

CONVENIENT BUT CONFLICTED: PARENTS' EVERYDAY NEGOTIATION OF SCREEN USE AS DIGITAL BABYSITTING

Muniba Fatima Zahra^{*1}, Dr. Rubab Mussarat²

^{*1}Assistant Professor, Department of Media and Communication Studies, Government College University, Lahore.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Media and Communication Studies, National University of Modern Languages
Lahore campus

^{*1}munibafatima@gcu.edu.pk, ²rubab.musarrat@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Muniba Fatima Zahra

Abstract

The present study examined the parent experiences of the use of digital screens for calming, distracting, entertaining, and/or managing children in their daily family lives. The study was limited to the practice of “digital babysitting,” which means parents entertain children during daily routines with devices like smartphones, tablets, televisions, YouTube, cartoons, and streaming platforms. A qualitative descriptive research design was used. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 30 parents of children between 2 and 8 years old. The parents were selected by purposive sampling with maximum variation. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, which was conducted in six stages similar to those described by Braun and Clarke. The following four major themes emerged: screens as everyday parenting support, screens as emotional support for parents, screens as a tool for managing children's behavior, and parents' challenges in establishing rules and boundaries. The results indicated that parents employed screens not only for their children's entertainment but also to control the parent-child household, work load, public situations, children's tantrums, and parent's stress. Acknowledging the utility of screens in the immediate term, parents also reported feelings of guilt, concern, and struggles for children to decrease screen time. Based on the findings, it is concluded that digital babysitting is a multifaceted parenting phenomenon influenced by the practical, emotional, and contextual factors of family. The results emphasize the importance of providing non-judgmental and realistic guidance that helps parents to use screens more intentionally and mindfully but also provides an opportunity to look at other ways to soothe and engage their child.

Introduction

Children are familiar with digital screens in their daily life. Kids these days live in a world of television, smart phones, tablets, YouTube and cartoons, games, and streaming services. Many families don't have screens just for school or play. They are also used by parents to soothe children, distract, keep them occupied, stop crying, control tantrums and find quiet times in the family's daily schedule. In some instances,

this is called “digital babysitting”, referring to the practice of leaving the screen in front of the child to occupy him in between tasks. While it's an accepted part of family life, it's also a complicated discussion since parents might feel relieved and guilty when screens are used like this.

The findings reveal that parents' screen usage with kids is influenced by practical reasons, family habits, and emotional stress. A long time

ago, parents used TV as a babysitter for the very young ones, according to Beyens & Eggermont (2014). Digital babysitting today is, however, much larger than TV, because today smartphones and the digital tablet are mobile and can be used virtually anywhere. Parents may allow a child to have a phone in the kitchen, in the car, at the restaurant, the clinic, the shopping area or the bedroom. This convenient access has transformed how screens are being utilized in family life. Sometimes parents permit and encourage children's digital media use to complete other tasks, obtain personal time, stay out of trouble or to keep children calm. The results provide insights beyond just children's media interest; they also reveal the parents' needs and pressures in the context of children's screen time (Geurts et al., 2022; Zahra et al. 2024).

In early childhood, parents' use of screens to calm or regulate kids is particularly significant. Children are still developing their ability to regulate their emotions, to wait their turn, to share attention, and to react to boundaries in this phase. Radesky et al. (2023) discovered that when children ages 3 to 5 used their mobile devices to soothe them, this was linked to emotional reactivity and executive functioning issues. This doesn't mean that all screen time is bad, but it does imply that if children are using screens as the primary way to calm down, then they have less opportunities to learn how to calm down in other ways. Meanwhile, parents can use screen time due to tiredness, occupation, lack of support, or pressure to silence crying or disruptive behaviours. Therefore, the question must be examined with a balance approach and without any negativity towards parents or neglecting possible concerns about development.

Another key factor is parent stress. Screen media have been identified by Brauchi et al. (2024) as potential "new pacifiers" and research demonstrated correlations between parenting stress and parental attitudes and screen time in early childhood. They're very pertinent when it comes to real world family life, as parents sometimes make screen choices when they are under stress. For instance, a parent could be cooking, working from home, helping another child, traveling or trying to soothe a child in

public while on a screen. The study conducted by Mallawaarachchi et al. (2022) also revealed that parents find it stressful to give mobile screen devices to young children. It can be challenging for parents to feel free to use screens while they are having a hard time, and it can be challenging for parents to feel like they are being judged if they permit screens. This indicates that digital babysitting isn't a easy issue of good/bad parenting. It is a complex caregiving practice, which is influenced by the actual demands of the family.

Problem Statement

The study of children's screen time is growing, but most research is on the amount of screen time that children consume or the impact of screen time on behaviour and development. Fewer studies have focused on parents' everyday experiences with using screens to soothe, distract, entertain, and/or regulate children. The question remains, why do parents use screens and what situations incentivize screen use, how do parents feel about it, and how do they cope with rules, guilt, and expectations?

