18
CHALLENGING ADOLESCENTS’ AUTONOMY
An Affordances Perspective on Parental Tools

Bieke Zaman, Marije Nouwen, and Karla Van Leeuwen

Introduction

This chapter revolves around the challenging media education dynamics at home when parents seek to balance strategies of granting adolescents autonomy with respect to their media use while also protecting them from possible online harm. Adolescence is characterised by a search for autonomy, which is to be negotiated between parents and adolescents (Janssens et al., 2015). Especially for personal choices regarding media use, adolescents expect to be given significant autonomy (Cranor, Durity, Marsh, & Ur, 2014; Smetana & Asquith, 1994). It creates a challenging situation for parents. Given the increased risk profile of adolescents online, the role of parents in young people’s media use remains important. However, parents are also looking for ways to give more degrees of freedom, granting opportunities for independent media use in which adolescents take responsibility for their activities (Chen & Shi, 2018; Ko, Choi, Yang, Lee, & Lee, 2015). This is at odds with the use of parental tools, i.e., apps, browsers, settings, and digital platforms that support parents with built-in technical mechanisms to guide, monitor, and control children’s media use.

This chapter revolves around the affordances of parental tools. In a theoretically informed review of exemplar parental control features, their affordances are discussed in the light of parental mediation practices and parenting dimensions. It responds to a call within media and communication studies to better understand (the effects of) parental mediation by relying on insights from the domain of parenting research (Fikkers, Piotrowski, & Valkenburg, 2017). This chapter shows that the affordances of parental tools are likely to invite restrictive and monitoring practices envisioning the protection of the adolescent. However, if used in a context of parental support, they have the potential to foster adolescents’ right for provision and participation in the digital world and their need to be supported in autonomy. These findings have important implications for future research on digital parenting and the design of tools that support parental mediation practices.

Parental Mediation Reconsidered from the Perspective of Parenting Dimensions

There are four common mediation practices that parents employ to guide their children’s media use. These include active involvement through communication between parent and child, media...
co-use, restrictions, and monitoring (Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013). Parents can rely on technical tools that assist them in these practices. With technical monitoring, they can, for instance, determine in advance which websites can (not) be visited (e.g., by specifying filters about what can be downloaded or uploaded), which activities are to be automatically blocked (such as in-app purchases, multiplayer gaming, or chatting), or request weekly reports of the adolescent’s online activities (Zaman & Nouwen, 2016). Only a minority of parents know how and what to install in order to technically monitor their child’s media use (Pew Research Center, 2016). When parents do invest in technical monitoring, young people are often unaware of this (Livingstone & Bober, 2004), and parents tend to quickly give up because of practical problems (Cranor et al., 2014; Symons, Ponnet, Walrave, & Heirman, 2017). The perceived (mis)match between parental values can further explain why parents decide to (not) adopt parental tools (Vasalou, Oostveen, & Joinson, 2012) and what kind of effects they may have on the child and the child–parent relationship. Hence, in order to achieve this understanding, it is useful to study not only what parents do with parental tools (i.e., parental mediation behaviours) but also why and how (i.e., parenting dimensions linked to parents’ underlying thoughts, feelings, and goals).

Table 18.1 provides an overview of the parallels conceptually drawn between parental mediation practices and parenting dimensions (Zaman, Nouwen, & Van Leeuwen, 2019). Parenting dimensions include different parenting practices that are related to each other in terms of content and statistics, and each dimension is considered to be a continuum: as a parent or guardian one shows to a greater or lesser extent certain parenting practices (Janssens et al., 2015; Power, 2013). Research distinguishes several dimensions, of which behavioural control – with subcategories proactive behavioural and reactive behavioural control – psychological control, and parental support show the most reliable empirical links with child and adolescent psychosocial development (Janssens et al., 2015; Power, 2013).

