GROWING UP BETWEEN SCREENS

Use of electronic devices
by children (3-8 years)

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of the 3rd edition of the Regulatory Authority for the Media project "Public and Media Consumption", developed in partnership with the Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences. The main analytical theme of this edition is the use of electronic media by children (3-8 years-old).

It seeks to identify the screen environments (televisions, computers, consoles, mobile phones, *tablets*…) in which children of these ages live, how they access and use them, how their parents monitor their use and their attitudes and concerns.

The study includes two components:

1. the first national **survey** on this topic, carried out face-to-face in 656 homes, which included a questionnaire for the parents of children aged from 3 to 8 and a questionnaire for children aged from 6 to 8;

2. **interviews and observations** in the homes of 20 families with different profiles and with children aged 3 to 8 who use the internet.

From the **national survey**, the following results are highlighted:

CONSUMPTION

- Mobile phones and television screens are most common in homes, followed by tablets and laptop computers.

- **All of the children see television, half had play video games and 38% use the internet.**

- Access increases significantly with age: 22% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 and 62% of children between the ages of 6 and 8 access the internet.

- The internet is accessed mainly on mobile devices: *tablet*, laptop computer and s*martphone*. Around half of the children with access to the internet have their *own tablet*.

- The internet is used mainly for entertainment purposes: watching cartoons and films, playing games, listening to music.

- Television is mainly used to watch cartoons (especially the children's channel Panda) and other children's programmes, followed by content for the family.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

- Around two-thirds of the families that completed the survey have only one child. Most of the parents had completed secondary education, while one-fifth has intermediate or higher education – the same proportion that has not completed compulsory schooling. Most of the mothers work in administrative roles, while most of the fathers work in non-administrative roles.

- More than two-thirds of the parents and mothers use the internet frequently at home, particularly in common areas; half had their first contact with the internet in their youth; around 20% does not use this technology.

- The families with lower education levels reported that their children make greater use of digital devices at home.

- Children from families at the higher end of the socioeconomic scale are those who most accessed and use the internet.

- Children between the ages of 6 and 8 stated that the activity they engage in most with their parents is searching for information; around one-fifth said they use the internet at school, half the number indicated by the parents.

- Boys, children between the ages of 6 and 8 years, and children from families at the higher end of the socioeconomic scale are those who played video games most. The tablet is the favoured device; boys also use consoles, while the girls like to play with their mobile phones. The boys prefer competitive games; while the girls prefer fantasy and caring scenarios.

- More than one-third of parents did not respond to the question on their children's digital skills. Installing games and finding interesting content predominate among the recognised skills.

PREVENTION

- Parents expressed greater concern in relation to the internet than they did to television.

- Less than half of the parents are concerned about the amount of television their children watch, considering it to be under control. Their intervention is more concerned with content (stopping them from watching violent content) than with the time spent watching television.

- Parents with higher levels of education showed greater concern and readiness to restrict access to video games, particularly those with violent content.

From the **interviews and observation** in 20 family homes, the following trends are highlighted:

- Children's contact with television is frequent and intense in common areas of the home, and with shared television sets that are often 'monopolised' and used with greater or lesser autonomy. It's during and/or after the evening meal that the screen is shared and more general channels are viewed.

- Television is present in the 'background' as a *babysitter* while children occupy themselves with other things. This screen is also used to distract the child while he or she is being dressed or fed, or to help them sleep or wake up.

- The most commonly expressed concerns of parents in relation to television are about inappropriate and violent content and the time children spend watching television, which some families use to justify restricting access.

- While used less for playing games, consoles and laptop computers were preferred by older children and by adults and for playing as a family.

- Most children use the internet every day with portable and personal screens, with a clear preference for *tablets*.

- There are families that either do not encourage or limit their children's use of the internet because they would prefer them to entertain themselves with other activities.

- Portable and touchscreen devices are used *offline* for expressive and entertainment purposes (taking photographs, filming, painting and playing games). *Online*, the activities are recreational, with YouTube being particularly popular for viewing videos of programmes and/or celebrities from television, but also for video comics, music, sport, games and tutorials.

