

Digital Parenting Practices and The Development of Social-Emotional Character In Early Childhood: A Case Study At Wahyu Kindergarten

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Abstract

The use of digital media by young children without parental supervision has been widely examined through quantitative approaches. However, qualitative research exploring how family digital parenting practices and teachers' roles jointly shape young children's social-emotional character within a small-scale early childhood education setting remains limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study addresses this gap by examining how parental digital parenting practices and teachers' roles collaboratively contribute to the development of children's social-emotional character at Wahyu Kindergarten. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving twelve purposively selected participants comprising one principal, three teachers, and eight parents. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through source and methodological triangulation. The findings indicate that unsupervised digital device use is associated with reduced face-to-face social interaction, weakened self-discipline, and increased individualistic tendencies among young children. In contrast, communicative digital parenting accompanied by active parental guidance supports the development of responsibility, politeness, and social skills. These positive outcomes are further reinforced by teachers through behavioral modeling and the facilitation of positive peer interactions within the school environment. Theoretically, this study contributes a collaborative framework for parents and teachers to promote balanced digital parenting practices that support the development of young children's social-emotional character in early childhood education settings.

Keyword: Digital parenting; Social-emotional character; Early childhood education; Parent-teacher collaboration; Qualitative case study.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a deliberate, systematic, and continuous process designed to create a learning environment that enables learners to develop their full potential, as mandated by Indonesia's National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003. Within this framework, Early childhood education occupies a strategic position as the foundation of human development by providing educational stimulation for children from birth to six years of age, thereby preparing them physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, morally, and spiritually for subsequent levels of education.

Early childhood is widely recognized as the golden age (Meyer Sauter, 2023), a developmental period characterized by rapid brain growth and an exceptional capacity to acquire knowledge and skills (Tomoda et al., 2025) from the surrounding environment. During this stage, multiple developmental domains progress simultaneously, including the formation of social-emotional character, which provides the foundation for children's ability to regulate emotions, establish positive interpersonal relationships, and adapt to their social environment. Consequently, learning experiences gained through direct interactions with family members, teachers, and the broader social environment play a crucial role in shaping children's values (Amin, 2023), attitudes, and behavioral dispositions that extend into later stages of development.

This phenomenon can be understood through the perspectives of the sociology of education and developmental psychology. Socialization theory identifies the family as the primary agent of socialization responsible for transmitting social values, norms, and behavioral patterns before children enter school, which functions as a secondary agent of socialization. The family constitutes the primary and most influential learning environment in early childhood, where parental self-efficacy and home literacy practices are crucial for children's language development and can be effectively supported through digital family support programs (Prokupek et al., 2026). Furthermore, Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that children acquire knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors through observing and imitating models within their environment, including those presented through digital media (Galanaki & Malafantis, 2022). In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, which has recently been extended to the digital context, suggests that family resources, cultural practices, and parenting behaviors, including digital mediation practices, influence whether children use digital technologies productively or develop dependency on digital media. Specifically analyze the relationship between Digital Capital and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, demonstrating that differences in cultural capital do not simply determine digital asset possession, but rather emerge through students' behaviors and school choices, where digital competencies intersect with broader social and cultural resources (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024). These three theoretical perspectives provide the analytical framework for examining the relationships among digital parenting practices, teachers' roles, and the development of young children's social-emotional character. Digital parenting strategies and mediation practices, including active, restrictive, and monitoring strategies, strongly influence the nature of children's digital engagement within their home environment, with parents' own digital literacy

affecting their confidence to protect children from online risks (Wilson et al., 2025).

