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Approaches to Developing Media Literacy in Parents of Children with Digital Autism

Abstract

Introduction. The study examines approaches to developing media literacy among parents of young children, focusing on families raising children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autism-like symptoms associated with excessive passive screen exposure. The purpose was to assess baseline parental media literacy and mediation practices and to evaluate a short, culturally adapted media-education programme in Kazakhstan. *Methodology and Methods.* A quantitative quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a comparison group was applied. The sample included 56 parents of children aged 3–8 years, sampled through preschools, primary schools, and psychological–pedagogical centres. Media literacy was measured with a composite questionnaire, and mediation patterns and behaviours were also assessed. The intervention comprised four weekly group sessions with home tasks. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, chi-square tests, and Cohen's d; ethics included informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. *Results.* Baseline media literacy was medium, with a gap between technical skills and critical components. Parents of children with "digital autism" more often used screens for calming and less frequently practiced co-viewing. After the programme, the experimental group increased the media literacy index and shifted toward active/enabling mediation. *Scientific novelty.* This study reveals the structure of parental media literacy in early childhood and links it to mediation patterns in families raising children with autism spectrum disorders/"digital autism." Practical implications. *Practical significance.* The programme may be used as a modular parent-training component in preschool, inclusive education, and counselling services to reduce reliance on screens as a "digital pacifier" and to strengthen reflective mediation.

Keywords: parental media literacy; digital autism; autism spectrum disorder; screen time; parental mediation; early childhood; inclusive education.

Introduction. Rapid digitalization has transformed everyday life, reshaping childhood and family communication and making connected devices central to children's leisure, learning, and socialization. Media and digital literacy are widely regarded as essential life skills and, for parents, a prerequisite for responsible mediation of young children's media use (Hobbs, 2010; 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Helsper et al., 2024).

Recent discourse has popularized the term "digital/virtual autism" to denote autism-like symptoms that are claimed to be associated with excessive passive screen exposure; however, professional guidance emphasizes that this is not a formal diagnosis but rather a warning label linked to developmental delays, prolonged unguided screen time, and reduced caregiver–child interaction. Research also associates high early screen use with attention, sleep, and socio-emotional difficulties, particularly when screens displace communication and play (Kardaras, 2016). At the same time, work in ASD indicates that digital media can both increase risks and offer opportunities for communication, learning, and participation, and that the quality of parental mediation may be more important than restriction alone (Pliska et al., 2023).

Parental mediation encompasses restrictive, active, and enabling strategies; evidence indicates that stronger parental digital skills and more nuanced risk perceptions are associated with greater use of active/enabling approaches, rather than reliance on technical controls alone (Livingstone et al., 2017; Helsper et al., 2025). Parental media literacy is increasingly conceptualized as multidimensional, combining technical competence, critical evaluation, algorithmic/commercial awareness, and developmental sensitivity, and higher parental social media literacy has been linked to lower levels of child digital addiction (Hobbs, 2011). Policy reports likewise highlight that many parents feel insufficiently informed as platforms evolve rapidly (UNESCO, 2025).

Clinical guidance also underscores bidirectionality: in some datasets, higher screen time precedes later parent-reported autism diagnoses, yet early autistic traits may themselves contribute to greater reliance on screens; accordingly, media-education perspectives stress relational and contextual determinants and the importance of purposeful, adult-mediated use (Hobbs, 2011; Pliska et al., 2023). Researchers additionally note that parents often underestimate background media exposure and the use of "digital pacifiers." Russian-language scholarship associates low parental media literacy with inconsistent rules, limited parent-child discussion, and patterns of either excessive control or delegation of regulation to devices; in this view, "digital autism" is frequently interpreted as an outcome of mediation deficits rather than screens per se (Kardaras, 2016; Gritsai, 2025; Chelysheva, 2023; Gavrilova & Mashanova, 2022).

