A Digital Home Playground: A Narrative Inquiry into Parents` Perspective on Early Technology Exposure in Children

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated parents' experiences, perspectives, and decision-making around their children's earliest exposure to digital technology at home. It investigated what parents thought about their children's first interactions with digital devices, what variables influenced their choices about what sort of device to buy and how long to use it, and how they believed it would impact their kids' behavior, learning, and growth. The results demonstrated that parents know both the good and bad things about utilizing technology. A lot of people indicated that digital devices help people learn, get more creative, and get better at things like reading, math, and problem-solving. People were afraid about too much screen time, changes in behavior, not getting enough exercise, and not being able to meet people in person as often. Parents made decisions based on their kids' ages and stages of development, the content's appropriateness, their kids' behavior, family values, and advice from friends or professionals. Parents utilized things like limiting screen time, picking educational content, watching usage, and making sure rules were followed to assess the pros and cons. The study demonstrates that parents think technology is a double-edged sword. It can help kids learn and grow, but they need to use it responsibly, with help, and with parental mediation.

Keywords: Early childhood, Digital technology, Parental mediation, Screen time, Child development, Home learning

INTRODUCTION

Early exposure to digital technology has become a defining characteristic of contemporary childhood, as digital devices increasingly shape how young children learn, communicate, and engage with their environments. While digital learning tools offer interactive and immersive educational opportunities, research consistently emphasizes that their developmental benefits are highly dependent on intentional design, appropriate usage, and guided supervision (Adhe et al., 2025; Flewitt et al., 2024). Scholars caution that the presence of technology alone does not guarantee positive outcomes; rather, meaningful integration requires structured support systems, adequate teacher preparation, and responsible mediation by adults (Lim and Wardrip, 2025; Nafiu and Olaitan, 2025). Within early childhood contexts, digital play has been recognized as a potential facilitator of creativity, cognitive engagement, and language development, yet its effectiveness is influenced by ecological factors, including home practices, classroom strategies, and social interactions (Bryan et al., 2023; Fielding and Murcia, 2022). Importantly, contemporary literature increasingly frames children's digital experiences as socially and contextually constructed, highlighting the collaborative roles of parents, educators, and learning institutions.

Studies indicate that the educational value of digital technology is strengthened when mediation practices are supported through cooperative relationships between families and schools, enabling consistency in expectations, guidance, and technology use (Lewis et al., 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2024). Teachers contribute to this collaborative process by guiding developmentally appropriate technology integration, while parents influence children's digital behaviors through regulation, co-engagement, and modeling practices (Radesky et al., 2023).

From a sociocultural perspective, technology use is further shaped by cultural values, institutional norms, and relational dynamics, reinforcing the necessity of shared responsibility among stakeholders (Siu and Lam, 2005). Moreover, emerging technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence underscore the need for coordinated approaches, as their educational potential relies not only on technical implementation but also on ethical considerations, pedagogical alignment, and parental understanding (Adhe et al., 2025; Su and Zhong, 2022). Research on digital play environments further suggests that peer interaction, creativity, and collaborative problem-solving are enhanced when digital experiences are intentionally supported by both teachers and parents (Scott and Marsh, 2021; Burns et al., 2024).

