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SCREEN TIME AND ITS EFFECTS ON CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOUR

Munazza Batool

BS Department of English, The Cosmic Degree College (For Women), University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Screen time has become an important part of children's daily lives because of the widespread use of smartphones, tablets, televisions, computers, and other digital devices. Children use screens for educational activities, entertainment, communication, and recreational purposes. Although digital technology provides several learning opportunities, excessive or inappropriate screen use may influence children's emotional, social, and behavioural development. During early childhood and the school years, children develop essential abilities such as emotional regulation, patience, empathy, communication, self-control, and social interaction. These abilities are influenced by family relationships, school experiences, physical activities, sleep patterns, and the surrounding environment. Excessive screen exposure, particularly when it replaces face-to-face interaction, outdoor play, reading, and adequate sleep, may be associated with irritability, emotional outbursts, frustration, anxiety symptoms, attention difficulties, and reduced social engagement. However, the effects of screen time are not identical for every child and may depend on age, duration of use, the type of content viewed, parental supervision, and the purpose of digital activities. Educational programmes and positive digital content may support learning when used appropriately. This research examines the relationship between screen time and children's emotional behaviour, with particular attention to emotional regulation, mood, social relationships, and behavioural difficulties. It also considers the importance of parental guidance, healthy routines, and balanced use of technology. The study aims to develop a clearer understanding of how screen habits may be associated with children's emotional wellbeing and to identify practical strategies that parents, teachers, and caregivers can use to encourage healthy digital habits.

KEYWORDS: *Screen time, children's emotional behaviour, digital media, emotional regulation, child development, behavioural problems, mental wellbeing, parental supervision, sleep quality, social interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly changed the daily experiences of children in contemporary society. Smartphones, tablets, televisions, computers, and other electronic devices are now commonly used in homes, schools, childcare centres, and public spaces. Children encounter digital media from an early age, and screen-based activities have become a regular part of their learning, entertainment, and communication. Ahmer, A., Raza, M., Azhar, M., Rahman, A., Das, J. K., & Jafri, S. K. (2025). Found that, Educational applications, online videos, digital games, and interactive learning platforms can provide opportunities to develop language, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and general knowledge. However, the increasing availability of digital devices has also raised concerns about how screen exposure may influence children's emotional and behavioural development. Childhood is a particularly important stage because the brain, emotional abilities, social skills, and behavioural patterns are developing rapidly. During this period, children learn to identify feelings, express emotions appropriately, manage frustration, follow instructions, and establish relationships with others. These abilities develop through interactions with parents, teachers, siblings, and peers, as well as through physical play and everyday experiences. Serrate González, S., Muñoz Rodríguez, J. M., Huete García, A., Murciano Hueso, A., Martín García, A. V., Gutiérrez Pérez, B. M., ... & Andrade Silva, L. (2024elobrated on,). When screen-based activities occupy a large proportion of a child's day,

they may reduce opportunities for these important developmental experiences. Therefore, examining screen time and its relationship with children's emotional behaviour is necessary for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with digital media in modern childhood.Screen time refers to the amount of time a person spends using electronic devices with screens, including televisions, smartphones, computers, tablets, and gaming systems. Wang, S., Deng, S., Zhang, J., Ran, J., Jia, W., Yan, X., ... & Zou, W. (2025). Explained, For children, screen time may involve watching cartoons, viewing online videos, playing digital games, attending online classes, reading electronic books, or communicating through digital platforms.