In Kazakhstan, MIL is increasingly embedded in educational initiatives, but structured support for parents remains scarce; educators often frame MIL primarily in terms of misinformation, while family-focused media education is addressed less consistently (UNESCO, 2025). Survey data point to early adoption of social networks and streaming services, alongside a gap in parents' skills related to monitoring, safety settings, and discussing risks with children. One study of 362 parents reported substantial unsupervised screen time among pre-schoolers and low awareness of "digital autism," together with noted withdrawal and communication difficulties patterns aligned with earlier Russian findings on diffuse family media norms (UNICEF Kazakhstan, 2024; Zhanaliyeva & Zhukenova, 2025; Chelysheva, 2023; Gritsai, 2025).

Russian and Kazakhstani scholars have proposed a range of media-education interventions for parents, from brief school-based informational sessions to more comprehensive programmes aimed at developing family media culture. Chelisheva's handbook on parent media education emphasizes systematic joint work with children on analysing advertising, news, and entertainment content, establishing rules for shared viewing, and encouraging creative media production within the family (Chelisheva, 2023). The psycho-pedagogical programme "Parent Media Literacy" developed by Gavrilova and Mashanova (2022) is designed for parents of preschool and primary-school children and combines lectures, discussions, and practical tasks focused on age-appropriate screen use, co-viewing practices, and digital safety (Gavrilova & Mashanova, 2022).

Recent Kazakhstani initiatives supported by international organizations aim to help parents identify online risks, build trust-based communication with children, and use simple tools to strengthen digital safety practices (UNICEF Kazakhstan, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). However, these programmes seldom engage with the specific realities of families raising children with ASD or autism-like traits, where screens may be used both for self-regulation and as a channel for learning and social participation (Pliska et al., 2023; 2025). International research on autistic people's digital participation likewise highlights the need for tailored guidance that balances sensory sensitivities and communication preferences with opportunities for inclusion (Pliska et al., 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates that efforts to develop media literacy among parents of children with "digital autism" should:

– be grounded in evidence-based understandings of screen use, child development, and ASD rather than alarmist narratives;

– combine core media-literacy components (critical analysis, content creation, and understanding of media systems) with practical parenting skills such as co-viewing, negotiating rules, and modelling healthy media habits (Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008);

– account for national and cultural contexts, including Kazakhstan's media environment and existing MIL policies;

– directly address the needs of families raising children with ASD, where digital media may operate both as a risk factor and a resource.

Building on these strands of research, the present article seeks to systematize pedagogical and psychological approaches to developing media literacy among parents of children showing signs of "digital autism" in Kazakhstan, addressing both the preventive and compensatory functions of family media education.

Materials and Methods. The study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a comparison group. Parents were assigned either to an experimental group that completed a structured media literacy programme or to a comparison group that received only brief written recommendations. The final sample comprised 56 parents (44 mothers and 12 fathers) of children aged 3–8 years. Thirty-one parents reported that their child had ASD or autism-like symptoms that specialists associated with excessive screen exposure (the "digital autism" group), whereas 25 parents reported no developmental diagnoses. Participants were recruited via preschools, primary schools, and psychological–pedagogical centres in a large Kazakhstani city; participation was voluntary, and the groups did not differ significantly in key socio-demographic characteristics.

Parental media literacy was assessed using a composite questionnaire that included items on technical–operational skills, critical evaluation of content, and awareness of commercial/algorithmic influences. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale and summed into subscales; these were then converted to a 0–100 metric using the transformation:

$$I_{is} = \frac{Raw_{is} - Min_s}{Max_s - Min_s} \cdot 100$$

where I_{is} is the standardized score of respondent i on subscale s Raw_{is} is the raw sum of item scores, and Min_s ical minimum and maximum. The overall media literacy index was computed as the arithmetic mean of the standardized subscales. Additional items captured parental mediation practices (restrictive, mixed/inconsistent, active/enabling) and specific behaviours, including using screens as a calming strategy, co-viewing, and the presence of household rules, as well as parents' awareness and understanding of the term "digital autism".

