

# **Development and well-being across the lifespan**

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# PARENTING IN DIGITAL ERA

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## ABSTRACT

Digital devices are here to stay. They have become an integral part of our world. Parenting is a lifelong commitment. Digital devices have made parenting more complicated. The paper studied the effect of technology on the behavior of children. It also revealed that digital devices affect the behavior of parents, which changes parenting. Subjects were parents and young children (0-3 years) in different settings. Infants as young as six months old are addicted to smartphones, videos, games. Parents are using these devices to soothe them and distract their attention. Digital devices are commonly used as boredom fillers. On the other hand they have been found to contribute to visual memory and recognition. Still more responsibility ounces with the parents. They should use assertive discipline to manage screen time of kids for their physical, cognitive, socio-emotional well-being and positive mental health.

**Key Words:** Digital devices, addiction, boredom fillers, well-being, visual memory.

## Introduction

Parenting itself is complicated and some so the technologies that are supposed to make parenting easy are actually making it more challenging.

We are living in technological era. In the present era, nearly every child is born in the environment surrounded with digital devices. The rise of technology in terms of cell phones, gadgets, computer devices and access to the internet have changed the whole scenario of the parenting. Therefore, parents these days have to perform parenting and digital parenting at the same time, otherwise children safety is always at stake (Sulina Williams, 2019).

The interactions with young contemporary families reflect that childhood experiences of playing, learning, education, has undergone changes. This change is the resultant of digital devices like smartphones, laptops, smart speakers, computers, tablets etc. These audiovisual aids fascinates young kids at a very early age. Watching rhymes, stories and playing games on a variety of online devices tops children's activities. According to Stephane et al (2017) digital technologies has become inevitable in the life of young children.

We often deny it but smart devices act as a digital babysitter, keeping the kids temporarily occupied and quiet. Although, parents are very much concerned about the excessive use of digital devices in the lives of their kids. Yet, because of their convenience and comfort parents encouraged the use of digital tools to keep young, tender minds engaged. This would keep the babies busy and parents too could remain busy in their preferential activities.

Technological era has changed the way our children learn, get entertained, interact and behave with others in the society. Children no longer actively think of more creative out of the box activities to entertain themselves. But take up readily available programs just by mere pressing of the icons. Thereby, shutting off the active part of brain. Brain development is very fast during early critical years. By three years of age

nearly 80% of the brain has developed. Cummings (2017) in one the research revealed that by too much dependence on digital devices children might lose their creative abilities to deal with their boredom. There are certain researches that viewed that digital technology might rewire or hijack children's brains and make them addicted (Ferranti, 2016). The young children spend most of their awake hours on their mobile phones, computers and digital technologies. The internet technology 'social media' online games are making them crazy and addicted. Some children get so engrossed in these games that they even take extreme steps like jumping from great heights or committing suicide. We had heard about blue whale online game last year. We all have heard, read and well aware about how digital devices effect the child upbringing-their health aspect like eyesight, cognitive aspects like attention span, brain activity, emotional safety, anxiety, mental health, social aspects etc.-but fewer parents understand the influence of technology on behavior. The early years are foundation period and critical for learning in the life of a child. Faster brain development leading to faster pace in learning.

## Objectives

This paper studies the effect of digital technology on the behavior of young children. Study also focuses on change in parenting as a consequence of dependence on digital technology. The study highlighted the effect of digital technology on children as parents were using them for engaging children, in educating and entertaining them.

## Methodology

Researchers prepared a checklist to conduct observation of digital devices-mobiles, tablets, computers, smartphones, internet, TV, laptop, i-pads usage in the life of young kids below three years of age. It was an exploratory study. The researchers visited and interviewed 100 mothers/fathers of young children of 0-3 years of age at many public places like shopping malls, markets, public transports, hospitals and recreational centers in Yamuna Nagar and Kurukshetra districts of Haryana state. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to draw meaningful inferences.

## Findings and Discussion

The major findings could be broadly classified into following broad categories.

- General information of the respondents.
- Favorable impact of digital devices.
- Negative impact of digital devices.