First, Table 18.1 elucidates how the practice of monitoring adolescents’ media use can be interpreted in two ways. When parents monitor in order to prevent or reduce online risks, but without really supporting autonomy, then this is likely to be played out in a context of proactive behavioural control. However, if the parent’s choice to monitor is based on a relationship of trust, with parents who are empathetic to the adolescent, their choice to monitor from a distance can

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental mediation practices</th>
<th>Parenting dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Behavioural control: proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active mediation (communication, co-use)</td>
<td>Parental support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural control: proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions</td>
<td>Behavioural control: proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

be interpreted as a parenting approach based on parental support. In the latter situation, parents are open and respectful of the adolescent’s personality, needs, and wishes (Janssens et al., 2015); they are interested in their behaviour and seek ways to promote their autonomy in a context of clear supporting rules in which the adolescents can take responsibility for their choices (Janssens et al., 2015; Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008; Timmerman, Ceulemans, De Roover, & Van Leeuwen, 2013; Wisniewski, Jia, Xu, Rosson, & Carroll, 2015).

Second, situations where parents are actively involved in the media use of their teenagers, whether by talking about it (communication) or by using media together (co-use), can play out in two ways (see Table 18.1). On the one hand, it can be characterised by a parenting dimension of parental support, when parents show a great deal of interest in initiating discussions or joint media use. Parents who follow this approach are likely to have more insight into their media use, without the adolescent experiencing this behaviour as controlling. Previous research has shown that many parents initiate discussions with their teens and monitor their online use without necessarily intervening in their online privacy, which is likely to afford autonomy and self-corrective behaviours (Wisniewski et al., 2015, p. 312). However, if the motivations to use digital media together or discuss it are an act of control and risk prevention without supporting the adolescent in their needs, then this should instead be considered as proactive behavioural control.

Finally, restrictive parental mediation practices can play out in three different ways, depending on the parenting dimension in which they are embedded. First, it can be proactive, preventive behavioural control as a way of preventing adverse media effects. Previous research has shown that many parents take proactive, preventive behavioural control measures that are linked to both restrictive and monitoring practices. Examples of these preventing measures are filtering or blocking content through parental software and helping set up privacy settings (Wisniewski et al., 2015). Second, restrictive parental mediation practices can also be characterised as reactive behavioural control when the corrective measures follow in a reaction to unwanted behaviour, which happens often without a well-considered plan of action and without paying much attention to the adolescent’s needs and personality. Previous research has shown that reactive behavioural control is less effective in reducing and preventing risky behaviour than the proactive approach (Janssens et al., 2015). Third, when threats accompany restrictions, parental control takes the form of psychological control. Psychological control is a manipulative form of control whereby parents put their child under pressure to think, act, or feel in a certain way or make them feel guilty (Barber, 1996; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010), with the expectation that they will comply and adapt to it. Psychological control affects the child’s development negatively (Janssens et al., 2015; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Van Petegem, 2015). For adolescents, it thwarts their need for autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Joussemet et al., 2008).

**Parental Control Affordances**

Making an informed judgement about parental control affordances implies making sense of their potential uses, their action possibilities. Initially introduced in the domain of ecological psychology by James Gibson (1977), the notion of affordances has been picked up by scholars in media studies and design-oriented disciplines (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014). It is an interesting concept to discuss the role that things, including technology, can play in people’s lives; not in a deterministic way, but as something that exists as part of and not beyond the interaction between people and things. Affordances do not constitute any fixed properties, as not everyone will perceive a similar relationship between the technology’s appearance and its action possibilities (Jung & Stolterman, 2012).
Affordances may ‘work’ in three ways, and unfold in functional, relational, and learned qualities (Lievrouw, 2014). First, functional qualities concern the physical and metaphysical properties that make certain actions (im)possible. As for parental tools, this would point to the buttons, settings, and functionalities as well as the language used in the commercial discourses around their promotion and sale. Second, relational qualities point to the way people perceive the functional qualities, give meaning to them in a particular setting, and how the interaction with the technologies result in certain adapted or emerging practices. This would elucidate how parents and adolescents perceive parental tools as (not) meaningful in the context of parental mediation practices and parenting. Third, learned qualities refer to the repertoire of practices and interactions shared among people from a similar community or culture and shaped by regulatory, institutional, and socio-cultural arrangements. Learned qualities, then, might put the attention on online risks and call upon parents’ responsibilisation to protect their children. Alternatively, they can focus on adolescents’ online opportunities and call upon parents to facilitate these as stepping stones to educational and employment achievements. The decision to (not) adopt parental tools may then be understood as serving one responsibilisation discourse more than another.

