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Media education on threats in the digital world of the child

Edukacja medialna wobec zagrożeń w cyfrowym świecie dziecka

Abstract

Introduction. The dynamic and continuous development of electronic media, which is actively used by children and young people, justifies the need for media education practiced at home by parents, and by teachers at school. The growing popularity and attractiveness of the media, and free access to it by the youngest, imposes additional obligations on parents in the process of child rearing. They are and should be the first teachers and educators who will gradually introduce their children to the world of media. The involvement of parents and teachers in the media education of the child is an opportunity to prevent media threats and to build awareness and maturity in the correct perception of the media and its correct use in play and learning.

Aim. The developed article aims to present the most important and most common media threats that have a serious impact on the proper development of the child. The article also emphasizes the importance and necessity of media education functioning in the im-

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mediate environment of the child.

Materials and methods. The article uses an overview of views and assumptions explaining the essence of selected threats and dangers of the media and beliefs emphasizing the need to practice media education. The author also proposes educational solutions as part of media education carried out by parents and teachers.

Keywords: family, child, school, teacher, upbringing, media, media threats, media education.

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Dynamiczny rozwój mediów elektronicznych, z których codziennie korzystają dzieci i młodzież, uzasadnia potrzebę edukacji medialnej praktykowanej w domu przez rodziców, a następnie przez nauczycieli w szkole. Rosnąca popularność i atrakcyjność mediów oraz swobodny dostęp do nich najmłodszych nakładają dodatkowe obowiązki na rodziców w procesie wychowania. To oni są – i powinni być – pierwszymi nauczycielami i wychowawcami, którzy stopniowo będą wprowadzać swoje dziecko w świat mediów. Udział rodziców i nauczycieli w wychowaniu medialnym dziecka jest szansą na zapobieganie zagrożeniom medialnym oraz na budowanie świadomości i dojrzałości w prawidłowym odbiorze mediów oraz poprawnym ich wykorzystaniu w zabawie i nauce.

Cel. Opracowany artykuł ma na celu przedstawić najistotniejsze i najczęściej występujące zagrożenia medialne, które mają poważny wpływ na prawidłowy rozwój dziecka. W artykule zostały podkreślone również znaczenie i konieczność edukacji medialnej w najbliższym środowisku dziecka.

Materiały i metody. W artykule zastosowano przegląd poglądów i założeń wyjaśniających istotę wybranych zagrożeń i niebezpieczeństw medialnych oraz przekonań podkreślających potrzebę praktykowania edukacji medialnej. Autor proponuje również rozwiązania edukacyjno-wychowawcze w ramach edukacji medialnej realizowanej przez rodziców i nauczycieli.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, dziecko, szkoła, nauczyciel, wychowanie, media, zagrożenia medialne, edukacja medialna.

Introduction

The fast and dynamic development of information and communication technologies brings many benefits and new opportunities on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is associated with many dangers, which very often affect children and young people. There are many such potential dangers associated with modern technologies (Pyżal-

ski, 2011). As they are appearing more and more frequently, parents' efforts towards the acquisition of media competence by the youngest media users are necessary. According to Juszczyk-Rygałło (2015), it is this group of children that should be included in the media pre-education process.

Parents have a crucial role in preparing children for media use, and teachers are another important element in the media education process, supporting the development of media skills and critical thinking in students (Dusza, 2012). The earlier parents and teachers develop media skills in the children, the better prepared young people will be to consciously, creatively and sensibly consume media. Early practice of media education is the greatest method of safe media use and prevention of media risks.

Media risks among adolescents

According to Janusz Morbitzer (2016), the media can be excellent tools for supporting a person's intellectual development, but they can also become tools for their intellectual degradation, an object of addiction, or a danger to further development. Among adolescents, one can observe constant online activity, which most often manifests itself in the form of being "on the phone," which is constantly within the reach of the young user. The activity and readiness of being on the phone consists of checking the phone for expected and upcoming messages, photos, or videos. This situation has resulted in modern youth being characterised by multitasking, that is, doing several activities simultaneously (Grinols, Rajesh, 2014). This means that today's students find it difficult to focus on one task, instead of performing multiple tasks at the same time. Being active on social media, listening to music, and searching for information on the internet – all of these things make it impossible and incapable for a young user to focus on one task (Lim, Shim, 2016).