The rapid advancement of digital technology has substantially transformed the patterns of young children's social interactions. Smartphones, tablets, internet access, and various digital platforms have become integral parts of children's daily lives, even from a very early age. However, the increasing accessibility of digital technologies has not always been accompanied by adequate parental guidance and supervision. As a result, many children spend more time interacting with digital devices than engaging with their immediate social environment. This situation may reduce opportunities to develop essential social competencies (Christakis & Hale, 2025), emotional regulation, empathy, and character-related values that are fundamentally cultivated through direct interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. Demonstrating that screen exposure negatively predicts socioemotional competence in children aged 3-6 years. The study found that this negative impact occurs because screen time can weaken children's emotional ability, which is a core component of social competence (Sun et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of intensive digital device use among young children is also evident in the context of this study, namely at Wahyu Kindergarten. Preliminary observations revealed that several children experienced difficulty maintaining attention during classroom activities, were less actively engaged in interactions with their peers, and displayed negative emotional responses when access to digital devices was restricted. Teachers also reported that some children demonstrated greater interest in playing digital games than participating in classroom learning activities. These initial findings suggest that digital media use without adequate parental guidance may adversely affect young children's social-emotional development.

In response to this situation, a more constructive approach is not to prohibit the use of digital devices entirely but to promote communicative, consistent, and actively supervised digital parenting practices. Such efforts should be reinforced by teachers, who serve as behavioral role models and facilitators of positive peer interactions within the school environment. Accordingly, effective collaboration between families and schools represents a critical strategy for ensuring that digital media are used in ways that support rather than hinder children's social-emotional development.

The urgency of implementing such an approach lies in the substantial influence of digital media on young children's social character, emotional development, and behavioral outcomes. In this regard, parental digital parenting practices play a decisive role in shaping children's healthy, responsible, and developmentally appropriate use of digital technologies. Without adequate guidance, the negative tendencies observed at Wahyu Kindergarten may persist and potentially impede children's long-term developmental trajectories.

Recent studies have highlighted the complex relationship between digital parenting and early childhood development. Through a scoping review of forty international studies. The impact of digital media on children is influenced more by parental mediation strategies and the purposes of media use than by screen time alone (Choy et al., 2024a). Consistent with this finding, digital experiences during the ages of 0–12 years may affect brain development when they are not balanced by direct social interaction. Furthermore, Jäggi et al., (2025)

demonstrated that participatory digital parenting interventions improved parenting competencies in low- and middle-income countries. Meanwhile, Akman et al., (2023) reported considerable variation in the digital literacy levels of both parents and early childhood educators, indicating the need for continuous capacity building. Within the Indonesian context, studies by Ilmi & Siregar, (2024) and Adi Kistoro et al., (2024) emphasized the importance of parental involvement and culturally responsive learning models in maintaining children's character development amid rapid digitalization. Nevertheless, these studies have predominantly employed quantitative methods, large-scale samples, or literature review approaches. In-depth qualitative investigations examining the dynamic interplay between family digital parenting practices and teachers' roles within a single early childhood education setting remain relatively scarce.

The developmental consequences of digital media use have also been widely examined from a child health perspective. Panjeti-Madan & Ranganathan, (2023) reported that excessive screen time is associated with emotional regulation difficulties, language delays, and reduced social competence among children under eight years of age. However, Chen & Zhou, (2025) argued that the effects of digital media are not inherently detrimental. Instead, active parental involvement through joint media engagement; watching and discussing digital content together with children, can foster prosocial behavior. Collectively, these findings suggest that the quality of parental guidance, rather than screen time alone, is the primary determinant of children's developmental outcomes.

Building upon these research gaps, the present study integrates Social Learning Theory and Cultural Capital Theory into a single analytical framework to examine how family digital parenting practices and teachers' roles jointly contribute to the development of young children's social-emotional character within a small-scale early childhood education setting. This perspective remains underrepresented in the digital parenting literature, which has largely been dominated by large-scale quantitative studies. Accordingly, this study seeks to contribute theoretically to the advancement of digital parenting research while offering practical implications for strengthening family–school partnerships in fostering young children's social-emotional character. Therefore, this study aims to examine parental digital parenting practices, teachers' roles, and the interaction between the two in shaping the socialization process and the development of children's social-emotional character at Wahyu Kindergarten.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design to obtain an in-depth and contextual understanding of parental digital parenting practices and teachers' roles in the development of young children's social-emotional character within a specific early childhood education setting. A case study design was selected because it enables a comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon in its real-life context while considering the interactions among multiple contextual factors. The study was conducted at Wahyu Kindergarten in May 2026, with field observations carried out over a four-week period.

