connection to this, and television viewing has been the predominant object of study. With the expanding role of digital and Internet-connected technologies in children's lives, discussions about parental mediation have multiplied; however, the strategies employed by parents and the rhetoric in research have drawn extensively on knowledge gathered in relation to television-viewing habits (Livingstone, 2007; Warren & Aloia, 2019; Warren & Bluma, 2002). This may explain why some of these discussions centre on the concept of screen time; for instance, this concept has been adopted in the guidelines offered by the World Health Organization (2019).

As I have presented elsewhere, parents' perspectives on young children's tablet play have often been sought in research, and the results testify to the prominent position that parents hold as both gatekeepers and educators (Lundtofte, 2020). The ongoing discussion on parental mediation gravitates towards a recurring typology of strategies, which mainly fall into the following categories: 1) restrictive mediation, 2) active mediation, and 3) co-viewing/co-use. These mediation strategies have also been described as rule-making (restrictive), discussion (active), and co-viewing (Austin et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999; Warren, 2001). Restrictive mediation encompasses the different quantitative measures of restricting media use (e.g., screen time); at the same time, it includes ways in which parents decide whether certain media content is suitable for their children. Contrary to restrictive mediation, "active mediation refers to instructive or evaluative conversations in order to explain, discuss, and/or share critical comments – for instance, by purposefully explaining media content in words children can understand" (Zaman et al., 2016: 3). In relation to co-viewing/co-use, Jessica Piotrowski (2017: 207) argues that "the effects of co-viewing has not been convincingly demonstrated in the literature", leading her to dismiss this category in her research of contexts of young children's media use. However, based on a study of Flemish parents' mediation strategies towards young children's digital media use at home, Bieke Zaman and colleagues (2016) have argued that co-use leads to positive attitudes and beliefs about children's media and Internet practices in several cases; this claim is supported, in essence, by the research of Collier and colleagues (2016).

Parents' efforts to mediate seem to accelerate as children reach early childhood, peaking when the children are around 8 years old and then slowly declining (Beyens et al., 2019). There are vast cultural differences to be considered when talking about the topic of parental mediation from a global perspective (Aarsand, 2011; Piotrowski, 2017: 218), and differences pertaining to social economic status continue to be identified in research as a major factor in children's opportunities and parents' mediation strategies (Kirwil, 2009; Top, 2016). Concomitantly, children who grow up with parents engaged in "media innovation" are likely to adopt this interest (Müller et al., 2018). In summary, parents draw on a variety of strategies to mediate their children's use of media and digital technologies, and in this article, I focus on parents' reasoning by reflecting on conversations from my media ethnography and direct, in situ interactions with children.

Media play practices and the child perspective

This study draws on an understanding of media practices inspired by the so-called new turn in practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001), which has been adopted in media theory by Nick Couldry (2004, 2012) and others. Thus, the microlevel study data presented here are viewed as representations of practices connected to meso- and macrolevel perspectives by the bodies that carry them and enact them as routines (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices with objects – and media – are carried out as meaning-making processes in which teleological and affective aspects come together (Schatzki, 2001), connecting knowledge of things and their properties with different moods or motivations. This theoretical perspective extends rather well to theories on play, which are often ambiguous in terms of describing *why* we play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). When we play with digital media and technologies, such as tablets, we also play with the pleasure

of breaking certain limitations, while enjoying others (Sicart, 2014) and exercising our ability to perceive the properties held by the object for play (Bogost, 2016). Fróes and Tosca (2018) proposed the term "playful subversion" to explain how, in school settings, young children appropriate tablets to their desired interactions; these researchers argued for a less normative understanding of how these technologies are used in schools and other institutional settings.

Tablets are technologies that offer feedback and connection to the online world, leading parents to scrutinise them differently compared with non-digital toys (Brito et al., 2018; Stephen & Plowman, 2014). In the context of this article, I mainly seek to understand how children make sense of their play with tablets; however, parents' attitudes affect children's digital play vis-à-vis mediation. Even so, I view children as competent actors and cultural producers in the social world, which must also be reflected in research (Christensen & James, 2008; Corsaro, 1997; Farrell, 2016; Tobin, 1995). Essentially, I wish to consider the struggle of parenting in relation to tablets as it occurs when children are playing and during conversations. By offering both of these aspects, my ambition is to move in a slightly different direction than has been adopted in most previous research. Even so, I wish to remain transparent in clarifying that the research design did not focus on parental mediation in particular, and thus, the analytical claims will not be systematic in the same sense.