According to Erik Peper and Richard Harvey (2018), young people manifest an addiction in the form of a constant need to check their phones day and night, even when there are no new notifications, just after waking up and just before bedtime. In the opinion of the aforementioned researchers, this use of ICTs can lead – among other things – to reduced contact with peers, disruption, distraction, malaise, or emotional disturbance.

Modern communication technologies are tools and, like any tool, they can be used positively – in a way that benefits both the user and others – but they can also be used in a dysfunctional manner – in which case most often the user but also other people suffer the consequences (Pyżalski, 2011).

The phenomenon of sexting among teenagers

Sexting is the phenomenon of sending personal erotic or pornographic material via mobile phones and the Internet.

This phenomenon can be divided into two situations. The first is when a person takes a photograph or short film of themselves and then voluntarily and involuntarily sends it to another person with whom the sender is not in a sexual relationship. The second is related to taking a photo or video of oneself and then voluntarily sending the material to a person with whom there is a sexual relationship (Ronatowicz, 2014). Such material sent out by adolescents is very often aimed at increasing self-esteem, attracting the attention of others, and satisfying the need to be attractive (Drum, 2015).

Sexting is a growing problem occurring among teenagers. This is confirmed by the latest research conducted at the end of 2022 by Thinkstat "Teens 3.0." A total of 4984 students (7th and 8th grade of primary school and 1st and 2nd grade of secondary school) took part in the study. According to the research, one in three teenagers (32.7%) say that they have happened to receive someone else's nude or semi-nude photos via the Internet. Parents do not know the subject. Only 5.6% of parents declared that their children had received such pictures. The problem of sexting is not only about receiving naked pictures or films from friends or strangers, but – above all – about sending such material voluntarily and knowingly. According to a study, more than one in ten teenagers have sent nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves via the Internet, while only 1 % of parents admitted to being aware of such activity by their children (*Teenagers 3.0 Report*, 2023, pp. 85–87).

At first, sexting was a kind of new romantic communication, but over time it has developed into a phenomenon that goes beyond the private sphere. Nudes obtained in this way began to be sent to people completely unknown or known only from the "net," at their request or on their initiative (Kania, 2017). Spreading erotic content among adolescents is an idea and a way to communicate to peers about their sexual activity and interests in this topic. For adolescents, it is original entertainment, media fun, and an opportunity to become known in the peer group. According to Sylwester Bębas (2015), sexting is also a way of expressing interest in the opposite sex, experiencing first fascinations and sexual experiences. However, very often young people, when sending out their nude or semi-nude photos or videos, are not aware that this material, shared online, can be used by others in different ways (Bębas, 2015).

The phenomenon of sexting, which has recently become popular – especially among teenagers – can lead to serious consequences such as invasion of privacy, blackmail, or misuse of content. For this reason, this issue requires special attention and education of young people on the safe use of ICT.

Cyberbullying – a problem for children and teenagers

Cyberbullying is violence using information and communication technologies in the form of mobile phones and the internet. The term is used in the context of peer violence. Its most common forms include harassment, threatening, and blackmailing using the Internet, as well as the publication and dissemination of ridiculing and disparaging photos, videos, or information.

In contrast to traditional violence, cyberbullying is characterised by a high level of anonymity of the perpetrator. In addition, the classically understood "strength," measured by physical or social features, loses its importance, and the perpetrator's advantage becomes the ability to use the opportunities offered by electronic media (Andrzejewska, 2009). Currently, the phenomenon of cyberbullying is defined as behaviour that causes emotional damage, realised with the use of electronic means (Król, Zawadzki, 2020). According to Sharlene Chadwick (2014), cyberbullying may take a direct or indirect form and can include:

– direct harassment or intimidation;
– publishing malicious content;
– attacking computer systems;
– deliberately setting up computer systems to exclude a person;
– impersonating someone's identity to denigrate and misrepresent reality.

Cyberbullying – as opposed to other forms of online aggression – is characterised by:
– intentionality of actions (on the part of the perpetrator);
– imbalance of power (to the perpetrator-victim relationship);
– the repetitiveness of actions (concerning the number and regularity of the stalking behaviour).

The perpetrator usually has an advantage due to his/her digital competencies, and materials posted online that compromise the victim begin to live a life of their own and are very difficult to eradicate and erase (Ogonowska, 2018). Cyberbullying hurts many aspects of young people's lives, including the invasion of their privacy, leading to mental disorders, emotional disorders, depressive states, feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and general insecurity (Zhu, Huang, Evans, & Zhang, 2021).

