DigiGen

Recognising digital technologies as a key part of 'doing family' in the digital era

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Introduction

Without any doubt, the family is one of the central and influential ecosystems in children's lives. However, regarding family arrangements, norms and conditions of founding a family and transitioning into parenthood, families have changed tremendously in recent decades. Although most families today still consist of children and two parents who are both gestational/generic and legal, and also social parents, the family forms and family arrangements people live in during their life spans are nevertheless diverse. Attempts to define families often refer to a specific family model: the traditional family or nuclear family, mostly understood as a breadwinner husband and a homemaker wife who live together with their biological children. This model is almost seen as 'natural' and universal and based on the narrative of the nuclear family. However, socio-historical research clearly shows that the family always was and still is diverse.[1]

Within the DigiGen project, the family is understood as an exclusive solidarity unit—a social-relational structure or network of two or more people—designed for a relatively long duration. Its members share goals and values, have a long-term commitment to one another, take responsibility for each other and often reside in the same household. Aside from the nuclear family, some examples of different family forms are same-sex parents and families, patchwork families, adoptive families, mixed-race families, families with different cultural backgrounds, single-parent families, families that come about with the help of reproductive medicine, foster families and multiple parenthood. Family is understood as a daily practice of 'doing family', based on interactions and communication among the different family members. Within this understanding, children are perceived as competent and active actors in their agency able to shape their social and family relationships.[2]

Technology is fast becoming a part of our daily lives, and technological progress is rapidly transforming the everyday lives of children and their families. This is even more true for digital technologies in recent decades.

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Study Info:

Countries participating in Work Package 3 of DigiGen: Austria, Estonia, Norway, Romania.

Qualitative empirical fieldwork:

42 focus groups with 176 children, aged 5 to 10 years.

124 single interviews, as 42 family interviews (ethnographic case studies), with at least three family members, including one child in the relevant age group. The analysis of these family interviews was based on a triangulation of the different perspectives of the families.

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1 For more see: Nave-Herz, 2015; Mitterauer, 2009; Segalen, 2010. Also: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU(2020)659870_EN.pdf

2 All results of the DigiGen Project on Family (Work Package 3) see: Kapella/Schmidt/Vogl (2022). Integration of digital technologies in families with children aged 5-10 years: A synthesis report of four European country case studies. DigiGen Working Paper Serios No 8.

(Digital) Technologies have also entered the family sphere and other systems in which children live and are raised (e.g., educational and care institutions). Nowadays, families and individuals are constantly surrounded by (digital) technologies and continuously interact with them. They, therefore, can be described as mediatised, and, particularly for children, digital technology has become a central part of their own and their families' everyday lives. digital technologies have penetrated families in various ways, for example, how they spend their free time as individuals and/or as a family, in the organisation of households and family life, in the area of education or further personal training, in the reconciliation of work and family and regarding communication processes within the family. It is evident that digital technology affects the lives of children and their families, but still it is not fully clear in which ways digital technologies are integrated in the lives of children and their families. What relevance does digital technology have for children and their families and which effects can be observed? These are important questions, which are especially relevant when it comes to younger children. Consequently, the DigiGen Work Package 3 focused on children between the ages of 5-10 and their families. Particularly for families with younger children the body of research is scarce with regard to digital technologies, especially when compared to existing evidence for families with older children and teenagers.

Drawing on evidence from the DigiGen project regarding children aged 5-10 years and their families, this policy brief addresses the following crucial questions:

1. How is DT integrated and used in families of 5-10-years-old children?
2. What effect does DT have on the daily life of families and their daily practices in 'doing family'?
3. How is the vulnerability of children affected by DT?