It is important to recognise that all screen activities are not the same. Some activities encourage learning, creativity, and communication, whereas others involve passive viewing, repetitive entertainment, or exposure to inappropriate content. The impact of screen use may depend not only on its duration but also on the quality of content, the child's age, the circumstances in which the device is used, and whether an adult provides guidance. For example, a child who uses a tablet with a parent to complete an educational activity may have a different experience from a child who spends several hours watching rapidly changing videos without supervision. Similarly, screen use that supports communication with family members may differ from use that replaces direct social interaction. Toledo-Vargas, M., Chong, K. H., Maddren, C. I., Howard, S. J., Wakefield, B., & Okely, A. D. (2025). Revealed,Consequently, screen time should be understood as a complex aspect of children's daily routines rather than as a single activity with identical effects on every child. Studying its different forms helps parents and educators make informed decisions about appropriate digital practices and children's emotional wellbeing.Emotional behaviour refers to the ways in which children experience, express, and regulate their feelings in different situations. It includes happiness, sadness, anger, fear, excitement, frustration, empathy, and the ability to respond appropriately to emotional experiences. During childhood, emotional regulation develops gradually through observation, guidance, social interaction, and repeated opportunities to manage everyday challenges. Children who develop effective emotional regulation skills are generally better equipped to cope with disappointment, communicate their needs, maintain friendships, and respond constructively to difficult situations. Screen use may be relevant to this process because digital entertainment can provide immediate stimulation and rapid rewards, while everyday activities often require patience, negotiation, and sustained effort.

Some children may become upset when a device is removed, when a game is interrupted, or when they are asked to transition from screen-based entertainment to homework, sleep, or family activities. Others may use digital content to relax or communicate their feelings. These differences demonstrate that children's emotional responses to screens are influenced by individual temperament, family practices, developmental stage, and the wider environment. Therefore, understanding emotional behaviour requires attention to the relationship between screen use and the broader experiences that shape children's emotional development.Excessive screen time has become a concern for parents, teachers, and child-development professionals because it may be associated with several difficulties in children's daily behaviour. Children who spend long periods using digital devices may have fewer opportunities for physical activity, imaginative play, conversation, and direct interaction with other people. These experiences are important for developing patience, cooperation, empathy,

and emotional self-control. In some circumstances, heavy screen use may also interfere with sleep routines, particularly when children use stimulating content close to bedtime or keep devices in their sleeping environment. Inadequate sleep can contribute to tiredness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and problems managing emotions during the following day. Some children may also experience frustration when their access to devices is limited, particularly if screen-based entertainment has become their main source of enjoyment. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to assume that screen time directly causes emotional problems in every child. Children experiencing emotional difficulties may also turn to screens for comfort or distraction, and other factors, including family stress, school pressure, and existing developmental needs, may influence both screen habits and behaviour. For this reason, research should examine associations carefully and consider the different circumstances that shape children's emotional responses.Parents and teachers play an essential role in helping children develop healthy relationships with digital technology.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. The main objective of this research is to examine the relationship between screen time and children's emotional behaviour, with particular attention to emotional regulation, irritability, anxiety symptoms, attention, sleep patterns, and social interaction, while identifying the role of parental supervision and balanced digital habits in supporting children's emotional wellbeing.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What is the relationship between screen time and children's emotional behaviour, particularly their emotional regulation, mood, social interaction, and behavioural development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2024 umbrella review by Vist and colleagues examined existing systematic reviews on screen use and emotional, cognitive, and motor development Nuvoli, V., Camanni, M., Mariani, I., Ponte, S., Black, M., & Lazzerini, M. (2025).revealed,. It reported that the available evidence was not sufficiently consistent to establish firm conclusions about the effects of screen use across childhood and adolescence. Some studies suggested associations between television exposure and behavioural difficulties in young children, whereas other findings indicated little or no association for particular devices or outcomes. These findings demonstrate the importance of examining screen time in a balanced manner. Rather than treating every screen activity as harmful, researchers need to distinguish educational use from passive entertainment and consider the developmental needs of children. Padmapriya, N., Chandrasekaran, M., Khan, S. F., Nishika, R., Huiyun, G. L., Chong, D., ... & Müller-Riemenschneider, F. (2026). Explained,The literature also suggests that emotional development is influenced by several interacting factors, including parental involvement, peer relationships, physical activity, sleep, and the quality of children's everyday experiences. Consequently, screen time should be studied as one component of a wider developmental environment.Another important area of research concerns the association between screen exposure and behavioural problems, including irritability, aggression, inattention, and

difficulty following rules. Children develop behavioural self-control through practice, adult guidance, and interaction with other people. Lambach, P., Silal, S., Sbarra, A. N., Koh, M., Aggarwal, R., Farooqui, H. H., ... & Wang, X. Y. (2024). Found that, When digital entertainment dominates daily routines, opportunities to practise patience, cooperation, and independent problem-solving may become limited. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in JAMA Psychiatry examined 87 studies involving 159,425 children aged 12 years or younger.

