PARENTING MEDIATION AND MONITORING: HOW FAMILY STRUCTURE SHAPES RESPONSES TO CHILDREN'S ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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Abstract: Children from single-parent families may face greater challenges related to both internalized and externalized difficulties compared to those raised in two-parent households. The digital age adds further risks, with the need to protect children from online threats such as sexual harassment. This study examines parental mediation and response strategies in the context of child online sexual harassment, focusing on differences between single-parent and two-parent families. A nationally representative quantitative survey was conducted within the deSHAME2 project in Croatia, which involved 1,667 parents of school-age children. Using structured questionnaires and validated measurement scales, the study explored how parents engage in internet safety discussions with their children, their level of concern about online harassment, and the specific actions they take when faced with such incidents. Data were analyzed using nonparametric statistical methods, including the Mann-Whitney test and Spearman's rank correlation. Findings reveal that while single-parent and two-parent households adopt largely similar parental mediation strategies and responses to online risks, parents in two-parent families were more likely to engage in discussions with their children when a problem was identified. These results suggest that parenting behaviors such as communication, monitoring, and readiness to act may play a more significant role in child online protection than family structure alone. By highlighting these patterns, the study emphasizes the importance of systematic education and support programs for all parents. Fostering proactive parental involvement in and open communication about online safety remain essential steps in reducing children's exposure to digital risks, regardless of family composition.

Keywords: single-parent families, two-parent families, parental mediation, child online sexual harassment, parental responses to children's online sexual harassment

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Parental strategies for managing children's internet use play a critical role in safeguarding them from potential risks and fostering a safe digital environment. Research indicates that effective parental mediation is linked to a reduction in risky online behaviors (Clark, 2011; Wachs et al., 2020). Three primary strategies for parental mediation are commonly identified: active mediation (encouraging communication and critical thinking), restrictive mediation (enforcing rules and restrictions), and monitoring (supervising children's online activities; Clark, 2011; Duerager & Livingstone, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2017).

Active mediation involves parents guiding and advising their children through open discussions about online activities. This two-way communication fosters critical thinking and helps children develop awareness of online risks and form informed opinions about digital content (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). Studies consistently indicate that active mediation is among the most effective strategies for reducing risky online behaviors and preventing online sexual victimization among children and youth (Corcoran et al., 2022). However, research also suggests that many children and parents do not regularly engage in such conversations. Several studies report that most teenagers have little to no communication with their parents about their online risk experiences (Vejmelka et al., 2023; Wisniewski et al., 2017). Additionally, discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' perceptions of online risks often contribute to poor communication on this topic (Nikken & de Haan, 2015). Nevertheless, when parents engage in ongoing, open discussions about online safety, privacy, and digital behavior, children demonstrate greater awareness of internet risks, reduced exposure to harmful content, and more responsible digital habits (Álvarez et al., 2019; Mesch, 2009).

Restrictive mediation refers to the use of rules and limitations to regulate children's technology use, ensuring compliance and applying consequences for rule violations (Chen & Chng, 2016; Clark, 2011). This strategy includes practices such as limiting screen time, monitoring browsing history, and restricting device usage. Some parents also adopt technological solutions, including parental control applications, to supervise their child's online activity (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). A related approach is supervision, where parents actively monitor their child's online engagement through physical presence, periodic review of digital activity, or monitoring apps. However, passive supervision, such as reviewing digital footprints without open communication, may erode trust between parents and children (Vejmelka et al., 2023).

Parental control strategies, often used with younger children or when concerns about digital safety are high, focus on technical interventions such as blocking specific content, setting parental controls, or imposing time limits on internet use (Borawski et al., 2003). Yet, excessive control may backfire, especially with adolescents, who might actively seek ways to bypass restrictions, reducing the effectiveness of these measures (Livingstone et al., 2017; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). For example, Gallego et al. (2020) found no significant impact of parental control software on children's internet access, pointing to the limitations of purely technical approaches.

The effectiveness of these mediation strategies is shaped by several factors, including the child's age, the parent's digital literacy, and the broader social context (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017; Livingstone et al., 2017). Notably, research consistently shows that mothers tend to be more involved than fathers in managing children's digital behaviors, often taking the primary role in establishing household rules and initiating conversations about internet use (Byrne et al., 2014; Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Symons et al., 2017). Studies on maternal internet-specific parenting styles further suggest that mothers are more likely to combine both control (supervision and restrictions) and warmth (support and open communication) when mediating their children's digital experiences. Children who experience transparent and supportive supervision are less likely to encounter inappropriate content or engage in risky online behaviors (Clark, 2011; Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017; Livingstone et al., 2017; Valcke et al., 2010; Wachs et al., 2020). In particular, higher levels of parental monitoring are associated with lower rates of online harassment among adolescents (Khurana et al., 2014).