Main findings

Children today live in media-rich families and are introduced to digital technologies in the early years

In general, our data confirm that children today live in media-rich households with access to various devices, and DT are part of children's everyday lives. The most available and accessible digital devices for children aged 5 to 10 years are smartphones, tablets, smart TV sets, video game consoles

(e.g., PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch), smart speakers, laptops and desktop computers. Children in this age group use DT primarily to play games, consume video and audio content, seek all kinds of information, communicate, and assist especially parents in everyday family life. Children at the ages of 5 to 10 years differ not only regarding their individual family situation and (social) context they are living in but also in terms of their age. The use of DT by children ages 5 to 6 years is strongly related to other family members. An exception in this regard is Estonia, where it is more common for a preschool child to own a tablet. Generally, DT are widely integrated into children's daily lives at the ages of 8 to 10 years. For children in this age group, it is common to have a device of their own. Furthermore, there is a clear difference between the knowledge and use of DT and whether a child owns devices or not. If children have their own devices, their access is limited to a lesser degree and their knowledge is based on their own practical experiences and less through observing others.

Strong, relaxed or highly sceptical users and diverse roles of different family members

Digital technologies are integrated very differently into families and their daily lives. The spectrum ranges from families with a very positive approach and attitude towards DT and a comprehensive integration of DT into everyday family life to families that are characterised by a somewhat sceptical approach and rigidly regulated access to DT, almost avoiding its use. In some families, we see an intergenerational transmission of these attitudes from one generation to another. With regard to the specificities of how to handle DT in everyday family life, family members assume or are ascribed to different roles. On the one hand, parents function as role models for their children. Mostly, they are aware of this role, although they also admit to not complying with these expectations all the time. Moreover, they are often insecure about dealing with and handling DT in everyday life. Next to being a role model, parents also function as guides and supervisors, supporters, home teachers and learning facilitators regarding DT, their use and integration into the family, but also as prohibitor, controller and filter of content that should not reach children. On the other hand, children also adopt different roles that occur in multigenerational ways. They might concern siblings, parents or grandparents. For example, children help to shape the digital competences of other family members, often for younger siblings, but they also act as teachers and controllers of DT use and activities,

not only for siblings but also for adults like their parents.

Digital technologies support the construction of family on a daily basis – 'doing family'

Family is constructed and exhibited on a daily basis through joint practices like managing balance on different levels (organisational and emotional, for example), constructing commonalities and interactions, creating a feeling of 'we-ness' and building a family identity and caring for each other. This is understood as 'doing family', and DT contribute and support these practices in several ways. Our data reveal that this does not only concern families with intensive use, highly positive assessment and less strict rules regarding DT, but also is relevant for families that are far more sceptical about the integration of DT in family life. Doing family is established in ways of sharing the different attitudes and values towards DT within a family, regardless if they are positive, negative or rather neutral. Different family practices of using and integrating DT in families' everyday lives contribute to 'doing family', for example: co-activities with DT, discussions on different attitudes and values around DT and its use, shared and stored family memories, co-creation of digital content, support in balancing daily family life by DT (e.g., online shopping list, outsourcing of control and monitoring digital activities to digital solutions). Furthermore, DT support care practices in the family and make care possible without physical co-presence, despite a physical distance between different family members.

Rules and parental mediation are often limited to screentime issues

Parents are challenged with the mediation of DT in the family. First, because this requires a certain level of know-how according to the rapid development of DT, and demands from parents a constant adaption to new situations, information, new devices, etc. Second, results reflect that mediation styles that are applied within one family context strongly depend on the respective parents' assessment. This, in turn, is firmly based on their own interests, experiences, knowledge and competence regarding DT, their fears and subjective benefits. In their upbringing of children, parents can draw on a range of common parental mediation practices regarding DT, for example, restrictive mediation, mediation through monitoring, active mediation by negotiation and explaining through co-use and by active distractions. Our data reveal that setting rules appear as a dominant mediation style of

parents, oscillating between two poles: (1) parents' mediation is characterised by very precise and clear rules regarding the integration of DT into family life and (2) parents' mediation is characterised by different mediation styles and is less focused on rules. Rules often revolve around limiting time for digital activities. To strengthen children in their digital competences, mediation styles of parents and significant others that are more active, like digital co-activities, interactive negotiations and agreements, would be helpful. The genesis of rules in the family is manifold. For example, rules might be grounded in long discussions among parents or parents can leave it to one parent alone. Rules can be based on the advice of experts or stem from a general gut feeling of parents. At best, parents might involve children in negotiation processes and in co-creation of rules.

