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Vigilant waiting in digital parenting: tensions in addressing sexual content risks

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ABSTRACT

The study delves into the practices, dynamics and dilemmas faced by families in the integration of TRICs and in relation to the possible exposure of children to pornographic and heterosexist content. Drawing on nine discussion groups with 41 mothers and 8 fathers from the Basque Autonomous Community (children aged 2–13), it analyses parental discourses it analyses parental discourses—predominantly maternal—marked by a heightened perception of risk, the feminisation of digital mediation, and the emergence of the ‘anticipation paradox’. This dilemma leads families, especially mothers, to adopt a strategy of ‘vigilant waiting’—delaying sexual education to preserve childhood innocence—shaped by limited digital and sexuality education. The article combines theoretical review, empirical findings and theoretical–practical discussion, highlighting the need for comprehensive training resources that bring together digital literacy, affective–sexual education and a feminist perspective.

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Introduction

Digital advances have reshaped how children learn and socialise. The TRIC (Technologies of Relationship, Information, and Communication) concept shifts the focus from a purely instrumental view toward understanding digital environments as relational and affective spaces. In these settings, children interact, construct identities, and engage in cultural practices (Diogo et al., 2018; Marta-Lazo & Gabelas Barroso, 2016; Ortiz Sobrino, 2023). Aligned with UNESCO (2021) transition toward Media and Information Literacy, this approach prioritizes the human dimension. Here, technologies serve as vital arenas for communication, identity formation, and cultural participation (Ananyeva, 2025; Christensen et al., 2025; Douglass et al., 2022; Mhamdi, 2025).

From this perspective, technologies transcend mere tools to become spaces for meaningful interaction that foster cognitive, emotional, and social development. The TRIC framework emphasizes that connectivity is insufficient without communication and dialogue, advocating for a holistic understanding of digital environments (Marta-Lazo & Gabelas-Barroso, 2023). Within this framework, families act as primary agents in digital mediation (Clark, 2011). However, gender disparities persist: mothers predominantly shoulder the burden of ‘digital care and protection,’ managing the supervision, negotiation, and regulation of children’s online activities (Duek & Mogueillansky, 2020; Heaselgrave, 2023; Peng, 2022).

Widespread digital access does not guarantee equitable use. Research indicates that parental strategies and perceptions—shaped by disparities in socio-cultural resources and parenting styles—heavily influence children’s digital experiences (Diogo et al., 2018; Livingstone et al., 2015). Furthermore, mediation is gendered, as mothers typically assume the primary role (Diogo et al., 2018). Beyond socio-economic gaps, digital literacy persists as a divider: families with higher cultural capital offer active, enriching mediation, whereas those with lower capital often limit involvement to basic regulation (Nikken & Oprea, 2018).

Digital parenting encompasses the attitudes, practices, and decisions caregivers employ to guide children’s digital lives (Fidan & Seferoğlu, 2020). Rather than mere rule-setting, it involves fostering

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technological awareness and socio-emotional competencies that empower minors to navigate digital spaces with autonomy and responsibility (Nichols & Selim, 2022).

Within digital parenting, a key tension lies in the dilemma of digital risk: balancing minors' need to explore and learn in digital environments with the need to minimise risks, protect them from threats, and control potential adverse effects of device use (Livingstone et al., 2014; Mutlu-Bayraktar et al., 2018). Families report concerns about exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and technological dependence, often leading to monitoring and restrictive practices (Fidan & Seferoğlu, 2020). These concerns create tensions in digital accompaniment, as many adults face uncertainty about the benefits and risks of digital environments, alongside generational gaps in technological skills that can produce ambivalence in educational decision-making. Together, these issues highlight the research gap addressed in this study: understanding the strategies, dilemmas, and perceptions parents employ when guiding minors in complex digital environments.

Unlike previous eras of predictable, standardized educational timelines, current digital trajectories are fragmented and unequal, forcing families to navigate without clear frameworks. This shift destabilizes traditional authority—such as the guidance of grandparents—replacing it with horizontal peer networks (Mascheroni et al., 2018). In these new reference communities, legitimacy and authority derive from shared parental experience rather than traditional hierarchy (Cino, 2022).

Within this framework, parental mediation—the practices used to regulate and guide digital media (Clark, 2011; Mutlu-Bayraktar et al., 2018)—is essential for balancing risk protection and opportunity promotion. The literature identifies three primary strategies: active mediation (dialogue and accompaniment), restrictive mediation (rules and limitations), and co-use (shared digital activities). While restrictive strategies prevail at younger ages, active mediation and co-use increase as children develop greater autonomy and digital competence. Ultimately, families often combine these approaches, adapting them to the child's needs and the home's socio-cultural context (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020; Nichols & Selim, 2022).