The participants consisted of twelve informants, including one principal, three classroom teachers, and eight parents. Participants were selected through

purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. These criteria included: (1) teachers who were directly involved in daily classroom instruction and had extensive experience observing children's behavioral development; (2) parents whose children demonstrated varying levels of digital device use, thereby representing diverse digital parenting practices; and (3) the principal, who was responsible for policies regarding digital media use within the school. This sampling strategy ensured that all participants possessed sufficient knowledge and first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation. A summary of participant characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Participant

Role	Number (n)	Selection Criteria
Principal	1	Responsible for school policies regarding the use of digital media and overall educational management.
Classroom Teachers	3	Directly involved in daily teaching activities and experienced in observing children's behavioral and social-emotional development.
Parents	8	Parents of children with varying levels of digital device use, representing diverse digital parenting practices.
Participants	12	Purposively selected based on their direct knowledge and experience related to the research phenomenon.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted to examine children's learning activities and social interactions during both classroom instruction and free-play sessions. Observations were guided by an observation protocol focusing on children's learning engagement, peer interactions, emotional regulation, and independence. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and parents using an interview guide that explored the duration and types of children's digital device use at home, parental supervision and mediation practices, and observed changes in children's social and emotional behaviors. Third, documentary analysis was undertaken to complement the primary data through the examination of learning activity records, documentation of children's classroom activities, and other school documents related to digital media use.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from the principal, teachers, and parents, while methodological triangulation was conducted by cross-checking evidence derived from observations, interviews, and documentary data (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023; Schlunegger, Zumstein-Shaha, & Palm, 2024).

RESULTS

Research Context

Wahyu Kindergarten is an early childhood education institution located in an urban area, serving 45 children across several age groups. The school adopts a learning-through-play approach supported by well-equipped classrooms, outdoor play areas, educational play materials, and audio visual learning media that are used selectively to facilitate educational activities. As presented in Table 1, most parents are employed as private-sector employees, small-scale traders, or daily wage workers with relatively long working hours. Consequently, many children spend their time outside school either with other family members or independently using digital devices for entertainment at home. This family context provides an important background for understanding the digital parenting practices identified in the present study.

Digital Parenting Practices in the Family

Participant observations conducted over a four-week period revealed that nearly all children had been introduced to and regularly used digital devices from an early age. Most children spent approximately two to three hours per day using digital devices. The most common activities included watching animated videos and children's songs through YouTube Kids, followed by simple digital games such as puzzles and virtual coloring applications.

The observational findings revealed a recurring parenting pattern across many participating families. Digital devices were commonly provided to children as a means of keeping them occupied while parents were working, cooking, or completing household responsibilities. Interviews with parents confirmed that digital devices were frequently perceived as an effective strategy for calming children when direct parental supervision was not possible.

Nevertheless, digital parenting practices varied considerably among families. Parents who adopted active mediation practices generally limited children's screen time to approximately 30 minutes to one hour per day and were actively involved in selecting digital content, supervising device use, and discussing viewed content with their children. In contrast, children whose parents provided unrestricted access to digital devices tended to spend substantially longer periods using digital media with minimal supervision or parental interaction.

Children's Social-Emotional Characteristics

Observations of classroom learning activities indicated that intensive digital device use was associated with several behavioral patterns among the participating children. Those who regularly used digital devices for more than two hours per day experienced greater difficulty maintaining attention during classroom instruction, showed reduced interest in activities that did not involve digital media, and frequently requested activities resembling the digital entertainment they typically accessed at home.