## General Information of the respondents

In this study equal number of respondents (44%) were in the age group of 1-2 years and 2-3 years of age whereas only 12% were below one year of age. Nearly 57% were male respondents and 43% were female. 44% kids had elder sibling and 15% were single child. Most of the respondents were member of nuclear families and only 23% were in joint family residing with their grandparents. Maximum parents (73%) were in early adulthood stage. 57% respondents were resident of urban area, 30% from rural area and 13% were residing in suburban area or small towns. When we look at the educational status of parents both were literate. Maximum fathers were postgraduate (63%), and 59% mothers were graduate. Maximum respondents' mothers were home-makers (52%) and 35% fathers were engaged in non-professional or skilled work. Families of most of the young kids were earning respectable income, 39% parents were earning between 50,000 to 1,00,000 rupees per month and 27% were earning more than one lakhs per month. It was found that 93% young kids use smartphones, followed by 45% using tablets and i-pods and 31% use laptops, whereas 1% was using smart speaker also. All the families had TV, parents were comfortable using smartphones, but only few mothers (49%), and fathers (62%) had computer skills too.

## Favorable Impact of Digital Devices

Some positive effects of gadgets were also observed. It was strongly felt that use of digital devices has improved the recognition and memory power of the young kids. As many as 70% young kids searched their favorite program and music or play by recognizing the icons (without having reading skills). It speaks of their visual intelligence skills. Maximum kids use mobiles, TV, computers, and only 1% use kindle and smart speakers. Playing games on tablets and other digital gadgets help in workout of their fingers and hands. Use of keyboard are not injurious or threatening when compared to outdoor activities. Handheld safe devices pose no risk of any injury or any kind of threat which they might face while playing outside. Outdoor activities requires constant monitoring. Few parents (48%) reported that they were happy as their kids remain busy with gadgets. By this way they felt that kids remain inside home safely thereby, intentionally or unintentionally nurturing a socially isolate (12%) child. Gadgets are entertaining for kids. While 69% watch cartoons, 13% loved playing video games and online games. These games enhance skills of competition. Children acquired new vocabulary through rhymes and cartoons. It leads to increase in imagination.

Lieberman et al (2009) of University of California conducted the study on impact of digital media on learning of young children of 3 to 6 years of age and revealed the positive impacts of digital devices on children's thinking abilities, planning and observing skills and problem-solving abilities. It also advances reading, language, and mathematical abilities which forms the basis of formal education. It also enhances creativity and collaborative learning.

Similar findings were revealed by Islam (2013) that interactive digital learning materials for kindergartens students enhances learning and recognizing.

The study also found that few parents (3%) discouraged the use of digital devices as emotional pacifier or keeping their children engaged. These parents take them to parks, and indulge in physical activities. One of the parent use to take the child to gymnasium to distract from digital devices.

## Negative Impact of Digital Devices

It was observed that in shopping malls and markets young kids carry their tabs and play with them for hours together while mothers enjoy shopping. When kids get cranky mothers gives their mobiles to pacify them (29%).

Parents use digital devices to bargain too. Like in hospitals parents asked young kids to cooperate and then afterwards they would earn more time to spend on digital devices and mobiles. Infants as young as six months old are handed over mobiles while they are being fed.

Parents informed that that more than 50% young kids use two digital technologies simultaneously while viewing TV they were also playing games and videos on the smartphones.

People from all walks of life and stratas of society irrespective of their place of residence, or socio-economic status uses mobiles effectively to distract the attention from main issues. In public transports (buses) when young kids gets uncomfortable during travelling, parents start the musical ring tones, videos and games to soothe as if it's very healthy practice and then they boost that their kid enjoys it and it's something indispensable to them.

The researchers also observed that kids continuously play on devices without blinking their eyes with tilted heads. Parents reported that young kids spend their time on these gadgets— 74% spend upto 5 hours on mobiles, laptop, TV, online games, I-pods, tablets and don't pay any attention to their body postures, brightness of screens and distance from screen which can negatively affect their eyes and vision. Some parents reported that their kids could spend unlimited time on the gadgets without asking for meals even. Looking and focusing at screens continuously for long time at bright, glaring screen causes serious problems, like eye irritation or difficulty in focusing, long-term vision problems like myopia. This is quite worrisome. It is injurious for eyes and posture too. All the respondents in the study were aware that excessive use of digital devices will affect the eye sight, 42% had knowledge about radiation emission, 83% were worried about its effect on posture.

Medical reports showed that excessive and prolonged use of mobiles among children causes severe myopia (Tay, Su Ann). Bright lights affects sleeping pattern too. Deprivation of sleep is one of the damaging effect of using digital technology. Only 36% parents were aware about it. The medical research findings revealed about radiation emission from computers, mobile and digital gadgets. The bright blue lights could suppress the production of sleep inducing hormones melatonin.