Method and data

The seven families with young children in this project were recruited from Danish preschools, and the informants were from middle-class backgrounds. Two families were single-parent households, one of which featured a mother who had immigrated to Denmark as a child, and the five remaining families consisted of one mother and one father, and one of the fathers had immigrated to Denmark as an adult. Building on previous methodologies, data were gathered using video observation–based media ethnography (Derry et al., 2010; Fleer, 2008; Fleer & Ridgway, 2014; Pink, 2013). Specifically, the sociomaterial points-of-view method was employed; following this approach, two cameras were mounted onto (or next to) the tablet to capture simultaneous footage of the screen and the child's hands, upper body, and face (Lundtofte & Johansen, 2019). While the term media ethnography signifies methodological kinship to traditional ethnography (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), it is not a fixed set of ideas. Rather, it signifies the anthropological turn in the study of media (Postill, 2009), where media reception is increasingly studied as situated practices. As is the case in this study, data collection often does not meet the standards of traditional ethnography in terms of time spent in the field with informants. However, in the specific context of this study, "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) was conceptualised across informants and settings following the mesolevel understanding of practices (Schatzki et al., 2001).

Using the methodology outlined above, two cameras recorded while the informant used the tablet; the resulting video dataset amounts to 6 hours and 32 minutes from both camera angles, and the data were transcribed and coded through a series of iterations using NVivo. Apart from video, audio data were recorded from the beginning of each visit using a Dictaphone, digital photographs were sometimes taken to support recollection, and field notes were written after each visit. Parents were often eager to discuss

their media habits, resulting in informal interviews in addition to observing and speaking to the child. Consequently, some examples offered in this article come from such informal interviews, which were recorded on the Dictaphone. As the original focus of this study was to understand how and why young children play with tablets, the children were not interviewed directly about parental mediation, but their observed practices are held up against the images portrayed by the parents. The present analysis focuses on how interactions between children and parents point to the nature of their discourse on digital media practices. As Pål Aarsand (2016) argued, ethnography on children's digital practices entails challenges in relation to mobility, visibility, and access; this is because they usually move beyond one place, the practices may be partially invisible, and accessing children's thoughts and sentiments on these practices can be cumbersome. Here, I focus on the microlevel interactions of hands on screens, facial expressions, and how interactions with interfaces connected to interactions with parents. The children were not moving around with the tablets, and although they did not express frustration with the constraints caused by my method, I am inclined to think that they would otherwise have been moving around with the device more often. Ethnographic research set in the private homes of young children is scarce compared with research in institutional settings, as well as a methodological reliance on self-reporting. Consequently, this study can serve to bridge the knowledge gap on in situ mediation practices.

Two paths in parental struggles

Research visits with young children and their families must be carried out carefully to avoid discomfort for the informants. This includes being transparent about the aims of the research project and mindful of the ethical aspects of consent, making sure children know they can decide to stop the process at any time. During my research visits and interviews, at least one parent was always at home and often seated next to the child. Sometimes, siblings were present as well. Apart from these professional aspects, research visits with young children are human encounters, and they involve several familiar aspects of socialising. In this respect, the parents I encountered in the field were most often interested in talking about their children's practices with digital media, and specifically, the many decisions they make in relation to mediation. Thus, although these aspects of being a twenty-first–century parent were not the focus of my study, they permeate the data; moreover, they are highly relevant to understanding the contexts in which the practices of the seven children took place, as Piotrowski (2017) argues.

The dual-feed video data of the seven children's play with tablets were coded through a series of iterations. First, the instances of parents and children interacting, directly or indirectly, in conjunction with the children's play were identified and later classified according to the nature of the interactions. This resulted in 12 categories, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 *Instances of coded interaction categories*

Interaction category	Number of instances
1. Parent assigns or directs	104
2. Parent praises	3
3. Parent helps physically	10
4. Parent helps verbally	23
5. Parent manipulates device	23
6. Parent plays along	9
7. Asking for help	19
8. Breakdown	55
9. Answers parent	56
10. Utterance is overheard	17
11. Declines parental direction	18
12. Explains to adults	97

