



7th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World”, EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

## Social networks and childhood. New agents of socialization

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### Abstract

The growth and popularity of the social network is undeniable. There is a growing number of studies focused in this field. These studies include the analysis of the impact social networks on children and their environments. All of this because of, nowadays, children are the main users of Web 2.0. The aim of this paper is to show the relationship between childhood and social networks. In conclusion, it's show the necessity to research the benefits and risks on social networks in the childhood and their environment. Just it makes easier the understanding of the phenomena an effecting vulnerable sector of the population.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

*Keywords:* Social networks; Family; Social influences; Cultural influences.

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### 1. Introduction

Expansion of information and communications technology (ICT) of Web 2.0 is creating new communicational scenarios in which social networks, virtual worlds and games are proliferating as a means of interaction. These digital media catch the attention of children and adolescents, being a common phenomenon among them the use of social networks to contact and communicate with friends.

Popularity of social networks is obvious, before the growth of its use in the last decade. Besides, there are studies that are designated as Generation Y, Generation Millennials or Generation We to people born between 1980-2000 and who are characterized by the use and familiarity with new technologies (McLeod, 2015; Liu, Pasman, Taal-Fokker & Jan, 2014). However, they are the ones who are giving way to new generations borned immersed in digital media, this is called Generation Z. Although there are studies focused on this generation, “it is difficult to find statistical

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information on new technologies and child population because public statistical agencies are reluctant to include them in their studies” (Rodríguez Gualda, Barrero, Arjona, Checa & Rodríguez, 2012:4), ignoring the fact that children today are one of the main users of web 2.0. An example of this reality is the report published by IAB Spain, for users aged between 14 and 17, which indicates that 70% of individuals were members of a social network in 2010, increasing the number of users to 82% in 2014, in which 97% of the subjects were young people between 14 and 17 years old (IAB Spain and Commends Ipsosfacto, 2011, 2015). Moreover, the study conducted by Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Staksrud, (2013), also reflects statistical data indicating that a 59% of European 9-16 years old internet users have their own social network profile –38% of 9-12 years old and 77% of 13-16 years old–. According to Marsh (2010) children in the early years of schooling are an age group frequently overlooked in analyses of online social networking.

ICT have broken into society including themselves in each context of people everyday lives and becoming an indispensable social platform for relations and computer-mediated communication (Skaar, 2009). However, socialization remains one of the development processes in childhood, it is “the process by which individuals, in their interactions with others, develop ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are essential for their effective participation in society” (Vander Zanden, 1986, p.126). The process of socialization during childhood is extremely important for the development and maturation of the child. This is the basis on which build future relationships. According to the theories of social learning, socialization occurs through the processes of discovery, linking and acceptance, in which the child interacts with his environment to achieve the acquisition of habits, social roles, norms, knowledge and values that society demands, and are transmitted through various social agents (Larzabal, 2013). In this sense, social networks where children interact with their peers, has implicit a character of socialization, as the online relationship peer learning implies the acquisition of knowledge and new forms of behavior, among other aspects.

Social networks integrate interpersonal communication and mass communication, offering many benefits to users. However, social networking sites, as it is known among young people and adults, are transformed into virtual worlds for children. These are becoming more popular and lead children to spend large amounts of time in front of technology, creating significant changes in social practices (Marsh, 2010). These platforms take a playful role, combining play and technology. Besides, given the growing popularity and usability among children, these virtual worlds have begun to be marketed to parents and educators offering a safe online gaming environment.

This study focuses on showing the link between children's sector and social networks, and therefore with virtual worlds, to reveal the reality that surrounds the lives of children at present attending two aspects: a) the influence of social networks in children through their environment; and b) the impact of virtual worlds on their socialization. Although Internet use involves taking certain risk, this study shows the benefits of the investigations of social networks in childhood and in their environment, facilitating a better understanding of the phenomena that affect such a vulnerable population sector.

## **2. Social networks in childhood**

Parental use of social networks can positively impact on children. Some research, such as those shown below, demonstrates that the use of social networks by families or institutions is linked to childhood, and that in one way or another has an impact on children:

Janvier, Farlow & Wilfond (2012), studied and described the experience of a virtual community in which parents of children with T13- 18 (trisomy 13 o trisomy 18) were users of social networks. The authors concluded that parents whose children survived longer were more likely to join support groups, in the same way as parents who took part in social networks were likely to acquire knowledge of a wide range of options and results. Also parents of children newly diagnosed with T13-18 are integrated into social networks to acquire views, hopes and expectations that are inconsistent with those held by some of the doctors that they found. Therefore, the use of social networks had a direct impact on children, so a better understanding of the perspective of parents can facilitate communication and decision making between doctors and parents, encouraging the child's welfare.

Morales & Cabral (2012) identified the visibility of a social network of nursing care in which they discussed various aspects of child care to transmit it to the family context of children with special health needs. The nursing care became visible among mothers and nursing assistants generating a large social network of care for those children who are part of an emerging group of society. This social network has been able to reach the family environment of children with health problems resulting in lower culling for families and better care for children. In the same line is Ayón (2011),

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