Leaving young people to their own devices:

Parents need help to develop effective ways to guide their children on the use of media devices and content

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As the year-end examinations draw to a close and the school holidays begin, parents and children around the island are basking in a well-deserved period of relief. But parents may struggle with how to meaningfully occupy their children during this long vacation period.

With media use absorbing a significant share of young people’s time, along with the proliferation of personally owned media devices, the likelihood of young people being glued to media gadgets during the holidays is high.

So can young people literally be left to their own devices?

Parents concerned about their children’s media use may post their worries online, or express them being exposed to unsuitable or inappropriate content. And they need to find ways to manage their children’s media use during this period.

Academics refer to parental supervision and regulation of their children’s media use as parental mediation, given their roles as mediators who provide their children with media consumption opportunities, and offering appropriate guidance.

In a study funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development, we conducted in-depth interviews and observations with 41 parent-child dyads where the children were of secondary school age and played videogames such as World of Warcraft and League of Legends.

Our objective was to understand the different forms of parental mediation that families practice with regard to their children’s videogame play, as well as their other media consumption habits.

We identified four crucial parental mediation activities that parents undertake in the light of young people’s growing media consumption, the increasing diversity of media content available and the ease of access to mobile media devices they enjoy. Our findings reveal that parents exercise gatekeeping, investive, discursive and diversionary mediation.

Gatekeeping mediation

As parents purchase media devices and pay for services such as cable, phone and Internet subscriptions, they wield considerable influence over which kinds of media their children can access and the quantity of access.

As principal gatekeepers to media access, parents can regulate their children’s range and frequency of media consumption.

Although the parents we interviewed did have their reservations about excessive media use by their children, they also recognize that media use is a key component of young people’s daily lives, and that limiting usage or managing parental exposure to media influence is neither productive nor practical. Instead, the parents believe in managing their children’s media use as a contingency basis, granting access if the children complete their schoolwork or perform other obligations well.

In the same vein, withholding media access or fee is no longer a means to discipline the child for misbehavior. This dynamic opening and closing of the gateway to the child’s media access is thus employed by parents both to manage the child’s media use and to manage self-regulation in the child through the setting of household norms. We term this gatekeeping mediation.

Investigative mediation

The sheer volume of media genres across multiple platforms, as well as the emergence of user-generated content and social media, have created a rich and complex media environment that parents and young people alike must navigate. Parents must equip themselves with information and advice to effectively guide their children’s media use.

While media use is pervasive and a valuable conduit for young people’s socialisation, different parents have different abilities to engage in these various mediation activities. Hence we believe there is a need to step up public education efforts to help parents perform these crucial mediation activities both efficiently and effectively.

The likelihood of young people being glued to media gadgets during the school holidays is high, as media use absorbs a significant share of their time amid the proliferation of personally owned media devices.