Strategy selection depends on families' digital literacy, parenting styles, risk perceptions, and socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, digital parenting is bidirectional: minors also influence family technological practices and can mediate adults' digital use (Fidan & Seferoğlu, 2020).

In managing digital environments, parents are primarily concerned with early exposure to age-inappropriate, sexually explicit, or heterosexist material (Mutlu-Bayraktar et al., 2018). Such exposure is classified as a content risk, where the child is a recipient of unwanted material, distinguishing it from contact risks (interpersonal interactions) and conduct risks (the child's own risky behavior) (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009).

Research indicates a significant prevalence of exposure to sexually explicit content, reported by approximately 40% of adolescents (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Among 9–10-year-olds, estimates range from 9% to 15% (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). These findings suggest that while risks increase with age due to more diverse usage, a potential decline in the age of first exposure poses evolving challenges for parental mediation and accompaniment.

Literature identifies consequences of exposure to sexually explicit content, including distorted perceptions of sexuality, normalization of violence, and the objectification of women (Sedano Colom et al., 2024). In Spain, exposure rates for minors (9–16) align with the European average (11% vs. 14%), but 92% report upsetting content, far exceeding the 55% European average (Livingstone et al., 2011). This sensitivity reflects a media overemphasis on pornography's negative effects (Martínez et al., 2020). Consequently, although Spanish parents express high concern, 53% remain unaware of their children's exposure—above the 40% European average—revealing a gap between concern and awareness (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Minors often attribute less significance to exposure than their parents (Berson & Berson, 2005). In Europe, while only 5% of 9–10-year-olds report seeing sexual images, discomfort is high among those exposed (56%), though it declines with age (Livingstone et al., 2011). Younger children primarily report feelings of disgust or fear (Livingstone et al., 2014), yet they perceive this exposure as less harmful than cyberbullying. This lower perceived impact may stem from a limited capacity to interpret sexual content at younger ages (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009; Tsaliki et al., 2014).

Adolescents and children often perceive themselves as capable of applying effective coping strategies when exposed to such content (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mutlu-Bayraktar et al., 2018; Staksrud & Livingstone,

2009). Research indicates that 53% of those exposed reported the incident to others—primarily friends (33%) or parents (25%)—while 25% took direct action by closing the content or implementing device control measures (Livingstone et al., 2011).

The relatively low concern among young people reveals a gap between adult risk perceptions and children's interpretations of their online experiences, often hindering family dialogue. Although strategies vary across contexts (Tsaliki et al., 2014), conversations about online pornography are frequently avoided, as parents postpone them assuming children are not ready or to protect childhood innocence (Grossman et al., 2018; McGinn et al., 2016; Robinson, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). While traditionally reactive, digital environments increasingly require more proactive parental engagement (Robinson, 2013).

Understanding how parents address these challenges, the obstacles they encounter, and their decision-making processes is essential. Qualitative approaches favoring collective reflection are particularly valuable, as discussion groups provide access to shared narratives and everyday strategies. Within this framework, the study examines how parents perceive and manage potential exposure to inappropriate online content, focusing on the dilemmas and uncertainties shaping contemporary parenting practices.

Studies emphasize supporting families in affective–sexual education to ensure healthy, equitable development. Limited guidance often leaves parents uncertain and children navigating these issues in isolation (Jackson et al., 2022). Effective sexual education must transcend biological facts to deconstruct gender stereotypes, promote equality, and prevent relationship violence through active, critical family involvement. Such engagement fosters the dialogue and trust necessary for children and adolescents to develop sexual agency and healthy relationships, free from patriarchal models (Allen et al., 2017; Noorman et al., 2022). However, persistent gaps in resources highlight the need for comprehensive programs that include caregivers and address sexual and gender diversity from early childhood.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative design to examine how parents manage digital risks, focusing on their perceptions, concerns, strategies, and the moral dilemmas of digital parenting. It is part of a broader project involving discussion groups with families, teachers, and children to capture multiple perspectives within shared educational contexts. However, this article focuses exclusively on parent discussion groups to analyze their experiences regarding children's exposure to inappropriate online content.