These findings collectively affirm that children's early encounters with digital technology are not isolated individual experiences but are shaped through dynamic interactions within family, educational, and cultural systems. Despite extensive investigations into digital technologies in educational settings, limited research has focused specifically on parents' lived experiences, decision-making processes, and perceptions regarding children's initial exposure to digital devices at home. While existing studies acknowledge parental mediation and home technology use (Lindahl and Folkesson, 2024; Neumann, 2023), deeper examination of how parents interpret, regulate, and negotiate digital engagement remains insufficient. Addressing this gap, the present study recognizes that understanding early technology exposure requires attention to the collaborative interplay between parental beliefs, children's behaviors, and broader educational influences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing a narrative inquiry research design to explore parents' perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences regarding their children's early exposure to digital technology within the home environment. A qualitative framework was deemed appropriate as the investigation sought to capture subjective meanings, personal viewpoints, and contextually grounded experiences that cannot be adequately represented through numerical data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry was particularly suited to the study as it emphasizes the collection and interpretation of participants' stories, enabling an in-depth understanding of how parents construct, describe, and make sense of their experiences with digital technology in relation to children's learning, play, and daily routines (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The primary sources of data were parents of children enrolled in the Laboratory Elementary School of Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University – Mid La Union Campus (DMMMSU-MLUC), selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants capable of providing rich, experience-based accounts relevant to the research objectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). A total of seven (7) parents participated in the study. Inclusion criteria required participants to be parents of children enrolled in Grades 1 to 3, have children with access to personal digital devices, and consent to participation in audio-recorded interviews, while exclusion criteria eliminated non-primary caregivers, parents outside the specified grade levels, and those with limited co-residence with the child. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method appropriate for narrative research due to its balance of structure and flexibility, allowing the exploration of predetermined topics while accommodating emergent insights (Özel & Yay, 2024). Interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim, with data collection continuing until saturation was achieved (Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024). The interview guide underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives (Bhalla et al., 2023), and all refinements were documented through reflexive journaling. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following an inductive approach to identify, interpret, and organize patterns of meaning emerging from participants' narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2023; Nowell et al., 2024), while trustworthiness was strengthened through peer debriefing, member checking, and sustained reflexive practices (Fletcher and Meyer, 2024). Ethical compliance was ensured through approval from the DMMMSU Research Ethics Committee, with adherence to principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and responsible data management throughout the research process.

RESULT

Thematic analysis generated five major themes: (1) Early Introduction Through Parental Modeling, (2) Perceived Educational Benefits, (3) Screen Time Regulation Challenges, (4) Behavioral and Social Concerns,

and (5) Intentional Content Selection and Guided Mediation.

The integration of digital technology into children's daily lives has become a defining feature of modern childhood. Parents play a central role in shaping how children first encounter and experience digital devices at home. The findings revealed that children's exposure to technology often begins at an early age, primarily influenced by parental modeling and household practices. Early exposure to digital tools was commonly introduced for educational videos, games, and communication purposes such as video calls. Parents perceived this early interaction as both a learning opportunity and a responsibility that required supervision. Research supports this observation, emphasizing that children's early engagement with digital devices is largely mediated by parental behavior and guidance (Mekhail et al., 2024; OECD, 2024). When exposure is structured and age-appropriate, digital tools can support early literacy, numeracy, and cognitive curiosity. Participant 1 mentioned, "My child started using a tablet at a young age for educational videos and games, learning by watching and imitating me." Likewise, Participant 4 expressed, "My child started using a cellphone at an early age because we used it for video calls. He enjoyed watching nursery rhymes and quickly learned colors and characters." These statements illustrate how children's initial digital engagement is often shaped by observation and imitation of parental practices. The participants viewed early exposure not merely as entertainment but as a guided learning process. Their responses suggest that children's familiarity with devices is cultivated through environmental influence and parental modeling rather than independent discovery alone. Several parents highlighted the learning benefits associated with technology use. Participant 3 shared, "Technology has helped my child learn better and become more creative and independent." Similarly, Participant 5 stated, "I was excited to see him learning nursery rhymes, colors, and numbers," while Participant 6 described technology as "a learning opportunity." These perspectives reflect a shared belief that digital devices can enhance children's academic readiness and intellectual development. Parents observed improvements in vocabulary, counting skills, reading abilities, and problem-solving capacity. This aligns with contemporary studies suggesting that interactive and educational digital content promotes cognitive growth when used appropriately (Frontiers in Developmental Psychology, 2024).Despite recognizing these benefits, participants consistently emphasized the importance of screen time management. Parents reported challenges in limiting device use and managing children's reactions when restrictions were enforced. Participant 2 noted, "The only struggle was setting limits on screen time because they often got upset when I restricted their gadget use." Participant 5 observed physical and behavioral effects, stating, "He became less active and sometimes had headaches, so I set rules for moderate use and encouraged him to spend more time playing outside." These statements demonstrate that parents are actively monitoring behavioral cues and adjusting digital use accordingly. Screen time management emerged as a deliberate and adaptive strategy aimed at balancing educational advantages with overall well-being. Parents also reported noticeable behavioral changes associated with technology use. Some described irritability, reduced outdoor play, and mood fluctuations when screen time was excessive. Participant 7 mentioned limiting technology use due to "mature content exposure and gaming addiction," highlighting concerns about inappropriate material. Others noted reduced family bonding and decreased face-to-face interaction. These observations indicate that parents perceive technology as having both positive and negative influences on conduct and social relationships. The dual nature of technology use was a recurring theme throughout participants' responses. Furthermore, parents emphasized the importance of focusing on educational and age-appropriate content. Participant 6 stated, "Our main focus is now on educational apps that build critical thinking," while Participant 1 shared, "I choose age-appropriate, educational, and interactive apps that support learning." This intentional content selection reflects parents' role as gatekeepers who filter digital experiences to align with developmental goals. The influence of the child's age and developmental stage was also highlighted, as parents tailored screen duration and app selection according to cognitive readiness. External advice from family members, teachers, and online resources also influenced parental decisions. Participant 1 acknowledged, "Advice from others helped me set stricter limits," while Participant 4 noted that although they listen to advice, final decisions are based on family values. This demonstrates that parental decision-making is informed by both personal observation and external guidance.