This gap is significant because screens are now a part of normal parenting. Domoff et al. (2019) found that family communication relating to screen media can be reactive and negotiated in the context of everyday home life. Likewise Livingstone and Helsper (2008) explained parental mediation comprises of guidance, restriction and discussion, however, in real life situations it becomes difficult to be consistent. Parents might know that they have to set limits, but proceed with screens when they are tired, working, traveling or dealing with tantrums.

This is a salient problem in Pakistan. Suleman et al. (2023) related excessive screen time with behavioural issues in pre-school children of Islamabad. But there is limited qualitative literature on the use of screens as a 'digital babysitter' among parents in Pakistan is available.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore how parents respond to children in their daily lives with digital screens to soothe, distract, entertain, or regulate.

- To examine the real-life stresses and feelings that impact parent use of screens as a care strategy.
- To understand the perception, negotiation and boundary setting skills of parents with regard to responsible parenting and screen time.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do parents use digital screens to distract, entertain, calm, and control children in everyday family contexts?

RQ 2: What are the practical needs and emotional experiences that can impact parents' use of screens as a means of managing child behavior?

RQ3. How do parents make sense of and work around the advantages, dangers, and guidelines of screen use in their routine parenting activities?

Significance of the Study

This study is important due to its attention to parents' lived experiences in a Pakistani context. This study treats screen use as a child behaviour issue, rather than focus on the relationship between screen use and family pressure, parenting stress, work demands and household routines. This is necessary because parents might need objective assistance instead of condemnation. The results can inform parents, teachers, child development workers and family therapists of the reasons behind the use of screens as a calming and/or management tool in daily life. The study might additionally offer more practical recommendations for families, including flexible but clear screen rules, alternative, soothing actions, and emotional management without just relying on screens. This study provides a more equitable account of digital babysitting as a useful short-term measure as well as a potential longer-term consideration in the day-to-day life of families.

Literature Review

Digital screens are a part of daily family life, particularly for families with young children. The children are now viewing TVs, smart phones, tablets, laptops, YouTube, cartoons, games, and streaming services at an early age. Many families don't use screens for learning or play. They're also a convenient tool for parents

to use to help calm kids, distract them, ease crying, soothe temper tantrums, and keep children busy during busy household, work, and family tasks. This can sometimes be referred to as "digital babysitting," as the screen temporarily distracts the child from other activities while the parent is on the go.

Initial studies on the subject were primarily limited to television. The study conducted by Beyers and Eggermont (2014) assessed the parents' attitude towards using television for babysitting purposes with young children, and the authors found a high correlation between attitude and parent use of television as a babysitter. Their research demonstrated that parents can be able to use the tv to help fill their children's time when they're busy or need some respite from care giving. Their work was about television but today there is digital babysitting too, on mobile phones, tablets, YouTube and streaming services. Newer screens are more portable and personal and so are easier to use in other settings, like in cars, restaurants, clinics, bedrooms, and kitchens.

The reasons for parents to give screens to children have been found to be mostly practical, the recent studies reveal. Geurts et al. (2022) identified that the needs and interests of parents' influence children's use of digital media. Parents can allow their children to have screen time as it helps them to get things done, to organize their schedules, to decrease conflicts, or to have personal time. This is particularly pertinent because child media consumption is frequently talked about as if it is children's choice, or a preference. But parents' stress can also influence when and how screens are used. When parents are cooking, cleaning, working at home, assisting another child or involved in a stressful routine, the screens may be a source of readily available "help and support (Zahra et al. 2024).

Mallawaarachchi et al. (2022) also explored parents' motives for giving mobile screen devices to young children. In their qualitative study, they identified that there are a number of tensions that occur for parents when using screens. Although parents might know that excessive screen time is a problem, they might still use screens to deal with actual situations. This reveals that there is a time when you aren't careless or unplanned with screens. Many

parents make decisions about screens when they are tired, busy or wanting to avoid conflict. Thus, digital babysitting should be examined in a neutral and non-judgemental manner.

One of the most common themes in the literature is that screens are used in order to soothe a child. Radesky et al. (2016) explored the association between parents' use of mobile technology to soothe upset children with children's social-emotional development. Subsequently, Radesky et al. (2023) identified that the greater the frequency of device use to calm children from 3 to 5 years of age, the higher the emotional reactivity and executive functioning concerns. This is not to say that all screen usage to soothe a child is bad. They do say, though, that if screens start to be used as the primary way to calm a child, they might miss out on learning other ways to do so. This is particularly crucial during early childhood when children are learning how to be patient, to control themselves and regulate their emotions.