Changes were also observed in children's social interactions. During free-play sessions and recess, some children preferred solitary play rather than participating in group activities with their peers. These children also demonstrated lower levels of peer communication than children who received more active parental guidance during digital media use.

These observational findings were reinforced by interviews with classroom teachers. Teachers reported that children who used digital media without adequate parental supervision frequently experienced difficulties regulating their emotions. They were more likely to become frustrated when access to digital devices was restricted and, in several instances, refused to participate in classroom activities until they had been allowed to use a digital device.

At the same time, teachers also identified several positive outcomes associated with digital media use. Some children demonstrated relatively advanced cognitive development, including early recognition of letters, numbers, colors, children's songs, and new vocabulary acquired through digital content. These findings indicate that the influence of digital media on child development is not uniformly positive or negative but varies according to the quality of the accessed content and the extent of parental guidance during media use.

Teachers' Roles in Supporting Social-Emotional Character Development

In addition to the family environment, the school played an active role in managing children's digital media use through consistent institutional policies and classroom practices. According to the principal, digital media were permitted only for instructional purposes, such as viewing educational videos or accessing learning materials. Children were not allowed to bring personal smartphones to school except when specifically authorized by teachers for educational purposes.

Teachers also implemented various learning activities designed to strengthen children's social interactions, including group singing, collaborative games, and outdoor learning experiences. Furthermore, daily classroom routines were used to foster discipline and independence through simple activities such as organizing school bags and shoes, disposing of waste appropriately, and returning learning materials and toys after use.

Interviews further indicated that communication between teachers and parents was maintained regularly through parent meetings and online communication platforms to discuss children's behavioral and social development. These ongoing interactions supported the establishment of consistent parenting practices across both home and school environments.

Synthesis of Findings

Triangulation of observational, interview, and documentary data revealed a consistent pattern across all sources of evidence. High levels of digital device use without adequate parental supervision were associated with reduced learning engagement, diminished peer interaction, and weaker emotional regulation among young children. Conversely, children who received active parental guidance, complemented by structured school policies and classroom practices that promoted social interaction, demonstrated stronger communication skills, greater responsibility, and more positive social behaviors. Collectively, these findings suggest that the quality of parental mediation and sustained collaboration between families and schools play a more influential role in the development of young children's social-emotional character than the intensity of digital device use alone.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the quality of parental guidance plays a more influential role in the development of young children's social-emotional character than the intensity of digital media use alone. This finding reinforces the concept of digital parenting, which conceptualizes digital parenting as a set of parental practices aimed at maximizing the benefits of digital technologies while minimizing their potential risks to children's development (Choy et al., 2024). Within the context of Wahyu Kindergarten, parental mediation was found to be largely situational, occurring when parents had sufficient time but diminishing when they were occupied with work or household responsibilities. Such a pattern suggests that digital mediation practices were not implemented consistently. This finding is consistent with Akman et al., (2023), who identified limited digital literacy among parents and early childhood educators as one of the major challenges to the effective implementation of digital parenting. Consequently, regarding structured digital parenting interventions becomes particularly relevant for strengthening systematic parent education programs within early childhood education settings (Jäggi et al., 2025).

The behavioral changes observed among children, particularly their tendency to imitate speech patterns, vocabulary, and behaviors presented through digital content, can be explained through Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. According to this theory, children acquire knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors through observing and imitating models available in their environment, including those presented through digital media (Galanaki & Malafantis, 2022). The findings of the present study suggest that digital media have become a significant source of social learning for young children. When such imitation occurs without appropriate guidance or corrective feedback from adults, the observed behaviors are more likely to become internalized as habitual patterns. Consequently, digital devices function not only as entertainment media but also as influential agents of social learning, highlighting the importance of active parental mediation to ensure that the behaviors children internalize remain consistent with positive developmental values.

