

EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF INTERNET USE ON CHILDREN DURING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD (PLAY) PERIOD

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Abstract

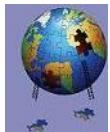
In recent years, there has been a marked increase in both the prevalence and use of the internet and technology. The rising ownership of smartphones, computers, and tablets, coupled with the widespread availability of internet connections in households, indicates that these devices have become indispensable not only for adults and adolescents but also for children in the play period, and even for newborns. The internet serves as a tool that enables children to explore the world, spend time in an enjoyable way, and access information with ease. It also helps reinforce concepts learned in daily life and education through computer games. By integrating text, images, motion, and sound, the internet captures children's interest and transforms learning into a multidimensional experience. However, alongside these benefits, internet use also poses certain risks for children, such as exposure to illegal or harmful content, communication with dangerous individuals, excessive gaming, and social withdrawal. This study aimed to identify the devices children in early childhood (play period) use to access the internet, the purposes for which they use it, how their parents supervise them, and the factors that increase or decrease their internet usage. The study was conducted with 60 parents residing in Nicosia and Güzelyurt in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, each having children aged between 3 and 6 years. The research followed a qualitative design, and data were collected through interviews. The results showed that approximately 51.76% of children accessed the internet via mobile phones, 32.43% used it primarily for gaming, and 47.16% of parents supervised their children during use. Furthermore, playing with family or friends was reported by 34.78% of parents as a factor that reduced internet use, whereas the absence of a caregiver was noted by 65.90% as the leading factor increasing usage.

Keywords: Early childhood, internet, parent.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the prevalence and utilization of the internet and technology. The increase in ownership of smartphones, computers, and tablets, along with the presence of internet connections in almost every household, suggests that these devices are not only indispensable to adults and adolescents but are increasingly integrated into the daily lives of children in the play period and even newborns (Ergüney, 2017). The internet provides children with the opportunity to explore the world, engage in entertaining activities, and access information quickly. Many concepts learned in daily life and during formal education are reinforced through computer games. The internet enriches the learning process by incorporating text, visuals, interactivity, and sound, thereby making it a multidimensional and engaging experience. While the internet offers numerous benefits to children, it also presents several risks, particularly in terms of easy access to illegal content, exposure to violence and sexual material, interaction with dangerous individuals, excessive gaming, and social isolation (Gündoğan, 2014).

Whether the internet becomes a threat or an opportunity for children largely depends on the awareness and actions of the adults influencing their behavior. Ensuring safe use requires that parents understand the developmental characteristics of this age group and have adequate knowledge about related technologies (Kuzu et al., 2008; Livingstone et al., 2010). Generational differences between "digital natives" and those who have adopted technology later in life often create challenges for parents in guiding their children's internet use (Ergüney, 2017). According to Brunner, children under the age of three learn primarily through direct interaction with their environment touching, hitting, biting, or



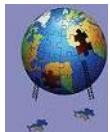
moving objects and by actively experimenting with materials. Therefore, the internet is not considered suitable for supporting the developmental skills of this age group, such as crawling, speaking, and walking. Research shows that from the age of 3–4, children are developmentally ready to explore the internet through devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. Children in this age group who use computers tend to demonstrate better developmental skills compared to their peers who do not (Haugland, 2000).

The early childhood (play) period, which encompasses children aged 3–6 before they start compulsory education, is characterized by significant progress in physical, cognitive, social, emotional, motor, and language development. During this critical stage, children lay the foundation for their future lives through play engaging in hands on exploration, collaboration, decision making, problem solving, and sharing experiences. The skills and concepts acquired during this period play a pivotal role in shaping later learning and development (Mağden & Şahin, 2002). Parents have a responsibility to guide, protect, and supervise their children's development. Traditionally, this has included teaching children to avoid speaking to strangers, not opening the door when alone at home, and refusing offers from unfamiliar individuals. However, in today's digital world, parents must also protect their children from potential dangers in digital environments (Ateş & Saltalı, 2019). Failure to maintain sufficient parental control can lead to children using tablets and smartphones in ways that extend beyond their intended purposes. When parents adopt permissive attitudes toward technology use, children may spend the majority of their time on these devices, which can lead to reduced family communication and significant socialization problems (Çakır, 2013).