Stress is another significant factor to consider and that of the parents. Brauchli et al (2024) referred to screen media as potential "new pacifiers" and identified links between parental attitudes and parenting stress with children's screen time in early childhood. This is particularly important for digital babysitting, as many parents may be on screens during stressful times. Sometimes, when parents feel they need to calm their children down right away, they may decide to give them a phone, even if they don't think it's the best possible long-term solution. Screens can be used in the midst of a tantrum, to prepare dinner, while on a work call, and while trying to calm a child in public, for example. During this time, screens can help alleviate stress for both parents and children, though the parent might feel guilt or worry afterward.

Studies also indicate that family communication and rules about screen time are not easily managed. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) gave a description of the different types of mediation that parents engage in, including rule-setting, content monitoring, discussion, and access restrictions. But actual family life makes it difficult to adhere to these rules. While parents can put their own boundaries, those boundaries can shift when the child is distressed, the parent

is exhausted or when they are away from home. Domoff et al. (2019) also discovered that family dialogue about screen media and cell phones frequently takes place in normal family lives. Screen rules aren't just rules; they're negotiated in the course of daily routines, conflicts, compromises and family interactions.

The quality of parent-child interaction is another important issue. McDaniel and Radesky (2018) examined technology interruptions to parent-child interactions (technoference) and concluded that there were connections between technoference and behavior problems in children. While the present study was conducted with parents' technology use, it is linked to digital babysitting as it revealed the impact of screens on family interaction. If screens are used frequently to keep children quiet, there may be less opportunities to engage in shared play, conversation, emotional coaching, or in-person interactions. Radesky et al. (2014) also noted the use of caregivers' mobile devices during meals in fast-food restaurants and reported that mobile devices may impact the attention and interaction of caregivers with their children. The results indicate that screens can play a role for parents in managing the moment, but can also have an impact on the emotional and social nature of family time.

Concurrently, not all screen use is problematic, as there is no literature evidence to suggest otherwise. Pempek and McDaniel (2016) found tablet use to be associated with the well-being of young children and family context. This implies that children's screen use should be assessed within the context of family use. Therefore, a parent who is overworked, under-supported, or overburdened may utilize the screens differently to a parent who has more time, support, and resources. Therefore, the reasons for children's screen use, the content that children watch, rules around screen time, and how screen time is emotionally significant for parents need to be investigated as well.

Screen use is also identified as an issue locally in Pakistan. Excessive screen time was found to be correlated with behavioural issues in preschool children in Islamabad by Suleman et al. (2023). This indicates that the use of screens is not a problem only in western countries. Families are also seeing an increasing exposure to

smartphones, television and online content in Pakistan. In addition, parents might have to cope with household responsibilities, work stress, and their children's education, as well as with the demands of extended family and the lack of sleep. These situations can lead to the use of screens as a practical parenting tool.

What can be concluded in general from this literature is that digital babysitting by parents is a multifaceted parenting challenge. Parents use screens for convenience, emotional relief, behaviour management, learning, entertainment and social pressure. Research indicates that screens are beneficial in the short term but regular use for calming and/or controlling purposes can lead to concerns related to emotional regulation, behaviour, and family dynamics. Thus, research should go beyond simply asking the question: how much screen time do children get? It should also inquire why screens are used, what the circumstances are for their use, how parents think about it, and how parents are managing rules and boundaries.

Theoretical Framework

This study applied Uses and Gratifications Theory which is a useful theory to explain why people deliberately select a media to satisfy a specific need. This theory does not consider the media user as passive recipient but as an active agent who uses the media as a means of entertainment, relaxation, escape, information, companionship, and practical assistance (Katz et al., 1973). The theory is relevant to the present study because it is used to explain the reasons why parents use digital screens as a way to soothe, distract, entertain and regulate children in their daily family activities.

Uses and Gratifications Theory claims that media consumption is linked with social and psychological needs. In the meantime, Katz et al. (1973) suggested that people use media intentionally in order to get satisfaction or help them in everyday life. This can be an explanation for a digital babysitting service because parents can provide a child with a phone, tablet, television or video on the internet not just for the kid's enjoyment but to deal with challenging scenarios. Screens can be used when cooking, doing household tasks, going on trips, shopping,

attending appointments and when a child is distressed.

The theory also puts the emphasis on the amount of screen time children consume rather than the purpose of their use and functions they have within the family life. Ruggiero (2000) asserted that Uses and Gratifications Theory is still relevant in the digital era: digital technology provides more choice, convenience, control, and flexibility. This is critical for today's parenting as smartphones and tablets are portable and readily available. The mobile screens are easy to use in the family, in restaurants, in clinics, in cars and in shops, unlike television.

Parents' use of screens can be interpreted in various ways in terms of gratifications. This first is a practical gratification. Parents can use screens to engage children in tasks during domestic chores or work, as well as in care and support or any other tasks. Thus, screens offer parents time and space in which to handle everyday tasks. Studies have also revealed that parents rely on digital media to aid their routines and responsibilities (Geurts et al., 2022; Zahra et al., 2024), and some parents have reported using television as a babysitter (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014).