- *Tablets and smartphones* are used to calm and distract children at mealtimes, or as a reward for good behaviour or performance at school.

- Practical skills were observed in children – their handling of the device or between devices and their use of the internet – and how they manage to find the content that interests them: with the help of family members; using Google, which directs them to YouTube; through the browser history or the suggestions that are generated.

- The parents value the skills the children develop with games and the internet (dexterity, problem-solving, language learning - reading and writing, in Portuguese and English – calculations, social skills, digital literacy and other forms of more general education, such as personal hygiene).

- Parents' greatest concerns are violence that is unsuitable for their children's age, the time children spend in front of screens and their dependency on the internet.

The study's scientific team end the report with **recommendations** for schools, families, industry and the community.

Study Presentation

Children begin interacting with screens, from the family television to their parents' mobile phones, from an increasingly younger age. Many play with tablets, surprising family members with the ease with which they discover how to use them.

One of the aims of media regulation is precisely to ensure the protection of more sensitive audiences, such as minors, in terms of content and services that are more likely to harm their development.

Taking this regulatory provision into consideration, the ERC decided to undertake a study of media consumption in order specifically to achieve a greater understanding of children as media consumers, taking into account the development of their personality, in order to better inform its decisions.

It should be recalled that ERC is responsible for conducting studies and other publications and research initiatives in the field of the media and media content. Moreover, this information and its publication in Portuguese society allow parents, family members and educators to monitor the relationship between children and the media in a more informed manner.

The study *Growing Up between Screens: Use of electronic devices by children (3-8 years)* seeks to understand how, within their families and elsewhere, pre-school and primary age children use these screens.

This concern led us to the following **objectives**:

- Identify the forms of access and use of electronic media (television, computers, games consoles, mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, etc.) by children aged from 3 to 8, at home;

- Describe how parents supervise the use of electronic media, their attitudes, concerns and contextual factors that affect this supervision.

These objectives led us to a set of guiding **questions**:

- What are the processes and dynamics of the relationship between children of this age and the media? How are television and digital media present in the daily life of younger children at home?

- How do we describe how 3-8-year-old children interact with electronic media?

- How does the use and possession of electronic media affect the skills and interests of children of this age?

- What role do digital and electronic media play in the child's daily life: entertainment, learning, occupying free time, among others?

- How are the practices of interaction with electronic screens described by parents?

- Are these interaction practices affected by their considerations about the place of the media in their children's lives?

- How do families socialise children through television and digital media, taking their expectations, concerns and social pressures into consideration?

The study is based on a mixed methodology. On the one hand, there was a survey that sought to develop a picture of the standards and trends across the country, while on the other, the study adopted a qualitative approach, to understand the intricate network of relationships between humans and technology. This report presents the study in its two components, divided into two parts.

This study fills a knowledge gap, given the absence of national information on how children up to the age of eight are growing up while in contact with the digital technology that surrounds them. The statistics show that there are more broadband connections in homes with children: 87% compared to a national average of 63% (INE, 2014), although there is no breakdown by age group. Television audience studies cover those over the age of four, but they ignore family mediation factors.

This gap is beginning to be filled at the European level. We have found longitudinal studies in countries with high penetration and use of digital media in households with children: in the United Kingdom, the communications regulator, *Ofcom* (Office of Communications), has, since 2005, conducted annual surveys focusing on people from the age of three.

In the Netherlands, *Mediawijzer.net*, an organisation that promotes media literacy among all age groups, has supported research in children aged from 0 to 9, and the mediation of their parents.

In 2014, the European Commission's *Joint Research Centre* carried out an exploratory survey of children up to the age of eight and their families in seven countries, interviewing 10 families in each country (Chaudron, 2015); this study was extended to include 18 European countries, including Portugal, using the same methodology (Dias and Brito, 2016).

