

PARTNER SEARCH: HORIZON-CL2-2026-01-TRANSFO-04: The impact of the use of digital tools outside school and for communication on educational outcomes and mental health

Call: Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society 2026

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The Research Centre Pedagogy in Practice at the KdG University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp, Belgium is seeking to join a consortium for the HORIZON call *The impact of the use of digital tools outside school and for communication on educational outcomes and mental health*.

Context

Over the past years, Pedagogy in Practice has worked extensively on the use of digital media in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Following the advice from the European baseline study of media use among 0 to 8-year-old children (Chaudron et al., 2018), we developed a practical pedagogical framework for childcare staff.

Not only did we work with childcare staff on how to guide and support young children in their media use, we also investigated the use of digital media for communication between staff and parents. This use is often framed as a means of increasing parental engagement and enhancing communication. In our research, we investigated the pedagogical implications of this type of media use with and in proximity to children.

The research centre emphasises the importance of a children's rights framework in matters related to digital tools and children, as clarified, for example, by the Digital Futures Group. Moreover, the research centre focuses on strengthening pedagogical systems and professionals outside of schools. We conducted several research projects on the lived experiences of children's free time and developed training programmes for staff in these pedagogical settings.

Finally, the research centre has a tradition of action research and participatory research with children and professionals. Moreover, the centre actively seeks diverse contexts, as this is a way to be relevant in Antwerp, a city with a high degree of diversity among children.

Philosophical frameworks: The Centre adheres to Care Ethics, and to participatory approaches in research. The centre considers questions related to the use of digital media as socio-scientific controversial topics (Venturini & Munk, 2022). Responses to these questions are not merely technical but should take their controversial nature into account.

With respect to this call, the centre would like to contribute primarily to exploring children's experiences with media use:

- How children conceive of digital leisure activities in free time at schools and in pedagogical settings outside of schools?
- How does media use of children differ along different contexts (such as school and settings outside of schools);
- How do parents and educators deal with their children's media use?
- How do children think about digital media use in their lives?

The research centre

Scope of research settings

- Pedagogical settings outside of schools, for and with children between 0 and 16 years of age. *Examples: ECEC settings, after-school leisure time settings, leisure time during school breaks.*
- Practice-oriented research with a multidimensional approach to valorisation.

Following competences are relevant to the calls:

- Extensive experience with practice-oriented research for stakeholders in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care and of organised leisure time for children.
- Strong networks in local organisations working with disadvantaged children and families, who are willing to participate in pilots and action research.
- Extensive experience in mixed-methods research, including experiential research with children, action research with parents and professionals, evaluation research, research by design, as well as narratological analysis.
- Experience in developing hands-on tools, such as a practical guide on how to introduce Education for Sustainability in Early Childhood Centres, a tool to reflect on childcare's cooperation possibilities with families, a playful method to discuss intercultural awareness.
- Experience with creating digital learning platforms such as a narrative website linking the experiences of refugee children to inspirational materials for professionals, webinars about parental involvement and interactional possibilities with infants and babies.

Data gathering and analysis

The centre uses participatory methods to gather and analyse data. In previous research, the centre used smartphone diaries as a form of experience sampling and extensively used photovoice and photo elicitation techniques with children and (sometimes vulnerable) professionals.

We actively try to support participants' agency in research. We experiment with co-analysing these data. Making complex matters tangible for all participants is an essential concern in these processes.

Results

Our results range from practical pedagogical tools, to action frameworks and to policy recommendations.

The centre has been and is involved in several EU projects:

Two social innovation projects in the Interreg 2seas Programme: PACE (Providing Access to Childcare and Employment) and VRAC (It takes a Village to Raise A Child), several Erasmus + projects (ProChill on training practitioners for childcare; the Value+ project on the principle of Educare); the AMIF-project MUST-a-LAB (Multi-Stakeholder labs for migrants and stakeholders). The centre was project leader of the CERV-project GOTALK (making children's participation inclusive, sustainable and impactful).

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