The second form is emotional fulfilment. Parents can use screens if they are feeling tired, stressed, overwhelmed or emotionally drained. A screen can keep crying, noise, conflict, or restlessness at a minimum for a time. In line with this, Bruachli et al. (2024) identified links between parenting stress and parental attitudes, and children's screen time, indicating that children's screen time is influenced by parents' emotional experiences.

The third form is gratification in the form of behaviour management. Screens can be used to soothe or curb parent-child conflict outbursts, sibling rivalry, public restlessness or tantrums, quickly. Radesky et al. (2023) reported that mobile devices are often used to soothe young children, but excessive use could be associated with emotional reactivity and executive functioning issues.

Social gratification is the fourth form. When a child is crying or acting out, parents might be embarrassed or criticized in public settings or at home. Providing a screen could help keep one calm and fulfil social norms of "good" parenting.

With regard to digital babysitting as a purposeful parenting tactic, Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a clear lens of understanding overall. It covers the practical, emotional, behavioural and social functions of screens as well as parents' guilt, anxiety, and uncertainty around the future impact and boundaries of the family.

Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative descriptive research was chosen for this study as it aims to examine the experiences parents have when using digital screens to soothe, distract, entertain and manage their children. This design was appropriate, as the study explored parents' decision-making, emotions, routines, and boundaries for screen use, rather than just screen time. It also facilitated the presentation of parents' experiences in their own words (Sandelowski, 2000). In previous research, parents' use of screens has been reported for practical care tasks, to minimise conflict, manage behaviour, and for short-term relief (Geurts et al., 2022; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022; Zahra et al., 2024). These experiences were explored with the parents through semi-structured interviews. This approach proved beneficial as parents' media consumption is associated with feelings of guilt, pressure, relief, fatigue, and worry (Brauchli et al., 2024; Radesky et al., 2023).

Sampling Strategy

The type of sampling in the study was purposive sampling with maximum variation. The study required parents to be able to provide detailed information, and parents who had first-hand experience of using screens with children were considered to be the participants of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015), making purposive sampling appropriate. Maximum variation was used to ensure that parents of different family circumstances, including mothers, fathers, working parents, non-working parents, single and two-parent families, and parents representing a range of social-economic statuses were included. The participants were parents or primary caregivers of children ages 2 to 8 years who lived with the child most of the week, and who had used screen media in the past month.

Sample Size

They had a final sample of 30 parents. This was appropriate for a qualitative interview study, where it was possible to discuss experiences of different nature while maintaining the data being manageable for detailed thematic analysis. For well-focused samples and in-depth interviews, it is recommended that this is a range in which many qualitative studies achieve good thematic patterns (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The data was collected until it became apparent that it was emerging in patterns and that there were no significant new themes.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants were recruited from preschools, primary schools and parenting groups, community centres and online parent networks. An information sheet was given, informed consent was obtained, and a brief demographic form was given. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online and were 45-60 minutes in length. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word for word. The researcher also took notes on the field following each interview. Questions were asked in a non-judgemental manner, as many parents are apprehensive about discussing screens with their child's parents (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022; Radesky et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

The necessary ethical approval was granted prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were informed that their participation was voluntary, they could opt out of answering questions, and they could opt out before the analysis. The interviews were carried out with caution due to the topic of parenting stress, parenting guilt and fear of judgment (Orb et al., 2001). The names of parents and children were changed to pseudo names and identifying details were omitted. All data were encrypted in password-protected files. Since the study included parents and children, confidentiality limits and safeguarding procedures were explained in the study (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The researcher read the transcripts several times, making notes on initial ideas. Then initial codes were developed, primarily from parents' own words. These were then divided into themes. Themes were discussed, clarified and given names prior to the findings being written with selected quotations. An audit trail, discussion with another researcher and focus on showing examples that contradicted the central patterns enhanced trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017).

The results are summarized based on the thematic analysis of parents' experiences of using digital screens to soothe, divert, entertain or control their children's behavior in daily family life. Thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. The results indicated that parents also utilized screens as a practical parenting tool in busy, stressful and emotionally difficult moments. Four main themes emerged: : screens as everyday parenting support, screens as emotional support for parents, screens as a tool for managing children's behavior, and parents' challenges in establishing rules and boundaries.