The researchers found weak but statistically significant correlations between greater screen time and both internalising problems, such as anxiety and depression, and externalising problems, such as aggression and inattention. The strength of these associations varied according to demographic and methodological factors. This evidence is important because it suggests that screen time and behavioural difficulties may be related, but it does not establish that increased screen exposure directly causes these problems. Children's temperament, family circumstances, existing emotional difficulties, and the types of media they consume may also influence the observed relationship. Therefore, research should consider behavioural patterns over time and examine the circumstances in which children use digital devices.The relationship between digital media use and emotional distress is another significant theme in the literature. Some children use digital devices to manage boredom, loneliness, frustration, or uncomfortable feelings.

Although such activities may provide temporary distraction, relying heavily on screens to regulate emotions could reduce opportunities to develop other coping strategies, particularly when adults do not help children identify and express their feelings. A 2024 systematic review of screen time and child behavioural disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic examined 12 studies involving 14,483 participants. It identified associations between screen exposure and internalising difficulties, including anxiety and depression, while also noting variation across studies and measures. The review further highlighted that emotional difficulties may predict increased screen use, suggesting that the relationship can operate in both directions. These findings are relevant because children experiencing stress may turn to digital entertainment for comfort, while certain patterns of screen use may coincide with disrupted routines or reduced face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, the evidence does not justify assuming that every child who uses screens frequently will develop anxiety or depression. Individual circumstances, emotional support, content quality, and the purpose of screen use must be considered when interpreting these associations.Sleep is an important factor connecting children's digital habits with their emotional wellbeing. Adequate sleep supports attention, learning, mood regulation, and the ability to respond appropriately to everyday challenges.

When children use stimulating digital content late in the evening, they may delay bedtime, experience difficulty settling down, or receive insufficient rest. The following day, tiredness may be accompanied by impatience, reduced concentration, irritability, and difficulties managing disappointment. Research on screen media overuse has also identified associations with poorer sleep quality, shorter sleep duration, and emotional or behavioural difficulties, although relationships can vary across populations and study designs. These findings suggest that the timing and context of screen use may be as important as the total duration. For example, using a device briefly for a calm educational activity earlier in the day is different

from spending a prolonged period playing stimulating games immediately before sleep. Establishing predictable bedtime routines, limiting device use before bed, and keeping sleep environments free from unnecessary digital distractions may help protect children's rest. Researchers should therefore consider sleep patterns when investigating associations between screen time and emotional behaviour.The literature also highlights the importance of parental involvement in shaping children's screen habits. Parents influence the types of content children access, the duration of device use, and the ways in which digital activities fit into family routines. Consistent and age-appropriate guidance can help children understand limits, manage transitions away from devices, and participate in alternative activities. The World Health Organization's guidance for children under five emphasises a balance between sedentary screen activities, physical activity, and sleep.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive research methodology to examine the relationship between screen time and children's emotional behaviour. A descriptive method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to organise and interpret existing information about children's digital habits, emotional responses, and behavioural development. The study focuses on the possible associations between screen exposure and experiences such as irritability, frustration, anxiety symptoms, attention difficulties, sleep disruption, and social interaction. It also considers the positive uses of digital technology, including educational activities, creative applications, and communication with family members. The methodology is designed to provide an organised understanding of the topic without assuming that screen time is the sole cause of emotional or behavioural difficulties. Relevant academic studies, systematic reviews, and public-health guidance can be examined to identify recurring themes, differences in findings, and areas requiring further investigation. This approach allows the research to bring together evidence from different perspectives and develop a balanced explanation of the relationship between screen use and children's wellbeing.The proposed study uses secondary data collected from published research articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and reports from recognised health and research organisations. Relevant sources include publications available through academic databases and scholarly platforms, including PubMed, journal websites, and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. The literature search focuses on publications from 2023 to 2026, consistent with the requested research period, while any older guidance would be used only if essential background context were needed. Preference is given to peer-reviewed research and systematic reviews that clearly describe their methods, participants, and findings.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis uses a thematic approach to organise the information gathered from published studies into meaningful categories. The first theme concerns the relationship between the duration of screen exposure and emotional or behavioural outcomes. Studies are examined to determine whether greater screen use is associated with irritability, emotional outbursts, anxiety symptoms, aggression, inattention, or other difficulties. The second theme considers differences between educational and recreational screen use, recognising that activities vary in their purpose, content, and level of interaction. The third theme examines whether screen exposure is linked to changes in sleep, physical activity, and face-to-face