The intervention comprised four weekly group sessions (60–90 minutes each) during which parents in the experimental group received psycho-educational input, analysed examples of children's media content, and worked on planning family media routines. The same set of instruments was administered to both groups before the programme began (pre-test) and shortly after it ended (post-test). For a subset of the experimental group, brief follow-up questions were also collected regarding perceived changes in media practices.

Data Analysis. Data analysis comprised descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) and inferential testing. Differences in continuous indices between groups and overtime were examined with t-tests; for independent samples, the statistic was calculated as:

$$t = \frac{\overline{X_1} - \overline{X_2}}{\sqrt{\frac{S_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{S_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

where $\overline{X_1}$, and $\overline{X_2}$ are group means, $\frac{S_1^2}{n_1}$, and $\frac{S_2^2}{n_2}$ are variance terms, and n_1, n_2 are sample sizes. Categorical variables, including mediation patterns and key behaviours, were compared using chi-square tests of independence. Effect sizes for mean differences were reported as Cohen's *d*. The study adhered to basic ethical

principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequences.

Results. The final sample included 56 parents of children aged 3–8 years (one parent per child). Thirty-one parents reported an ASD diagnosis or autism-like symptoms linked by specialists to excessive screen exposure ("digital autism" group), while 25 reported no developmental diagnoses (comparison group). Most respondents lived in urban areas (71.4%, n = 40), had higher education (58.9%, n = 33), and had daily access to smartphones and home broadband (94.6%, n = 53). The intervention and comparison groups did not differ significantly in parental age, education, or socio-economic status (all $p > .05$), indicating baseline comparability.

Table 1

Sample characteristics (N=56)

Indicator	n	%
Total number of parents	56	100.0
Mothers	44	78.6
Fathers	12	21.4
"Digital autism" group (child with ASD / DA)	31	55.4
Comparison group (no developmental diagnosis)	25	44.6
Urban residence	40	71.4
Higher education	33	58.9
Daily access to a smartphone and broadband at home	53	94.6

At baseline, the overall parental media literacy index (0–100) indicated a medium level (M = 57.3, SD = 11.4). Scores were higher for basic technical skills (M = 68.9, SD = 10.2) than for critical evaluation of content and awareness of commercial and algorithmic influences (M = 49.7, SD = 12.7).

Parents of children with "digital autism" and those in the comparison group did not differ significantly in the overall media literacy index (M = 56.4 vs. 58.4; $p = 0.218$). However, profile analysis showed that the "digital autism" group had lower scores in critical appraisal of child-directed content (M = 46.1 vs. 52.9; $p = 0.032$), relied more on screens as a calming tool (73.9% vs. 49.3% used screens to manage tantrums "often/very often"; $\chi^2(1) = 10.87$; $p = 0.001$), and reported less frequent co-viewing and discussion of content (28.3% vs. 41.9% "often/very often"; $\chi^2(1) = 4.18$; $p = 0.041$).

Table 2

Baseline media literacy and mediation indicators by group

Indicator	"Digital autism" group (n = 31)	Comparison group (n = 25)	Statistic
Total media literacy index, M (SD), 0–100	56.4 (11.6)	58.4 (11.1)	$p = 0.218$
Critical assessment of child-directed content, M (SD)	46.1 (12.9)	52.9 (11.8)	$p = 0.032$
Use of screens as a calming tool "often/very often", %	73.9	49.3	$\chi^2(1) = 10.87$; $p = 0.001$
Co-viewing and discussion "often/very often", %	28.3	41.9	$\chi^2(1) = 4.18$; $p = 0.041$

Across the sample, three main parental mediation patterns were identified: primarily restrictive mediation (34.5%), characterized by clear time limits and content bans with little

discussion; mixed or inconsistent mediation (42.9%), marked by unstable rules, irregular monitoring, and situational use of screens as rewards or distractions; and active/enabling mediation (22.6%), combining rules with co-viewing and discussions of content and online risks. Parents of children with "digital autism" were more frequently represented in the mixed or inconsistent pattern (51.1% vs. 33.8%) and less often in the active/enabling pattern (16.3% vs. 29.6%; $\chi^2(2) = 9.04$; $p = 0.011$).