Findings**Table 1.*****Demographic Characteristics of Participants***

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Work Experience	Field	No. of Children	Ages of Children in Years
P1	F	30	Master's	8 years	Academia	2	2, 6
P2	M	35	Bachelor's	10 years	Banking Sector	2	3, 8
P3	F	25	Bachelor's	3 years	Healthcare	1	2
P4	F	32	Master's	10 years	University administration	3	2, 5, 7
P5	M	39	Master's	12 years	IT	2	5, 8
P6	F	30	Bachelor's	6 years	Private business	2	4, 6
P7	F	31	MPhil	8 years	Academia	1	7
P8	M	32	Bachelor's	9 years	Marketing	3	2, 4, 6
P9	F	27	Master's	4 years	Freelancing	1	3
P10	F	38	Bachelor's	12 years	Nursing	2	5, 8
P11	M	35	Master's	13 years	Government Job	2	3, 7
P12	F	31	Bachelor's	7 years	Homemaker	3	2, 5, 8
P13	F	28	Master's	5 years	School counselling	1	4
P14	M	35	Bachelor's	16 years	Retail business	2	6, 8
P15	F	40	Master's	15 years	Healthcare administration	3	3, 6, 8
P16	F	24	Bachelor's	3 years	Customer service	1	2
P17	M	33	Master's	10 years	Software development	2	4, 7
P18	F	30	MPhil	9 years	Teaching	2	5, 8

P19	F	37	Bachelor's	12 years	Home-based business	3	2, 4, 7
P20	M	41	Master's	17 years	Engineering	2	6, 8
P21	F	28	Master's	6 years	Media and communication	1	5
P22	F	32	Bachelor's	11 years	Banking	2	3, 6
P23	M	30	Bachelor's	8 years	Transport/logistics	2	4, 7
P24	F	27	Master's	4 years	Early childhood education	1	3
P25	F	31	Bachelor's	10 years	Human resources	3	2, 5, 8
P26	M	40	Master's	15 years	Business management	2	5, 7
P27	F	30	Bachelor's	7 years	Social work	2	3, 6
P28	F	36	MPhil	12 years	Researcher	1	8
P29	M	33	Bachelor's	11 years	Private company	3	2, 4, 6
P30	F	31	Master's	8 years	Healthcare	2	4, 7

Note. P = participant. All participant names were replaced with codes to protect confidentiality. The table presents parent characteristics relevant to understanding family routines, work pressure, and children's ages.

Screens as Everyday Parenting Support

The first theme illustrated parents' use of screens as a part of regular family life. Uses of the screen were widespread in the kitchen, when cleaning, feeding and putting children to bed, shopping, travelling or when doing a job in the house. Parents reported using screens to help them get tasks done and to keep the child occupied and quiet. This result is in line with previous studies indicating that parents occasionally use TV or a digital media to fill time and regulate children's daily activities, serving as a "babysitter" for children (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014; Geurts et al., 2022).

There was some parent feedback that screen use was not always intentional. Rather, this occurred when the parent was occupied and required brief silence or co-operation of the child. For instance one mother said that: "My younger one keeps going into the kitchen and asking for things when I'm cooking and I give him some cartoons on the tablet for a bit to get me to finish the cooking without being unsafe." (P1) Another parent said that screens were a part of their family's evening: "The children help me to put things up for the next day and I watch a video

on YouTube while I am getting dinner ready after coming home from work. (P2)

Parents also were using screens in a car and while waiting. Some participants reported having fewer restlessness issues in cars, clinics, restaurants, and at family events with the use of screens. One participant stated: "My daughter gets bored very easily in the car if we are in a traffic jam; if I give her my cellphone she watches rhymes; otherwise, everyone becomes stressed. (P9) This theme demonstrated the use of screens as functional everyday parenting support. While parents may not have considered this to be ideal, they felt that it was useful in coping with daily tasks.

Screens as Emotional Support for Parents

The second theme revealed that parents felt a sense of emotional relief when using screens within a stressful period. Parents reported feelings of being tired, overwhelmed, irritated or mentally exhausted. During these times, screens have been valuable for minimizing noise, crying and conflict. Previous research has also revealed associations between parenting stress and

parenting attitudes and children's screen time in early childhood (Brauchli et al., 2024).

A few participants reported that they were able to have a brief respite due to the screen and that they did not shout at the child as they would have otherwise done. One mother shared:

"Sometimes I get impatient; I give my son the phone for 20 minutes, so I can calm myself down and not be so angry at that moment. I know it's not the best thing to do, but at that time it helps me to be less angry." (P6). Another participant said that she used screen time to calm herself down from being 'tired emotionally'. "Once I get to the end of the office work and housework, I feel really exhausted. When I am watching cartoons with my child, then I get a bit of quiet time, that's important." (P22)

But parents also reported feelings of guilt following their use of screens. Others believed that they were not doing well as parents or that they were becoming addicted to the digital devices. This tension is comparable to the earlier qualitative study where parents felt judged on their permission or prohibition of the mobile screen devices (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022). One participant said, "When I give the phone too much I feel guilty, at the time, I feel good but later, maybe I should have played with him" (P13). This theme illustrated a link between relief and guilt in regard to screen use. Parents resorted to using screens because they needed to be emotionally separated, but there were others that asked themselves if they were doing a good job as parents.