It had been observed that parents turn to smartphones and tablets to distract their kids while doing shopping (67%) or household chores (84%). As many as 56% parents admitted the use of digital devices while feeding their young ones. Nearly 48% parents were happy that these digital gadgets keep their kids engaged, engrossed and happy. Thereby making parents free of their responsibilities of baby seaters. Some parents 37% even use technology to please an upset child. These are used as boredom fillers also thus killing the creativity in children. These things widen the gap between parents and kids and ultimately put the kids at risk. The messaging apps and social media negatively influence the kid's skills to socialize with people around

them. Even in the company of family members kids remained engrossed in virtual world. It was found that 33% kids were getting addicted to their digital devices particularly mobiles. Out of which many use visual memory to open the lock of the gadgets and play with it.

Children develops communication skills through interactions with others. Too much use of gadgets by kids results in delay in expressive speech. 21% parents felt its effect on language skills. Similar findings were reported by Sundus M (2018). The time spend on the digital gadgets was greatly proportional to the language and speech development. More the exposure and time spend by the children on handheld screen such as smart phones, tablets and electronic games, in the age group of six months to two year the more are the chances of speech delays. Thus hampering language development which is otherwise very fast during these critical years.

Parents reported that when gadgets were taken back or snatched from kids they showed distress, anxiety and disturbed emotional behaviors like mood swings and withdrawal symptoms. Kids would cry in shrill loud voice and becomes hyperactive, arrogant and obstinate. They became insensitive to the environment around them. Nearly 30% parents told that their young ones even threw the mobiles in aggression and showed temper tantrums. For them it's only an entertaining play material. ADHD hyperactivity disorder is a mental disorder that causes children to be frigid, creates restlessness and less focussed. These gadgets keep children occupied and they communicate less with their parents, caregivers and siblings. They fail to build adequate vocabulary which is very important for language and communication skills. Researchers at the University of Washington revealed that digital technological gadgets are not essential for holistic development of children. Wireless gadgets emit radiations which is absorbed by child's body at a rate particularly higher than that in adults.

## Conclusions and Implications

Traditional ways of parenting may not be effective today. It must be accepted that parental guidance need to match with digital era. Parents have to play a vital role in keeping a check on their kids. It's the primary responsibility of the parents to guide their young ones while using digital technologies. They can make effective use of rewards and punishments and other behavioral techniques in restricting the use of digital devices. Parents can apply 20-20-20 rule as suggested by eye specialists, which means that after every 20 minutes use of smartphones or gadgets by kids, they should leave it for 20 seconds and focus on objects that is 20 feet away. It will relax their eyes and will also help retain moisture.

Managing screen time is the biggest concern for the parents for the wellbeing of their children. Parents need to make up their own mind about exactly where to draw the lines around children's use of technology. Avoid excess of screen time. Bright screens like phones, TV, and movies keep the brain awake and child cannot sleep comfortably at night and making it more difficult to drift off at an early hour.

Parents should limit their screen time and be a good role model. Young children imitate their behavior. It is a parent who had introduced these gadgets to the young kid and now they have become inseparable because technology and human interaction is interwoven. We can create a 'no tech zone' in home. Parents should encourage face to face conversation. Book reading should be encouraged. Interactions improves the language skills and is more effective rather than passive, less interactive, command based one-way interaction with a screen. Beware, technology should never be used as an emotional pacifier.

Parents should co-view and co-engaged with their young kids when they are using the screen. It will also encourage interaction, bonding and effective learning.

Make sure that digital engagements donot restrict the physical activities and personal interactions with other people. Outdoor plays should be encouraged. It's parental duty to tell the kids about the necessity of maintaining privacy and risks and threats associated with inappropriate text messages. Recently on WION news channel in GRAVITAS (8.12.19) it was shown that many young children in South Korea are committing suicide due to cyberbullying.

It has become important to create an environment of openness and talk to kids about their online experiences. Discuss about the contents. Make them understand the difference between virtual world and the real world. Researchers strongly believe that face to face time with parents, siblings, peer mates, caregiver and other family members leads to holistic development of children.

An important challenge for the parents and society as a whole is to understand when and how much to use digital devices..

No doubt technology is beneficial and have educative useful value but it does come with some damaging effects that would have been difficult to predict few decades ago. The longitudinal studies are essentially required in this area to throw light on the positive and negative effects of the digital devices. It's effect on the cognitive development, mental health, emotional and social development, physical and motor development needs to be undertaken. The popular commercially available digital media products like online games, videos for young children should be studied or tested before launching.

Multimedia and technological devices remain inseparable part of our world and more technological advances will be made in this area in the coming years. If used appropriately their benefits could be great.

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