A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how social actors interpret their experiences within the socio-cultural contexts that shape parenting (Murillo & Mena, 2006). Discussion groups served as the primary technique, fostering collective reflection and the emergence of shared narratives (Barbour, 2013; Ibáñez, 2015). This method is particularly suited to examining social norms and moral dilemmas by revealing how meanings are negotiated through peer interaction.

Group participants

The broader research design included discussion groups with parents, teachers and children recruited from nine schools that responded to an open call to participate in the study. The present article focuses exclusively on the results obtained from the parent groups.

The study used a purposive convenience sampling strategy based on voluntary participation through schools. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the selection sought to include schools from diverse educational and territorial contexts within the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC). To capture variation in school environments, the participating schools included both rural (4) and urban (5) settings and represented the three main types of schools present in the BAC: public (5), state-subsidised private schools (3) and private schools (1). Although private schools represent only a very small proportion of schools in the BAC (approximately 1%), one private school was intentionally included in order to reflect the diversity of the educational system. Schools from the three provinces of the BAC were represented: Araba (3), Bizkaia (3) and Gipuzkoa (3).

With regard to the parent discussion groups, a total of 49 participants took part across the nine schools. The largest group included eight participants, whereas the smallest comprised two. Two groups had seven participants each, two had six participants, and two had four participants. One group consisted of five

participants. The group with two participants corresponded to a rural setting; one of the participants was a separated mother, and her inclusion was considered important in order to capture this perspective.

All participants were mothers or fathers of children aged between 2 and 13 years living in the Basque Autonomous Community. Of these participants, 41 were women (84%) and 8 were men (16%). Participants were aged between 35 and 50 years: 18.4% were between 35 and 40 years old, 34.7% between 41 and 45, and 46.9% between 46 and 50.

Regarding family composition, 85.7% had one child, 10.2% had two children and 4.1% had three children. Concerning the age of the eldest child, 18.4% were between 2 and 5 years old, 34.7% between 6 and 10, and 46.9% between 11 and 13.

Participation in the study relied on voluntary recruitment through schools, which may have favored parents already engaged with school activities or those particularly interested in the topic. Consequently, mothers represent the vast majority of participants (84%), a pattern frequently reported in research on parenting and family–school relations, especially in school-based recruitment (Byers et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2022).

This process resulted in a sample largely consisting of white, urban mothers with high levels of school engagement. While this reflects existing participation patterns, it constitutes a limitation; these narratives represent the perspectives of a specific group and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across all family structures.

The project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Deusto. This ensured compliance with all institutional requirements regarding voluntary participation, informed consent, and the protection of anonymity. Given the study's focus on children, participant safety was further addressed through risk prevention protocols and safeguarding measures.

Procedure and data collection

Discussion groups were conducted in participating schools between May and November 2024. Each session lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes, was facilitated by trained researchers following a discussion guide, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts reviewed for accuracy. Sessions were held in Basque or Spanish, depending on group preference and the school context.

Facilitators were members of the research team, trained in social research methods and involved in developing the theoretical framework. Discussion guides were based on an operationalisation table.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process was supported by ATLAS.ti 9, which facilitated the systematic organization and coding of the focus group transcripts. An abductive approach was employed: initial coding was guided by the operationalization table (deductive), while new themes were allowed to emerge directly from the participants' narratives through open coding (inductive). Codes were organized into multi-dimensional families, including contextual elements (device and application types), operational categories (participants strategies and usage), and experiential dimensions (difficulties, dilemmas, and emotions). Throughout this iterative process, codes and categories were constantly reviewed, compared against the raw data, and discussed among the researchers to ensure that the participants' testimonies were accurately represented and consistently coded. This collaborative review ensured the internal consistency of the findings. The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Limitations

The study has some limitations. Convenience sampling through schools may have favoured more engaged parents; the sample is highly feminised (84% mothers), thus findings are primarily shaped by maternal perspectives; and its sociocultural homogeneity—mostly white, urban, school-engaged families from the Basque Country—limits generalisability to more diverse or vulnerable contexts.

Results

Use of technology by age

Within households, the most common technologies are television, mobile phones, tablets, and computers, used by adults for work, communication, and leisure. Children show a progression from early, passive and supervised use to more interactive and eventually autonomous practices.

Access begins early: between ages 2 and 5, children mainly use televisions and tablets to watch content, with occasional, closely supervised use and strong parental control over content and access.

But at six-thirty he wakes up for his bottle and is already saying 'tractor'. He wants to watch tractor videos on TV, at two years old. We've realised that's what he wants. (F21: Mother of two boys aged 2 and 8).