In this study, following Clark (2011) and Livingstone et al. (2017), we define monitoring as parents' active supervision and rule-setting regarding their child's internet use. Recognizing that the understanding and practice of monitoring and supervision may vary across geographical and cultural contexts, we apply an operationalized approach using validated measurement scales to assess both parental control behaviors and communication patterns within the Croatian context.

Finally, research suggests that a balanced approach, which combines elements of active mediation, supervision, and technical restrictions, is the most effective in supporting children's safe and responsible use of the internet. Parents who maintain open communication while setting reasonable boundaries tend to foster greater digital security for their children and promote trust and autonomy in the parent–child relationship (Vejmelka et al., 2022).

Online Sexual Harassment of Children, and Parental Behaviors

Online sexual harassment of children can take various forms, including unwanted sexual messages, threats, blackmail, the sharing of inappropriate content, and attempts to establish contact for sexual exploitation (Vejmelka et al., 2023). In these situations, parents play a crucial role in protecting, supporting, and educating their children.

Online sexual harassment has become a widespread issue among adolescents that includes unwanted sexual inquiries, image-based abuse, and cyberbullying; global studies report that between 11% and 75% of young people experience such behaviors (Childnet, 2019; Smahel et al., 2020). This wide range reflects that online sexual harassment is both a measurable phenomenon and a socially constructed category, and that reported prevalence is highly sensitive to how researchers define, measure, and contextualize it. Recent research in Croatia highlights similar concerns. National data show that 41.2% of high school students have been victims of online sexual harassment, while 48.5% admit to perpetrating it; these findings point to the normalization of risky behaviors in digital spaces (Ramljak et al., 2025; Vejmelka et al., 2023).

Previous research highlights that online sexual harassment can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem among children and adolescents (Smahel et al., 2020; Wurtele, 2017). Victimized youth may also experience social withdrawal, fear of using digital platforms, or reluctance to report harmful experiences (Ramljak et al, 2025; Whittle et al., 2013). Understanding parental responses is therefore critical in mitigating these consequences. Parental interventions generally fall into several key areas: informing children about risks, educating them on safe online practices, providing emotional support, and reporting harassment (Whittle et al., 2013).

Research highlights that parental behavior can serve as a significant protective factor in children's online safety, as parents are often the first adults children turn to for help (Smahel et al., 2020). Despite their central role, parents often underestimate the extent to which their children engage in risky online behaviors, such as cyberbullying, interactions with strangers, and accessing sexual content (Byrne et al., 2014). In addition, Caivano et al. (2020) revealed that parents of elementary school children tended to underestimate their children's engagement in cyber aggression, while parents of high school adolescents overestimated their involvement.

Active parental involvement in children's digital lives not only enhances children's awareness of online safety but also reduces the likelihood of exposure to harmful content. Effective parental monitoring provides a direct protective effect by increasing awareness of a child's potentially harmful peer relationships and discouraging interactions that may pose risks (Dishion et al., 2004). Conversely, lack of parental monitoring and supervision has been identified as a major risk factor for both online victimization and perpetration (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Moreover, Chen et al. (2023) showed that parental active mediation was negatively associated with both cyberbullying victimization and perpetration while restrictive mediation was not significantly associated with cyberbullying. Parents who did not enforce restrictive mediation underestimated how frequently their adolescent was exposed to cyber aggression (Caivano et al., 2020).

Prevention plays a key role in protecting children from online sexual harassment; it includes parents educating their children on what online harassment entails, how to recognize it, and what steps to take if they experience it (Smahel et al., 2020). Open parent–child communication, based on trust and a high level of self-disclosure, is crucial in protecting children from online harassment and encouraging them to seek help when needed (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Smahel et al., 2020). Research suggests that children are more likely to report online harassment if they feel supported rather than punished for their online activities (Wurtele, 2017). Smahel et al. (2020) stated that parents are often the first to learn that their child has been a victim of online harassment, yet many lack sufficient knowledge on how and where to report such incidents.