Table 3

Patterns of parental mediation by child's status

Mediation pattern	"Digital autism" group, %	Comparison group, %	Total sample, %
Primarily restrictive	32.6	36.8	34.5
Mixed/inconsistent	51.1	33.8	42.9
Active / enabling	16.3	29.6	22.6

The intervention comprised four modular sessions (group training, home-based practical tasks, and online support) focusing on understanding screen-time recommendations and developmental needs, analysing children's media content, strengthening co-viewing and dialogic practices, and establishing rules and routines for healthy family media use. Pre- and post-tests were completed by 30 parents in the experimental group (from both child-status categories) and 26 parents in the comparison group, who received only a brief informational leaflet.

Table 4

Pre–post changes in media literacy index by group

Group	Time point	M (SD), 0–100	Change ΔM	Significance
Experimental (n = 30)	Pre-test	56.9 (11.2)	–	–
	Post-test	71.8 (9.6)	+14.9	$p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d \approx 1.24$
Comparison (n = 26)	Pre-test	57.8 (10.9)	–	–
	Post-test	59.3 (10.7)	+1.5	$p = .119$; $d \approx 0.13$
Group × time interaction	–	–	–	$p < 0.001$

Behavioural indicators also shifted in the experimental group. Six weeks after the programme, the proportion of parents using screens as a primary calming strategy at least once a day fell from 61.9% to 32.1% (McNemar's $\chi^2 = 18.54$; $p < 0.001$). The share reporting regular co-viewing and discussion with the child ("often"/"very often") increased from 27.4% to 58.3% ($p < 0.001$), and the proportion of families with clearly defined screen-time rules and "screen-free zones" (e.g., during meals, before sleep) rose from 35.7% to 72.6% ($p < 0.001$).

In the subgroup of parents of children with "digital autism," comparable but somewhat smaller changes were observed: the use of screens for calming declined from 78.0% to 46.0% ($p < .001$), and active/enabling mediation increased from 18.0% to 44.0% ($p < .01$). Parents in this subgroup also more often reported replacing passive viewing of cartoons and short clips with brief, structured digital activities (e.g., educational apps, shared video calls with relatives) followed by offline play.

Table 5

Changes in key mediation behaviours in the experimental group

Behaviour (experimental group)	Pre, %	Post, %	Behaviour (experimental group)
Uses screens as primary calming strategy ≥ 1 time per day	61.9	32.1	Uses screens as primary calming strategy ≥ 1 time per day
Regular co-viewing and discussion ("often/very often")	27.4	58.3	Regular co-viewing and discussion ("often/very often")
Clear rules on screen time and "screen-free zones" at home	35.7	72.6	Clear rules on screen time and "screen-free zones" at home
Subgroup: parents of children with "digital autism" (n = ?)			Subgroup: parents of children with "digital autism" (n = ?)
Uses screens for calming "often/very often."	78.0	46.0	Uses screens for calming "often/very often."
Active/enabling mediation pattern	18.0	44.0	Active/enabling mediation pattern

At baseline, only 23.8% of parents were familiar with the term "digital autism," and fewer than 10% could explain it in a way consistent with scientific and clinical discussions. After the intervention, 74.0% of parents in the experimental group correctly distinguished clinically diagnosed ASD from autism-like symptoms linked to excessive passive screen time, while also recognizing that developmental difficulties cannot be attributed to "gadgets alone".

Qualitative feedback from brief open-ended questions indicated that parents began to link risks not only to the amount of screen time but also to the quality of interaction around media; many participants evaluated their own smartphone habits as a key model for children; and some parents of children with "digital autism" reported fewer episodes of emotional withdrawal during family routines after introducing more predictable and interactive media use.