We have a TV (...) we tell her what cartoons she can watch and when. We even negotiate the time. She's 3. It's one or two episodes. She doesn't ask much yet, but she likes it. (F28: mother of a girl aged 3 and a boy aged 1 month).

Between ages 6 and 8, children mainly use tablets and parents' mobile phones for videos and games. Access remains controlled and largely offline, though children gain more autonomy in content choice. Families continue to mediate use, often negotiating time and content, and may introduce devices such as smartwatches for communication and geolocation in semi-autonomous contexts.

They have a TV and a tablet that doesn't work very well, but they prefer the tablet or mobile because they can instantly choose what to watch. They start something, then switch... They even find it hard to watch TV because it's not as immediate. (F42: mother of a girl aged 2 and two children aged 8 (a boy and a girl)).

Between ages 9 and 11, a key shift occurs with the rise of multiplayer, often online gaming, marking more connected and autonomous use across consoles, computers, and parents' mobile phones. Families may introduce consoles to promote offline play and retain control. Tablet use continues, and children begin to request their first mobile phones in order to access social media (TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp), with parents often allowing access through their own accounts.

They don't have a phone or tablet—we might let them use ours, but we try not to (...) At eight we got her a Nintendo, because I thought, if she's going to play, at least it's something controlled (...) My daughter watches videos of girls doing their hair... and the other watches football... (F25: mother of a girl aged 7 and a boy aged 9).

In my case, I have two, but they only have them because we spend summers at a campsite. We bought them a geolocation smartwatch to keep track of them, since they move around freely (...) we use it to call (...) and when we go places, like Disney, in case they get lost. So only in specific situations. Even here on Fridays, this place is chaotic and ours hide. It's just for those moments—they forget it most of the time. If they call, it's usually to say: 'bring me a snack' (...) so yes, only in specific situations, just to keep an eye on them. (F7: mother a boy aged 8 and a girl aged 10).

From age 12 onwards, use of social media and online games becomes frequent, autonomous, and largely unsupervised, consolidating independent and connected use. Parental supervision decreases, though families may still intervene by delaying smartphone access or opting for Wi-Fi-only devices.

Technology in the family: doubts, challenges and feelings

Among the eight fathers participating in the groups, three openly define themselves as 'pro-technology,' while none identify as anti-technology. Among mothers, by contrast, only one describes herself as pro-technology, despite the presence of ICT professionals among them (two women), while two explicitly position themselves as 'anti-technology.' Both ICT professionals and those who identify as pro-technology tend to conceptualise technology as a tool. They emphasise its benefits, while also recognising the risks associated with its use at inappropriate ages.

For my part, I've always been a technology enthusiast. I think it's essential for our children's future, but it comes with risks we need to manage. It's important they use it in a beneficial way and learn what the risks are and how to distance themselves from them. It's a challenge we face today, and it's not easy. (F35: father of boy aged 9).

It's not just about knowledge, but identity and maturity. No matter how aware you are of the risks, there are ages when it's not appropriate. I could teach my 9-year-old daughter to use a chainsaw, but that doesn't mean I'd let her use it. (F38: father of two boys aged 11 and 13 and a girl aged 9).

Digital device use forms part of broader family educational dynamics, shaped by parenting styles, generational differences, and children's developmental stages. Practices evolve across childhood.

In early childhood (2–6), access is limited through routines and restricted devices. In middle childhood (7–9), mediation becomes more complex, combining parental controls (content, time, access), shared spaces, co-presence, and use of parents' accounts, with both prohibition and dialogue. In pre-adolescence (from around 11), concerns focus on mobile phones, with strategies such as prohibition, limited devices (no data/SIM), and rules on sharing, dialogue, ownership, and parental access. Negotiation remains central across all stages.

Alongside these certainties, family practices are also characterised by doubts and difficulties. Those with greater technological knowledge tend to express fewer uncertainties and establish clearer patterns and limits. In other cases, decisions are made and strategies adjusted 'on the go,' with families describing flexible and situational approaches to managing children's use of digital devices.

Yes, they have tablets, but we only let them use them at weekends. We try to keep it under control, though we don't have a fixed rule. We take it as it comes, depending on what we need, because sometimes we also use them to have some time for ourselves. (F41: mother of a boy aged 7 and a girl aged 9).

In many cases, negotiation is described as a form of 'push and pull,' often involving repeated requests from children. When parents give in, this is sometimes followed by feelings of discomfort or regret.