The nomenclature for the coded categories reflects a child's perspective, as mentioned in relation to the research design. The category "parent assigns or directs" (1) signifies instances where parents ask their children to play a game in a certain way, move in a different direction (e.g., a different video or game), or pay attention to something. When the "parent praises" (2), it refers to instances where the child is praised for a talent or their ability to handle an app. When the "parent helps physically" (3) or the "parent helps verbally" (4), the child is assisted in handling or understanding something because the parent either explains it verbally or takes over briefly to tap or swipe something. In contrast, when the "parent manipulates device" (5), the parent takes control of the device *without* being asked to help. When the "parent plays along" (6), the parent plays with the child but does not necessarily do so according to the game design in a narrow sense. "Asking for help" (7) signifies that a child seeks adult assistance with something. "Breakdown" (8) refers to instances where play is hindered due to technical glitches or dissonance in the child's interpretation of an app as a device for play. "Answers parent" (9) refers to the child answering the parent, and "utterance is overheard" (10) refers to instances where a child's comment or question – often from conversation with the researcher – is simply overheard by the parent. When the child "declines parental direction" (11), the child disregards a direction, for instance, to handle the app in a certain way or move on to something else. "Explains to adults" (12) is assigned to situations where the child offers explanations to parents or the researcher about such details as how a game works or why a certain television show is funny.

Struggling to move play in the right direction

I now turn my attention to discussions and indications offered by the parents to reflect on how these aspects intersected with the instances from the observations pertaining to the 12 categories. These discussions are accessible to analysis via the audio data, but to analyse them, I also draw on my field notes, which were written to facilitate reflections on the immediate and subsequent impressions from each visit. In relation to the first category, directions from parents often seemed prompted by the research context;

parents behaved as co-researchers to varying degrees in the sense that they were seeking to steer their children in what they deemed a constructive direction. If children did not answer questions because they were concentrating on something, parents would sometimes ask them to answer the question. However, instances of parents assigning and directing included other aspects of making sure the children were staying on task by pushing them in a certain direction. For example, when Malou, age 4, was playing a game that included aspects of spelling with letters, her mother noticed how she was not picking up on cues offered by the game. Consequently, she encouraged her daughter to listen to what the game was telling her. The mother of 5-year-old Sebastian offered a similar a piece of advice to him when he was playing a game in which sentences could be constructed using picture cards. In this case, an on-screen character in the game offered an explicit voice-over instruction to "click me when you're ready". Ironically, this older game had been remediated from a desktop interface, but the voice-over audio had not been rerecorded to reflect the gesture nomenclature associated with tablets (i.e., "tap" instead of "click").

The above example of dissonance resulted in a "breakdown", as the unclear instruction left Sebastian stuck in the game. However, breakdowns took quite different forms, occurring because of glitches and other types of (gestalt) dissonance. Generally, the breakdown moments pointed to differences in the routines children and parents were accustomed to in terms of solving issues related to tablet play. In the example with Sebastian, where his mother tried to offer him a solution, he did not follow her instructions, nor did he ask her to explain things differently or help him at any other time during my observations. During my visits with Sebastian, his mother had described their use of (digital) media as rather individualistic. For instance, they did not watch a lot of television together, as everyone had individual preferences and screen devices – such as tablets for Sebastian and his younger brother – making the content they desired to engage with accessible to them. Sebastian's mother indicated a fondness for the convenience of their individualised practices. Everyone could do as they pleased, which meant less conflict. She did not indicate scepticism about tablets or digital media in general, and she especially valued how these technologies make parenting easier at times, such as in the car and at the hairdresser.

In the home of Amira, age 5, breakdowns resulting from glitches and poor design were handled by her mother, either as the result of Amira asking for help or as a preemptive measure (i.e., the mother could see that Amira was headed in the wrong direction). One such example occurred when Amira was using a video app (unfamiliar to me) in which the mother had stored videos from the Internet to the tablet's hard drive. These videos were accessible via tiny thumbnails, but the interface was often slow to react to gesture interactions, causing confusion for Amira. To deal with instances where the app became stuck or the wrong video played, Amira's mother would grab the tablet and perform the necessary gestures to put it back on track. When she was otherwise attempting to instruct Amira verbally, in line with the fourth category, Amira reacted by protecting the device physically to indicate she wished to remain in operative control. During my observations, their interactions pointed to a routine of insistence from Amira and her mother, in the sense of seeking control over the device. When things went off track, Amira's mother took over for a bit, and Amira would ask for help quite emphatically when things truly had become impossible for her to figure out independently.

