An Assessment of the Effects of Screen Time on Children's Academic Performance: A Case Study of Lusaka, Woodlands

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ABSTRACT

Excessive screen time is increasingly linked to adverse developmental outcomes in children, yet its specific impact on academic performance remains nuanced. This study assessed the effects of electronic screen exposure on children's academic performance from the parental perspective in Lusaka, Zambia. A quantitative, descriptive cross-sectional design was utilized. Data were collected via structured questionnaires from 121 randomly sampled parents (N = 121) and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results indicated that 74% (n = 89) of parents perceived screen time as having a negative effect on academic performance. Descriptive cross-tabulations showed that performance declines were higher among children spending >4 hours daily on screens (48%) compared to those spending <1 hour (19%). However, a Pearson chi-square test revealed that total daily screen duration was not statistically significantly associated with academic performance, χ^2 (6) = 11.034, p = .087. Conversely, screen activity type demonstrated a statistically significant association, χ^2 (2) = 7.102, p = .029. Children engaging in educational screen activities were significantly more likely to show academic improvement (53%) than those without educational screen engagement (28%). While parental perceptions remain largely negative regarding screen duration, total daily usage time alone does not drive academic outcomes; rather, content quality and educational purpose are critical determinants. Interventions should prioritize promoting purposeful, educational technology integration alongside active parental oversight over rigid duration restrictions.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Children, Digital Literacy, Educational Content, Parental Perception, Screen Time, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century generation of children is increasingly immersed in a world dominated by screens, raising concerns about the potential impact on their well-being. Globally, reports indicate that children aged 8–18 spend an average of 7.5 hours daily on digital devices, a level of exposure that has alarmed parents, schools, and health authorities (HSE, 2024). Scholars such as Notte and Renzi (2026) attribute this trend to the growing availability of digital devices and the tendency of parents to permit unregulated use. Similarly, Gupta (2023) found that children exposed to high levels of screen use at an early age often exhibit poorer cognitive outcomes by the age of nine, suggesting that unregulated screen use may have lasting consequences on educational achievement and emotional well-being. In response, health experts recommend that children under two years should not be exposed to screens, while older children should limit screen time to one to two hours per day (MedlinePlus, 2025). While these findings highlight global concerns, the issue is equally pressing in Zambia, where increased access to digital devices among children has raised questions about their academic and social development. Despite the government's introduction of the Child Online Protection Policy (2025–2029) to address risks such as cyberbullying and online exploitation, there remains limited empirical evidence on how excessive screen time affects children's academic performance in the Zambian context. This gap underscores the need for localized research that examines parental perceptions and experiences, thereby providing insights that can inform strategies for balanced and purposeful screen use among school-going children in Zambia.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The Government of Zambia has introduced the Child Online Protection Policy (2025–2029) to create a safer digital environment for children, addressing issues such as cyberbullying and online exploitation (Ministry of Technology and Science, 2025). However, the policy does not provide direct guidance to parents on managing excessive screen time, which remains a growing concern. At the same time, there is limited empirical evidence in Zambia examining how parents perceive the effects of screen use on children's academic performance and social wellbeing. Without such evidence, efforts to regulate screen time and mitigate its negative consequences lack a solid foundation. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by investigating parents' perceptions of screen time and its impact on children's academic outcomes and social development. The findings aim to inform parents, educators, and policymakers in designing effective strategies and interventions that promote balanced and purposeful screen use among children.

1.2 Objectives

The main aim of this study was to examine the effects of screen time on children's academic performance and social development, while the specific objectives were to determine the amount of time children spend on electronic screens, assess the effects of screen time on children's academic performance, and to identify the strategies used by parents and schools to manage children's screen time and improve academic performance.

1.3 Hypothesis

Based on the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses were formulated to examine the relationship between children's screen time and their academic performance

H_0: There is no significant relationship between children's daily screen time and their academic performance.