Digital technologies contribute to exacerbating vulnerabilities or the emergence of new vulnerabilities, but also reduce or prevent vulnerabilities

Our data reflect that children's or families' use of DT can potentially affect the vulnerability of children in different ways. To grasp the vulnerability of pre- and primary school children and families, we employed a conceptualisation that comprises different but partly overlapping types of vulnerabilities, including inherent, situational and pathogenic vulnerability. Vulnerability is not understood as an exceptional or even problematic status of being a child, rather as a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition, since every human being is social and depends on care.

On the one hand, DT can contribute to exacerbating children's vulnerability or the emergence of new vulnerabilities. This might occur when, for example, children lack digital competences, parents are overprotecting, children act as the main instructors and mediators on DT in the family, are exposed to specific content or digital experiences, or if a child is excluded by other family members from their digital activities. On the other hand, children's use of DT can also help to reduce children's vulnerability. This occurs when, for example, DT contribute to the feeling of solidarity within the family as DT enables to stay in contact and care for one another (e.g., through a shared device), or when DT has a positive impact on health and well-being when digital competences function as a resilience-enhancing factor. In general children aged 5 to 10 years and their families are aware of multiple beneficial and harmful effects of DT in diverse areas, such as

effects on health, social effects and effects for their family, effects on emotions, safety aspects and effects, educational effects and effects on the development of children and young people.

Resilience-enhancing factors – understood as the resources and strength of living systems like individuals or families – play an important role in ensuring the well-being of children. For example, cognitive factors (like cognitive reappraisal and mental flexibility), factors that regulate emotions (e.g. distress tolerance), family cohesion, parental support, social networks and belief systems protect and support children's development and, therefore, their well-being. Using DT is more likely to entail beneficial effects for children when they have digital competence. Thus, in the context of children, their families and DT, digital competences can be considered a resilience-enhancing factor that contributes to the well-being of children in many ways. It helps ensure and prepare children to navigate safely in the digital world. Children can be characterised as digitally competent when they are comprehensively aware of both certain risks and aspects they can profit from and when they are able to adapt their digital behaviour accordingly. Depending on their level of digital competence, resilience, and strength and resources, children's exposure to and use of DT has a rather beneficial or rather harmful effect on their well-being.

Development of children's digital competences is related to several aspects in the family

Results reflect that children's digital competence in the age groups under study primarily is shaped by their parents' background and family practices. When parents have a higher education, are responsible users, and generally assess DT positively, children seem to develop a more competent and reflected way of integrating DT into their daily lives. In addition, when children can participate in negotiations about and in using DT and when family practices of regimenting DT occur in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and interest, it is more likely that children develop competent ways of using DT in their daily lives. In this regard, the parent-child relationship is also highly relevant for the development of digital competence: when these relationships are close and trustful, children can develop digital competence easier. Furthermore, family structure is relevant for establishing digital competence; for example, if children have older siblings or close older relatives, they can observe their competent use, critical and prudent engagement with DT. Peer group dynamics are

particularly crucial for children's digital competence. Parents might adjust their assessment and children's digital activities to the assessment and activities of their child's friends and their parents or other family's peers. Different socialisation contexts, e.g. institutions like kindergarten and schools and how these institutions integrate, explain or mediate DT, also impact the development of digital competence. Finally, digital competence seems to be developed more easily when digital activities for the children are similarly relevant to offline or analogue activities like sports, hobbies, interaction or communication or other games.

Policy recommendations

Based on our findings, we give the following recommendations for supporting and encouraging families to ensure their children's well-being, helping them develop and maintain digital competences to enjoy the full potential of digital technologies and grow up safe in the digital world. This support could come from different players, for example, policymakers, parental support centres, and persons from other institutions like schools or kindergartens.

Building and improving children's digital competences in the family from an early age onward to ensure their well-being and to avoid increasing and creating (new) vulnerabilities of children. **1**

Since parents are often insecure in dealing with digital technologies in the life of their young children, they should be supported with information that is easily accessible, understandable, evidence-based, practical, and adequate for their situation. To strengthen the digital competences of children, and ensure their well-being and safety in the digital world, parents should be encouraged, enabled, and supported to apply the following family practices regarding the integration of digital technologies in the family.

