

## Italy



### National socio-economical context

- Italy is a southern European country with a population of 60 665 551 inhabitants. It is still ranked as one of the most industrialised nations of the world and the third largest economy in the euro area. However, it has been strongly hit by the economic crisis, and unemployment rates (especially of young 15-to-24-year-olds) are still above the EU average.
- Italy is an ageing society with 13 369 754 people aged over 65, compared to 8 281 859 children aged 0-14 in 2015. The average size of households dropped from 3.3 in 1971 to 2.4 in 2011. The average fertility rate, though, has slightly increased, from 1.27 children per woman in 2002 to 1.39 in 2013.

### Internet and digital technology

- The number of Italian households with internet access has increased from 52.4 % in 2010 to 66.2 % in 2015. 64.4 % of households have a broadband connection, though the amount of mobile-only broadband access is increasing - from 6.6 % in 2010 to 18.6 % in 2015.
- The internet is more diffused among young people and households with children: 89 % of households with children have access to the internet. 45 % of children aged 6-10, 81 % of those aged 11-14 and 90 % of teenagers aged 15-19 are internet users.
- The European Commission's 'Survey of schools: ICT in education' (2013) ranks Italy among the countries with the lowest percentages of students having access to internet-connected desktop computers in Europe at grade 8. Also, in terms of internet-connected laptop computers at grade 8 Italy is among the bottom group of countries, and the situation is the same for all other grades. The percentage of students in schools without broadband is higher than the EU average, particularly at grade 4, where more than one in three students are in a school with no broadband.

### General pattern of parenthood

- National statistics show that households with children are more likely to adopt new tech-

nologies earlier and to have media-rich homes. Nonetheless, the way parents regulate their children's access to and use of digital media varies consistently depending on parents' education, socioeconomic status and own familiarity with the internet and digital technologies. Higher educated parents are more concerned with promoting children's empowerment, thus balancing online activities (with a preference for educational content and apps) with a variety of outdoor activities and afterschool programmes. Lower educated parents often feel inadequate in mediating their children's relationship with technologies and favour a restrictive approach based on rules. However, lower socioeconomic families are also more likely to use technologies as digital babysitters or 'surrogate parents', to keep children busy and safe while they are engaged in household chores.

- Independently from income or education, parents who are digitally literate are more confident in promoting positive uses of technologies and supporting their children's digital literacy practices.

## Schooling system for children from 0 to 8-year-old

- Compulsory school attendance begins with the first class of primary school, usually when the child is already 6 years of age. Pre-schoolers can attend kindergarten, from the age of 3 to 6, whereas babies and toddlers are either looked after by grandparents or babysitters at home or attend nurseries. The number of nurseries is still insufficient to meet the demand.
- Though not compulsory, attendance at early childhood education is nearly universal in Italy: 98 % of 4-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education, compared to 88 % on average across OECD countries.
- The 'Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale: la Buona Scuola' ('National Plan for Digital Schools: the Good School'), launched in 2015 by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), encourages the adoption of new technologies in the pre-school context in order to support children's learning. More specifically, the teaching of coding is extended to pre-schools and a new teacher profile will be trained and employed also in the pre-school context, namely the so-called 'animatore digitale' (the 'digital trainer').

Age	Schooling type
0-3	(Nursery)
3-6	Kindergarten/pre-school
6-8	Two first grade of primary school

## After-school and leisure activities

- After school, children are usually looked after by grandparents or mothers (if employed part-time) and engage in various afterschool activities. The range of after-school programmes directly organised by school is also expanding, including sports, English classes, drama classes or free leisure activities. As a consequence, children's leisure time is highly structured and this

influences the (overall limited) time that children of this age spend with technologies.

## Italy - Key findings

1. Children grow up in media-rich homes. However, a high level of presence of digital devices in the home does not necessarily mean ICTs are made available to the children, nor does it necessarily lead to high use. The computer and, occasionally, the father's smartphone, in this sample, are reserved for work and more serious uses.
2. Children's access to and interactions with digital devices are strongly mediated by their parents. However, the extended family also represents an important source of socialisation of children with digital media. It is especially remarkable that online technologies are a way to develop an intra-generational bond between grandparents and grandchildren.
3. Children's online activities are articulated around a set of interests and practices, including their passionate engagement with TV content as well as other toys. Playing games, watching videos and, occasionally, communication on WhatsApp or via email were the most common online activities practiced by children.
4. Most children have basic operational skills, but some have also acquired more advanced online competencies. Safety skills are also common, especially closing pop-ups by clicking on the 'X'.
5. Younger children with older siblings are facilitated in acquiring digital skills for two reasons: they usually socialise with digital technologies when they are younger, and they are actively supported by their older siblings.
6. Positive perceptions of ICTs among children include the idea of online technologies as entertainment devices, as educational devices and as spaces of autonomy from younger siblings.
7. While children of this age have a limited or no perception of online risks, two main negative views of online technologies emerged, one more related to the child's direct experience and one more adherent to parental mediation. The first includes problematic experiences with pop-ups and in-app purchases. The second mirrors the main concerns expressed by adults and relates to the belief that overuse of these devices is associated with negative health issues, such as damaging sight or becoming indolent or lazy dull.
8. Parental perceptions of the potential opportunities and risks of technologies inform children's own attitudes and perceptions, and directly shape the availability of technological items and online activities that children had to explore.
9. Positively, new technologies (especially tablets and apps) are perceived by parents and grandparents as educational tools that help stimulate children's cognitive development. Tablets are viewed as a way to pursue the child's interests in a safe environment (e.g. watching videos on YouTube instead of watching 'stupid' or inappropriate cartoons on TV).
10. Risk perceptions, directly expressed by parents or informing their mediation strategies, include: health issues; overuse; inappropriate content; and commercial risks. However, parents tended to postpone negative online experiences to the future, when their children would be