Single-Parent Families and Children's Risky Behaviors in the Digital Era

The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines a family as "a group of people who are related to each other, such as a mother, a father, and their children". This structural definition serves as a reference point for understanding how single-parent families differ in composition. Several scholars have

broadened the definition of single parenthood by considering both its causes and the parenting responsibilities involved, noting that single-parent families may result from divorce, separation, the loss of a spouse, or a parent's choice to raise a child alone (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). In these households, the single parent takes on the primary roles of both caregiver and financial provider for their children.

Interparental conflict plays a significant role in shaping children's emotional and behavioral responses: research suggests that high-conflict environments contribute to children's emotional distress by affecting parental availability and self-regulation, which in turn influence their ability to adapt (Cummings & Davies, 2002). High-conflict divorces not only threaten a child's sense of security but can also result in a single-parent family, with parental behavior playing a key role in their adjustment. However, children may have already been exposed to parental conflict before the divorce, indicating that negative developmental outcomes are more likely a consequence of pre-existing family discord than of single parenthood itself (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Brkić & Jovović, 2016; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Perales et al., 2017).

However, existing findings indicate that children raised in single-parent families often experience poorer developmental outcomes, including lower academic achievement, higher rates of mental health challenges, and increased engagement in risky behaviors (Hayatbakhsh et al., 2013). Furthermore, studies have revealed that single mothers, especially those with less education, who work long hours and experience a lack of environmental support are more likely to be stressed about raising children, which can significantly affect their parenting skills (Cairney et al., 2003; Murry et al., 2001). While various studies have explored and confirmed that parental behavior affects both children's mental health and their involvement in risky behaviors, it is important to note that these findings do not necessarily establish causation between family structure and an increase in risk-taking behaviors (Hayatbakhsh et al., 2013; Perales et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2023).

Research on the relationship between single-parent households and children's online behaviors remains limited, despite extensive studies on the broader impact of single parenthood on child development. The digital world introduces new online risks and opportunities for children to be exposed to harmful content, with the result that children's online interactions further complicate the already challenging role of the parent in single-parent families. Stahlmann et al. (2020) explained that children from single-parent and blended families spend more time in front of screens with less strict rules for watching television and using computers. One significant challenge faced by single-parent households is the lack of supervision of children's internet use, often due to time constraints, work commitments, and the absence of another adult to share parenting responsibilities (Livingstone et al., 2017). Studies suggest that single parents, particularly those with more than one child, may struggle to provide equal attention to all their children, leading to disparities in parental involvement depending on such factors as birth order (Blake, 1981 as cited in Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Caceres-Delpiano, 2006, as cited in Nikken & de Haan, 2015). Furthermore, Mesch

(2009) found that children from households with married parents are significantly less likely to experience online victimization than are those from single-parent households and other types.

Single parents often struggle with the dual responsibilities of both parenting roles, while also facing social stigma and limited support. As a result, they may find it challenging to spend quality time with their children and this can be reflected in their children experiencing lower academic achievement, reduced social interactions, and increased emotional and behavioral difficulties (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). In their recent study, Youssef et al. (2025) revealed that children who spend significant time on social media are more frequently exposed to inappropriate content. The same study stresses the importance of clear boundaries and open communication between parents and children regarding internet use in order to minimize children's online exposure. The absence of extended family members, friends, or partners may make it more difficult for single parents to access critical information on digital safety (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & de Haan, 2015). In fact, Murry et al. (2001)'s study of African American single mothers showed that support from extended family members and close relatives can serve as a protective factor, enhancing maternal psychological well-being and promoting adaptive parenting practices, which ultimately foster positive adolescent development. Beyond family support, friendship networks also play a crucial role in a parent's overall well-being, as they are positively associated with life satisfaction and fulfilment, and are negatively linked to stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015).

By understanding the unique circumstances within single-parent families, including limited support networks and challenging family dynamics that can result in reduced supervision of children's online activities, efforts to strengthen parental resources and promote safer digital practices for children in these households can be made more effective. This research aims to deepen the understanding of parental mediation and the risks of online sexual harassment for children, with a particular focus on the behaviors of parents in single-parent families. Specifically, the study compares the behaviors of single and partnered parents in three key areas: (1) discussions about internet use with their child, (2) concerns about their child's potential exposure to online sexual harassment, and (3) actions taken in response to such incidents.