I'll admit it—sometimes it really annoys me that in the park there's always someone who lets them use a mobile phone. So yes, I've done it too, I won't deny it. I don't like it, and afterwards I feel bad, but yes, I admit it. (F9: mother of a boy aged 8).

Families report difficulties typical of parenting: differences in children's personalities, emotional reactions (e.g. anger or tantrums when limits are imposed), and ambivalence toward children's digital skills. While most participants value children's ease and competence with technology, it also generates concern linked to the digital gap, as these skills may exceed adult control or knowledge. This unease is often projected into the future, reflecting uncertainty about how these skills will develop and their long-term implications.

We parents are lost. Everything moves so fast we can't keep up. You can set controls—Family Link, time limits, restrictions—but they'll always find a way around them. (F34: mother of a boy aged 6 and a girl aged 11). Sure, he might be watching football, but he could also be watching anything. Since they can write, they can search for anything. (F45: father of children aged 5 and 8). And if they can't: 'Alexa, play... I don't know what.' (F44: mother of two girls aged 2 and 5).

Beyond these concerns, families highlight harder-to-manage external influences, including older siblings, peers, school-provided devices, interactions with older children, and grandparents, who often allow greater freedom of use.

At the grandparents' house things get more out of control. He uses a tablet there and likes YouTube Kids, but I don't really know what he's watching. That's where I lose control. I hope it's moderated, but I'm not sure. (F46: mother of a boy aged 6).

It's not that I don't trust him—I don't trust the rest. I trust him, but not others. (F7: mother of a boy aged 8 and a girl aged 10).

In the village, everyone mixes. So the 7-year-old is with the 10- or 13-year-old... what the 12-year-old says, the 6-year-old repeats the next day. In the end, it's not just the internet—it's everything. (F23: father of a boy aged 7).

With regard to mobile phone ownership, the main difficulty is peer and environmental pressure, which often challenges and destabilises family strategies.

Emerging dilemmas

Uncertainties surrounding digital technology often evolve into genuine **dilemmas**, where families must navigate conflicting values, expectations, and needs. Based on the focus groups, four central dilemmas

emerged; while the first three are summarized below, the fourth—regarding inappropriate content—is the primary focus of this analysis.

Dilemma 1. learning vs. risk (digital risk).

The first dilemma refers to the tension between the development of digital capital—understood as the acquisition of skills and competencies through the use of technologies—and the psychosocial risks associated with intensive use, particularly in relation to potential screen addiction or exposure to content not appropriate for their age. This dilemma reflects parental ambivalence between fostering learning opportunities and protecting children's well-being.

My niece came home one day wearing makeup. After lunch she arrived fully made up—really well done. She had learned it from videos. I was amazed. I said: wow! (F20: mother of two girls aged 2 and 4).

Dilemma 2. privacy vs. control.

The second dilemma lies in balancing respect for children's privacy with the perceived need for control. This is particularly evident in relation to the use of geolocation devices and access to digital conversations. This tension is common within the fields of parental mediation and digital surveillance, where parental practices oscillate between educational guidance and more intrusive forms of control, thereby straining the development of trust and autonomy:

Yes, it seems like you don't trust him, that you're not giving him that confidence, but... in my case... it's more for me... in the end it's about me being at ease. (F9: mother of a boy aged 8).

Dilemma 3. lack of need vs. belonging (social pressure).

The third dilemma concerns providing a mobile phone at an early age, despite the absence of a clear need, in a context of social pressure and potential peer exclusion. While participating parents often feel able to resist such pressure, they express greater uncertainty about its possible effects on their children.

She wasn't asking for it, there wasn't a real need, but we felt she was becoming a bit excluded from their plans. (F2: father of a boy aged 8 and a girl aged 11).

It's more about staying connected, being part of a group, that sense of belonging at this age, than the screen itself. (F17: mother of a boy aged 11).

In this context, owning a mobile phone enables children to participate in daily conversations, coordinate activities, and maintain peer relationships in real time. Exclusion from these digital spaces—primarily organized via WhatsApp—can reduce interaction opportunities, potentially undermining a child's sense of belonging and group integration.

Dilemma 4. the paradox of anticipation.

The fourth dilemma, examined in the next section, is the 'paradox of anticipation': the need to anticipate risks—especially exposure to sexual content—to protect children, while such anticipation may also stimulate curiosity and access. This dilemma relates to parents' capacity to manage dialogue and address sexual education.