H_1: There is a significant relationship between children's screen time and their academic performance

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is timely and important as it may help parents understand how screen time affects their children's social wellbeing and academic performance. It may also raise awareness of both the positive and negative effects of screen use and encourage better parental monitoring and guidance of children's screen habits. The findings may also benefit educators by providing insight into how screen use may influence children's behaviours and learning, helping them support learners more effectively. Further, the study may inform policymakers and stakeholders by providing evidence that can guide the development of policies and interventions that promote healthy screen use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To adequately delve into the issue of excessive screen time and how it affects academic performance in children, the following is the literature review.

2.1 Global perspective

Mori et al. (2026), in their systematic review of 60 peer-reviewed papers, reveal a significant increase in screen time among children and adolescents over the last three decades, including periods during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of computers, mobile phones, and video games generally increased, whereas television viewing declined. Importantly, Shaleha, et al, (2026) recommend that future studies move beyond measuring duration and device type to examine the quality and purpose of screen-based activities. They emphasize that technology is now an inevitable part of modern education, making it essential to guide young people in safe and effective use through digital literacy, balanced routines, and parental involvement.

International health authorities, such as the American Psychological Association (2025) and the American Academy of Pediatrics, broadly recommend limiting screen time for young children to one to two hours daily,

with emphasis on high-quality educational content and parental supervision. These guidelines highlight the importance of balancing screen use with physical activity, sleep, and social interaction.

While such recommendations provide a global benchmark, the realities in Zambia differ. Increased access to digital devices among children has not been matched with widespread parental awareness or structured guidance on healthy screen use. This contrast underscores the need for localized research that explores how Zambian parents perceive screen time, the strategies they employ to regulate it, and its implications for children's academic performance. By situating the study within this context, the findings can bridge the gap between international best practices and Zambia's specific challenges.

2.3 African Perspective

Research in South African secondary schools indicates that smartphone ownership among adolescents is widespread, with learners spending several hours daily on their devices, mainly engaging in social media and entertainment activities that may distract them from academic tasks (Le Roux & Feldman, 2025). However, this study focused exclusively on secondary school children, whereas the current study considers parental perspectives across a broader age range, from preschool to secondary school.

In contrast, Wachira (2022), in Nairobi, Kenya, found no relationship between screen time and academic performance. Her study suggested that academic outcomes could not be directly linked to the amount of time children spent on screens, and further noted no gender differences in screen use. This finding differs from South African evidence, which highlights distraction from academic tasks, suggesting that the impact of screen time may vary across contexts and educational environments.

Karani et al. (2022) also examined South Africa, but from the perspective of language development. They found that the effects of screen exposure depended on content type, duration, and adult involvement. Fast-paced entertainment programs were associated with poorer language outcomes, while educational programs enhanced vocabulary and comprehension. Although their study focused on language rather than academic performance, it reinforces the idea that the quality of screen activities matters as much as the quantity.

Taken together, these African studies present mixed findings: some highlight negative impacts through distraction, others show no direct link to academic performance, and still others emphasize the importance of content type. This inconsistency underscores the need for localized research in Zambia, where children's screen use is increasing but little is known about how it affects their academic achievement. By examining parental perceptions in Lusaka, the current study seeks to clarify whether Zambia's realities align more closely with experiences, and to identify strategies that can support positive academic outcomes.

2.4 Zambian Context

The Ministry of Technology and Science, in collaboration with partners, introduced the National Child Online Protection Strategy (2025–2029) to address the increasing risks children face online, including cyberbullying, harmful content, online predators, and exploitation (Ministry of Technology and Science, Zambia, 2025). While this strategy highlights both opportunities and risks associated with internet access, it primarily emphasizes policy coordination, safe online behaviors, and digital skills development.

Empirical studies, however, remain limited. Zulu and Tembo (2020) found that children in Zambia are increasingly exposed to internet-related risks such as hate speech, social media addiction, sexting, and fake news. These exposures were linked to psychological and behavioral effects, including depression, low self-esteem, deteriorating social behavior, and reduced concentration on educational activities. Similarly, Sinyangwe, President of the Information and Communication Technology Association of Zambia (ICTAZ), observed that children's curiosity often leads them to engage with inappropriate online content when devices are provided without adequate parental monitoring (Zambian Business Times, 2022). He emphasized the importance of parental controls and supervision to mitigate risks.