The problems that children may encounter during internet use can generally be grouped as follows. Technical damages include children infecting the computer with viruses, causing spyware to be installed, or damaging the computer either in terms of software or hardware. As a result, existing documents and files may be lost, and some software settings may be disrupted. Physical, social, and psychological damages may arise from excessive gaming, isolating themselves at home instead of interacting with friends outside or at school, and playing violent games—all of which are possible harms caused by computer and internet use (Canberk & Sağiroğlu, 2007).

Considering that in today's digitalized world it is not possible for families to completely keep their children away from the internet and technological tools, it is thought that preventing these problems can only be achieved if parents guide their children regarding both the duration and the content of their internet use. A more appropriate approach would be for families to make internet use interactive by applying controllable filters and adjustable options, monitoring content, asking questions, and talking with their children. In this way, children will be able to consult their families about the problems they encounter while using the internet and technological devices under parental knowledge and supervision. Otherwise, children may engage in behaviors that break trust with their families and lead to undesirable consequences (Yükselen, 2018). Since the internet is such a powerful tool that influences our lives, when it is used consciously and for its intended purposes, it is expected to contribute greatly to children's development. However, there are also many inappropriate materials that children may encounter on the internet, as well as dangerous environments that may exploit their innocence and make them vulnerable to abuse. Therefore, precautions regarding computer and internet use should primarily be taken at home. Parents and educators, in particular, have important responsibilities in protecting children from inappropriate materials and dangers on the internet (Şendağ & Odabaşı, 2006).

According to the findings obtained from a study commissioned by one of the antivirus software companies, ESET, 53.7% of internet users considered children's exposure to inappropriate content as a major threat. The 2008 report of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) in the United Kingdom revealed that 58% of the websites identified as containing child abuse material included highly inappropriate images. Furthermore, 97% of the abused children were under the age of 10, and 28% were 6 years old or younger. In this context, it becomes evident that parents bear significant responsibilities in determining how and to what extent technology should take place in children's lives, as well as in ensuring the conscious use of technology (Demirel, Yörük & Özkan, 2012).



Research Aim

This study is important in terms of examining how long and for what purposes children in early childhood (play period) use the internet, determining parents' attitudes towards their children's internet use, and providing information to raise awareness on this matter. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to identify the internet usage habits of children in the early childhood (play period).

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

- 1) What are the tools through which children access the internet?
- 2) For what purposes do children use the internet?
- 3) Can parents control their children while they are using the internet?
- 4) What factors reduce children's internet use?
- 5) What factors increase children's internet use?
- 6) What are the opinions of families in the early childhood play period regarding gender, age groups, number of children, and the age of their children?

Research Significance

This research is significant in identifying the situations related to children's internet use for play development and in providing contributions to relevant institutions and organizations. It can be stated that the study may guide child development and preschool specialists and educators in the field and contribute to supporting parental education. Examining the reasons behind internet use among children in the early childhood (play period) a stage of rapid and critical development is crucial in drawing families' attention to this issue.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena within their natural settings, adopting a holistic approach and using specific methods to interpret and explain data (Işıkoglu, 2005). Among qualitative methods, the interview technique was utilized in this study. The interview technique involves a purposeful interaction in which individuals respond to pre-prepared questions, typically conducted face-to-face (Özdemir, 2010).

Population and Sample

The study sample consisted of 60 parents residing in the Nicosia and Güzelyurt regions of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 2025, each having a child aged between 3 and 6 years.

