

Abstract

Growing Up Healthily in a Digital World

Living environments, socialisation patterns, and possibilities for action lay the foundations

Dr Iren Schulz, self-employed media educator and communications scientist, Erfurt, and Mirko Eichner, Platform on Diet and Physical Activity (peb), Berlin

The significance of the media in influencing a healthy lifestyle is an intensively debated topic in the fields of scientific research and educational practice. Children use digital media offerings at an early age to deal with development-specific challenges. This is a matter of relationships and personality, but also a question of nutrition and exercise. The interaction between these factors may pose risks, but also offers the prospects for a healthy upbringing. In this regard, families and educational institutions in particular, but also political actors, are called upon to set an example, to create conducive framework conditions, and to make support systems available. For bans alone are neither helpful nor do they lead to the desired results.

Children today not only grow up in households boasting a broad media repertoire. They also possess their own media devices at an early age. When they use these media, they are not only focused on watching films and series but also on playing games on a PC/laptop, console, or mobile phone. In addition, these children conduct their own online research or simply go surfing on the Internet.

PARENTS AND EDUCATORS ARE FREQUENTLY “DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS” BY COMPARISON

Each phase of a child's life is framed by certain challenges that are determined by a society and culture, but also by a person's individuality and that person's physical and mental constitution. Typical tasks faced during childhood and adolescence relate to the development of a positive self-image and gender identity, building relationships with peers, and cultivating friendships. And yet the development of norms and values and learning motor skills are also part and parcel of this process. The media provide points of orientation, give rise to discussions, and are likewise a testing ground and leisure activity. How do I want

to be as a boy or girl? How do relationships work and what do I have to do to be part of them? Who do I model myself on? Children and adolescents can find a broad variety of answers to all of these questions not only in TV series and in various magazine formats but also on the Internet.

These types of use not only change and shift spaces, boundaries, and environments but also alter role models, competencies, and the rules governing media usage. Children and adolescents increasingly move in individualised communication spaces where they are permanently in touch with their idols (e.g. influencers) and within reach of their peers at any time. Simultaneously, media-free timeouts are fast disappearing and the relationship between media role models and “real” life is becoming increasingly blurred. What is more, excessive media consumption often adversely affects a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, new demands are also being made on media education in kindergartens and schools. For many parents, teachers, or educators – as so-called “digital immigrants” – did not grow up with the standard features of today's digital world or lack any formal education in this field.

CREATING POSITIVE INCENTIVES

But the media also create an active and creative approach to the world of children and adolescents and promote skills that exert a positive influence on health, nutrition, and exercise. In this context, learning games are worthy of mention, for example. The field of Entertainment Education focuses on health-related messages that are integrated into typical entertainment formats for children and, through their guideline function, can also provide positive incentives for healthy eating and exercise. Last but not least, action-oriented media education projects teach children how to deal with the subject of health and exercise in a playful and creative way.

OUTLOOK

Of paramount importance is a training programme geared to the acquisition of media skills, and this approach should be consistently pursued – true to the motto of the German initiative “SCHAU HIN! Was dein Kind mit Medien macht.” (PAY ATTENTION to how your child uses media!): understanding is better than prohibiting. However, it is also clearly discernible that the transition from theory to practice is still insufficiently anchored in the various contextual settings.