The relationship between these qualities is mutually constitutive (Lievrouw, 2014). For instance, the buttons, settings, and functionalities that are pre-defined by design, as well as the commercial ‘texts’ used for their promotion, reveal and shape an understanding of what is considered as ‘default’, ‘normal’, ‘appropriate’ (Gee, 2011). The functional design qualities, however, do not deterministically define how parental tools are used and understood, as their functions will be interpreted within the broader context of family practices and meaning-making processes. This is where the relational qualities come in. Understanding how family members make sense of parental tools reveals reasons for non-adoption (e.g., refusing installation because of a perceived lack of alignment with parenting values), for acceptance (e.g., when both parent and adolescent have negotiated a meaningful implementation), or refusal (e.g., when adolescents feel their autonomy is thwarted and decide to de-install or circumvent the tools). By exploring the wide variety of relational qualities, it becomes clearer why parental tools are (not) adopted and why they do not yield univocal effects.

In what follows, an illustrative reading of the affordances of parental tools is reported. The analysis took the level of functional qualities as the starting point. It then explored the potential relational qualities at the level of both parental mediation practices and parenting dimensions. Thus the aim was an informed judgement based on the conceptual framework developed earlier (see Table 18.1). The analysis considered how these functional and relational qualities could be understood against a background of learned qualities in contemporary Western ‘risk societies’ that circulate public discourses that tend to be fearful for and protective of children (Beck, 1992). However, this also acknowledges the increased negotiating culture in families. Before the 1970s, parents mainly exercised authority, but they have, since then, been entering into dialogue with their children in order to take account of their needs and wishes and to give children a say in the making of family agreements and rules (Chambers, 2012). The account of the parental control affordances acknowledged the possible mutual constitutive influences situated at the level of these three qualities.

The sample of parental control affordances is based on a purposeful selection. The researchers sought examples that could help us illustrate a broad spectrum of potentialities. The first and second author independently selected potential meaningful parental tools. The first author consulted the SIP-Bench III website (https://sipbench.eu) that provides a systematic benchmarking of parental control tools as the outcome of a European project within the Safer Internet Programme. She ran a search query for tools across a variety of devices and operating systems and tailored the results for relevance for families with children aged 13 and older. The outcome of the search, however, gave outdated information. In order to complement this with more recent
examples, the first author approached a senior representative of the Flemish Knowledge Centre on Digital and Media Literacy in July 2018 and asked about parental tools that are popular in Flanders, Belgium. The second author relied on the findings from a previous research project (‘MeToDi’, n.d.) to propose a meaningful set of parental tools to consider. The intention was not to include all possible existing parental tools in the analysis; neither was the aim to reveal all possible affordances. Instead, the goal was to select convincing illustrative examples that would help us to demonstrate how parental tools might reveal and shape a broad set of affordances.

Restrictions and Monitoring ‘By Design’

The findings suggest that the functional design features of parental tools are most likely to afford restrictions and monitoring as default parental mediation practices. To illustrate, the Mac Operating System’s (MacOS High Sierra, 2018) built-in parental tool and the Curbi (version year 2018) provide predefined time limits and schedules, and content filters, to select blocked content, respectively. The design of the Spyzie parental dashboard (‘Spyzie – Dashboard – Live Demo’, n.d.) shows user statistics, data, and visualisations about the adolescent’s activities.