The anticipation paradox: fear of pornographic content and parental (maternal) response

Fear and concern in digital parenting

As suggested earlier, fear appears as a present emotional dimension in the context of digital parenting across the focus groups. In all but one group, families explicitly refer to 'fear,' while in the remaining group similar experiences are articulated in terms of 'concern.' In this sense, it is possible to distinguish between concern-driven risks and fear-driven risks.

Dependence on technology is identified in 6 of 9 groups, especially in rural contexts (11 vs. 8 mentions), but is framed mainly as a concern. A similar pattern appears with trivial or low-value content, where concern focuses on the imitation of undesirable behaviours.

By contrast, bullying and exposure to inappropriate or pornographic content are consistently framed as fear-driven risks and perceived as genuine dangers. Fear of bullying is mentioned in 5 groups (9 mentions),

mainly in urban settings (4 urban, 1 rural). Concerns about access to pornographic content arise in 5 groups (3 urban, 2 rural), with two additional groups referring more broadly to inappropriate content, particularly violence and sexual or sexualised language. Fear of contact with strangers is also clearly identified and appears in 4 groups, predominantly urban (3 urban, 1 rural).

Fear of unintended exposure to pornography

This concern is reflected in everyday practices. Across participants' accounts, access to inappropriate content is described as a significant concern, both in terms of its perceived frequency and inevitability, as well as the intensity of such content.

On YouTube, the eldest gets hooked through linked videos. I stop it because she sometimes ends up watching things not appropriate for her age. I'm concerned about that growing need to watch videos. (F44: mother of two girls aged 2 and 5).

What scares us most—at least me—is everything related to the personal sphere: social media, exposure, and the possibility they might post about your child or talk about them in a context no one controls. (F40: mother of a boy aged 9).

Our 12-year-old nephew is on Besiege, a children's game, and somehow people get in sending videos... and you think, what kind of mind would try to reach children through a game like this (F40: mother of a boy aged 9).

The content referred to mainly includes pornography and violence, and is associated with feelings of worry and, in some cases, shock, even from the earliest years. In particular, fear is linked to the unintended exposure to videos with sexual content. These risks are described not only in relation to present experiences, but also in anticipatory terms, especially with regard to later developmental stages such as adolescence.

The problem is that one video leads to another. Until suddenly... (F24: father of two children aged 8 and 13). It really scares me that they might be exposed to sexist ideas or things like pornography or violence. I feel afraid about adolescence, that in-between stage—they're not children, not adults—the rebellion... (F12: mother of a boy aged 9).

For now, it's an early stage, so it doesn't feel urgent, but what worries me is how we'll deal with it in the future. I don't think we're aware of the consequences of a mobile phone. There's a whole hidden world—how it works, how people avoid detection, how they attract users—and that worries me. Above all, I'm concerned about children's exposure, especially girls, who seem more vulnerable. I don't really know how to protect them. (F28: mother of a girl aged 3 and a boy aged 1 month).

These narratives are not based on direct experience but are largely shaped by secondary sources of information—statistics, news or accounts from third parties. The fear is less associated with minors' deliberate searching for such content than with its unexpected intrusion into videos and games.

Someone told me that in the games they play, pornography pops up. They click without realising and more appears, so they end up wherever they end up. That's why I say everything is happening earlier and earlier, and it terrifies me. My daughters are very small, but I already see my nieces, each with a phone... (F20: mother of two girls aged 2 and 4).

Statistics say that at 10 or 11 they already access porn. And what kind of porn? They say the first things you see are atrocities. At 10 they see it as normal... by 16 or 18 they've normalised it... There is a huge danger (...) because 'someone in my class, when he goes to the village' and 'someone has a cousin with a phone and they watch porn all the time, then go to school and make the noises'. At nine. So it's there. It's so easy. (F38: father of two boys aged 11 and 13 and a girl aged 9).

Responses to pornography: control-based responses

In contrast to concerns about general technology use or potential addiction—where families combine control with educational strategies such as explanation and dialogue adapted to children—responses to the fear of exposure to pornography or inappropriate content differ markedly.

Educational approaches are more evident in general technology use, where participating parents aim to promote understanding and self-regulation, sometimes explaining its effects in ways accessible to children.

And we've talked about it. I tell him: 'when you're in front of the TV, an invisible hand comes into your head. You can't see it, but it hooks us'. (F46: mother of a boy aged 6).

'It affects your brain, which is still developing. We talk about it so he understands, so it's not just "I don't want you to use it because I said so"'. (F16: mother of a boy aged 9).