Despite these insights, most Zambian literature has focused on online safety and digital risks rather than directly examining the relationship between screen time and academic performance. This gap is critical, as increased access to digital devices among school-going children raises questions about how screen use affects learning outcomes. The current study therefore seeks to provide empirical evidence by investigating parental perceptions of screen time and its impact on children's academic performance, while also identifying strategies used by parents and schools to regulate screen use.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach utilizing a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A quantitative paradigm was selected to systematically measure variable frequencies, establish empirical patterns, and perform inferential testing regarding the relationship between screen exposure and academic outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional framework allowed the researcher to collect data across multiple exposure levels and performance outcomes simultaneously at a single point in time without manipulating the natural environment of the participants (Takona, 2024). This observational design is particularly effective for generating population snapshots and evaluating associations between behavioural factors and developmental outcomes in educational and social research.

3.2 Study Area and Target Population

The study was conducted in Woodlands, a residential community in Lusaka, Zambia. The target population comprised parents and guardians residing in Woodlands who had school-going children aged 2 to 17 years. Parents and guardians were selected as primary proxy respondents because they are uniquely positioned to monitor home digital consumption, track academic progress, and implement home environment controls.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A target sample size of N = 150 parents and guardians was established to ensure sufficient statistical power and population representativeness while adhering to logistical and resource constraints (Fowler, 2014). Of the distributed instruments, 121 fully completed questionnaires were retrieved, yielding an effective response rate of 80.7% (N = 121).

Participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique. In accordance with probability sampling principles, simple random sampling ensured that every eligible parent or guardian within the study area had an equal and independent probability of inclusion (McCombes, 2023; Saunders et al., 2019). This technique minimized selection bias, controlled for systematic sampling errors, and enhanced the internal validity and generalizability of the findings to the broader community (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.4 Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Primary data were gathered using a structured, self-administered questionnaire delivered electronically via Google Forms. Structured questionnaires are widely recognized for their efficiency in standardized quantitative data collection, eliminating interviewer bias and facilitating direct data aggregation (Fowler, 2014). Google Forms provided a secure, accessible, and user-friendly platform that minimized manual data entry errors and improved completion rates among urban respondents.

The instrument was organized into four distinct operational sections:

1. Demographic Characteristics: Sex and age bracket of the child.

2. Screen Exposure Patterns: Daily duration of screen use, types of media activities, and observed interference with study/homework.

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3. Academic Performance Metrics: Subjective parental perceptions and objective academic performance trajectories (improved, declined, or unchanged).

4. Parental Management Strategies: Specific control measures utilised within the household.

3.5 Data Management and Statistical Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, raw responses were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel for data auditing, cleaning, and verification (Saunders et al., 2019). Processed data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies (n) and percentages (%) were computed to summarize demographic attributes, screen duration brackets, activity types, and management strategies.

- **Cross-Tabulations:** Bivariate tables were constructed to examine distributions across age brackets, screen durations, and academic performance changes.

- **Inferential Statistics:** Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2) was conducted at a 5% level of significance (alpha = .05) to test for non-random associations between categorical variables (Field, 2018) specifically evaluating:

    1. Daily screen time duration vs. academic performance changes.

    2. Participation in educational screen content vs. academic performance changes.

Processed results were formatted into standardized APA tables for presentation and interpretation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical standards governing research with human proxy participants were strictly maintained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Informed consent was integrated into the introductory section of the electronic survey, requiring participants to confirm agreement prior to accessing the items. Participation was entirely voluntary, with respondents retaining the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To safeguard privacy, data collection was conducted anonymously, prohibiting the recording of personally identifiable information (e.g., names or contact addresses), and all responses were kept strictly confidential and used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Woodlands, Lusaka, to examine the relationship between screen time exposure, activity content, and children's academic performance (N=121).