Screens as a Tool for Managing Children's Behaviour

In the third theme, children were seen to be controlled by screens, particularly when they were having a tantrum or crying, bored, fighting with siblings, and refusing food or sleep. When parents felt they were failing to calm the child when using some of the other strategies, they reported using screens as a 'quick fix'. Mobile devices have also been found to be used to soothe young children, but excessive use to soothe may decrease children's access to other ways of soothing themselves (Radesky et al., 2023).

Some parents described how screens were particularly helpful when they were out with

their children in situations where they had felt a need to keep their kids quiet socially. One father said "When he begins crying in a restaurant, people look at us, at that moment I give him my mobile which immediately stops him crying" (P8). Another participant was talking about using the screens when he/she got upset at home, "Sometimes, when my daughter, she throws a tantrum, nothing works. Sometimes I show her her favourite cartoon, and she falls silent in minutes" (P24).

Some parents commented that when the child was in distress, he/she started wanting the presence of a screen. This caused parents to be concerned that screens had become a habit and not a support. One parent explained: "Now he understands that, if he cries enough, someone will give him the phone. This makes me worried because he is beginning to learn to soothe himself with the screen." (P17)

In this theme, parents learned that screens could be useful when used for a short period of time to manage children's behaviour, but the parents recognized that the repeated use of screens could cause increased long-term difficulties for them in setting limits and helping children regulate their emotions without screens.

Parent's Challenges in Establishing Rules and Boundaries

The 4th theme was centred around parents' struggles with setting and enforcing screen time limits. The majority of parents reported rules, including no screens at meal times, no screens before bedtime, only educational videos, and/or limited screen time after homework. These rules, however, were frequently altered when parents were tired, too busy, working, traveling, or when a difficult situation arose. Similarly, previous research has already confirmed that children's needs and parents' own practical needs influence parent decision making regarding children's digital media use (Geurts et al., 2022; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022; Zahra et al., 2024). One participant explained: "We have a rule that there is no screen before bedtime but when I'm too exhausted I let him watch cartoons as long as it keeps him in bed" (P10). Another parent explained how planned rules were different from actually being in a situation: "In my mind, I want only an hour of screen time, but in reality, it is

more, as I have to make office calls, cook and look after other children” (P4).

Reducing guilt was another strategy used by parents through selecting educational and religious material. They felt that the content had learning value and they felt it to be more acceptable to use a screen. One participant said, “When she watches the alphabet videos or the Islamic stories, I feel better because I know she has something to learn, but if she doesn't look at them it feels like she's wasting her time” (P18).

A few parents said that they didn't agree with other family members when it came to screen rules. Sometimes grandparents, spouses or older siblings were permitted more screen time than the parent wanted. One mother shared, “My husband gives the phone to children very easily, and the children don't listen to me.” (P27).

In this theme it was demonstrated that screen boundaries were not set. They were negotiated daily in terms of the stresses, supports, work, children's actions, and the family routine.

Summary of Findings

Overall findings indicated that the use of screens was part of parents' daily care giving. Screens supported parents in dealing with household chores, work, children's behaviour, in public places and emotional pressure. Parents reported feeling guilty, concerned and confused about screens. The results indicated that digital babysitting did not just represent poor parenting. Instead, it was a product of “real-life” family stressors such as fatigue, decreased support, work pressures, kids' emotional needs, and challenges of establishing consistent rules.

The results also revealed that parents knew about the positive and negative effects of screen use. They cherished screens as a support in tricky moments but were concerned about dependency, diminished self-regulation and struggles with boundaries. These results add to the earlier studies on how practical considerations (Brauchli et al., 2024), parenting stress (Geurts et al., 2022), emotional relief (Radesky et al., 2023), and concerns about child development (Geurts et al., 2022, Zahra et al., 2021) influence parenting decisions surrounding screens.

Discussion

This study aimed to gain insight into parental experience of handling children with digital screens in their daily life to soothe, divert, entertain, and settle them down. The results indicated that screens were not solely for kids' entertainment. Rather, they were part of every day care, particularly when parents were working, travelling, tired, trying to get dinner ready, or dealing with a tantrum. Four themes emerged: (1) Screens as Everyday Parenting Support, (2) screens as emotional support for parents, (3) Screens as a Tool for Managing Children's Behaviour, and (4) parent's challenges in establishing rules and boundaries. The results indicate that digital babysitting is a multidimensional practice, which is influenced by parenting pressure, emotional labour, children's behavior, and the needs of modern day.

The first big finding was that parents saw their screens as a regular parenting device. A number of parents reported that screens were useful in everyday activities like cooking, cleaning, setting the table, putting the child to bed, travelling, working from home, etc. This is corroborated by the research conducted by Beyens and Eggermont (2014) who noted that sometimes parents use the television as a “babysitter”, keeping their young children occupied. Today this role has gone beyond tv into the smartphone, the tablet, YouTube, cartoons, streaming platforms and more. The difference between mobile and traditional television is its portability and ability to be used almost anywhere – in the car, at restaurants, at clinics, at market, at family gatherings, etc. This demonstrates the flexibility and increasing prevalence of digital babysitting, thanks to new technologies.