Differences in social competence between children who received active parental mediation and those who used digital devices independently can also be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital. From this perspective, family resources encompass not only economic capital but also communication practices, parenting behaviors, and parental involvement in children's learning experiences (Röhlke, 2025). Likewise, digital capital has become an integral component of contemporary family cultural capital. The present findings extend these arguments by demonstrating that parental involvement in selecting digital content, supervising children's digital device use (Amri, n.d.), and engaging in conversations about digital experiences contributes positively to children's communication abilities and social interaction skills (Goodall et al., 2025). These findings therefore suggest that the quality of parenting practices, rather than the mere presence of digital devices, is the primary determinant of children's social-emotional development.

The findings concerning children's difficulties in regulating their emotions when digital device use was restricted further support previous empirical

evidence. Excessive screen time is associated with emotional regulation difficulties, delayed language development, and reduced social competence among young children (Galanaki & Malafantis, 2022). Similar conclusions, who identified significant associations between prolonged screen time and delays in fine motor, language, and social development among children aged one to six years (Dhar et al., 2026). Nevertheless, the present findings also support the argument advanced by Chen & Zhou, (2025) that the effects of digital media are not inherently deterministic. Children who experienced active parental involvement through joint media engagement continued to demonstrate developmental benefits, particularly in communication skills, vocabulary acquisition, and prosocial behavior. These findings indicate that the critical factor is not the presence of digital devices themselves but rather the quality of parent–child interaction during digital media use.

The findings also underscore the important role of schools as secondary agents of socialization that complement parental practices within the family. School policies restricting children's digital device use, regular parent education programs, and learning activities designed to promote social interaction demonstrate that schools function not only as educational institutions but also as collaborative partners in fostering a healthy digital environment for young children. These findings reinforce previous studies, which emphasized that effective collaboration between families and schools is essential for character development in the digital era (Ilmi & Siregar, 2024; Wahdini, 2024). Furthermore, teachers' consistent implementation of daily routines, such as organizing personal belongings, maintaining classroom cleanliness, and returning learning materials after use (Desmila & Suryana, 2023), who demonstrated that repeated habituation practices contribute significantly to the development of discipline, responsibility, and independence among young children.

Overall, the findings indicate that digital media have evolved into influential agents of socialization that shape young children's language, behavior, and social character, as similarly reported by Aswandi et al., (2023). However, the present study further demonstrates that these influences are neither direct nor universally negative. Rather, the developmental consequences of digital media are mediated by the quality of parental digital parenting practices and further strengthened through educational practices implemented within schools. By integrating these two dimensions, this study extends the existing digital parenting literature by demonstrating that the development of young children's social-emotional character is shaped not only by parenting practices at home but also by sustained collaboration between families and schools in managing children's digital experiences. Consistent with the bibliometric trends, these findings confirm that digital parenting has become an increasingly significant area of inquiry in early childhood education and highlight the need for collaborative approaches to inform educational policies and practices in the digital era (Handayani, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that parental digital parenting practices and teachers' roles are complementary factors in fostering young children's social-emotional character development. High levels of digital device use without

adequate parental guidance were associated with reduced social interaction, lower learning engagement, and weaker emotional regulation. In contrast, digital parenting practices characterized by active communication, parental mediation during children's digital media use, and reinforcement through school policies and positive classroom routines contributed to the development of children's communication skills, sense of responsibility, and social competence.

Interpreted through the perspectives of Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital, the findings indicate that digital media function not only as sources of behavioral learning but also as reflections of the family resources available to mediate children's digital experiences. Accordingly, the developmental consequences of digital media are neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental; rather, they depend largely on the quality of parental guidance and the educational support provided by schools.

Theoretically, this study extends the digital parenting literature by integrating perspectives from the sociology of education and developmental psychology to explain the relationships among digital parenting practices, teachers' roles, and the development of young children's social-emotional character within the context of a small-scale early childhood education institution in Indonesia. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening sustained family–school collaboration through structured parent education programs, well-defined digital media policies, and consistent positive habituation practices to support young children's social-emotional development in the digital era.

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