The mentioned media threats are only a small part of the phenomenon. Notably, all educational activities need to emphasise that cyberspace is a place where different people meet. Therefore, it is necessary to create and follow rules to prevent dangers and potential interpersonal conflicts. It is about being a knowledgeable consumer of online content, but – even more importantly – a conscious constructor of that content (Pyżalski, 2011).

If we want to be educators or parents who accompany their children in the digital age in a meaningful way, we need to guard against simplifications and a superficial view of new media and their role in the lives of young people. This is especially relevant when it comes to dysfunctional behaviour (Pyżalski, 2011) such as cyber-bullying or sexting.

The significance of media education in preventing media risks

In the view of Janusz Morbitzer (2016), media education is knowledge, but above all – the art of wise use of media, treating them as tools for learning the truth about the world. According to Dorota Bis (2018), it aims to equip primarily children, but also adolescents, with specific knowledge and skills to enable conscious, correct and critical reception of media messages. It is important to be able to use information and communication technology as an aid and support for intellectual development and the process of social communication.

The major task of media education is to prepare young people to function properly in a given reality – in a world of attitudes and values, in the context of the choices and decisions they make. The implementation of media education among children and adolescents provides the basis for the upbringing of a person who, in addition to the accumulation of knowledge and experience, is also able to function in the information and communication society, makes skilful use of technology and technology, and the knowledge achieved allows to make his or her life better and more valuable (Bis, 2018, pp. 100–101).

Preventing media risks involves, first and foremost, the presence of an adult while children are using different media and multimedia. This parental attitude is an essential element in ensuring the safety and proper navigation of children and young people in the media reality. Parents and carers have a crucial role in monitoring and guiding how their children use media.

Both parents and teachers should be involved in preparing the children and young people to use new technologies safely. Thus, the adults in the immediate environment will contribute to shaping the safe media space for the child.

The first contact a child has with the media occurs in the family environment. Very often, parents themselves organise the media space for their children, often without paying attention to whether these relationships are correct and safe. Therefore, it is precisely for this reason that media education should begin in the family environment. Involving parents in their child's media education is an opportunity to build awareness and maturity in the youngest children's correct media perception. This way, parents themselves can protect their children from media dangers

(Nowicka, 2020). Preparing children and young people to navigate safely in the information society is a challenge, especially for parents, who should be equipped with new media knowledge and skills.

According to Anna Kaczmarek (2013), media education should develop media competencies in children and young people using ICT. Media education should also consist of teaching understanding and interpreting the content of media messages, and learning about new communication opportunities in modern media. Meanwhile, media competence is understood by the author as "a combination of knowledge, understanding, valuing, and proficient use of new media" (Kaczmarek, 2013, p. 71).

In media education, it is also important how parents use the media. Adults, by their behaviour, present patterns that will be adopted by the youngest. Agnieszka Ogonowska (2018) highlights three models of the media environment that parents create at home. These models have a significant impact on children's and young people's attitudes and behaviour towards new information and communication technologies. The author distinguishes between intensive, moderate, and poor media environments. In the first environment, family life revolves around the media, which are present in all household activities. Media are present during conversations, meals, entertainment, cleaning, and learning. In this environment, the youngest have their media in their rooms and very often use them outside of their parents' control and knowledge. Parents, for their part, are very rarely involved in their children's media activities. This environment, according to A. Ogonowska, is the most exposed to media addictions and other media threats that have a serious impact on the child's proper development. In a moderate media environment, parents devote their time to media-related activities, but also to other activities that are important for the child. Parents show interest in what media content their children use and how much time they spend on new technologies. Parents also teach their children safe behaviour, explain the content of the messages to their children, and willingly participate in their children's media activities. In the last – poor media environment – there is little time allocated for all media-like activities. Instead, parents devote their time to common conversations, housework, sports activities, and favourite games. Media use follows pre-established rules that everyone in the family follows. These include monitoring the children's media activities, concern for the development of media and digital competencies, and involvement in the selection of appropriate and valuable programmes, films, and cartoons (Ogonowska, 2018).

