

## MEDIA LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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(Original scientific paper)

**Gabriela Durchevska-Georgieva<sup>1</sup>, Vesna Horvatović<sup>2</sup>, Simona Palchevska<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Adviser in the Bureau of Education Development

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Kliment Ohridski", Skopje

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### **Abstract**

*In the 21st century, media literacy is considered one of the most important forms of literacy. Being media competent is important not only for adults, but also for children from the earliest preschool age. Experts in the field of early learning and development of children believe that media education should start from the moment when children first come into contact with media and media content. Research confirms that the majority of children, on average between the ages of two, are exposed to various types of media and media content for approximately 2 to 3 hours a day. This exposure often occurs without the presence and support of adults to guide children in understanding the media and how it functions. The paper aims to show the importance of media literacy in early childhood and its placement within the subsystem of preschool education. We hope that this paper will encourage parents, educators and educational policy makers in our country to take advantage of current movements and trends to incorporate media literacy in early childhood.*

**Key words:** *media literacy, early childhood, preschool age.*

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### **Introduction**

To have a meaningful discussion about media literacy in early childhood, it is crucial to establish media education. Today, the significance of media literacy in early childhood is being widely discussed by various international organizations. The Technology in Early Childhood Center at the Erikson Institute, in collaboration with the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), the Children's Library Service Association (ALSC), and the Association of Children's Museums (ACM), is organizing two national forum meetings in 2018. These meetings aim to engage experts and practitioners in discussing early childhood media literacy and developing resources that promote an understanding of its importance. The initiative is supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The result of these two national meetings in 2019 is translated into a *Report on media literacy education in early childhood* ( 2020 Media Literacy Report . )

### **What is early childhood media literacy and why is it important?**

Preschool children are regular consumers of media in their homes, in kindergarten, in the outdoor environment, including museums and libraries. All of these environments offer the opportunity to support and develop media literacy skills in preschool children. As key consumers of media, media literacy has always been important to them. Early childhood media literacy encompasses all media, including print, but most attention around media literacy today focuses on digital media technologies. In recent decades, rapid technological advances have resulted in digital media devices such as touch screen devices, smartphones and tablets, and even a variety of content created specifically for preschoolers, including children's television programs and interactive games. Research continuously confirms that children of preschool and early school age (up to 8 years old) are regular and frequent media consumers, on average, of about 2 hours a day (Rideout, 2017), and every year the amount of time that the child spends it crosses a variety of media content and platforms (Ofcom, 2019; Chaudron, 2015; Common Sense Media, 2013). In addition, in kindergartens, with the increase in access to various media devices, their use in daily educational activities with children within the educational group and other rooms in the kindergarten increases. In developed societies, even informal learning environments, including libraries and museums, are increasing the use and incorporation of digital media into their premises.

On the other hand, the media represent a significant factor that strongly influences the intellectual, social, emotional and physical development of children. From here, when we talk about the media literacy of preschool children, it is important to emphasize the role that parents and educators have in the process of media literacy of children.

Research (Gonzalez Gaitano, 2008) confirms that the media play an increasingly important role in family upbringing. In many families, it is they who determine the rhythm of the day, occupy space and organize time, asserting themselves as powerful factors for the transfer of cultural models, ways of behavior and values. Parents are the first educators of the child. Within the family, the child grows, is educated and begins to form as a person. In a research on *preschool children in front of small screens*, conducted by the *Polyclinic for the Protection of Children and Youth* in Zagreb in 2017, the data obtained show that almost all families (99.9%) with preschool children have a TV in their home, mobile phone and computer; 85% of families with preschool children have a tablet; 65% of families have gaming consoles. The data shows that, on average, there are 6 electronic devices in each household (in their rooms 27% of children have a TV, 8% have a computer, and 5% have game consoles), which greatly affects communication between family members. The research was conducted on a sample of 700 children of preschool age. At the same time, the fact that there is not a single family that does not use at least one electronic device, that is, modern technology is used by all the children whose families were included in the sample of this research, is worrying.

From here comes the responsibility of parents for continuous development of their own media competences, so that they can understand the new media language, learn to distinguish between positive and negative influence of the media, try to reduce the negative influence of the media, in particular, if the use of media takes up too much space and takes up more time that family members should spend in quality mutual interaction with the preschool child. Otherwise, media saturation may occur (Potter, 2012), which will certainly negatively affect the child's development and success in further education and life.

More broadly, early media literacy is aimed at helping preschoolers begin to understand the role of media, preparing them to be creative and healthy consumers and creators of media throughout their lives.