5.1 Demographic Characteristics

Of the 121 children represented in the sample, 57.9% (n=70) were male and 42.1% (n=51) were female. As presented in **Table 1**, the primary age cohort comprised children aged 7–10 years (42.1%), followed by children aged 2–6 years (31.4%). Adolescents aged 11–14 years and 15–17 years comprised 19.8% and 6.6% of the sample, respectively.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=121)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	70	57.9

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	Female	51	42.1
Age Group	2–6 years	38	31.4
	7–10 years	51	42.1
	11–14 years	24	19.8
	15–17 years	8	6.6
Total		**121**	**100**

5.2 Patterns, Content, and Interference of Screen Exposure

Over two-thirds of the children (69.4%) spent two or more hours daily on electronic screens, with the modal category being 3–4 hours per day (35.5%). Screen time patterns varied noticeably by age: younger cohorts (2–10 years) predominantly engaged in 1–2 hours of screen use daily, whereas older adolescents (11–17 years) were concentrated in the higher duration thresholds (3–4 hours and >4 hours).

As shown in **Table 2**, television viewing (62.0%) and video gaming (41.3%) were the predominant screen activities, while educational activities accounted for 30.6% of usage. Social media (11.6%) and mobile phone use (1.7%) were reported less frequently. Overall, 71.9% of parents reported that screen exposure interfered with homework or study habits at least occasionally ("sometimes," "often," or "always").

Table 2

Daily Screen Duration, Activity Types, and Homework Interference (N=121)

Variable	***Category / Activity***	***Frequency (n)***	***Percentage (%)***
Daily Screen Time	Less than 1 hour	16	13.2
	1–2 hours	40	33.1
	3–4 hours	43	35.5
	More than 4 hours	22	18.2
Screen Activities*	Television viewing	75	62
	Video games	50	41.3
	Educational activities	37	30.6
	Social media	14	11.6
	General phone use	2	1.7
Homework Interference	Never	12	9.9
	Rarely	22	18.2
	Sometimes	52	43
	Often	28	23.1
	Always	7	5.8

Note: Multiple choices permitted for activities; percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.3 Academic Performance Outcomes and Inferential Analyses

5.3.1 Perceived vs. Observed Academic Outcomes

A key results of this study is the marked contrast between parental perception and observed academic trajectories. While 73.6% (n=89) of parents agreed or strongly agreed that screen time negatively affects academic performance, actual observed academic outcomes were evenly divided: 35.5% reported a decline, 35.5% reported an improvement, and 28.9% reported no change (**Table 3**). This disparity suggests that widespread parental concern does not uniformly correspond to observable academic decline.

Table 3 Perceived Impact vs. Observed Changes in Academic Performance (N=121)

Measure	*Outcome Category*	*Frequency (n)*	*Percentage (%)*
Perceived Negative Impact	Strongly Agree	36	29.8
	Agree	53	43.8
	Neutral	17	14
	Disagree	8	6.6
	Strongly Disagree	7	5.8
Observed Performance Change	Declined	43	35.5
	Improved	43	35.5
	Remained the Same	35	28.9

5.3.2 Inferential Analyses: Screen Duration vs. Screen Content

Cross-tabulation indicates that academic improvements were highest among children with low screen exposure (<1 hour: 56.3%; 1–2 hours: 42.5%), whereas performance declines were highest among those exceeding 4 hours of daily screen time (47.8%; **Table 4**).

To test whether total screen duration significantly influenced academic outcomes, a Pearson chi-square test of independence was performed at $\alpha=.05$. Although descriptive trends suggest that higher screen time aligns with poorer performance, the association was not statistically significant, $\chi2(6) =11.034$, $p=.087$. Statistical evidence in this sample is insufficient to establish total daily duration alone as a primary driver of academic decline.

Conversely, screen **content** proved to be a significant determinant. A separate chi-square test revealed a statistically significant association between participation in educational screen activities and academic performance, $\chi2(2) =7.102$, $p=.029$. Children whose screen time included educational activities were significantly more likely to demonstrate academic improvement (53.0%) compared to those without educational screen engagement (28.0%). Thus, the nature of screen engagement carries greater statistical weight in predicting academic trajectory than daily usage time alone.