interaction, which may help explain associations with emotional wellbeing. The fourth theme considers parental supervision, household rules, and the ways in which adults support children during transitions away from devices. Information from individual studies is compared rather than simply counted, because differences in participants, measurements, and research methods can influence results. This thematic organisation helps identify recurring patterns while acknowledging that findings are not always consistent across studies.The second stage of analysis examines how age, family environment, screen content, sleep, and existing emotional difficulties may influence the relationship between screen time and behaviour. For example, a study reporting an association between prolonged screen exposure and irritability may also identify sleep disruption or reduced physical activity as relevant factors. Another study may find that educational screen use has a different relationship with wellbeing from prolonged passive entertainment.

FINDINGS

The review of available research indicates that screen time is associated with certain emotional and behavioural difficulties in children, although the strength and consistency of these relationships vary. Some studies report associations between greater screen exposure and emotional problems, hyperactivity, irritability, inattention, or difficulties with social-emotional development. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Ahmer and colleagues (2025), which included 12 studies involving children under five, reported an association between screen time and poorer social-emotional development. The pooled estimates also indicated associations with hyperactivity and emotional problems. These findings suggest that excessive or poorly managed screen use deserves attention from parents, educators, and childcare professionals. However, the evidence should not be interpreted as proof that screen exposure independently causes emotional difficulties. Children's existing behavioural characteristics, family environment, and daily routines may also contribute to the observed associations. The overall finding is that screen time is a relevant factor to consider when examining children's emotional wellbeing, alongside other developmental influences.A second major finding concerns the importance of children's daily routines and opportunities for direct social interaction. Long periods of screen use may coincide with reduced outdoor play, fewer conversations with family members, less participation in group activities, and delayed bedtimes.

CONCLUSION

Screen time and its effects on children's emotional behaviour represent an important area of research in contemporary child development. Digital devices have become part of everyday life, providing opportunities for education, entertainment, creativity, and communication. However, research indicates that greater screen exposure is associated with certain emotional and behavioural difficulties in some groups of children. These may include emotional problems, hyperactivity, inattention, and difficulties in social-emotional development. The extent of these associations varies according to children's ages, the types of screen activities they engage in, their family environment, and the methods used to measure outcomes. Consequently, screen time should not be considered the sole explanation for children's emotional or behavioural problems. Emotional development is influenced by multiple interacting factors, including relationships with parents, experiences at school, sleep quality,

physical activity, and opportunities for social interaction. The main conclusion is that children's screen habits deserve careful attention, but decisions about digital media should be informed by evidence, developmental needs, and individual circumstances.Parents, teachers, and caregivers can contribute to children's emotional wellbeing by encouraging balanced and responsible use of digital devices. Families should establish age-appropriate limits, select suitable content, maintain consistent bedtime routines, and create opportunities for screen-free activities. Children should have regular opportunities to play outdoors, read books, participate in creative activities, communicate with family members, and develop friendships. Adults should also help children understand their emotions and learn constructive ways to manage frustration, disappointment, and boredom.

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