Building on existing empirical findings, we hypothesize (H1) that single parents engage in discussions about internet use with their children less frequently than partnered parents do. Given the limited research on parental concerns and responses to children's exposure to online sexual harassment, this study also aims to explore whether there are significant differences in these behavioral patterns between single and partnered parents (H0).

Method

Sampling Procedure

deSHAME research projects (Childnet, n.d.) were conducted on a sample of Croatian parents of elementary and high school students by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children Croatia[1] and the Croatian Safer Internet Centre[2], with the approval of Childnet. A probabilistic cluster sample strategy was implemented in the research, with the first cluster being the county (Croatia is territorially divided into 20 counties and the City of Zagreb, which has the status of a county). The second cluster comprised one primary school and one secondary school in each county (42 schools in all). The third cluster consisted of two classes per grade, from 5th to 8th grade in primary schools and 1st to 3rd or 4th grade in secondary schools, though some schools had fewer classes per grade or varying program durations. The second sampling stage was conducted randomly, while the third stage followed a systematic approach. In defining the subsamples, the study did not focus on the biological relationship between both parents. Instead, parents were classified based on whether they were raising the child alone or with a partner, regardless of whether the partner was the child's biological parent. Subsamples of single-parent families and two-parent families were created based on specific criteria, using the following questions:

1. Do you live with your child?
2. Are you married or in a relationship with the child's biological parent?
3. Are you currently in a relationship that has lasted at least six months?

All data and analyses in this study focus on subsamples from the total sample of 1,715 parents. The subsamples used, totalling 1,667 parents, were categorized as being from either single-parent families (117, 7%) or two-parent families (1,550, 93%). The average age of respondents in the subsamples was 43.6 years (range 27–65); the majority were female (89.5%). Therefore, our subsample is mostly generalizable to mothers, in line with other research that reported that it is mostly mothers who participate in research about their children (Byrne et al., 2014; Nikken & de Haan, 2015; Sayer et al., 2004).

Table 1 shows that more than half of the parents had at least a secondary education and around one third held higher education degrees. Permanent employment was the dominant employment status (74.51%), though a significant minority faced unemployment (13.08%) or were experiencing job insecurity in temporary jobs (10.32%).

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[1] https://cnzd.org/

[2] https://csi.hr/

Table 1. *Education and Employment of Parents*

Characteristic	*f*	%
Education		
Unfinished primary school	10	0.60
Primary school	69	4.14
Three-year secondary school	382	22.92
Four-year secondary school	614	36.83
Bachelor's degree	175	10.50
Graduate/Master's degree	394	23.64
Doctorate	19	1.14
Other	4	0.24
Employment		
Unemployed	218	13.08
Temporary employment	172	10.32
Permanent employment	1242	74.51
Pension	27	1.62
Other	8	0.48

Measures and Instrumentation

Sociodemographic Questionnaire

A sociodemographic questionnaire was constructed to collect data on the research participants (age, gender, education, employment status, financial income, partnership status, duration of partnership), their children (number of children, age of children, gender of children, relationship towards children), and their family and household (who was living with them in the household).

Parental Mediation and Monitoring of Child Internet Use

Parents rated how often they supervised or set rules for their child's internet use, on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*). A principal component analysis was conducted on a total of six items. The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .858) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[15]$ = 5236.927, $p < .001$) showed that the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), which in turn revealed that all six items form a single factor. We named the factor "monitoring a child's internet use" to reflect the item content; it explains 62.04% of the variance with a Cronbach's alpha of .87. A variable was created as the sum of all responses, where a lower result indicates less parental supervision and control over children's use of the internet.

Parent–Child Internet Communication Patterns

Parents rated their level of agreement from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with statements describing their willingness to talk to their child, such as "I do not have the confidence to talk to my child about difficulties related to internet use", and "I talk to my child about his online behavior whether he has difficulties or not". Principal component analysis was performed on 10 items. The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .772) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[45]$ =

4269.750, $p < .001$) showed that the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Three factors explained 63.09% of the variance and were named according to the content of the items that formed them: "avoiding conversation" (6 items, $\alpha = .82$), "talking over an identified problem" (2 items, $\alpha = .74$), and "willingness to talk" (2 items, $\alpha = .60$). The responses for each subscale were totalled at the individual respondent level, with higher scores indicating more willingness or a stronger tendency to avoid conversations with children.

