

# The role of Estonian teachers in the social mediation of children's internet use

Kadri Soo<sup>a1</sup>, Veronika Kalmus<sup>a</sup>, Mare Ainsaara<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *University of Tartu, Institute of Social Science*

## Summary

This article investigates the socio-demographic differences of Estonian teachers' social mediation of 9–16 old children's internet use. The social mediation of children's internet use refers to practice and strategies employed by socialising agents to support, monitor and regulate children's online activities (Kalmus, 2012). Social mediation embraces socially supportive practices, such as guidance, co-use and co-interpreting, but it also consists of setting rules and restrictions.

Children and parents believe that it is the responsibility of teachers to educate children about safer and better online behaviour (Ainsaara et al., 2012; O'Connell et al., 2004; Wishart, 2004). At the same time our knowledge about teachers' role as social mediators of internet use is limited. More information is also needed about possible differences in the social mediation of internet use in different regions (urban/rural areas) and language groups. Previous studies have mainly concentrated on parental mediation activities (Dürager & Livingstone, 2012; Kalmus & Roosalu, 2012; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008) and the role of teachers has been partly neglected (Kalmus et al., 2012). Kalmus et al. (2012) analysed the EU Kids Online data in all European countries and found evidence that teachers' social mediation activities are positively related with students' digital literacy and safety skills. They also argue that the main role of teachers in most European countries is the role of web coaches.

Although guidance and help from adults might help children to avoid or mitigate online risks (Dürager & Livingstone, 2012), previous research results have been controversial. For example, analysis by Kalmus et al. (2012) showed that children's perception of online risks and harm is positively associated with more support from teachers and peers. This result is quite surprising, but might be explained by hypothesising that the help

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Social Science, Faculty of Social Science and Education, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, 51003 Tartu, Estonia; kadri.soo@ut.ee

of teachers is used retroactively, after children have had a negative online experience.

The aim of the article is to give an overview on the social mediation practices of Estonian teachers in different municipality types and language groups. Besides that, the influence of teachers' social mediation on children's online risk behaviour and harm experience is examined. We investigate the Internet use in Estonia because Estonia is a country with one of the highest internet freedom levels in the world (Freedom House, 2014). Recent representative surveys (Livingstone et al., 2011a; Kalmus, 2013) demonstrate that Estonian children are active internet users with a high level of risky online activities, while the level of parental mediation is quite low, and parents rely on teachers and older siblings as mediators of children's internet use (Komp, 2012; Vinter & Siibak, 2012).

We use data on Estonian children from the international EU Kids Online survey (see Livingstone et al., 2011b). The survey was conducted as a computer assisted personal interview with a response rate of 78% among 9–16 year-old children. A random stratified sample of 1005 children who used the internet was collected in 2010; 51% of them were boys and 49% girls. Most of the children (81%) gave Estonian as their home language, 19% spoke Russian. Children (1%) who reported both Estonian and Russian as spoken at home were classified among Estonian speaking children in the analysis. The age distribution was as follows: 22.0% 9–10 years old, 23.1 % 11–12 years old, 26.4% 13–14 years old, and 28.5% 15–16 years old. Nearly one quarter (24%) of children lived in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 29% in towns with 10,000 – 100,000 inhabitants and 46.4% in smaller towns and rural settings.

We measured *teachers' social mediation of internet use* with eight activities: making rules about what a child can do on the internet at school (restrictive mediation); talking with a child about what they do on the internet (active mediation of internet use); helping a child when something is difficult to do or find on the internet; explaining why some websites are good or bad; suggesting ways to use the internet safely; suggesting ways to behave towards other people online; talking to a child about what to do if something on the internet bothers the child; having helped a child in the past when something had bothered the child on the internet (active mediation of internet safety). All activities were recorded as children's reports about teachers' activities. We used an index of the social mediation of internet use, computed as the sum of teachers' different activities.

In addition, we used different indexes to measure children's online experiences:

- The index of children's *risky online experiences* was constructed, based on self-reported experiences on the internet within the last 12 months concerning: (1) receiving or seeing sexual messages, (2) experience of hurtful or nasty behaviour (cyberbullying), (3) seeing sexual content, (4) meeting online contacts offline (47% of 11–16 year-old children had experienced at least one online risk);
- *Experience of harm on the internet* was measured using two categories: 1 – no experience of any risky situation or harm; 2 – experience of harm from receiving or seeing sexual messages, seeing sexual content, or meeting online contacts offline (17% of children reported about harm from online risks);
- *Digital skills* is the sum index of eight digital literacy and safety skills (for example, changing privacy settings on a social networking profile; blocking messages from someone a child does not want to hear from; etc.);
- *The range of internet activities* sums up 16 different online activities practiced with a frequency of at least once a week.

Majority (87%) of Estonian children aged 9–16 reported about some activities of teachers' social mediation of the internet. The most common type of the social mediation of the internet was restrictive mediation, while active mediation of internet safety was also quite common among Estonian teachers.

Teachers in smaller municipalities and the Estonian-speaking community were most active in mediating children's internet use. They also used the most diverse range of different mediation activities. A possible explanation may be that teachers in smaller municipality schools have smaller classes and, thus, more personal contacts with students.

There were no gender differences in the case of most of the social mediation types, probably because teachers' activities are targeted at the whole class, and there are predominantly mixed gender classes in Estonia. Two exceptions were revealed: more girls reported about being helped by a teacher when something was difficult to do or find on the internet, and when something on the internet bothered them. The gender differences can be a result of the higher exposure of girls to online risks and harm (Baumgartner et al., 2010; De Graaf & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006; Jones et al., 2012), their lower self-confidence in digital skills (Henwood et al., 2000), and greater readiness to ask for help (Vandoninck et al., 2012).

We analysed the relationships between teachers' social mediation of the internet use and children's risky online experiences in different age groups, language groups and municipality types, taking into account the range of

internet activities and digital skills. It turned out that children with better digital skills also experienced more online risks. Teachers' social mediation was not a statistically significant predictor in the whole sample, but in the sub-samples of 14-16 year olds, Estonian-speaking children and those living in small municipalities a positive correlation existed. The more attention teachers paid to internet issues, the more students had risky online experiences. We explain this by retroactive mediation: children having experienced more risks also speak more about those issues with a teacher either on their own initiative or on the initiative of a teacher. Teachers' social mediation of internet use did not have any influence on children's perception of online harm.

*Keywords:* social mediation of internet use, teacher's role, online risks, online harm, digital skills