pre-adolescents or teenagers.

11. New online technologies tend to have a minor role in children's and parent's lives. Parents, in particular, emphasise the importance and the centrality of a wide range of 'non-mediated', 'non-technological' indoor and outdoor activities.
12. In general things that brought families together were not technology-driven: they went for walks or rides, watched TV, etc.
13. On the other hand children seem to look at the new technologies with great interest and fascination. The perceived relevance of ICTs to the child is quite independent from their own use and the amount of parental regulation.
14. Inside the family and the household's economy, new (digital) technology represents both a challenge and a resource. On one hand children's digital media use is perceived as something problematic that needs to be carefully regulated and controlled: digital media and new technology contribute to making family management more complicated (use restrictions by parents; quarrels between siblings). On the other hand these tools are seen as available resources to encourage social interactions inside the household.
15. Parents seem to be more focused on regulating screen time and balancing digital media use with other everyday activities. By contrast, grandfathers in our sample were particularly engaged in 'active mediation'.
16. The majority of parents perceive rules as effective tools to educate children and teach them how to self-regulate. Main rules adopted by parents include: setting limits to screen time; limiting children's autonomy; and regulating permitted content and activities. Technologies are also used as disciplinary tools, to reward or punish the child for their school achievement or behaviour.
17. Typically, there are two kinds of responses to the rules set by parents. In the majority of cases children have completely interiorised parental rules. In other circumstances, instead, children are not fully aware that parents are limiting their use of technologies.

## Italy - Surprising findings

1. One of the most surprising findings that emerged from the pilot study is the positive role at times played by grandparents, who are actively engaged in socialising children to online technologies, selecting appropriate content for their grandchildren and encouraging the acquisition of skills and digital literacy. Grandparents are also usually more permissive and complicit with the child, thus providing even those children who are highly regulated at home with the opportunity to experiment with new technologies.
2. A second remarkable finding is the observation of potential age divides in skills and self-confidence: for example, in one household (I5) parents and grandparents agreed that the younger girl (aged 4) was more confident with the iPad than her older sister. She was deemed to have learned more easily and faster how to use it, and her approach was perceived as being more 'natural'. The impression of the younger sibling being more self-confident and comfortable when using the tablet was also confirmed by direct observation of the two

girls interacting with different apps. Similarly, parents in Family 1 note that their younger daughter, aged 3, 'knows perfectly how to use it, she is much more skilled, the touchscreen technology is perfect, at 2½ years old she could do everything, but she doesn't know how to manage it from an emotional point of view' as I1f explains.

3. A consistent finding across households was also the emergence of contradictions, or inconsistent accounts by parents and children: more specifically, parents tend to value as important experiences for the child activities and experiences that the child has not mentioned and vice versa. This is the case with communicative abilities, with parents naming communicative practices (the use of Skype or WhatsApp) among the things the child is able to do and does at least occasionally, while the child does not even mention them. Another example concerns different perceptions of devices: I7f, for example, thinks that his 7-year-old boy does not appreciate the computer and finds it 'obsolete' because it does not have a touchscreen. By contrast, the child is excited about having access to the computer and says this makes him feel older. Obviously, since his younger, 2-year-old twin siblings also have access to his own iPad, the computer (and the smartphone) are valued as symbolising his own autonomy and older age.
  4. Less surprising, but still remarkable, is the observation that being 'a good parent' is associated more with restrictions than with active engagement with children's online activities: the parents seemed eager to show they were limiting the screen time of children. Part of this restrictive approach to children's digital media is also the choice to lend children their own devices instead of giving them a device for private use. This choice, however, is counterproductive, as parents' smartphones are not configured to and designed to be used by younger children: in-app purchases are a common risk of use of parents' smartphone by a child.
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