

Media-empowerment: a behavior change approach to media education

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Today's children – from babies to teenagers – grow up in a world where computers, tablets and smartphones are ubiquitous. This offers them important opportunities in terms of entertainment, education, communication and cultural development, but there are also risks for their well-being, such as game addiction, online bullying behavior, a distorted self-image, and poorer learning performance. In order to ensure that children can fully benefit from the opportunities and are less sensitive to the risks that media entails, it is important that they have the opportunity to develop into autonomous, active, and conscious media consumers who are in control over their own media behavior. Media empowerment is a method that children can help with this.

The media empowerment approach is based on theoretical insights from the field of persuasive communication and social and developmental psychology, and seeks to explain how children can become more aware of the influence that media have on their thoughts and feelings, and through that become more in control over their media behavior. The autonomy of children is central to this approach. The goal is to teach children to use their own strength and skills to reflect on and self-regulate their media behavior.

Media-empowerment includes four elements:

- 1- KNOWLEDGE: e.g., having an understanding of what media is and how and by whom it is made, being aware that media can provide a distorted image of reality, knowing how to use and apply media equipment and applications to achieve certain goals, and knowing how to create media content yourself (*knowing*)
- 2- INTUITION: being able to feel and name what media do to you (*feeling*)
- 3- COMPETENCE: having self-confidence and being able to actively and consciously deal with media (*doing*)
- 4- MOTIVATION: being intrinsically motivated to actively and consciously deal with media (*wanting*)

KNOWLEDGE (*knowing*)

Knowledge forms the basis of media empowerment. Having knowledge about media, such as understanding what media is and how and by whom it is made and knowing how to use media to achieve certain goals, is a prerequisite for actively and consciously dealing with media. For example, it is only possible for children to reflect critically on advertising if they can also recognize advertising as such. And to protect their privacy on social media, children must first be aware of the features available to do so.

Although it is very important that children have knowledge about media, scientific research shows that having that knowledge does not automatically lead to a change in their media behavior (Jeong, Cho, & Hwang, 2012; Rozendaal, Lapierre, Van Reijmersdal, & Buijzen, 2011). Children who have more knowledge about media do not by definition also actively and consciously interact with media. In order to do so, children must be able to use certain media empowerment strategies. Examples of such strategies are reflecting critically on what they see in media, avoiding undesirable media content or actively seeking for desirable media content, reflecting on their own media behavior, such as the time they spend on media or their behavior on social media. However, based on theories

about the attraction and effects of media on children (Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2017), there are important reasons to believe that due to the emotional nature of media, combined with their immature cognitive skills, most children are not capable or motivated to activate and apply their media empowerment strategies if the situation requires it. In order to be a conscious and critical media consumer, it is therefore not only important that children have knowledge about media (i.e., the *knowledge* element of media empowerment), but also that they are capable (i.e., the *intuition* and *competence* element) and intrinsically motivated (i.e., the *motivation* element) to implement their media empowerment strategies when they are using media.

INTUITION (feeling) en COMPETENCE (doing)

The extent to which children are able to use their media empowerment strategies depends to a great extent on their cognitive skills. In order to enact a strategy that helps them actively and consciously deal with media, children should be able to control their impulsive emotional responses to what they see in and do with media and instead respond in a different way. For example, a child who receives an unkind message through social media will first have to get control over his or her automatic emotional response (anger, grief) in order not to immediately respond by sending back an unkind message, but instead to use a different strategy (for example, not responding). This process is also called the "stop-and-think reaction" (Rozendaal et al, 2011), because it requires that children control their emotional reactions ("stop") and then come up with a strategy to deal with the situation ("think").

The "stop" part of the stop-and-think reaction is closely related to the emotion regulation skills of children (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Emotion regulation is the ability to deal with and express both positive and negative emotions. This skill only reaches an adult level in the last phase of adolescence (Diamond, 2002). Emotion regulation plays an important role in children's ability to apply the stop-and-think reaction when dealing with media, mainly because of the emotional nature of media. Much of what children see and do with media is about emotion and is to a great extent emotionally satisfying. Think of playing exciting games, sharing feelings through social media, and the presence of appealing advertisements. Children who are less able to control their feelings will easily be overwhelmed by the emotional aspects of media and therefore less able to use their media empowerment strategies. Earlier research has shown, for example, that children with less well developed emotion regulation skills are much more susceptible to the effects of advertising than children who are better able to regulate their emotions (Lapierre, 2013, 2016).

Although emotion regulation develops naturally as children grow older, research shows that this skill can also be learned and strengthened, regardless of the age of a child (see Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995; Izard et al., 2008). Social-emotional development programs, such as the Alternative Thinking Strategies Program (PAD curriculum) and mindfulness programs for children (e.g., MindfulKids), offer useful techniques in this respect. In these programs children learn to become aware of and express their emotions. The idea is that by teaching children to recognize and name their emotions, they automatically gain more control over their emotions. As a consequence of this increased emotion control, mental space is created to change their emotion-driven behavior (Izard et al., 2008, Greenberg et al., 1995). This technique is also called 'emotion-labeling'. The labeling of emotions can be an effective method to help children enact their media empowerment strategies, because it can strengthen their emotion regulation skills and thereby also facilitate the "stop" part of the stop-and-think reaction.