This observation is also in line with Geurts et al. (2022) who discovered that parents' needs and interests affect children's digital media usage. Not all parents in this study used screens, as they felt that screens were the best option for their children. These were used by many because they required more time to finish certain activities such as cooking safely, attend to work calls, to assist the other child, to quiet the home environment, etc. Children's screen time needs to be viewed not just a children's issue. It is also

linked to parents' working hours and occupation status, and the support they have at home. Digital babysitting, as a result, can be regarded as a coping mechanism in the context of the busy lives of families.

The second finding was that screens helped parents to seek emotional relief. Parents reported experiences where they were feeling tired, irritated, stressed or mentally overwhelmed. In these cases the introduction of a screen will make for a small bit of a break and decrease emotional stress. This is consistent with the results of Brauchli et al. (2024), who observed that the parenting stress and parental attitudes are associated with young children's screen time. The current study further elucidates this connection by providing a personalization via parents' reports of sometimes using screens as a way to soothe themselves, prevent yelling, and cope with challenging emotions.

This aspect of screen use is crucial due to the fact that when parenting young children, there is always a need to be attentive, patient and emotionally controlled. Sometimes screens are a quick emotional break for parents who are tired and unsupported. Pempek and McDaniel (2016) also discovered that links between young children's tablet utilization and maternal well-being point to the fact that kids' screen use is related to the overarching emotional states of the family. In this study, relief was a recurring parent sentiment in the moment, and guilt, later on. This guilt reveals that there was awareness of the issue on screen time but parents were using screens in difficult days of their daily life.

This is also in line with the findings of Mallawaarachchi et al. (2022) who have found that parents often feel between a rock and hard place when providing their young children with a mobile screen device. Parents can feel judged if they permit screens, however they can also feel stressed if they don't use screens and are unable to manage the kid or accomplish important tasks. The tension of the parents in this study was described similarly. They desired to be responsible, but they also had to find solutions to practical matters. This indicates that a conversation around screen usage should not be centred around the parents and rather take into account the actual circumstances of parents' decisions.

One part of the third finding was that parents use screens to regulate children's behaviour. Screens were used when the child was experiencing tantrums, crying, boredom, sibling conflict, when he/she refused food or when he/she was restless in public places. Parents found screens to be speedy and effective, particularly in times of urgency for calm. This result is related to the results of Radesky et al. (2016) who concluded that parents employed mobile technology to soothe distressed children. Later, Radesky et al. (2023) reported a link between frequent use of a mobile device for calming young children and emotional reactivity and executive functioning problems. This study confirms that it is not harmful, but it does help explain why parents might return to screens over and over again to calm: screens are effective when parents are under pressure to calm crying and disruptive behaviour.

The importance of parents' screen use in public settings was noted. Parents felt pressured to keep children quiet with no comment and not be judged when in a restaurant, clinic, car or at a family gathering. This indicates that digital babysitting service isn't simply a private family practice, but is additionally influenced by social expectations. A phone or tablet could be useful for parents to help them control their child's behavior and other people's response to them. Meanwhile, a few parents were concerned that their kids were getting used to the use of a screen when they were upset. Intermittent use for calming might diminish children's opportunities to practice other strategies for emotion regulation (Radesky, et al., 2023). This concern of the parents is supported by the present study. Some screens have been able to soothe crying babies in no time, but parents have also worried that babies would become so accustomed to the screen to be comforted that they would no longer be able to be comforted by a person.

The fourth finding was that setting boundaries and rules with parents around screen use was challenging. Most parents reported having rules which included setting a time limit, no screens before bed, selecting educational videos, or taking screens during mealtimes. But these guidelines were often subject to change according to the stress, work pressure, travelling, tiredness and/or child behaviour. In line with

Livingstone and Helsper's (2008) study on parental mediation, this study confirmed that parents rely on rules, discussion, restriction and co-use as strategies for regulating children's media use. Parents used these strategies in this study but not necessarily routinely. It was decided to modify the rules based on the changing family circumstances each day.

This demonstrates that parental mediation is more than just about rules. It's a continuous process that is influenced by reality. A parent might think they have to be strict, but give the extra time when they have to work late, if sick or travelling, or exhausted. Geurts et al. (2022) and Zahra et al. (2024) also discovered that the needs of parents affect their children's digital media consumption. In the present study, it is found that screen rules are not fixed, but vary depending on the context.