5.4 Parental Management Strategies

To regulate screen exposure, parents employed a mix of active supervision and structural boundaries (**Table 4**). Content monitoring was the most common strategy (59.5%), followed by setting overall time limits (40.5%) and restricting device access during study hours (36.4%). Behavioural strategies, such as encouraging outdoor activities (29.8%) and removing devices overnight (26.4%), were utilized less frequently.

Table 4

Academic Performance Outcomes by Screen Duration and Parental Control Strategies

Measure	*Subcategory*	*Declined n (%)*	*Improved n (%)*	*Unchanged n (%)*	*Total (N) / %*
Academic Outcome by Daily Screen Duration	Less than 1 hour	3 (18.8%)	9 (56.3%)	4 (25.0%)	16
	1–2 hours	15 (37.5%)	17 (42.5%)	8 (20.0%)	40
	3–4 hours	14 (33.3%)	10 (23.8%)	18 (42.9%)	42
	More than 4 hours	11 (47.8%)	7 (30.4%)	5 (21.7%)	23

Parental Management Strategies	Content monitoring	—	—	—	72 (59.5%)
	Setting time limits	—	—	—	49 (40.5%)
	Restricting use during study	—	—	—	44 (36.4%)
	Encouraging outdoor activity	—	—	—	36 (29.8%)
	Night-time device removal	—	—	—	32 (26.4%)

Note: Multiple strategies permitted; percentages reflect proportion of total sample (N=121).

DISCUSSION

6.1. Duration of Screen Time Exposure among Children

The results showed that children engage in substantial daily screen time, with over half the sample exceeding three hours per day and only a minimal proportion maintaining less than one hour of usage. Cross-tabulation by age bracket confirmed that 1–2 hours and 3–4 hours represent the most prevalent daily exposure spans. When measured against international benchmarks, these usage patterns markedly exceed the guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (2025), which recommend limiting daily exposure to approximately one hour for children aged 2–5 years and a maximum of two hours for those aged 5 years and above.

These patterns align with broader global and regional longitudinal shifts. A systematic review by Mori et al. (2026) documented a continuous, three-decade upward trajectory in screen time exposure among children and adolescents internationally. Within sub-Saharan Africa, Le Roux and Feldman (2025) observed similar trends among secondary school learners in South Africa, who recorded extensive daily device interaction driven primarily by social media and digital entertainment. The present findings confirm that children in Zambia are subject to these global digital immersion trends, exceeding health guidelines regardless of specific age brackets.

6.2 Impacts of Screen Time Dynamics on Academic Performance

The analysis indicates that electronic device usage frequently encroaches upon study periods, creating direct competition for time needed for homework completion and independent study. This temporal displacement mechanism corroborates findings by Le Roux and Feldman (2025), who noted that heavy recreational device engagement severely disrupted academic routines among South African learners. Similarly, Zulu and Tembo (2020) demonstrated that elevated immersion in internet-based platforms and social networking correlated directly with reduced cognitive focus on educational tasks among school-aged children in Zambia.

A key nuance emerged regarding parental perception versus actual academic metrics. While most parents conceptualized screen time as inherently detrimental to academic outcomes, observed academic trajectories varied widely: some children experienced declines, others improved, and a substantial cohort exhibited no change. This divergence suggests that local parental attitudes may be heavily mediated by pervasive global discourses on the risks of digital exposure, rather than grounded in localized empirical evidence. This disconnect aligns with Wachira's (2022) findings in Nairobi, Kenya, which yielded no statistically significant correlation between total screen duration and academic metrics.

However, unlike Wachira's study, the present investigation highlights the critical moderating role of **content type**. Cross tabulation initially indicated an inverse descriptive pattern children consuming under one hour daily reported higher rates of academic improvement, whereas those exceeding four hours daily showed the highest proportions of academic decline. Yet, this bivariate relationship lacked statistical significance, χ^2 2(6) = 11.03, p = .087. Consequently, the null hypothesis could not be rejected, confirming that overall *duration* of daily screen exposure alone is not a definitive predictor of academic success.