With the knowledge obtained through this study and its dissemination in Portuguese society, the aim is to allow parents, family members, educators, public policy decision-makers, industries, communication professionals and the third sector to be able to monitor the relationship between children and the media in a more informed manner.
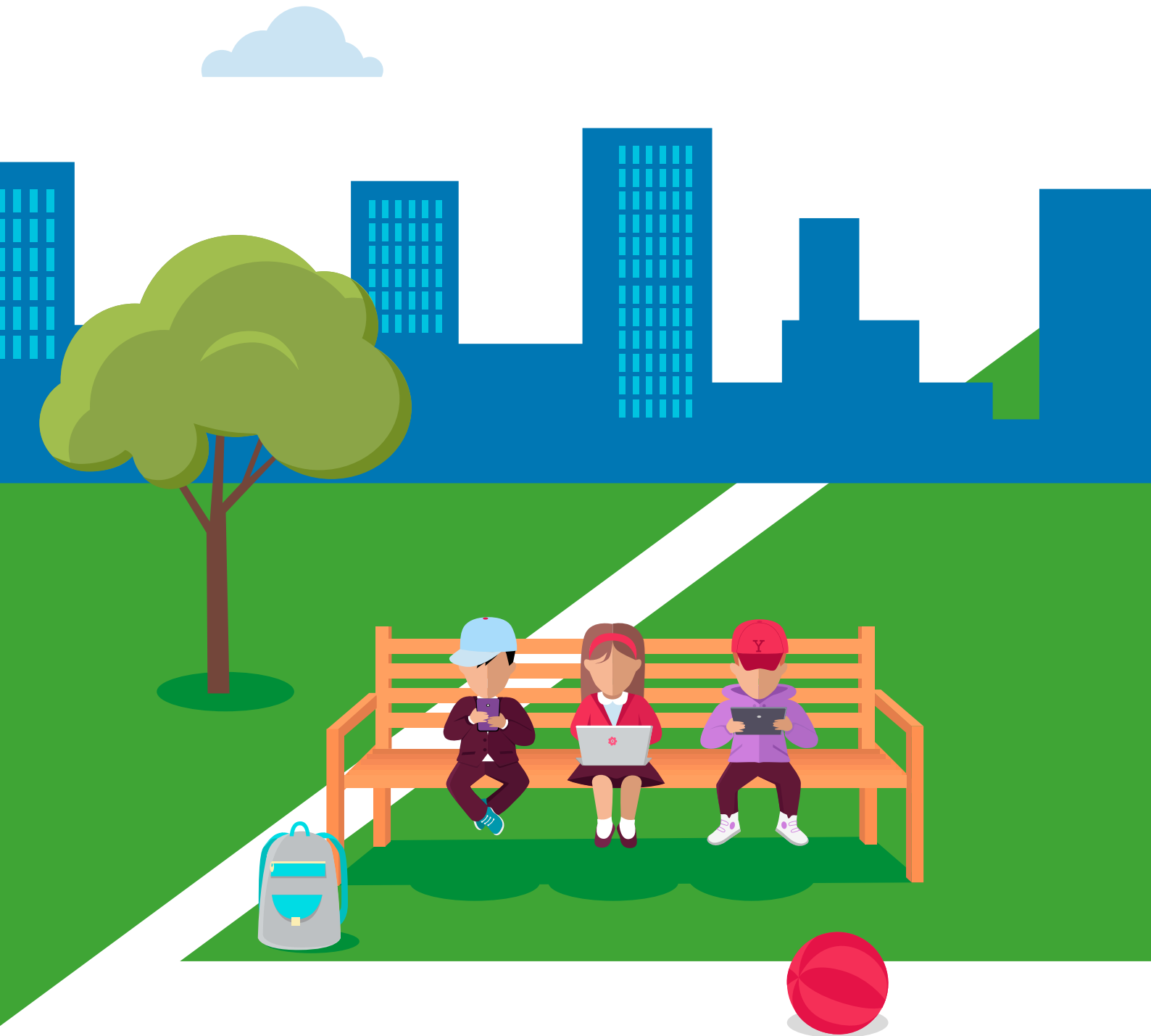
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