We also work on things that can affect and harm the brain. Sometimes he becomes thoughtful about it, which helps us keep things under control. (F16: mother of a boy aged 7).

However, when addressing the risk of exposure to inappropriate content such as pornography, parental responses - as reported by participating mothers- shift toward restriction and control, focusing on limiting access and filtering content.

So YouTube is forbidden (F9: mother of a boy aged 8).

When one of those videos appears, we cut it off. That doesn't go through (F24: mother of a girl aged 8 and a boy aged 13).

Social media? Total restriction (F25: mother of a girl aged 7 and a boy aged 9).

If I think he's seen it, I say: 'this porn thing—I'll kill you, I swear...' I kind of test the waters (F4: mother of a boy aged 11).

Anticipation, postponement and 'vigilant waiting'

Differences between mothers and fathers emerge in responses. Fathers tend to adopt more flexible control, allowing some trial and error and framing exposure as not necessarily harmful, depending on education and individual disposition:

What makes you 'bad' or 'good' when exposed to risk? It's education and disposition. You can show ten children porn, and maybe one is affected while another says, 'I saw it, and that's it.' (F35, father of a boy aged 9).

Similarly, exposure is sometimes framed as a learning opportunity, where mistakes support awareness and self-regulation:

Sometimes, like in maths, we let them make mistakes. It's not always bad to get things wrong. If he's seen something inappropriate, I tell him: 'this is not for you... you don't understand it.' It's about helping him see it was a mistake. (F24: father of a girl aged 8 and a boy aged 13).

Mothers' strategies tend to follow a logic of anticipation and postponement, aiming to delay exposure and avoid stimulating curiosity or encouraging exploration of such content. This tension is reflected in participants' accounts:

What scares me is that if I talk to him about pornography, something he hasn't imagined, he might say: 'what is that?' I'm in conflict—between explaining or keeping him unaware so he doesn't discover it. He's too small for me. The longer I can delay it, the better. (F21: mother of two boys aged 2 and 8).

Mothers aim to preserve childhood innocence through 'vigilant waiting,' intervening only when signs of exposure or specific incidents arise. Indirect indicators—such as attitudes or behavioural changes—guide their assessment: *'you can tell by the child's attitude... when you see that he's still living in ignorance... it's because he hasn't seen anything'* (F22: mother of a boy aged 7).

This approach is marked by uncertainty, as mothers are often unsure about their children's exposure, even when aware of cases in their environment. Communication remains reactive: children are encouraged to ask, but conversations are usually triggered by external events—*'yes, we have also been discovering things little by little... boom'* (F23: father of a boy aged 7); *'it was just a cartoon, but... a way of starting the conversation'* (F4: mother of a boy aged 11). Trust is prioritised over explicit guidance: *'anything you don't understand... we have a lot of trust'* (F12: mother of a boy aged 9).

Mothers report feeling 'very lost,' citing limited communicative tools and uncertainty about how to address sexual content: *'you don't know how to talk to them... what to say'* (F22). This lack of clear criteria reinforces postponement.

Schools are seen as key actors, though mothers are not always fully aware of the content of school-based sexual education. Parent-oriented activities are perceived as informative rather than practical, leading participants to call for more applied training and a stronger role for schools in addressing these issues.

Discussion

The results enable participants' experiences to be linked to the theoretical framework, showing how family management of TRIC reproduces tensions documented in the literature.

Following the TRIC perspective, technologies are viewed as relational and affective settings (Diogo et al., 2018). Around age 9, technology shifts from a purely instrumental tool to a relational dimension as children transition to connected uses. Consequently, families interpret digital environments as spaces where moral and educational dimensions directly shape children's identities (Christensen et al., 2025; Douglass et al., 2022).

Our findings show that managing these digital risks—perceived largely as external—relies on 'on-the-go' strategies. Rather than following stable, long-term frameworks, participating parents adopt a situational approach, adjusting decisions based on immediate circumstances. This reflects both parental (maternal) uncertainty and a lack of clear guidelines. Furthermore, the intergenerational digital divide remains a persistent challenge, complicating effective mediation.

Conversely, participants who self-identify as 'pro-technology'—particularly fathers and ICT professionals—tend to view technology as a primarily instrumental tool. This perspective does not result in permissive use; rather, these parents often establish clearer boundaries and express greater confidence in their mediation.