Being able to control emotions is therefore important for children to be able to actively and consciously cope with media. But it is not enough. Children should also be able to activate their media empowerment strategies (the "think" part of the stop-and-think reaction). This skill is closely related to the information processing skills of children. To actively and consciously deal with media, children have to mentally process the media they are using, and at the same time activate and apply an effective media empowerment strategy. For example, a girl who is using WhatsApp with her friends needs all her attention to read and interpret incoming messages and to write messages herself, but at the same time, she should also be aware of the time she is already using WhatsApp and remember that it would be good to put the phone away to make her homework. Because the cognitive skills of children are still developing, this process is often too complex for them. It simply requires too much mental effort to simultaneously pay attention to their media activity and to think about which strategy they could use to change their media behavior (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Rozendaal et al., 2011).

A technique that can help children to activate their media empowerment strategies with minimal mental effort is the implementation intention. An implementation intention is a simple if-then plan that defines when and how you put a certain goal into practice. So: 'If situation X occurs, I will respond in this way' (Gollwitzer, 1999). In the context of media, such an if-then plan can take many different forms, depending on the media activity to which the plan applies. For example: 'If I see advertising, I do not pay attention', or 'If I send a message to someone else, I always say something nice'. Through exercise and repetition, this process can become a habit and thereby lead to a change in behavior in a relatively automatic way, without requiring much mental effort. The success of this technique has already been demonstrated for different types of behavior, such as healthy eating behavior, smoking, alcohol consumption, safe sun behavior (see for an overview, Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Hagger & Luszczynska, 2014), and recently for advertising-related behavior (Hudders, et al. 2016). One of the studies that focused on if-then plans in the context of advertising found that children (8 to 12 years) who made an if-then plan for their favorite, self-devised advertising empowerment strategy (for example, "If I see an advertisement, I do not pay attention") before they watched a television commercial, less often chose the advertised product after viewing the commercial than the children who did not make an if-then plan (Rozendaal & Anschütz, 2015). Another study found that implementation intentions could help seven-year-old children to be less easily distracted from the task they were working on by the presence of attractive advertising (Mau et al, 2015).

Creating implementation intentions is a powerful method that can help children to actively and consciously deal with media, because using simple if-then heuristics will make it much easier for them to activate their media empowerment strategies (the "think" part of the stop-and-think reaction) if the situation requires this.

MOTIVATION (wanting)

To motivate people to change their behavior, techniques are commonly used in which arguments are given why it is important to do something or to leave it (Petty & Wegener, 1991). Parents, teachers and other media educators often do this when it comes to the media behavior of children. They tell children why it is important not to play games too long, to put the phone away while doing their homework, to think carefully about what they place on social media, and to not just fill out their personal details if an advertiser asks for it in exchange for a nice gift or discount. This technique, in which media educators use their own arguments to convince children to actively and consciously

deal with media, is also called direct persuasion. However, if the arguments used to change certain media behavior are not in line with how the children themselves feel about it, resistance will occur and most will not change their behavior (Aronson, 1999). Children generally have a very positive attitude towards media: their favorite game is very exciting and fun, so why stop? And if you put your phone away, you might miss all kinds of fun things that happen online, so why would you do so? Because the arguments given by parents and media educators often do not correspond to the attitudes and beliefs children have with regard to their media behavior, it is unlikely that direct persuasion will motivate them to change that behavior by using one of their media empowerment strategies.

A method that could work is self-persuasion (Aronson, 1999). The underlying mechanism of self-persuasion is cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance is a psychological term for the unpleasant feeling that occurs in people if their beliefs do not match their behavior. According to the cognitive dissonance theory, people have a strong urge to reduce this unpleasant feeling of dissonance by adjusting their beliefs or their behavior. Self-persuasion makes use of this principle by asking people to formulate arguments that plead for a certain desired behavior ("Write down two arguments why you believe it's important to"). When the relevant situation occurs, people tend to behave in accordance with their own beliefs in order to avoid the unpleasant feeling of dissonance. For example, in the context of media, children may be asked to come up with arguments why they believe it is important to keep an eye on the time when they use media ("Why do you think it's important not to play games for too long?"). A child for whom the self-persuasion has worked, will be more inclined to keep an eye on the clock during gaming or more willing to stop gaming when someone asks him to.

Self-persuasion is a powerful technique because it can increase the intrinsic motivation of people to adjust behavior (Mussweiler & Neumann, 2000). Scientific research has shown that self-persuasion can be effective in many different situations (e.g., condom use, smoking behavior, alcohol use, Banderjee & Greene, 2007, Müller, et al., 2009, Briñol, McCaslin, & Petty, 2012). Children from the age of 4 are already able to experience cognitive dissonance (Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007). This suggests that self-persuasion could be an effective way of increasing children intrinsic motivation to use their media empowerment strategies.

Being motivated to actively and consciously deal with media and to use media empowerment strategies is the last and also a very important element of media empowerment. Children can (a) know what media is and how and by whom it is made, (b) feel what media does to them, and (c) use their media empowerment strategies if the situation requires it, but if they are not motivated to actually do so, there is little chance that they will actually actively and consciously deal with media.

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