Some parents attempted to make the use of the screen more acceptable by selecting "good" content, such as educational videos, alphabet songs, religious stories or learning apps. This indicates that parents did not neglect their children. They attempted to control the quality of the content and minimise any harm. But even when children were not against turning off screens, worries about time, dependency or conflict were not completely addressed with educational programs. Screen rules were also impacted by family members. Some parents wanted to restrict screen time, but spouses, grandparents or older siblings gave them more readily, leading to confusion and disagreement. The results are also related to studies of parent-child interactions. A high level of technoference (disruption of parent-child interaction by technology) was correlated with child behaviour problems, according to McDaniel and Radesky (2018). Radesky et al. (2014) also determined that a parent's use of a mobile device while eating may impact parent-child interaction. The current study indicates that the screens can decrease the conflict in the present moment, but may also limit the opportunities for conversations, play, emotional coaching, and family moments.

The conclusions reveal in totality that digital babysitting is not a one-way street but a more balanced approach is required. Parents who use screens aren't just anything but a careless or

irresponsible parent. Many employ screens due to trying to balance work, household responsibilities, fatigue, lack of support, public pressure and children's emotional needs. Meanwhile, parents are concerned with dependence, lack of patience, poor boundaries and children's expectations of screen time when they're upset. So, digital babysitting is helpful as well as challenging. It can be useful for parents to manage challenging circumstances while it can also be challenging for family routines and children's self-regulation.

The study has significant implications for both parents and educators as well as child development professionals. Screen use advice must be practical and non-judgemental. In addition to advising parents not to use screens, professionals should suggest ways to use them less, such as providing toy baskets while cooking, verbal or audio stories when on the road, calming routines, parent-child scripts, and predictable screen-time rules. It is also important to support parents' emotional health as decreasing children's screen time may involve decreasing parents' stress.

To conclude, this study revealed that screen is a part of everyday caregiving. Parents are able to manage them for routines, emotions, behaviour and social pressure. The key contribution of this study is that it presents digital babysitting from parents' point of view. It highlights that screen-time isn't just a matter of children's practices but also the concerns of modern parenting. There needs to be a balance; appreciation of parents' difficulties and promotion of some more healthy, regular and engaging methods of communicating with their children to help them regulate their emotions and schedules.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how parents used digital screens to soothe, distract, entertain, and/or handle children during daily family life. The results indicate that screentime is not just a kid-related phenomenon, but also a parenting strategy that is influenced by daily routines, emotional stress, and practical concerns. Parents used screens when eating together, when traveling, doing chores, going to bed, doing work, going out in public, and when children cried, were bored, restless or upset. In

many of these cases, the screens were able to offer immediate assistance when parents might need time, quiet or respite.

One of the findings of this research is that parents are not reckless about the use of screens. The majority of parents knew that overuse of screen time could cause issues, including dependency, inability to set limits, lack of patience, and that children become used to devices when they are upset. But parents also described how screens may have assisted them in dealing with issues in their everyday life. Many parents were using screens when they were tired, busy, stressed or when they were trying to do multiple things. This is an indicator that digital babysitting isn't merely about kids' fascination with screens but also tied to the challenges faced by parents in today's family life.

The study showed that the screen was used as a source of support that was used routinely in parenting. Phones, tablets, televisions, YouTube, cartoons and online videos were used by parents to keep kids entertained during the time they had to fill while at home cooking, cleaning, in the office, traveling or waiting in public. These were normal times in family life in which screens played a role in decreasing crying, conflict or disruption. The screens are accessible and effective in the moment and thus became part of parents' everyday life.

Another significant finding was that screening offered emotional relief for parents. Being a parent of young children can be tiring and stressful, particularly when parents have little support. Some parents reported that providing a screen for a child could provide a few minutes for them to cool down, stop shouting or relieve emotional stress. This doesn't imply that parents thought the most effective answer was screens. Instead, in some cases screens were used because parents at the moment did not have any other better alternative.

The research also revealed that screens were often utilized to behave kids. Parents screened during temper tantrums, crying, boredom, sibling conflict, not eating or when the child was restless in public places. Screens were helpful as they worked quickly and were helpful as parents were under pressure to control the child's behaviour. This resulted, however, in concern. Some parents were concerned children may be

screen addicted and will not be able to find alternative calming strategies.

Other challenges for parents included keeping rules about screen time consistent. There were a lot of rules that were established, including screen time limits, screen-free before bed, or only watching educational shows. Parents however, were prone to change these rules when they were tired, working, on vacation, or in a difficult situation. This demonstrates that there is no simple formula in actual family life for setting screen time limits.

In all, this study presents the final conclusions of the phenomenon of digital babysitting being viewed in a balanced and nonjudgmental manner. Parents engage in screen time to help them cope with everyday life, but also have concerns about how screens affect their children's behaviors, feelings and schedules. Thus, the conversation about the amount of screen time children have needs to be shifted to further discussion about what screen time does for children. More focus needs to be placed on the reasons for using screens, the pressures on parents and how families can be supported with tangible alternatives. It is crucial for parents, teachers, and health care providers to have this awareness when encouraging healthy and balanced screen time in the family.

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