Parent–Child Discussion on Topics of Sexuality and Safety

Parents expressed how often — from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*) — they talked to their children on nine offered topics of conversation, such as "About physical appearance" and "About sexual behavior in a relationship". A principal component analysis was conducted, and the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .876) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[36] = 6351.755$, $p < .001$) showed that the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Two factors explained 62.87% of the total variance and were named according to the content of the items that formed them: "topic of conversation — sexuality" (5 items, $\alpha = .83$), and "topic of conversation — friendship, relationships and safety" (4 items, $\alpha = .82$). The responses for each subscale were totalled at the individual respondent level, with higher scores indicating a higher frequency of conversation about the selected topics.

Concern About Child's Involvement in Specific Online Behaviors

Through eight items, parents expressed their level of concern — from 1 (*not at all concerned*) to 3 (*very concerned*) — about their child's exposure to, experiences of, and involvement with violent and sexual content and behaviors. A principal component analysis was conducted, and the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .950) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[28] = 18517.629$, $p < .001$) showed that the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The analysis shows that all eight items form one factor, which we named "concern about a child's involvement in harmful online behaviors" according to the item content, and which explains 83.24% of the variance, with a Cronbach's alpha of .97. The responses for each subscale were totalled at the individual respondent level, with higher scores indicating a greater willingness to discuss, or a higher level of concern about, their child's involvement in specific online behaviors.

Parental Assessment of Children's Exposure to Online Sexual Harassment

Parents assessed how frequently — from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*) — their children had witnessed online sexual harassment. A principal component analysis was conducted on 10 items, and the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .895) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[45] = 8249.872$, $p < .001$) showed that the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Two factors explained 64.32% of the variance and were named according to the content of the items that formed them: "child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual photos" (6 items, $\alpha = .87$) and "child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual messages" (4 items, $\alpha = .82$). Responses were summed for each dimension, with a higher score indicating that the child had witnessed online sexual harassment more frequently.

Parents' Reactions to Online Sexual Harassment of Children

Parents were asked how they would respond if their child were to experience online sexual harassment in the future. They rated their likelihood of taking action with nine statements, using a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very likely*). A principal component analysis was conducted; according to the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO = .856) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\alpha^2[45]$ = 5773.477, $p < .001$) the data were suitable for further analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Three factors explained 63.85% of the variance and were named according to the content of the items that formed them: "parental reaction — seeking help from people around them" (5 items, α = .82), "parental reaction — reporting" (4 items, α = .75), and "parental reaction — no reactions". This third dimension was measured on one item only but, due to the gravity of the online harmful behavior to which children are exposed and the importance of reporting sexual online harassment, it was included in further analysis. The responses for each subscale were summed at the individual respondent level, with higher scores indicating stronger parental reactions to the online sexual harassment of their children.

Data Collection

The research was conducted in Croatian schools between January and May 2023. Prior to data collection, the Center for Missing and Abused Children organized a one-day training session for professional associates and school coordinators, providing them with guidance on the research topics and methodology. Through field research, school coordinators and class teachers were contacted, who then informed parents about the study and distributed the survey link. The invitation to participate was sent via students to an estimated 9,487 parents, resulting in a response rate of 18.08%. Participating parents completed the online questionnaire using either computers or smartphones, depending on their preference.

Ethical Considerations

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation, University of Zagreb. Additionally, approval was granted by the Ministry of Science and Education, and consent was obtained from the principals of the selected schools.

Before giving their final approval and consent, parents received detailed information about the study's aim, purpose, data confidentiality, and voluntary participation. They were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

A brief summary of key research points was presented at the beginning of the online questionnaire, where participants were required to confirm their informed consent before proceeding. At the end of the survey, respondents were provided with links to counselling service pages that offered support in case any of the questions had prompted personal reflection or distress.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics were presented in frequencies, percentages, mean, median, mode, minimum, and maximum values. The Mann-Whitney test was used for group comparisons. Spearman's rank correlation was applied to assess the relationship between variables.

Results

Parental Mediation in the Context of Children's Online Sexual Harassment

The correlation analysis provides insights into how different mediation strategies relate to child online sexual harassment (Table 2). Monitoring fosters open communication, while avoiding conversations leads to passivity and inaction. Discussing online risks is beneficial, but does not strongly predict proactive responses to harassment. Finally, seeking help and reporting are closely linked behaviors: once a parent takes action, they are likely to apply multiple response strategies.

Parental Monitoring and Communication Patterns

As shown in Table 3, parental monitoring of a child's internet use is positively associated with willingness to talk and discussion of important topics, such as sexuality and friendship, relationships, and safety. At the same time, it is negatively associated with avoiding conversations.

