Parental Mediation of Children's Internet Use *Before* and *After* Parental Awareness of Online Risks

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Abstract

This quantitative cross-sectional survey aims to determine the extent to which restrictive, enabling, and observant parental mediation strategies predict and are predicted by parental awareness of children's online risk experiences. The research conducted multiple and multivariate regression analyses on data from a convenience sample of 397 parents of 14-year-olds in Ireland. The primary finding indicates that parental awareness was more likely to predict and be predicted by restrictive mediation only. This result provides preliminary support for the transactional theory of parenting for children's Internet use and suggests that parental mediation is a dynamic process, capacity, and outcome. Therefore, a combination of restrictive, enabling, and observant mediation is likely to be the most effective strategy for increasing parental awareness.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, research has reached no conceptual clarity on whether parents set rules for their children's Internet use before or after they become aware that their child has experienced an online risk (Kuldas et al., 2023b). The present research aims to determine which parental mediation strategy (i.e., restrictive, enabling, or observant) best predicts parental awareness, and vice versa. Parental mediation is defined as "promotive-protective strategies that parents use to restrict, enable, and/or observe their children's Internet use, including child-initiated communications about privacy, activity, conduct, contact, content, or time spent online" (Kuldas et al., 2023b). Parental awareness refers to "the extent to which parents accurately estimate or know how frequently their child has experienced risks online" (Kuldas et al., 2023b).

Although parental mediation has been the primary focus of empirical studies over the last two decades, they have lacked a theoretical framework that explains how parental awareness and mediation affect each other in parenting for children's Internet use (Kuldas et al., 2023a). Therefore, the issue of whether parental mediation is a result or antecedent of parental awareness remained unclear (Caivano et al., 2020). To clarify this conceptual issue, testing a bidirectional conceptualization is a rather different stance that has been proposed by a *Transactional Framework of Parenting for Children's Internet Use* (Kuldas et al., 2023a). The bidirectional effect denotes the transformation of and being transformed by transactions between parent-child-risk characteristics (Kuldas & Foody 2021). However, this bidirectional effect has yet to be tested.

Methods and Materials

Table 1. Participants

Population	Sample		Sampling method
14-year-old adolescents' parents	397 Parents 28 post-primary schools in Ireland	53 Fathers – 340 Mothers	Convenience

Table 2. Measures

N of items	Scale	Adapted by
Parental mediation of children's online safety and risks		
14	A 6-point scale [1 = Strongly disagree – 6 = Strongly agree] [1 = Not at all – 6 = Daily]	OeSC (2018)
Parental awareness of their child's online risks		
15	A 5-point scale [1 = It hasn't happened in the past couple of months – 5 = Several times a week]	OeSC (2018)

Results

Only restrictive parental mediation had a significant positive effect on parental awareness. There was no statistically significant effect of enabling and observant parental mediation on parental awareness.

Table 3. Multiple Regression - Prediction of Parental Awareness

Predictors	B	SE B	β	F	R²
Restrictive parental mediation	0.073*	0.028	0.168	3.54	0.03
Enabling parental mediation	0.037	0.036	0.057		
Observant parental mediation	-0.020	0.019	-0.064		

*$p < 0.05$

Parental awareness had a statistically significant but small effect on parental mediation. Parental awareness accounted for 2% of the statistically significant variance in restrictive mediation only. There was no statistically significant effect on enabling mediation and observant mediation.

Table 4. Multivariate regression analysis – Prediction of Parental Mediation Strategies

Predictors	B	SE B	F	R²	Wilk's Λ
A. Multivariate regression analysis – Parental mediation strategies					
Parental awareness			3.54	0.03	0.970
B. Univariate Regression – Restrictive parental mediation					
Parental awareness	-0.358**	0.122	8.64	0.024	
C. Univariate Regression – Enabling parental mediation					
Parental awareness	-0.158	0.084	3.59	0.010	
D. Univariate Regression – Observant parental mediation					
Parental awareness	-0.100	0.171	0.35	0.001	

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.005$

Discussion

This research aimed to determine the extent to which parental mediation predicts parental awareness and the reverse. As a main result, parental awareness was more likely to predict and be predicted by restrictive mediation only. This empirical result provided preliminary evidence for the transactional theory of parenting for children's Internet use, indicating bidirectional effects between parental awareness and mediation (Kuldas et al., 2023b).

In line with evidence for a representative sample of parents in Australia (OeSC, 2018) and Germany (Festl & Gniewosz, 2019), the current evidence for a convenience sample of parents in Ireland indicated that parental engagement in more restrictive mediation could be a result of their awareness. After they become aware of their child's experience of an online risk, parents are more likely to engage in restrictive mediation rather than enabling and observing mediation. However, this is inconsistent with some recent (Caivano et al., 2020) and earlier studies (Livingstone et al., 2017; Symons et al., 2017), which found no significant relation of restrictive mediation with parental awareness and argued that as parental perception of an online risk rises, parents engage more in enabling mediation and less in restrictive mediation. Although other studies (e.g., Byrne et al., 2014; Cerna et al., 2016) also argued that enabling mediation is most likely better than restrictive mediation for parental awareness, their own findings showed a lack of supportive evidence for this argument (Kuldas et al., 2023b). For instance, Symons et al. (2017) concluded that no parental mediation strategy could be associated with parental awareness. Hence, further research is needed to test the extent to which restrictive, enabling, or observant parental mediation predicts and is predicted by parental awareness.

Conclusions

Although the findings show that restrictive mediation is the best strategy for raising parental awareness, parental restrictions on the child's Internet use can be inhibitory to the child's access to online opportunities. Instead, as the transactional theory suggests, parental mediation is dynamic/overlapping in practice; therefore, a combination of restrictive, enabling, and observant mediation is likely to be the most effective strategy for raising parental awareness. This transactional (bidirectional) account of parent-child-risk characteristics in relation to the child's Internet use can help future research explain: "What do parents do to prevent their children from experiencing risks online? Do parents know (correctly estimate) how frequently their children experience risks online? How confident are parents in their abilities to prevent their children from experiencing risks online?" (Kuldas et al., 2023a).

Acknowledgments

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