This suggests that digital familiarity facilitates more structured mediation rather than relaxed oversight, aligning with research linking higher cultural capital to effective digital parenting (Nikken & Oprea, 2018). This confidence reduces the uncertainty derived from the intergenerational digital divide, enabling more consistent strategies and a greater sense of agency when facing external risks.

Digital risk is articulated through four interrelated sub-dilemmas that reflect underlying value tensions in modern parenting. These dilemmas indicate that digital parenting is not merely risk management, but a field of moral negotiation where protection, autonomy, privacy, belonging, and identity are constantly at stake. The learning–risk dilemma captures the ambivalence between promoting development and ensuring protection, while the privacy–control dilemma positions practices along a continuum between guidance and surveillance, raising issues of trust and autonomy. Furthermore, the lack of need–belonging dilemma highlights the role of peer dynamics, as digital access enables participation in social life whereas exclusion may affect belonging. Together with the anticipation paradox, these dilemmas show how families interpret digital environments as complex spaces where various educational and moral dimensions are continuously negotiated.

In relation to the anticipation paradox, exposure to pornography emerges as a fear-driven risk, perceived by participants as a serious and inevitable threat, comparable to bullying or violent content (Sedano Colom et al., 2024). This stands in contrast to more concern-driven risks that are managed through daily routines.

Furthermore, it is primarily conceptualized as a content risk—where the child is the passive recipient of inappropriate material—rather than a conduct risk, in which the child's own actions or interactions contribute to the danger (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009).

The findings align with a broader collective imaginary marked by concern about early exposure to pornography and its negative effects (Martínez et al., 2020), suggesting these discourses shape parental perceptions. References to statistics and third-party accounts appear to amplify fear, particularly regarding pornographic and violent content.

They also reflect a gap between this collective imaginary and parents' actual knowledge of their own children's exposure (Livingstone et al., 2011).

The findings suggest that, among participating mothers—overrepresented in the sample—there is a tendency to rely on restrictive mediation (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020; Nichols & Selim, 2022) and avoid conversations about sexuality due to lack of preparedness or the aim of preserving children's 'innocence' (Grossman et al., 2018; McGinn et al., 2016; Robinson, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). They also point to the anticipation dilemma, whereby providing information may unintentionally stimulate curiosity and encourage exposure.

As a result, unlike other areas of digital education, reluctance persists and the shift toward dialogue (Robinson, 2013) is not fully evident. Strategies remain centred on prohibition and control, while families—particularly mothers—adopt 'vigilant waiting,' delaying intervention until specific incidents occur.

The findings suggest a framework where preventive intervention is viewed as risky, while inaction is framed as emotional and moral protection. This ‘vigilant waiting’ is partly linked to a perceived lack of digital and sexual training (Diogo et al., 2018).

The discourse on sexuality underscores the relational and moral nature of digital parenting: decisions are shaped by cultural expectations of childhood, gendered educational responsibilities, and limited resources that constrain proactive action. Consistent with research on Spanish families, the results highlight a feminization of accompaniment (Diogo et al., 2018), placing the burden of both technological mediation and sexual communication on mothers. This intensifies the moral and emotional dilemmas surrounding sexual content, increasing uncertainty and the need for greater parental competence. Consequently, the findings support calls for comprehensive affective–sexual education from a feminist perspective (Allen et al., 2017; Noorman et al., 2022).

Conclusions

The findings show that from age 9, digital use shifts from purely instrumental to a relational space where children construct identities. This transition requires families to move beyond technical control toward mediation involving complex moral and emotional dimensions.

A gendered pattern emerges among participating parents, although it should be interpreted with caution given the predominance of mothers in the sample. While some fathers adopt a more technical perspective, mothers more frequently assume the emotional responsibility of mediation, resulting in higher levels of uncertainty, guilt, and stress, particularly regarding exposure to pornography.

Families’ fear of pornography is shaped by a collective imaginary informed by media and statistics rather than direct experience. Consequently, in sexual risk, pedagogical dialogue—present in areas like screen overuse—is often replaced by restrictive strategies and avoidance of open communication.

‘Vigilant waiting’ emerges as a pattern where sexuality conversations are postponed to avoid ‘awakening curiosity’ or disrupting idealized childhood innocence. This anticipation paradox frames inaction as moral protection, yet leaves children without tools to process accidental encounters with explicit content.

Overall, the study suggests that addressing digital dilemmas depends not on technical controls, but on fostering family literacy integrating a feminist perspective. This implies promoting educational approaches that empower children’s critical and sexual agency, moving beyond protection based on fear and restriction.

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