Moving matters in "the right direction" could also be viewed in accordance with how playing with the tablet appeared to make sense to the child. In 97 instances, the children in this study explained aspects of their tablet play to the adults; such explanations were not necessarily prompted by a question. Kenneth, age 6, was keen on engaging in conversation, and he would often point out what he thought was funny or explain the purpose of a game. At one point, he was playing a rather complicated game that took place in a food court, and Kenneth took care to explain to me how the game was played and what he was trying to achieve. He asked his mother to take over for a bit, saying, "I hate this part – Mummy, will you play it for me?" She replied that he should give it a try on his own. As we can see from these examples, the diversity in strategies employed by parents to move their children in "the right direction" varied in nature. While some appeared to have established rapport and rather casual conversations regarding tablet play, other children seemed accustomed to solving issues independently or becoming slightly frustrated with the parental approach to assigning, directing, or helping. From the empirical data, I gathered that parents could agree on wanting to steer their children in a certain constructive direction with their play, but their methods for doing so varied both in terms of style and apparent success.

Struggling to set boundaries

As with the discussion of the literature on restrictive mediation, I now turn my attention to aspects of parents discussing boundaries in relation to tablet use, as well as examples of this in situ. Some of these instances occur in the categories of "parent assigns or directs", as previously mentioned, and more than one example of this occurred in the home of 5-year-old Charles. Charles's parents introduced themselves as (medical) scientists, and thus, in stark opposition to unfounded claims, religion, and the like. In terms of Charles's proverbial "media diet", his father explained that they restricted time spent with the tablet. "He needs something besides empty calories", he said as Charles concentrated on playing. Charles's mother added that they would allow such tablet use as watching an episode of *Paw Patrol* in the evening, but they encouraged him to play with non-digital toys during the day. His mother explained at one point that they would sometimes refrain from charging the tablet to avoid arguments over whether he could use it. In contrast, when Charles was with his grandparents (his mother's parents), he faced few media restrictions – something his parents considered "uneducated" and a bit of a problem. This raises the question of why they had a tablet for him to play with at all. In this vein, the parents stated that they wanted Charles to learn to handle computers, and their attitude towards parenting was focused on developing curiosity and self-reliance. In conjunction with a short conversation about Charles's fondness for Lego, his mother proudly revealed a photo of him with a large spaceship he had assembled without help. She zoomed in on the box to accentuate that the spaceship build had been designed for children aged 11 and up.

The parental struggle to balance restrictions was a recurring topic. As we have seen from previous research, restrictive mediation is a strategy employed by many parents to varying degrees. While Charles appeared to be the extreme case of restriction in this small sample of children, other parents talked about restricting certain content. Kenneth's parents were somewhat worried about the effects of content featuring a character called

Onkel Reje [Uncle Shrimp], a character associated with the Danish Broadcast Corporation's *Ramasjang* universe. This character uses silly and perhaps offensive language, echoing the naughty or digressive side of children's play practices and humour. Parents who approve of Uncle Shrimp would perhaps be inclined to think of him as an example of children's culture free from censorship and the objectives of scholastic learning. Charles's parents had reservations about Uncle Shrimp, and his mother was particularly puzzled by his rude silliness. When Charles was allowed to play a game featuring Uncle Shrimp in which he could smash different items with a hammer for fun, Uncle Shrimp would cheer him on saying, "Yes! That'll teach it!" Charles's mother replied, "That'll teach it what, exactly? I don't get it".