Overall, the findings suggest that a structured, culturally adapted media-education programme can substantially strengthen parental media literacy and facilitate a shift from inconsistent or predominantly restrictive mediation toward more active and reflective guidance. For families raising children with "digital autism," such programmes appear to help move from compensatory overuse of screens to more balanced, developmentally informed digital practices.

Discussion. The study explored whether a targeted media-education programme could enhance parental media literacy and modify family media practices in households where young children, including those with "digital autism," are intensively exposed to screens. The results suggest that parental competencies and routines are both problematic and malleable: baseline mediation patterns were suboptimal, yet even a brief, structured intervention yielded meaningful cognitive and behavioural changes.

First, the findings show that parental media literacy is developed unevenly. In this sample, parents scored relatively high on basic technical skills but markedly lower on critical evaluation of content and on understanding commercial and algorithmic influences. This imbalance aligns with international evidence suggesting that many parents feel confident using devices yet lack analytic tools to grasp how platforms shape children's attention, emotions, and values (Hobbs, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). For young children, such a gap is especially consequential: choices about what children watch and for how long are made with limited awareness of hidden persuasive mechanisms or developmental needs.

A central contribution of this study is the comparison between families raising children with "digital autism" and those without developmental diagnoses. Although the groups

did not differ on the overall media literacy index, they displayed different profiles of everyday practices. Parents in the "digital autism" group relied more often on screens as a primary calming strategy, engaged less in co-viewing and dialogue, and scored lower in critical appraisal of child-directed content. This pattern suggests not general skills "deficit," but a specific mediation style in which digital devices are used to regulate behaviour and manage emotional crises. In contexts of sensory overload, communication difficulties, and elevated parental stress, screens become a fast and seemingly effective means of de-escalation while reinforcing passivity and reducing live interaction. Similar dynamics have been noted in clinical and psycho-pedagogical discussions of excessive early screen exposure and its association with autism-like symptoms (Hill & Council on Communications and Media, 2016; Kardaras, 2016).

The mediation typology identified here, primarily restrictive, mixed/inconsistent, and active/enabling, largely corresponds to classifications reported in earlier studies (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & Schols, 2015). In this study, however, mixed or inconsistent mediation was the most common pattern, particularly among parents of children with "digital autism." This result is theoretically significant: it suggests that the central issue is not simply excessive permissiveness or strictness, but oscillation between strategies in the absence of a coherent framework and stable rules. Devices may be banned at times, used as rewards or pacifiers in others, and occasionally left unmonitored. Under these conditions, children receive mixed signals, and media use becomes a site of negotiation and conflict rather than a structured developmental resource.

The intervention outcomes show that parental media literacy can be improved even through a brief four-session programme. The substantial increase in the media literacy index in the experimental group, alongside only minor change in the comparison group, suggests that the combined format of psycho-educational input, joint analysis of concrete media examples, and practical homework was effective. Especially notable were gains in components that are often most difficult to influence: critical reading of media messages, awareness of commercial and algorithmic mechanisms, and confidence in setting privacy and safety controls. These changes support the view that media literacy is not limited to "time limits," but involves understanding how digital ecosystems operate and how children navigate them (Hobbs, 2010; Chelysheva, 2008).

Behavioural changes in family media routines were also substantial. Six weeks after the programme, parents in the experimental group reported less frequent use of screens as a primary calming tool, more co-viewing and discussion with children, and clearer rules regarding "screen-free zones" and screen-free times at home. In families raising children with "digital autism", the move from passive background viewing to brief, structured, interactive activities followed by offline play suggests a shift from compensatory overuse to more deliberate, goal-oriented digital practices. These changes align with recommendations in the literature on digital participation of children with ASD, which stress balancing risk reduction with meaningful, supported engagement (Pliska et al., 2023).