Parental tools typically combine various functional qualities into one system. Most tools have restrictive features, inviting parents to limit time, content, or activities. Settings often allow parents to specify the time duration or time slots. Examples of content restrictions are filters of incoming content via so-called black and white lists: the first bans access to specific sites, the second allows access to only listed/pre-approved sites. Filters for outgoing content allow parents to predefine what kind of (personal) data can be revealed. An example of an activity restriction includes forced prevention of online purchases. In addition to risk prevention, some restrictions are put in place to promote offline activities. The Circle discourses frame this within a context of valuing joint family moments and parental modelling; see, for instance, its ‘OffTime’ feature to “get some good old fashioned family time” (Circle, n.d.-a), and the ‘Pause’ feature to get “everyone to the dinner table” (Circle, n.d.–b).

Many features allow the parent to monitor and track online activities, for example by activating the setting to receive information about browsing history, or to send a warning when the adolescent is about to be exposed to inappropriate content.

Finally, some tools come with general safety measures (e.g., as part of the anti-virus program) or with options to monitor and track non-media-related activities such as adolescents’ whereabouts.

One Functional Quality, Several Potential Relational Qualities

Design functionalities that afford monitoring and restrictions can play out in diverse ways. From the literature on parenting dimensions it can be inferred that a similar feature can be interpreted differently, as more or less supporting adolescents in their autonomy. When technical measures are implemented in a relationship of trust and parental support, then their adoption might encourage adolescents to take responsibility for their choices and, as such, provide an effective means in the ‘toolbox’ of online and offline media education practices.

On some websites promoting parental tools, this message of building trust is made significant. For instance, on the website promoting SafeToNet, trust between parents and children is communicated as an important value. The home page states that “parents never get to see what their child sends and receives. This means that a child’s rights to data privacy are fully maintained” (SafeToNet, n.d.–c). The company further states that ‘informed safeguarding’ “is about more than simply blocking devices or apps. All too often, this approach is counterproductive and results in family arguments and distrust between parents and children”. As a consequence, these discourses are not only affording less risk-taking behaviours through the promoted restrictive and
preventive measures but also encouraging autonomy and risk-coping behaviours by fostering a climate of trust and respecting children’s privacy needs (Wisniewski et al., 2015).

Whereas these SafeToNet discourses build on the parental value of safety and connect it to a relationship of trust and respect for the child’s privacy, the KidGuard discourses show how the same concern for safety is used as a motive to promote protection by ‘spying’ on children:

a cell phone tracking software provided to parents to ‘spy’ on their kids’ text messages, monitor GPS location, track phone logs, chats, allowing the parent to stay on top of issues such as cyberbullying, online predators, teen depression, and other risks to their children arising from the internet.

(KidGuard, n.d.)

KidGuard considers the likelihood of ‘a crisis’ as a real concern that justifies revealing adolescents’ media use history and their whereabouts to parents, potentially also to relatives, friends, or police. The technology is introduced as the ‘solution’ parents can rely on in order to guarantee children’s ‘protection’ on a broad set of online risks (KidGuard, n.d.). Even though there are some more subtle messages on the website that warn against the secretive use of the tool, the risk-based responsibility messages are made dominant via the strategic use of online content and formatting. There is, for instance, a prominent section on the ‘Resources’ page (KidGuard, n.d.), entitled “5 Reasons To Spy On Your Kid’s Text Messages” featuring tips on “HOW TO MONITOR & SPY ON”, “LIKE A CIA AGENT”.

Opposing Affordances

The affordances revolving around parental tools can be classified on a spectrum ranging from risk and safety-oriented to opportunity and rights-oriented qualities. These findings show that these opposing qualities are made salient across parental tools, and sometimes even within the affordances of one tool, as KidGuard exemplified.

Many of the functional qualities echo the safety and protection concerns of parents and underlie the value of its services for parents. However, recent tools are being launched with promotional discourses that go out from a more empowering role of the adolescent while acknowledging their digital opportunities. For instance, the Kudos website explicitly takes the opportunities as experienced by youth – ‘empowered kids’ – as a starting point, and this with a mission of engaging oneself to: “inspire kids to have the courage to express themselves, to create, to co-exist, to connect and to respect one another” (Kudos, n.d.).