A moderate positive correlation ($r = .341$) between monitoring and willingness to talk suggests that parents who actively monitor their children's internet use tend to foster an open and communicative environment. A strong correlation ($r = .456$) between monitoring and discussing friendship, relationships, and safety highlights that monitoring strongly encourages safety-related discussions. The weaker, but still significant, correlation ($r = .228$) with discussing sexuality suggests that monitoring alone might not lead to conversations on more sensitive topics.

Parents who monitor their children's internet use are also somewhat less likely to avoid conversations ($r = -.211$), reinforcing the idea that monitoring encourages discussion rather than avoidance. Conversely, avoiding conversations is significantly negatively correlated with willingness to talk ($r = -.309$), indicating that parents who avoid difficult conversations are far less likely to engage in meaningful discussions with their child.

Discussion Topics and Exposure to Online Sexual Harassment

Parents who discuss one critical topic are likely to discuss others. A strong correlation ($r = .516$) between discussing sexuality and discussing friendship, relationships, and safety suggests that these topics often go hand in hand. However, engaging in these discussions shows a weak positive but significant correlation with a child's exposure to sexual harassment. The correlations ($r = .144$ and $r = .171$) imply that children who are more informed about these topics may also be more likely to recognize and report instances of harassment rather than submitting to further harassment. Discussing these topics is somewhat associated with reporting harassment, but the relationship is not particularly strong ($r = .138$).

Table 2. *Spearman's Rho Correlation of Dimension of Parental Mediation and Responses to Child's Online Sexual Harassment*

		Mean	*SD*	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Monitoring a child's internet use	16.70	4.37	159	1											
2	Avoiding conversation	9.03	4.63	1570	-.21**	1										
3	Talking over an identified problem	7.64	2.48	1628	-.05	.04	1									
4	Willingness to talk	8.41	2.01	1511	.34**	-.31**	.19**	1								
5	Topic of conversation - sexuality	11.56	2.82	1622	.23**	-.11**	-.04	.17**	1							
6	Topic of conversation - friendship, relationships and safety	12.27	2.18	1642	.46**	-.22**	-.02	.30**	.52**	1						
7	Concern about a child's involvement in harmful online behaviors	15.72	6.17	1566	.18**	.03	.05	.02	.09**	.15**	1					
8	Child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual photos	6.85	1.84	1626	-.04	.03	-.02	-.01	.14**	.04	.11**	1				
9	Child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual messages	6.26	2.08	1622	-.01	-.03	-.01	.02	.17**	.07**	.07**	.59**	1			
10	Responding by seeking help from people around them	21.16	4.49	1667	.17**	-.07**	.08**	.14**	.13**	.11**	.10**	-.02	-.04	1		
11	Responding by reporting	14.74	4.22	1667	.11**	-.03	.07**	.09**	.14**	.10**	.07**	.00	-.01	.50**	1	
12	No response	1.62	1.30	1667	-.09**	.23**	.05	-.13**	.03	-.08**	.00	-.05*	-.13**	.06**	.07**	1

**<.01, *<.05

Responses, Avoidance, and Lack of Responses to Child Online Sexual Harassment

When parents do not communicate openly about online risks, they are more likely to remain passive when faced with online sexual harassment of their children, since avoiding conversations is weakly associated with a higher likelihood of not responding to harassment ($r = .230$). Seeking help and reporting harassment are strongly correlated ($r = .504$), indicating that parents who seek help are very likely to also report harassment, suggesting these responses often go hand in hand.

Parental Mediation and Responses to Child Online Sexual Harassment: Differences Between Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families

Table 3 presents the differences between single-parent and two-parent families in terms of parental mediation and responses to children's online sexual harassment. The only significant difference is that two-parent families are more likely to talk with their child when a problem is identified than are single-parent families ($p = .006$). This could suggest that children in two-parent families are receiving more parental support when issues arise. Table 4 shows that two-parent families tend to be more willing to talk in general ($p = .074$) and avoid conversations less often ($p = .104$). Although this difference approaches significance, it is not statistically strong, suggesting possible slight trends. Parental monitoring, discussing sexuality, and discussing friendships, relationships, and safety show no significant differences between single-parent and two-parent households.