However, when we talk about media literacy in early childhood, it should be pointed out that among experts in this field, there is a lack of consensus regarding the questions: what constitutes media literacy in early childhood, how to encourage parents and other adults to be mentors and media literacy models?

In order to answer these questions, we will rely on the updated definition provided by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (n.d.). This definition emphasizes the distinct components of media literacy that hold significance and relevance in early childhood, such as understanding, engagement, and research. It aligns with the definition put forth by the Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) for School-Age Children. According to this definition, media literacy in early childhood is defined as "the capacity to access, engage, explore, comprehend, evaluate, and create with age-appropriate media."

International documents dealing with media literacy in early childhood

The concept of media literacy in early childhood has gained recognition and integration within various documents of international organizations. One notable document is the Grunwald Declaration on Media Education, which was adopted by UNESCO in 1982 during the International Symposium in Grunwald, Germany. Additionally, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe have emphasized the importance of media literacy through numerous resolutions and recommendations, considering it a priority across all levels of education, from preschool to university. This includes its inclusion as part of the broader learning process. In line with this, the Council for Education, Youth, Culture and Sports of the European Union issued the Conclusions on developing media literacy and critical thinking through education and training in 2016.

"The Board of Education calls on States to:

- encouraging sufficient attention devoted to the development of media literacy and critical thinking starting from pre-school education, including civic and media education,
- an effort to raise the level of digital competences among children and students at all levels of education, as an important prerequisite for strengthening their ability for their later active participation in the democratic life of modern societies, as well as for increasing their employability,
- fostering a safe learning environment,
- supporting educational staff and directors in kindergartens for education and training and continuous professional development of their digital competences, as well as pedagogical skills needed for using new

technologies and opening educational resources during learning, with an effective way of solving the issue of media literacy and critical thinking with preschool children,

- involving parents and other stakeholders in society in order to reduce the digital divide between generations and encourage a common culture of dialogue and mutual understanding,
- strengthening the dialogue, cooperation and partnership between the education and training sector and the media sector – including journalists – as well as all other relevant stakeholders.
- encouraging innovative, creative and participatory ways to develop media literacy and critical thinking in preschool education" .

Today, more and more attention is directed to the modalities of media literacy in the existing programs for early learning and development of children, that is, to whether the desired goals are achieved through the established models. In that direction, there is more and more research not only for the promotion of media literacy, but also for the evaluation of acquired competencies.

One of the most commonly used models for studying media literacy among children of early preschool age is the intercurricular approach, i.e. its full integration in the area of Language, communication and literacy development, separate aspects in other program areas/aspects of children's development and learning, as well as various non-institutional activities (visit to theater for children and youth, cinema). This model is also applied by Slovenia, a country that was the first in Central and Eastern Europe to introduce media literacy in the educational system, from pre-school to higher education.

In that direction, the competent authorities in the states are invited to:

- To develop courses for the training of mediator educators, to increase their knowledge and understanding of the media and to train them in appropriate methods, while taking into account the significant but fragmentary familiarity with the media that many children already possess;
- To encourage research and development activities in the interest of media education, from the sphere of psychology, sociology and communication sciences, and
- To support and strengthen the activities undertaken or foreseen by UNESCO, the purpose of which is to encourage international cooperation in the field of media education, in order to encourage the development of critical opinion among children from the earliest age, to introduce them to the creation of various media forms, to be informationally and functionally literate and to be active citizens, not passive consumers of media messages.

Undoubtedly, in the future, the task of each country will be to further strengthen the role of media literacy, the demand for media education in early childhood, encouraging those interested in the public and private sectors for greater initiative in the process of adapting the new results of media literacy research, or the development of new technologies.

## Conclusion

The incorporation of media literacy in early childhood in European and world frameworks is a long established practice. But despite that, it still remains a key part of the educational policies of every country. In Macedonia, the question of when and how media literacy will be incorporated into the subsystem of preschool education remains open. What preschool children should learn about media literacy has so far been addressed in the Early Learning and Development Program by "embedding" within the *Language, Communication and Literacy Development aspect* of the separate program area *Communication and Media Culture*, which covers only a small part of this area. Not as media literacy, but as media culture. Further education of the educational staff is also missing, i.e. supporting education and training and continuous professional development of their digital competences, as well as pedagogical skills needed for using new technologies and using open educational resources in learning, with an effective way of solving the issue of media literacy and critical thinking in preschool children. Namely, parents and educators should be media literate enough to transfer their competences to today's children, who do not remember life before smartphones.

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