Parental involvement in their children's media education is an opportunity to build awareness and maturity in the youngest children's correct media reception. In this case, media education in the family, through which parents themselves

can protect their children from media dangers, becomes essential (Nowicka, 2020). If we consider the correctness of the media in the family, the daily activities of parents in the home environment can take on the following character:

- Activities including media and multimedia: watching TV programmes, films, and fairy tales together. Discuss with children the characters in fairy tales and computer games. Collaborative analysis of issues raised in media messages, interpretation of TV and Internet commercials, and review of TV station offers suitable for the youngest audience.
- Activities integrating media with traditional activities: going out to the cinema or theatre together, playing games based on stories taken from films and fairy tales watched, or from favourite characters.
- Traditional activities: organisation of the child's free time in such a way that mainly traditional activities prevail, such as: reading favourite fairy tales, readings, or magazines, joint conversations addressing issues important for the child, spending leisure time outdoors, playing board and card games, playing physical activities, arts and crafts, cooking.

The presence of parents in media education is particularly important, such a need is emphasised by both children and young people. This is confirmed by the 2018 Polish EU Kids Online survey of 1,433 pupils aged 9–17 years. ICT users were asked what support they could count on from their parents regarding the safe use of ICT. The research found that more than half (57.9%) of early childhood pupils (9–10 year olds) choose to talk to their parents about what makes them anxious or upset on the internet. 49.2% of children ask their parents for help with a situation encountered online that they cannot handle themselves. 35.9% of young Internet users initiate conversations with a parent themselves about what they are doing on the Internet and 33% of children ask their parents for advice on how to behave in a specific situation occurring on the Internet. Research with older students shows that the older children get, the less often they ask for help. Despite this, a significant proportion of teenagers – 33.9% in the 15–17 age group – still look to their parents to talk about their experiences online (Pyżalski, Zdrodowska, Tomczyk, & Abramczuk, 2019).

Media education is a process of continuous learning and adaptation to the changing media environment. Parents and teachers, who will continue media education at school, should actively participate in this process. The primary task of the media education teacher will be to shape students' skills and attitudes towards information and communication technologies. In addition to imparting knowledge, the teacher's tasks include developing practical skills, promoting safe media use, and building digital awareness.

The implementation of media education with the help of the teacher in grades I–III may include the following areas:

– building early sensitivity and correct attitudes towards the correct use of information and communication technologies;
– preventing media risks through early and effective education on the correct use of digital tools is an opportunity to develop children's awareness of the correct use of media, using it in such a way as not to harm another person. By addressing topics such as cyberbullying, media addiction, and inappropriate content, the teacher builds and develops knowledge that will help them understand what the main risks are and how to protect themselves from them;
– developing the ability to understand the language of the media in media messages aimed at the youngest, such as advertising, fairy tales, and films, understanding positive and negative content, and distinguishing between the fictional and real-world;
– connecting information technology with the teaching and learning process, including ICT in the educational process the teacher presents the educational possibilities of new media, and new solutions, which in the future may be helpful in the acquisition of knowledge and skills by the student;
– developing the ability to use information technology freely, to learn about new digital devices, applications, programs and the possibilities of their use in learning and entertainment;
– an involvement in the family environment in the process of preparing children to use information technology safely at home and school.

The didactic and educational activities undertaken by the teacher are a combination, continuation or complement of the media education activities started in the family environment. It is the teacher who presents and explains the principles of the correct use of information and communication technologies and organises situations in which pupils will have the opportunity to test their knowledge and skills in the correct use of new media for learning and entertainment. Media education practised by the teacher is a valuable signpost guiding children and young people on the right way to navigate the media reality.

Conclusion

According to Piotr Drzewiecki (2010), media education should primarily be carried out in the family, which is the primary upbringing environment, and the most common place for media consumption. However, upbringing in the family alone is not sufficient.

Effective media education is a process of two cooperating and complementary environments. The family environment and the school environment. Media education should begin in the family (in the form of casual conversations about media content viewed, adopting appropriate patterns of ICT use). It is up to the parents – in consultation with the child – to establish rules for the safe and sensible use of media in the home. They should show an interest in what content their children are exposed to and ensure that they spend their leisure time actively. However, media education initiated and practised at home is not sufficient. The development of safe media literacy should continue at school with the help of competent teachers.

Upbringing young people to function properly in the digital world should result in an ability to assess the consequences of their actions and responsibility for using material available on the Internet or publishing it. As Julia Barlińska (2009) rightly notes, parents and schools are faced with the task of enriching existing efforts to ensure the safety of children and young people in a media-dominated world.

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