Malou's mother explained how she would restrict her children's time spent playing digital games and watching Netflix, but not be quite as restrictive towards time spent with *Ramasjang* – especially if it took place in front of the family television set. In this sense, she viewed the tablet as less of a device for using media in a "social manner", as she put it. The *Ramasjang* public service television channel, as well as the associated app, was commonly regarded as a positive influence by parents. The mother of 5-year-old William expressed how she was saddened that he seemed to be losing interest in *Ramasjang* in favour of other games and cartoons from Netflix. Being an early-years schoolteacher, she especially liked how *Ramasjang* offered a range of learning opportunities, and thus, she would restrict William's options when viewing television on his tablet or elsewhere to programmes from *Ramasjang* when she felt he had spent too much time watching Netflix. The issue of "learning something" from the use of tablets was a recurring theme across both paths proposed here; it was an issue of steering children's play in a positive direction and hindering excessive intake of "empty calories". The many conversations with parents that took place during research visits testify to an overarching point: parents were highly interested in this topic. From the conversations, I developed the impression that they were not only talking about their decisions and thoughts on parenting vis-à-vis media and technology use to be compliant with the research setting; instead, they also appeared to be looking for confirmation or some degree of assessment from me as a professional. While there are obvious similarities to the three major groups of parental mediation, as presented in previous research, the two paths of parental struggles related to digital practices show an alternative approach. In the following, I discuss the implications of this analysis and how it can contribute to our understanding going forward.

Discussion

This study has relied on a rather novel and less-than-naturalistic approach to media ethnography, and in all likelihood, the applied video observation method affected the nature and frequency of these interactions. Compared with previous research on parental mediation, this study does not offer units of analysis, such as measuring the frequency of different types of mediation, as parents' attention was directed to the children's activities by design. However, as I have put forward, previous research on parental mediation has often relied on self-reporting (with noteworthy exceptions, e.g., Zaman et al., 2016), a method that is sensitive to error in terms of measuring frequency, given that this must be noted by respondents or recollected during interviews or surveys. As such, this study offers reflections from parents that can be related directly to observed

practices, considering a child's perspective. The two presented paths of struggles, in relation to balancing one's values and ambitions as a parent, reflect the recurring duality of scepticism towards the pitfalls of digital technologies, as well as the reverence for the potential they promise. These were the major areas of concern parents talked about and displayed in their interactions with the children.

Marsh and colleagues (2017) have argued in favour of focusing on family digital literacy to foreground the ways in which families facilitate children's initiation into the social practices associated with digital media. The cases presented here support this argument, illustrating how the practices and mediation strategies employed by parents are reflected in their children's attitudes. In Sebastian's case, where it was indicated that restrictive and active mediation was rather absent, routines in seeking help from parents seemed absent as well. In contrast, Charles – who was often restricted from using the tablet for play – displayed a keen interest in exploring the properties of various apps. As discussed, previous research has revealed cultural differences in parental approaches towards mediation, and when we look at the microlevel data offered in this study, we see complexities and differences as well. Bearing the methodological effects in mind, the codes applied to the data still indicate that most of the children were willing to engage in conversation about their digital play. This testifies to a potential in parents' exercise of active mediation and co-use – especially if this takes place in a manner that engages interests expressed by the child.

Recent discussions on screen time and the familiar discussion on media panics (Drotner, 2000) reflect cyclical processes of perceived dangers associated with new media and technologies. While it is imperative to remain critical towards the many aspects of what is offered by media products, the empirical examples in this study reveal how parents approach this rather differently. I have previously argued how "screen time" does not necessarily capture the idea of setting boundaries that we are looking for because time spent with these screens varies greatly in terms of how other actors (e.g., parents) form part of the practices (Lundtofte et al., 2019). By the same token, some parents appear to view permissiveness positively in encouraging their children's ability to figure things out independently, and thus reach heightened agency in their use of digital technologies. The empirical data from this study suggest that parents who are willing to play along and exercise patience when giving directions, instead of seeking physical control of the device, had rather constructive interactions with their children in terms of mediation. Importantly, this study sought to understand *play* practices, so the children were asked directly to show how they liked to play. Even so, parents were often eager to discuss scholastic learning potentials from this sort of play; they were less interested in talking about this in the sense of how this sort of play with digital media could foster creativity. The proposed paths of parental struggles could perhaps be bridged further by an overarching strategy of viewing digital play as part of other practices, such as creativity.

Conclusion and perspectives

The two suggested paths in parental struggles concerning children's play with tablets point to several nuances in mediation strategies and how these work in situ. The path of struggles in relation to maintaining a desired direction in play activities leads parents to direct their children in various ways. However, the analysis has pointed to differences in

routines as some children simply appeared more used to viewing directions as constructive input, while others either ignored or failed to realise suggestions. When parents assisted their children in moving past obstacles, there were also vast differences in their ways of going about this. Children whose parents played along and patiently talked to them about how they could deal with the problem they had encountered were more prone to offer explanations about their digital play and engage in conversations with the adults. The children who appeared to be fond of involving their parents and me in their play demonstrated routine in these practices. However, if we compare the example of Kenneth to that of Charles, for instance, we see how rapport with parents was present in both situations, yet in the case of Kenneth, the parents had intimate knowledge of the game, whereas Charles's family simply appeared to insist on dialogue in relation to his play and creativity in general.