Data Collection Tools

A structured interview form was used to address the research problem. The form consisted of two sections. The first section contained questions related to demographic and personal information, while the second section focused on questions regarding the internet usage habits of early childhood (play period) children. Expert opinion was obtained for the interview form, and reliability and validity were established accordingly. The form was then administered to the participants.

Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study were analyzed through content analysis, a qualitative research approach. Content analysis seeks to answer one or more of the following questions: who said what, to whom, how, and with what effect (Koçak & Arun, 2006). In this study, the analysis involved identifying categories, themes, frequencies, and percentages, which were then detailed in the findings section.

**RESULTS and DISCUSSION****Table 1.** Social and Demographic Characteristics.

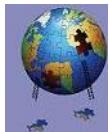
Child's Age	Frequency	Percentage
3 Years	13	% 21
4 Years	18	% 29
5 Years	15	% 24
6 Years	16	% 26

Number of Children in the Family	Frequency	Percentage
1 Child	25	% 40
2 Children	29	% 47
3 Children	6	% 10
2 Children	2	% 3

A total of 60 parents participated in the study. Among their children, 21% were 3 years old, 29% were 4 years old, 24% were 5 years old, and 26% were 6 years old. Regarding the number of children in the family, 40% had one child, 47% had two children, 10% had three children, and 3% had four or more children.

Table 2. Parents' Views on Children's Internet Access Devices, Usage Purposes, and Supervision Methods

CATEGORY	THEME	FREQUENCY (f)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Internet Access Tools	Phone	44	51.7
	Tablet, computer	30	34.9
	Television	8	9.5
Purpose of use	Does not use	3	3.6
	Playing games	24	32.5
	Watching cartoons	21	28.4
	Watching videos	13	17.6
	Listening to music	7	6.8
	Education, learning and research	5	6.7
	Does not use	3	4
Parental Control Methods	Entertainment	1	1.3
	Monitoring the websites visited	25	41.66
	Watching together	13	21.66
	Setting the limits	13	21.66
	Unable to control	1	1.66
	Does not use	1	1.66



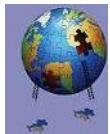
The majority of parents (51.76%) reported that their children accessed the internet via mobile phones, followed by tablets and computers (35.29%), and televisions (9.5%). Only 3.53% reported no use of internet access devices. Regarding usage purposes, the most common response was playing games (32.43%), followed by watching cartoons and videos (28.37%), listening to music (6.8%), educational and research activities (6.7%), and entertainment (1.35%). Only 4% indicated that their child did not use the internet. Parental supervision methods included monitoring visited websites (47.16%), watching together (21.66%), setting time limits (21.66%), inability to supervise (1.88%), and no usage (1.66%). These findings indicate that most children access the internet primarily through their parents' mobile phones, allowing constant availability. Although games are the predominant usage purpose, when integrated with educational content under parental supervision, they may not pose significant problems. However, unrestricted use can lead to negative outcomes such as lower academic performance, irregular sleep patterns, inadequate physical activity, unhealthy eating habits, obesity, musculoskeletal issues, and poor self-care skills (Irmak & Erdogan, 2016).

In response to the question "How do you control your children during internet use?", it was determined that 47.16% of parents controlled their children by monitoring the websites they visited, while 1.88% reported being unable to control their children. When allowing their children to use technological devices, parents are expected to consider factors such as age and developmental appropriateness, whether the content of the internet sites or TV programs is suitable, the presence of violence or slang, and limiting excessive use. It has been observed that conscious parents watch together with their children and intervene immediately in case of any negative situation, thereby preventing potential problems. Moreover, parents who select the computer programs and games their children use themselves believe that this practice reduces the negative effects of information and communication technologies on children (Zehir & Yalçın, 2019).