Parents often focus on rules that regulate or limit screentime. To support children's digital competences, parents should be encouraged to apply different styles of mediation in relation to digital technologies. In addition, active mediation styles would be more helpful, such as active monitoring, communication, and discussions in digital co-activities. The digital technologies industry could and should support parents in this task by developing family ICT mediation tools, which focus not only on screentime limitation, but also on meditation styles that support and encourage communication

in the family and thus active mediation by parents or older siblings and other family members. These tools should also enhance digital competencies and citizenship.

According to the motto 'learning by teaching', digital competences can be improved for all family members, in an intergenerational sense. For example, when older children teach their younger children how to use digital technologies safely or when children explain to grandparents or parents how to use a specific digital device or software, both of them will benefit and improve their digital competences. For example, the updated Better Internet for Kids (BIK+ strategy) Pillar 2 recognises the value in this approach through its invitation for the Member States to "support peer to peer training and child to adult teaching on digital".[3]

Furthermore, families should be supported in balancing the relevance of online and offline activities. They should learn how to be engaged in the co-creation of clear family rules regarding digital technologies that apply to all family members. Although parents seem to be aware of their function as role models for their children, they could be supported in how to fill out these roles and how to avoid situations in which children feel excluded or lonely, in cases when most family members are busy with their digital activities (for example home schooling, home office). In this sentiment, DigiGen welcomes initiatives to support the reconciliation of work and family life as laid out in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan Principle 9 "work-life balance".[4]

Promoting the exploitation of the full potential of digital technologies as one way to support 'doing family' in everyday family life. **2**

To enable families to fully profit from the positive and supportive effects of digital technologies on 'doing family', we recommend support for families in the following aspects: Families should be encouraged to engage in digital co-activities and value these activities as family activities. These joint activities have the potential to create a feeling of 'we-ness" and strengthen a family identity. Still, the diversity of families' attitudes towards digital technologies and its integration into family life needs to be respected. Some

3 European Commission (2022) Better Internet for Kids Strategy (BIK+) section 5.3

4 European Commission (2021) European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan Principle 9

families may need encouragement, ideas, and support to balance online and offline (co-)activities and value both as family time. The digital technologies industry can ensure that their products provide meaningful opportunities for families to enjoy the digital world together, in a safe way by supporting maintaining and building up the digital competences of all members.

Other families may need evidence-based information and practical advice on how to integrate digital technologies in the life of young children, to protect rather than harm their well-being. For example, in implementing the BIK+ strategy, the European Commission should include this advice in awareness-raising campaigns under Pillar 2 and assist family organisations, family support services and Safer Internet Centres in disseminating this advice to families through different formats (campaigns, training, workshops).

To ensure the balance of online and offline activities parents may also need support in organising and managing these transitions between the different spheres, and also in managing upcoming conflicts, and putting active parental mediation styles in to practice in daily family life. Our data also reveal several care practices in the family that are supported by digital technologies and contribute to the well-being of family members, for example: helping each other in obtaining and maintaining digital and media competences, protecting children's and parents' well-being and security, using digital technologies as a 'babysitter', staying in contact with each other, and being able to update each other (despite a physical distance). These family practices of care make it evident that digital technologies enable to care or to receive care without necessarily being physically co-present.

Supporting all children in having access to the digital world to ensure children's rights. **3**

The 20th century has brought a paradigm shift in the view of children: childhood was increasingly considered as an independent phase of life and as a social phenomenon, rather than a natural one, and children nowadays are seen as active agents in their own rights, development and socialisation. Their agency is also reflected legally in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and transformed the child from a legal object into a legal subject. The UNCRC General Comment 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment adds additional clarity in this arena. The

General Comment makes clear that State Parties must ensure children's access and competency to digital technologies in all settings, including the home.[5]

Our results give some hints to situations of families or contexts families live in and have to cope with that have the potential to harm the rights of the child regarding the digital area. These occur when, for example, families live under precarious conditions that do not allow access to digital technologies, when parents have the tendency to overprotect children by permitting or limiting children's access to digital technologies or when they tend to engage in 'sharenting' practices, i.e., share private insights including children with a wider digital audience. Consequently, we recommend easily accessible support for parents who experience insecurities and tensions in their parental mediation practices, particularly when it comes to inconsistencies between the right to protection (online safety), the right to provision (children's right to have equal access to devices and an Internet connection) and the right to participation (access to information, to express their voices, to establish connections via social media, to choose how they spend their free time, to participate to civic movements) of children.