The path of struggles in relation to setting boundaries affirms well-documented parental concerns about the effects of media. In this regard, limiting time spent with tablets was a strategy employed by some parents, but the nature of media content seemed more important. Parents generally expressed a positive attitude towards public service content – especially that which focused on learning – while silly or digressive content was limited. In a case where the rate of access to digital play with a tablet was high and parental mediation low, the child was reluctant to ask for help or pick up on suggestions from the parent. Concomitantly, in a case where the rate of access was low and mediation strategies abundant, the child had less experience with digital play but was keen to seek help and discuss content with the parents. These opposites exemplify how rapport between children and parents can expand into the field of digital play, but if tablet play is viewed as an activity free from parental involvement, routines of dialogue do not seem to develop. Moreover, in a case where the parent would be quick to take over and handle the device, the child appeared to become frustrated more often during their interactions. The findings of this study indicate that there is considerable potential in understanding the ways in which parents can develop routines with their children about mediation that lead to strong rapport and heightened agency. Such routines are likely to be valuable later, when children are expected to expand their abilities with digital technologies, as well as in relation to unfolding their creative potential.

References

Aarsand, P. (2011). Parenting and digital games. *Journal of Children and Media*, *5*(3), 318–333. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2011.584382

Aarsand, P. (2016). Children's media practices: Challenges and dilemmas for the qualitative researcher. *Journal of Children and Media*, *10*(1), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1121894

Austin, E. W., Knaus, C., & Meneguelli, A. (1997). Who talks how to their kids about TV: A clarification of demographic correlates of parental mediation patterns. *Communication Research Reports*, *14*(4), 418–430. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099709388685

Beyens, I., Valkenburg, P. M., & Piotrowski, J. T. (2019). Developmental trajectories of parental mediation across early and middle childhood. *Human Communication Research*, *45*(2), 226–250. https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqy016

Bogost, I. (2016). *Play anything: The pleasure of limits, the uses of boredom, and the secret of games*. Basic Books.

Brito, R., Dias, P., & Oliveira, G. (2018). Young children, digital media and smart toys: How perceptions shape adoption and domestication. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *49*(5), 807–820. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12655

Christensen, P., & James, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203964576

Collier, K. M., Coyne, S. M., Rasmussen, E. E., Hawkins, A. J., Padilla-Walker, L. M., Erickson, S. E., & Memmott-Elison, M. K. (2016). Does parental mediation of media influence child outcomes? A meta-analysis on media time, aggression, substance use, and sexual behavior. *Developmental Psychology*, *52*(5), 798–812. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000108

Corsaro, W. A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Pine Forge Press.

Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics*, *14*(2), 115–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/1035033042000238295

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Polity.

Derry, S. J., Pea, R. D., Barron, B., Engle, R. A., Erickson, F., Goldman, R., Hall, R., Koschmann, T., Lemke, J. L., Gamoran Sherin, M., & Sherin, B. L. (2010). Conducting video research in the learning sciences: Guidance on selection, analysis, technology, and ethics. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *19*(1), 3–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508400903452884

Drotner, K. (2000). Dangerous media? Panic discourses and dilemmas of modernity. *Paedagogica Historica*, *35*(3), 594–619. https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923990350303

Farrell, A. (2016). Ethics in early childhood research. In A. Farrell, S. L. Kagan, & E. K. M. Tisdall (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of early childhood research* (pp. 187–200). Sage.

Fleer, M. (2008). Using digital video observations and computer technologies in a cultural-historical approach. In M. Hedegaard (Ed.), *Studying children: A cultural-historical approach* (pp. 104–117). Open University Press.

Fleer, M., & Ridgway, A. (2014). *Visual methodologies and digital tools for researching with young children: Transforming visuality* (Vol. 10). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01469-2

Fróes, I. C. G., & Tosca, S. (2018). Playful subversions: Young children and tablet use. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *21*(1), 39–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417705601

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203944769

Johansen, S. L., Larsen, M. C., & Ernst, M. J. (2016). *Young children (0-8) and digital technology: A qualitative exploratory study – National report – DENMARK*. EU Commission.

