

How can we support parents in protecting their children's digital privacy?

A systematization of research on privacy interventions for parents

Children increasingly leave digital traces in their everyday lives. Parents make decisions about their children's privacy while having to navigate opaque data flows, conflicting interests, and changing technologies. Even motivated parents may therefore struggle to make informed decisions.

Research on this question is currently **fragmented**. There are qualitative studies on parents' expectations and needs, quantitative studies on factors influencing their behavior, and studies on developed and evaluated support interventions. These strands of research are only partially connected. As a result, it remains difficult to understand **how existing knowledge can be translated into concrete forms of support**.

What was investigated?

The study systematizes existing knowledge on how parents can be supported in protecting their children's digital privacy.

To this end, English-language, peer-reviewed publications from 2015 onward were searched in four academic databases and assessed according to predefined criteria. Of **517 records** identified, **119 full texts** were screened and **22 papers** were included in the final analysis.

The study organizes the research along two perspectives:

What should the support intervention achieve?
→ **Learning outcomes**

How can this support be designed?
→ **Design features of interventions**

Corpus

7

evaluated interventions

1

proposed, not yet evaluated, intervention

13

pre-studies on parents' needs and expectations

1

quantitative study on factors influencing parental behavior

What do parents need for privacy management in everyday family life?

The research describes five interrelated learning outcomes:

1

Understanding privacy risks and data practices

Parents need to understand what data are generated, how platforms process data, and what consequences may arise. **However:** awareness of risks does not automatically translate into effective privacy mediation in everyday family life.

2

Evaluative judgment in digital privacy situations

Privacy decisions are context-dependent. They involve interpreting concrete situations, reflecting on existing practices, and considering different perspectives – rather than simply knowing about abstract risks.

3

Technical enactment of privacy protection

This includes, for example, configuring privacy settings, managing permissions, or using privacy tools. The research describes procedural competence as important for translating privacy intentions into actual actions.

4

Developing parental self-efficacy in privacy management

Parental self-efficacy refers to parents' perceived capability and legitimacy to manage privacy challenges in their children's lives. Technological anxiety and a perceived lack of competence can make it more difficult to engage actively.

5

Parent-child privacy communication

Privacy is not only a matter of parental control. Research therefore also describes joint interpretation, dialogue, and the negotiation of privacy decisions between parents and children as important aspects of family privacy management.

What do existing interventions do?

The reviewed interventions can be broadly grouped into three approaches:

Educational programs

e.g., video curricula or digital learning environments

Facilitated parent–child interaction

e.g., facilitated discussions, scenarios, or activities

Parental control approaches

e.g., technical systems for structuring and changing parental oversight

More strongly represented

Understanding of privacy risks
Parent–child privacy communication
Everyday scenarios
Interactive and narrative formats
Structured activities

Less consistently operationalized

Technical enactment of privacy protection
Reflection and evaluative judgment
Explicit support for parental self-efficacy
Sustained institutional embedding
Peer-to-peer learning

Three tensions shaping the design space

The distribution of existing interventions can be understood through three recurring tensions:

Accessibility ↔ Complexity

Privacy is complex and context-dependent. Easily accessible formats can reduce this complexity, but may provide less room for developing deeper, transferable judgment.

Parental responsibility ↔ Distributed expertise

Parents are responsible for their children's privacy. At the same time, children can have greater platform or technical knowledge, particularly as they get older. Support therefore needs to consider how responsibility and expertise are distributed within families.

Scalability ↔ Contextual depth

Digital tools, videos, or playful formats can reach many people with relatively little facilitation. More intensive and tailored support, by contrast, offers greater opportunities for practical and context-sensitive engagement, but is more resource-intensive.

What does this mean for future support?

The research suggests that, when developing and evaluating support interventions, it is not enough to ask whether parents know something about privacy. What also matters is:

- ? Can parents evaluate a concrete situation?
- ? Can they derive practical consequences from it and put them into practice?
- ? Do they feel confident in dealing with the topic, or rather overwhelmed or intimidated?
- ? Can they discuss privacy decisions together with their children?
- ? And: Can support interventions become part of longer-term family and institutional practices?

This does not mean that every intervention should address all of these criteria. The framework is explicitly an analytical tool that can be used to reflect on existing and future approaches – not a prescription for what an “ideal” intervention should look like.

Key Takeaway

Research on parental privacy is further developed in describing problems and needs than in the development and evaluation of concrete support interventions.

Existing interventions primarily focus on knowledge acquisition and parent–child communication. Less consistently operationalized are the translation of this knowledge into reflection and practical enactment, the development of parental self-efficacy, and the sustained institutional embedding of support.

The identified gaps are not simply missing “features”, but reflect broader structural tensions.

The next challenge is to better understand how existing knowledge can be translated into sustainable and effective forms of support.

Source

Lieberknecht, Ann-Kristin & Löbner, Sascha (2026): SoK: The Design Space of Usable Privacy Interventions for Parents: A Systematization of Knowledge. USENIX Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security (SOUPS 2026).