Table 3. *Differences Between Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families According to Parental Mediation and Responses to Child Online Sexual Harassment*

Mediation and response	Type of family	*n*	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann-Whitney U	*p*
Monitoring a child's internet use	single-parent	110	812.60	89386.00	79519.00	.685
	two-parent	1480	794.23	1175459.00		
Avoiding conversation	single-parent	108	849.56	91752.50	72029.50	.104
	two-parent	1462	780.77	1141482.50		
Talking over an identified problem	single-parent	116	700.75	81287.50	74501.50	.006
	two-parent	1512	823.23	1244718.50		
Willingness to talk	single-parent	101	685.36	69221.50	64070.50	.074
	two-parent	1410	761.06	1073094.50		
Topic of conversation — sexuality	single-parent	116	813.61	94379.00	87103.00	.959
	two-parent	1506	811.34	1221874.00		
Conversation topic: friendship, relationships and safety	single-parent	117	796.59	93201.00	86298.00	.548
	two-parent	1525	823.41	1255702.00		

Table 4 shows that no statistically significant differences were found between single-parent and two-parent families in concerns about online risks, children's exposure to online harassment, or parental responses to their children's perceived online sexual harassment. The data suggest that

children from single-parent families may have marginally higher exposure to online sexual harassment, but the differences are small and not significant. An important insight is that parental reactions to their child's harassment (seeking help, reporting, or ignoring it) are not influenced by family structure.

Table 4. *Differences Between Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families According to Parental Mediation and Responses to Children's Online Sexual Harassment*

Mediation and response	Type of family	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Mann-Whitney U	p
Concern about a child's involvement in harmful online behaviors	single-parent	113	837.05	94587.00	76043.00	.188
	two-parent	1453	779.34	1132374.00		
Child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual photos	single-parent	115	843.55	97008.50	83426.50	.378
	two-parent	1511	811.21	1225742.50		
Child's exposure to sexual harassment through sexual messages	single-parent	115	849.37	97678.00	82297.00	.359
	two-parent	1507	808.61	1218575.00		
Responding by seeking help from people around them	single-parent	117	839.68	98243.00	90010.00	.893
	two-parent	1550	833.57	1292035.00		
Responding by reporting	single-parent	117	825.16	96543.50	89640.50	.836
	two-parent	1550	834.67	1293734.50		
No response	single-parent	117	814.27	95270.00	88367.00	.535
	two-parent	1550	835.49	1295008.00		

Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing research on parental mediation and responses to children's sexual harassment, emphasizing the importance of monitoring, open communication, and discussions about online safety in shaping children's behavior in digital environments. Parent–child communication in general plays a crucial role in assessing adolescent mental health and shaping effective prevention strategies (Zapf et al., 2023). When it comes to online risks, prior studies have established that parental mediation strategies, particularly active mediation through open discussions and restrictive mediation through monitoring, play a critical role in protecting children using the internet (Clark, 2011; Corcoran et al., 2022; Livingstone et al., 2017; Wachs et al., 2020). Consistent with these studies, our findings suggest that parental monitoring fosters open communication, particularly regarding friendship, relationships, and safety, whereas avoiding conversations leads to passivity and inaction. Khurana et al. (2014) showed that even the perception of parental monitoring and awareness was significant protection for adolescents against online harassment. Parents who combine mediation strategies could possibly achieve a higher level of digital safety for their children, balancing open communication, supervision, and technical

restrictions (Vejmelka et al., 2022). However, while discussing online risks is generally beneficial, engaging in such discussions does not strongly predict proactive responses to harassment. Finally, seeking help and reporting harassment appear to be closely linked behaviors, meaning that parents who take one action are likely to engage in both.

Parental Mediation and Communication Patterns

Research has shown that parental monitoring is linked to increased communication between parents and children about online risks (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012; Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). Our study supports this, finding that monitoring contributes to fostering communication within families, particularly regarding discussions about relationships and safety. However, discussions about sexuality appear to be less frequent, suggesting that monitoring alone does not necessarily lead to conversations on sensitive topics.

Research suggests that children who struggle to openly discuss their online experiences with their parents face an increased risk of negative psychological consequences when encountering online harassment (Ramljak et al, 2025). Ultimately, fostering positive family communication plays a vital role in mitigating anxiety and depression among adolescents (Huang et al, 2023). When parents avoid conversations about online risks, their children will be less likely to seek parental guidance when encountering issues (Huang et al., 2023, Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). A lack of parental communication may also contribute to passive coping strategies when children experience online risks (Huang et al., 2023).