Kirwil, L. (2009). Parental mediation of children's internet use in different European countries. *Journal of Children and Media*, *3*(4), 394–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482790903233440

Livingstone, S. (2007). Strategies of parental regulation in the media-rich home. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *23*(2), 920–941. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2005.08.002

LSE. (2021). *Parenting for a digital future: A blog about growing up in a digital world* [Blog]. The London School of Economics and Political Science. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/

Lundtofte, T. E. (2020). Young children's tablet computer play. *American Journal of Play*, *12*(2), 216–232.

Lundtofte, T. E., & Johansen, S. L. (2019). Video methods: Researching sociomaterial points-of-view in children's play practices with IoToys. In G. Mascheroni, & D. Holloway (Eds.), *The internet of toys: Practices, affordances and the political economy of children's smart play* (pp. 241–263). Palgrave Macmillan.

Lundtofte, T. E., Odgaard, A. B., & Skovbjerg, H. M. (2019). Absorbency and utensilency: A spectrum for analysing children's digital play practices. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *9*(4), 335–347. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610619881457

Marsh, J., Hannon, P., Lewis, M., & Ritchie, L. (2017). Young children's initiation into family literacy practices in the digital age. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *15*(1), 47.

Müller, P., Schmitt, J. B., & Krämer, B. (2018). Of rules and role models: How perceptions of parents' mediation and modelling contribute to individuals' media innovativeness. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *62*(4), 692–710. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2018.1519569

Pink, S. (2013). *Doing visual ethnography* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Piotrowski, J. T. (2017). The parental media mediation context of young children's media use. In R. Barr, & D. N. Linebarger (Eds.), *Media exposure during infancy and early childhood: The effects of content and context on learning and development* (pp. 205–219). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45102-2

Postill, J. (2009). What is the point of media anthropology? *Social Anthropology*, *17*(3), 334–337. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2009.00079_1.x

Reckwitz, A. (2002). Towards a theory of social practices a development in cultural theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *5*(2), 243–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310222225432

Schatzki, T. R. (2001). Practice mind-ed orders. In T. R. Schatzki, E. von Savigny, & K. K. Cetina (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp. 50–63). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453

Schatzki, T. R., von Savigny, E., & Cetina, K. K. (Eds.). (2001). *The practice turn in contemporary theory*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453

Sicart, M. (2014). *Play matters*. MIT Press.

Stephen, C., & Plowman, L. (2014). Digital play. In E. Brooker, M. Blaise, & S. Edwards (Eds.), *Sage handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 330–341). Sage. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473907850

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press.

Tobin, J. (1995). Post-structural research in early childhood education. In J. Hatch (Ed.), *Qualitative research in early childhood settings* (pp. 223–243). Praeger.

Top, N. (2016). Socio-demographic differences in parental monitoring of children in late childhood and adolescents' screen-based media use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *60*(2), 195–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2016.1164168

Valkenburg, P. M., Krcmar, M., Peeters, A. L., & Marseille, N. M. (1999). Developing a scale to assess three styles of television mediation: "Instructive mediation," "restrictive mediation," and "social coviewing." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *43*(1), 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838159909364474

Warren, R. (2001). In words and deeds: Parental involvement and mediation of children's television viewing. *Journal of Family Communication*, *1*(4), 211–231. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327698JFC0104_01

Warren, R., & Aloia, L. (2019). Parenting style, parental stress, and mediation of children's media use. *Western Journal of Communication*, *83*(4), 483–500. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1582087

Warren, R., & Bluma, A. (2002). Parental mediation of children's internet use: The influence of established media. *Communication Research Reports*, *19*(1), 8–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090209384827

World Health Organization. (2019). *Guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age*. http://www.who.int/iris/handle/10665/311664

Zaman, B., Nouwen, M., Vanattenhoven, J., de Ferrerre, E., & Looy, J. V. (2016). A qualitative inquiry into the contextualized parental mediation practices of young children's digital media use at home. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *60*(1), 1–22. http://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1127240

© 2021 Nordicom and respective authors. This is an Open Access work licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of the licence, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/