Instead, a statistically significant association emerged when examining *purposeful engagement*: children who used screens for educational purposes demonstrated significantly greater academic improvement than those whose screen usage was strictly non-educational, χ^2 2(2) = 7.10, p = .029$. This distinction accords with Karani et al. (2022), who observed that early childhood developmental impacts are heavily moderated by content quality and active adult involvement.

Situating these results within Zambia's national policy environment exposes a critical institutional gap. While contemporary national digital governance frameworks prioritize cybersecurity and online safety (e.g., cyberbullying mitigation), they largely overlook pedagogical integration and academic media literacy. Consequently, while parents remain vigilant regarding online safety risks, they lack structured guidance on leveraging constructive screen interactions to enhance educational outcomes.

6.3 Parental and Institutional Mediation Strategies

The study identified active content monitoring as the primary strategy employed by parents to manage child screen exposure, followed by time caps and scheduled device bans during dedicated study hours. This hierarchy demonstrates that parental interventions are driven equally by concerns over exposure to inappropriate material and total usage volume.

These proactive mediation practices align closely with institutional recommendations. CHOC (2024) emphasizes structured parental supervision and age-appropriate content curation as fundamental components of healthy digital development. Similarly, the Zambian Business Times (2022) advocated for increased parental oversight across web browsing, social networking, and gaming platforms via technical parental control mechanisms. Furthermore, secondary parental strategies such as encouraging outdoor play and restricting access to digital devices before sleep mirror the American Psychological Association's (2025) behavioural guidelines, which promote physical alternatives and healthy sleep hygiene to counter digital overuse.

Collectively, these mediation patterns demonstrate that parents actively employ a combination of restrictive and active strategies. However, to maximize the educational benefits identified in this study, future mediation frameworks must evolve beyond passive restriction toward the proactive facilitation of high-quality, educational content.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, relying on parents and guardians to report screen time and academic results creates potential for memory errors and a tendency to give socially desirable answers. Additionally, because the study gathered data at a single point in time, it can show relationships between variables, but it cannot prove direct cause and effect. Second, while the study looked at total screen duration and broad activity types such as educational versus recreational use it did not use digital tracking tools to measure specific details, such as exact screen size, specific apps used, or whether parents watched content alongside their children. Finally, key background factors, including family income and parental education levels, were not controlled for in the statistical analysis, even though these can strongly influence both device access and academic support at home. Future studies should follow children over a longer period, combining digital screen-tracking technology with direct academic records across diverse urban and rural communities

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that electronic screen exposure is a central feature of modern childhood, with the majority of children in Lusaka spending substantial daily time on digital devices. Although descriptive patterns suggest that high screen exposure (>3 hours daily) coincides with poorer academic trends, inferential analysis confirms that screen duration alone is not a statistically significant predictor of academic performance. Rather, screen content is the primary determinant of academic trajectories: engagement in educational activities significantly predicts academic improvement compared to purely recreational usage.

These findings challenge broad assumptions that screen exposure is inherently detrimental to academic success, offering critical context-specific evidence within Zambia. While a majority of parents perceive screen time negatively, their active implementation of content monitoring, time boundaries, and study-time restrictions reflects a growing capacity to regulate digital environments. Ultimately, screen exposure is not inherently harmful; its educational impact is dictated by purpose and content quality. Interventions should therefore move beyond rigid duration limits toward promoting balanced, educational technology use supported by structured parental guidance and school-based digital literacy initiatives effectiveness of these strategies may depend on how consistently they are applied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Parents and guardians need to set reasonable screen-time limits, monitor content, and encourage children to engage in outdoor activities, reading and physical exercise.
- Schools need to guide children on responsible use of digital devices and promote the use of technology for educational purposes while maintaining a balance with other learning activities.
- Teachers need to educate learners on the responsible use of screens and help them understand how excessive screen use can interfere with study and homework.
- Policymakers and educational stakeholders need to develop clear guidance on appropriate screen time and promote awareness of both the benefits and risks of digital technology for children.

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