Table 3. Parents' Views on Factors Reducing and Increasing Internet Use

CATEGORY	THEME	FREQUENCY (f)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Factor Reducing Internet Use	Playing games with family or friends	16	34.78
	Spending time together	14	30.43
	Engaging in different activities	7	15.21
	Attending school	6	13.04
	Does not use	3	6.52
Factor Increasing Internet Use	Lack of someone to engage with	29	65.90
	Before Sleep	4	9.09
	While eating	2	4.54
	Weather Conditions	2	4.54
	Imitating peers who use	2	4.54
	Distance learning	2	4.54
	Holiday period	2	4.54
	Holiday period	1	2.72

The main factors reducing internet use included playing with family or friends (34.78%), spending time together (30.43%), engaging in different activities (15.21%), and attending school (13.04%). Factors increasing internet use included the absence of a caregiver (65.90%), followed by pre-sleep use (9.09%), eating meals (4.54%), weather conditions (4.54%), imitation of others (4.54%), distance education (4.54%), and holiday periods (2.72%). Parents' responses highlighted that children tend to turn to the internet when they feel bored or lonely, whereas family engagement, alternative activities, and outdoor play reduce screen time. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that structured, engaging, and interactive activities provided by parents can reduce children's dependence on digital technologies (Ateş & Saltalı, 2019).



In response to the question “What factors increase your children’s internet use?”, it was observed that the majority of parents (65.90%) reported that the absence of someone to engage with their child was the main factor. Based on this result, we can emphasize the importance of spending quality time with our children. When there is no one to engage with them, children may feel lonely and seek to fill this void and alleviate their sense of isolation through internet use.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data obtained in relation to the research problems, results regarding internet use among children in the childhood period were identified. According to these results, it was observed that children predominantly accessed the internet through communication devices such as smartphones. Uyar and Hasdemir (2021), in their study on children’s internet use, also reported that smartphones were the most frequently used communication tool, supporting the findings of this research. Similarly, Kiesler, Lundmark, and Kraut (2000) found in their study that children’s internet use had a strong interaction with gaming, educational activities, and behavioral effects, which further supports the results of the present study.

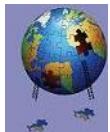
In this research, it was determined that parental control and guidance significantly influenced children’s internet use during the childhood period. This finding aligns with the results of Anderson and Jiang (2018), who concluded that parents developed control and management strategies regarding children’s social media and media content consumption. The sites monitored and games selected by parents were central to guiding children’s internet use and preferences.

Furthermore, the study found that factors reducing internet use during childhood were related to family and community engagement in leisure activities, whereas factors increasing internet use were associated with limited interaction with family and community. This aligns with Chaudron (2015), who reported that children’s internet use is influenced by educational and behavior-enhancing activities, which can both effectively manage time and increase internet use, while limited family and environmental interaction can have negative effects. These findings suggest that family and environmental engagement are key factors affecting children’s internet use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results obtained in this study, several recommendations are proposed. Parents should make a conscious effort to spend more quality time with their children in relation to internet use. They need to understand the powerful influence of the internet on children and avoid giving them uncontrolled access to internet-enabled devices. Families should recognize that short-term convenience may lead to serious consequences, such as internet addiction, and act accordingly. Specifically, providing smartphones or tablets to children without monitoring content or usage time can lead to excessive use and dependency. Parents should prioritize controlled and conscious internet use over a permissive approach, and avoid frequently spending time on their devices in the presence of children, as children tend to model adult behavior. While smartphones facilitate daily life, uncontrolled use can pose risks for children and for society’s future. Governments, universities, schools, and parents should take immediate and effective measures to promote conscious and safe internet use among children and adolescents, and develop new strategies.

Rather than relying solely on internet filters to protect children, it is also crucial to educate both children and parents on how to cope with online risks and raise awareness about them. Outdoor activities such as nature walks and picnics can encourage quality family time, and children should be provided with opportunities to interact with peers. From an educational perspective, assigning age-appropriate, enjoyable learning responsibilities can reduce children’s digital technology engagement. When families spend more quality time with their children, children are less likely to fill their free time with the internet, leading to better family relationships and greater overall happiness.



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