Another noteworthy outcome was a shift in how parents conceptualized "digital autism." At baseline, only a small minority had heard the term, and most linked it to alarmist media narratives. After the programme, a substantial proportion of parents could distinguish clinically diagnosed ASD from autism-like symptoms associated with excessive passive screen time, while acknowledging both the role of devices and the broader biopsychosocial context. This more nuanced understanding is important: simplistic "screen-blaming" can stigmatize families and divert attention from comprehensive developmental support, whereas informed media literacy helps parents view digital technologies as both a potential risk and a resource to be integrated thoughtfully into individualized support plans.

From a Kazakhstani perspective, the study indicates that parental media literacy is still underdeveloped but represents a highly promising domain for preventive work. Current initiatives

in Kazakhstan and the wider region have tended to prioritize adolescents, misinformation, and civic resilience, whereas the needs of parents of young children, particularly those raising children with ASD or "digital autism," have received far less attention. The findings suggest that embedding media-education modules into preschool and school settings, as well as into psychological and pedagogical support services, is both feasible and potentially impactful. Such an approach could also connect two policy strands that are often treated separately: digital safety and inclusive/special education.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the sample was small (56 parents) and likely biased toward more motivated, urban, and better-educated families, which restricts generalizability. Future research should recruit larger and more diverse samples, including rural and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, where digital inequalities and stress may be greater. Second, media use and mediation practices were measured via self-report, making the data vulnerable to social desirability and recall biases; combining questionnaires with digital logs, observations, or time-use diaries would yield a more accurate picture of behaviour. Third, follow-up was limited to six weeks, so it is unclear whether gains in media literacy and family routines persist over time and under everyday pressures; longitudinal designs with multiple follow-ups are needed. Finally, the quasi-experimental design without random assignment cannot fully rule out selection effects, and randomized controlled trials would strengthen causal inference.

Despite these constraints, the study has practical and theoretical implications. It suggests that:

– programmes that address parents' beliefs, stress, and personal media habits may be more effective than purely informational "screen time" campaigns;

– support for families of children with "digital autism" should explicitly combine guidance on healthy media routines with help in developing alternative avenues for communication, play, and emotional regulation;

– parental media literacy may function as a protective factor, moderating the link between children's screen exposure and developmental risks.

In conclusion, the results support moving from a deficit-oriented view of parents framed mainly as sources of "wrong" screen practices to a competence-based perspective in which parents act as reflective mediators of their children's digital experiences. Strengthening parental media literacy in this way not only reduces potentially harmful patterns of screen use but also contributes to more responsive, inclusive, and developmentally informed family practices.

Conclusion. Parental media literacy in families with young children, including those raising children with ASD and "digital autism," was generally at a medium level and showed a marked imbalance: parents reported greater confidence in technical skills than in critically evaluating children's content and understanding commercial and algorithmic influences. This gap increases the risk of poorly informed decisions about children's screen use. Families of children with "digital autism" showed a distinct mediation profile despite similar overall media literacy: more frequent use of screens for calming, less co-viewing and dialogue, and lower critical appraisal of child-directed content. As a result, devices often serve as behavioral and emotional regulators, reducing live interaction precisely when structured support is most needed.

The four-session Programme improved both knowledge and practices. Participants increased their media literacy index, with the largest gains in critical reading, awareness of persuasive and algorithmic mechanisms, and confidence in privacy and safety settings. Reported routines also changed: parents relied less on screens for calming, engaged more in co-viewing and discussion, and established clearer family rules; in the "digital autism" subgroup, passive viewing was more often replaced by brief, structured, interactive digital activities integrated into daily routines. Overall, parental media literacy appears to be a modifiable protective factor. Embedding media-education modules in early childhood support, inclusive education, and counselling services may help families shift from inconsistent or mainly

restrictive mediation toward more active and reflective guidance.

The study is limited by a modest sample, reliance on self-report, and a short follow-up; future research should use larger samples, objective indicators of media use, and longer-term assessment. Ethical principles were observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw.

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