Overall, the findings reveal that parents perceive technology as a powerful yet complex tool. It enhances knowledge, creativity, and academic growth when supervised, but may negatively influence behavior, emotional regulation, and social interaction if misused. The participants' experiences highlight the

importance of intentional guidance, structured limits, and developmentally appropriate content in shaping children's digital experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that early exposure to digital technology is shaped primarily by parental mediation. Consistent with socio-constructivist perspectives, children's learning occurs through guided interaction within their environment. Parents serve as mediators who scaffold digital experiences, ensuring that exposure supports cognitive growth rather than passive consumption. According to Mekhail et al. (2024), children benefit most from digital media when adults actively engage in co-viewing and discussion, transforming screen time into interactive learning experiences. The emphasis on learning benefits aligns with Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, which highlights that children actively construct knowledge through exploration and interaction. When parents provide age-appropriate digital tools, children engage in symbolic thinking, problem-solving, and logical reasoning. However, excessive exposure without supervision may disrupt attention span and emotional regulation. This supports the dual-impact perspective observed in participants' accounts. Screen time management emerged as a central parental responsibility. The findings support Self-Regulation Theory (Zimmerman, 2000), which emphasizes the gradual development of behavioral control through guided practice. By setting rules and explaining consequences, parents teach children moderation and discipline. Research from the OECD (2024) further suggests that balanced digital routines contribute to healthier cognitive and emotional outcomes. The observed behavioral changes correspond with the Digital Media-use Effects (d-MUsE) Model, which explains that digital media effects depend on purpose, content, and context. When technology is used for learning and meaningful communication, it enhances curiosity and engagement. However, when overused or unsupervised, it may contribute to irritability, social withdrawal, and reduced physical activity. This contextual understanding clarifies why parents continuously negotiate boundaries and adjust strategies. The influence of developmental stage supports Piaget's assertion that cognitive readiness determines how children process information. Parents who align content with developmental capacity maximize learning potential while minimizing frustration or overstimulation. Additionally, Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains how children imitate both digital content and parental behavior. Thus, parental modeling remains crucial not only in introducing devices but also in demonstrating responsible use. Finally, concerns regarding mature content exposure align with Cultivation Theory, which suggests that repeated exposure to media messages shapes beliefs and behaviors over time. Parents' efforts to filter content and enforce supervision reflect an awareness that prolonged exposure to inappropriate material may influence children's attitudes and social behavior.

CONCLUSION

The research examined the lived experiences and decision-making of seven parents on the issue of whether their children should be exposed to digital technology at home at a tender age. According to our results, parental mediation plays a significant role in the determination of children online experience, and engagement depends on modelling, deliberate instruction, developmental maturity, and suitability of content. The thematic analysis outlined five overall dimensions, parental modeling leading to early introduction, perceived educational value, difficulty controlling screen-time, behavioral and social problems and purposeful content choice with guided mediation.

Theoretically, the study supports both sociocultural and social-learning views demonstrating that family and relationship interplay makes kids technology interactions co-constructed instead of existing as solitary interactions. Supervising, modeling, and controlling activities by parents would assist in converting digital interaction into valuable learning, as well as minimizing the dangers associated with the overuse or unsupervised use.

In practice, the results indicate that well-organized screen-time schedules, age-related learning materials, and joint practices between teachers and parents are significant. Supporting, observing, and playing out an example of responsible online behavior can increase cognitive, artistic, and interpersonal development and decrease unpleasant behaviors such as irritability, lack of exercise and face to face communication. To conclude,

technology exposure in early childhood, when properly balanced and mediated on purpose, can prove to be an effective instrument in helping to develop learning, creativity, and holistic growth in early childhood.

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