It can be difficult for parents to balance the rights of the child in the digital environment, but this challenge is far away for many families. DigiGen has highlighted the extent of digital deprivation across Europe, with an average of 5.4% of children living in households without access to internet or digital devices.[6] The European Pillar of Social Rights defines access to digital communications as an essential service, in the same way that water or healthcare are. The Pillar also reinforces the need to specifically combat child poverty.[7] A key initiative to this aim is the European Child Guarantee which recommends Member States to ensure that all children have access to digital technologies.[8] Member States should address this issue in their National Action Plans under the Child Guarantee. For families with access to digital technologies, awareness raising is key to support families in navigating parenting in the digital era. It is important that the European Commission include topics such as 'sharenting' and other key issues in media literacy campaigns under Pillar 2 of the BIK+ strategy.

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5 UNCRC General Comment 25 paragraph 9
6 DigiGen policy brief "Digital diversity across Europe"
7 European Commission, European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan Principles 11 and 20
8 European Child Guarantee (2021) Section 7.G-H

Parents should be made aware of the diverse ways in which digital technologies can contribute and ensure their children's rights in the digital world, for example, in forming their own identity, their access to information, protection from violence and sexual abuse, being offered the best health care possible and having access to education in times of digital schooling. As our data shows, children in the age of 5 to 10 years are already aware of various risks and benefits of digital technologies, and even in younger age, they have started to learn how to protect themselves, and how to avoid and prevent negative effects. Children have to be encouraged in these practices and parents have to be supported in learning how to empower their children in this matter, to ensure their safety and well-being in the digital world.

Support and encourage researching young children through participatory and multiple-perspective approaches. **4**

Research on children in general and especially among children at a younger age are not as common in the social science field. So, the research of DigiGen did contribute to an under researched area, focusing on children in the age of 5-10-years and their families. To understand digital technologies in the life of children and their families we recommend multiple-perspective interviews and focus groups with children. Encouraging and supporting research in this area would also support the implementation of the BIK+ Pillar 3 "active participation" by respecting children by giving them a say in the digital environment and would recognize children in their agency.

Regarding the multiple-perspective interview research, it has proven very valuable to triangulate perspectives for more nuanced understanding of shared knowledge and family practices. Furthermore, comparing the different perspectives within one family allows for new insights. Triangulating means comparing, relating, and integrating perspectives—not validating. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics and practices. Another triangulation exercise was the integration of different disciplinary perspectives amongst researchers. Practically, we triangulated perspectives during the entire research process in conducting and analysing interviews.

Our data and experiences also show that conducting focus groups with children in the age of 5-10-years is a fruitful way

to collect data. Focus groups with children are characterised by children's short attention spans. Furthermore, they require more directive moderator behaviour. The added value of focus groups with pre- or primary school children lies in the inspiration they give each other in talking about certain topics and remembering experiences but also how they refer to some aspects with more enthusiasm and potentially without the moderator's interventions. However, researchers should expect that focus groups with children generate neither one coherent peer opinion nor discussions in terms of exchanging arguments.

DigiGen

Project background

The DigiGen project develops significant knowledge about how children and young people use and are affected by the technological transformations in their everyday lives. The project is uncovering both harmful and beneficial effects of technology in the everyday lives of children and young people. This includes a focus on the family, educational institutions, leisure time and children and young people's civic participation.

DigiGen is providing new knowledge about the barriers and opportunities that children and young people from a variety of backgrounds experience in relation to technology. The project is developing effective social, educational, health and online safety policies and practices in collaboration with national and international stakeholders.

The project combines various research methods to develop new robust participatory methodologies for including children and young people as co-researchers, co-creators and co-designers. The diverse and innovative data collection methods include a mixed-methods study design and methodological triangulation, multisite and comparative ethnographic studies, multimodal approach, interviews and diaries. The interdisciplinary research team for this Horizon 2020 project comes from nine European countries.

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