An interesting finding is that open discussions about online risks are associated with a higher awareness of online sexual harassment. This does not imply that discussing risks directly leads to greater exposure; rather, it suggests that children who are better informed are more capable of identifying and reporting harassment. Additionally, among those who have encountered online risks, children are more likely to report harmful experiences if they have received parental mediation (Garmendia et al., 2012). However, despite this increased awareness, discussing critical topics does not strongly predict whether children will report harassment, suggesting that awareness alone may not be sufficient to encourage proactive responses. This aligns with past studies indicating that children may hesitate to report online harassment due to fear of parental punishment or loss of internet privileges (Wurtele, 2017).

Variances in Responses to Online Harassment According to Family Structure

Our research findings regarding differences between single-parent and two-parent families are important, as there is a lack of studies of parental mediation of child online activities involving single-parent families. Our findings suggest that two-parent families are more likely to engage in discussions when a problem is identified, suggesting that children in two-parent families are receiving more parental support when issues arise. This aligns with previous research findings that parents from two-parent households may receive more support in general, which results in their greater capacity to deal with child harassment (Cairney et al., 2003; Harknett & Hartnett, 2011).

In summary, this study suggests that family structure is not a determinant of parental mediation strategies, as no significant differences were found between single-parent and two-parent families in their parental mediation and responses to online sexual harassment. When comparing single-parent and two-parent households, no significant differences in seeking help, reporting harassment, or ignoring harassment were found, although some studies have suggested that, in single-parent families, lower parental supervision and extended screen time make children more vulnerable to online risks (Livingstone et al., 2017; Stahlmann et al., 2020). Our conclusion, based on the present study, is that family structure does not significantly influence children's responses to online harassment. Instead, our results suggest that other factors, such as parental engagement and communication style, may be more influential in determining how children respond to online risks.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the low response rate from fathers, which may have influenced the findings. This limitation could potentially have been mitigated through additional efforts to encourage paternal participation. However, the higher response rate from mothers may reflect their greater involvement in their children's education and daily lives, making their perspectives particularly valuable.

Another important limitation is the potential presence of socially desirable answers. Given the sensitive nature of topics related to parental mediation and children's online experiences, some participants may have provided responses that align with socially accepted norms rather than their actual practices. For instance, parents might have overreported positive behaviors, such as active mediation and monitoring, while underreporting avoidance or lack of engagement in discussions about online risks. This response bias could affect the accuracy of the data, making it crucial to interpret the findings with caution. Future research should consider employing anonymous surveys, indirect questioning techniques, or triangulating data from multiple sources (e.g., children's perspectives) to reduce the risk of response bias and obtain a more comprehensive understanding of parental mediation practices.

Additionally, the sample distribution reflects the general population structure in Croatia, where single-parent families are less common than two-parent households. This may influence the comparability between groups due to the smaller size of the single-parent subsample. The study also did not differentiate between biological and non-biological parental figures in partnered families, which may limit insights into how different caregiver roles affect parental mediation practices.

Conclusion

These findings contribute to the growing body of research on parental mediation and online risk management, emphasizing the critical role of monitoring, communication, and response strategies in shaping children's digital experiences. While the results reinforce the importance of open discussions about online risks, they also suggest that parental mediation alone may not be

sufficient to ensure that children respond proactively to online harassment. Instead, parental engagement and communication style appear to be more influential than family structure in determining how children navigate online risks.

Regardless of family structure, open parental communication and active involvement play crucial roles in mitigating the risks associated with online harassment. To ensure that children feel supported and encouraged to respond appropriately to online threats, parents must engage in consistent discussions about online safety and promote proactive coping strategies.

Further research is needed to explore additional factors that influence children's responses to online risks, including peer influence, school interventions, and cultural differences in parental mediation strategies. In particular, studies examining what discourages young people from reporting online harassment, as well as whether engaged parenting contributes to reducing or increasing such incidents, would offer valuable insights. It would also be important to investigate how parenting dynamics may differ between biological and non-biological caregivers, as family theory suggests these relationships could shape parenting practices, mediation strategies, and children's online behaviors.

Finally, raising awareness about the preventative impact of reporting online sexual harassment remains essential. Reporting such incidents not only helps protect individual children but also contributes to broader efforts to prevent similar occurrences. By actively addressing online risks, providing emotional support, and fostering an environment of trust, parents can play a pivotal role in safeguarding children from online sexual harassment.

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