There were examples where parental support is afforded by emphasising adolescents’ responsibility to make their own choices. To illustrate, OurPact has a feature ‘allowance’ which grants some level of autonomy to the adolescent by inviting them to “budget screen time allowances throughout the day, independently” (OurPact, n.d.). SafeToNet has features that allow adolescents to report and discuss potential harmful content with their parents. The latter feature suggests that children can also initiate discussions about online safety. It sheds a bidirectional perspective on the notion of parental mediation that goes beyond the parent as the only initiator, indicating that parents and children influence one another instead (Van den Bulck & Van den Bergh, 2005; Wisniewski et al., 2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter explored and critiqued the affordances of parental tools. Its reading was theoretically informed by literature on affordances, parental mediation, and parenting dimensions.
The findings reveal a broad spectrum of affordances whereby parental tools can have qualities situated on a spectrum, with more or less of the following opposing characteristics:

- Fostering protection versus empowerment;
- Concerns about risks versus opportunities;
- Responsibilisation of parents versus responsibilisation of adolescents;
- Top-down parenting versus building a dialogue, granting the adolescent autonomy;
- One-directional versus bidirectional parent–child influences and interactions;
- Catering to the concerns of parents versus catering for adolescents’ needs;
- Symbolising a means to spy on children versus a means to build trust and a dialogue.

This broad spectrum of affordances echoes the variety of discourses that run in the online public sphere (Hartikainen, Iivari, & Kinnula, 2016). The critical challenge, however, revolves around balancing children’s right for protection with their needs for provision and participation in the online world (Livingstone & Third, 2017), without the risk of promoting over-controlling and over-protective parenting, which negatively affects children’s development (Janssens et al., 2015; Pinter, Wisniewski, Xu, Rosson, & Caroll, 2017). In response, previous researchers have called for the participatory design of parental tools that are sensitive to the values of parents, children, and other stakeholders (such as families indirectly affected) (Czeskis et al., 2010; Nouwen & Zaman, 2018; Vasalou et al., 2012), tools that balance enabling and autonomy-supporting with restrictive and protecting parental measures (Cranor et al., 2014; Ko et al., 2015; Livingstone et al., 2017; Nouwen, JafariNaimi, & Zaman, 2017; Pinter et al., 2017), and that are flexible, dynamic, and open for renegotiation (Muñoz, Ploderer, & Brereton, 2018; Wisniewski et al., 2015).

These findings are far from conclusive, as the researchers did not engage in a systematic review of all potentialities of parental tools. However, based on an exploration of a broad spectrum of parental affordances, this chapter presents a blueprint for a taxonomy based on the following five lenses, which deserves future research to gauge its potential for social sciences analyses and as a design sensitivity:

1. **Parental tool functional qualities** including, for instance, time, content, and activity restrictions; monitoring and tracking functions;
2. **Parental mediation practices**, including parental restrictions, monitoring, active mediation, co-use as well as bi-directional influences;
3. **Parenting dimensions**, including parental support while granting the child autonomy, proactive behavioural control, reactive behavioural control, psychological control;
4. **Children’s rights**, accounting for the sweet spot between avoiding and mitigating risks on the one hand and fostering opportunities on the other and acknowledging the right to protection, provision, and participation;
5. **The notion of the child**, considering the spectrum of the child as vulnerable, in need of protection versus the child as empowered, an active agent.

In sum, parental tools cannot deterministically be thought of as a homogeneous technological ‘solution’. Neither can one a priori anticipate what ‘effects’ their uptake will have. It is hoped that in the future this taxonomy and the proposed sensitivity to account for a broad set of relational qualities at the level of both parental mediation practices (what parents do) and parenting dimensions (how and why) will foster a fruitful discussion about the role of parental tools in the lives of families with adolescents.
References


Challenging Adolescents’ Autonomy


