

**Digital Parenting and Children's Problematic Internet Use: A Narrative Review of Parental Influences and Implications for Counseling and Education**

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**Abstract**

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly reshaped children's daily lives, learning environments, and family dynamics. While digital media provide important educational and social opportunities, excessive and poorly regulated internet use among children has become a growing concern. This narrative review examines the relationship between digital parenting practices and children's problematic internet use, focusing on implications for family counseling and educational contexts. A structured literature search was conducted across major databases, including PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, covering peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2025. The selected studies were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that supportive and communicative digital parenting practices function as protective factors by enhancing children's self-regulation and digital literacy. In contrast, permissive and inconsistent parenting approaches increase the risk of problematic internet use, while overly restrictive strategies without open communication may produce counterproductive outcomes. The study highlights the importance of balanced parental mediation and emphasizes the integration of digital parenting education into family counseling and school-based interventions.

**Keywords:** digital parenting, problematic internet use, parental mediation, family counseling, children

**Introduction**

Digital technologies have become an indispensable part of children's everyday lives, profoundly shaping their educational experiences, social interactions, and leisure activities (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). The widespread accessibility of the internet, smartphones, and digital devices has led to a significant increase in children's screen time and digital engagement (Rideout, 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). While these technologies provide valuable opportunities for learning, creativity, and communication, excessive and uncontrolled internet use has raised growing concerns regarding children's psychological, social, and academic well-being (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Odabaşı, 2016; Przybylski, 2019; Twenge, 2019). These concerns are also reflected in national reports, which indicate a steady increase in children's access to digital technologies and internet use across households (MEB, 2022; TÜİK, 2023).

Problematic internet use among children has been associated with a wide range of negative outcomes, including emotional difficulties, behavioral problems, academic underachievement, sleep disturbances,

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and impaired family relationships (Anderson et al., 2017; Radesky et al., 2015; Young, 2017). Furthermore, excessive digital engagement has been linked to increased risks of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, particularly during critical developmental stages (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Twenge, 2019). Due to their still-developing self-regulation skills, children are especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of excessive internet use (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Consequently, identifying both protective and risk factors influencing children's digital behaviors has become a critical concern for families, educators, and mental health professionals (Çelik, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2017).

Within this context, parents play a central role in shaping children's digital experiences through their attitudes, rules, and guidance practices, commonly referred to as digital parenting (Livingstone et al., 2017). Digital parenting encompasses a range of mediation strategies, including active (supportive), restrictive, and permissive approaches, each of which may differentially influence children's online behaviors and their susceptibility to problematic internet use (Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Valkenburg et al., 2013). Research suggests that supportive and communicative parental mediation can enhance children's digital literacy and self-regulation skills, whereas inconsistent or overly permissive approaches may increase vulnerability to problematic use patterns (Coyne et al., 2019; Livingstone et al., 2018; Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies that address both the risks and opportunities associated with children's digital engagement. In particular, integrating digital parenting awareness into family counseling and educational frameworks may contribute to healthier digital behaviors and improved psychosocial outcomes among children (Aral & Doğan Keskin, 2018; Çelik, 2020; Odabaşı, 2016). Despite the growing body of research, there remains a need to synthesize existing findings within a coherent conceptual framework that highlights the interplay between parental mediation strategies and children's problematic internet use. This gap highlights the importance of integrative approaches that connect theoretical insights with practical applications in digital parenting research.

This study aims to examine the relationship between digital parenting practices and children's problematic internet use and to discuss its implications for family counseling and educational contexts. Adopting a narrative review approach, the study synthesizes existing literature to provide a comprehensive and integrative understanding of this relationship, while the methodological framework of the review is presented in the following section.

### **Method**

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine the relationship between digital parenting practices and children's problematic internet use. Narrative reviews are particularly valuable for synthesizing diverse bodies of literature and providing a comprehensive conceptual understanding of complex and evolving research topics (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Snyder, 2019). Although narrative reviews allow for methodological flexibility, specific efforts were made to enhance transparency and rigor through the use of structured search and selection procedures (Ferrari, 2015).

The literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. In addition, national databases such as TR Dizin were consulted to ensure the inclusion of regionally relevant studies and to integrate both international and national perspectives. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English and Turkish between 2010 and 2025, reflecting the rapid evolution of digital technologies and parenting practices during this period.

A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used to identify relevant studies. The primary search terms included “digital parenting,” “parental mediation,” “problematic internet use,” “internet addiction,” “children,” and “adolescents.” These terms were combined using operators such as AND and OR to refine the search results and improve precision.

The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, (2) studies focusing on children or adolescents, (3) research examining parental attitudes, behaviors, or mediation strategies in digital contexts, and (4) studies addressing problematic or excessive internet use. Studies focusing exclusively on adult populations, non-peer-reviewed sources, and articles lacking empirical or theoretical relevance to digital parenting were excluded.

Following the initial search, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and the full texts of the selected studies were reviewed in detail. The extracted data were analyzed and synthesized using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is widely used to identify and interpret patterns across qualitative data sets and to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative synthesis. In this study, the process involved identifying recurring themes, categorizing digital parenting practices, and examining their relationships with children’s problematic internet use. This approach enabled the integration of findings across diverse study designs and contributed to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic.

## **Findings**

### **Conceptual Framework of Digital Parenting**

Digital parenting refers to parents’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding their children’s use of digital technologies (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). It is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing various forms of parental mediation, including active mediation, restrictive mediation, co-use, and permissive approaches (Livingstone et al., 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2013). These dimensions reflect the ways in which parents regulate, guide, and engage with children’s digital experiences, thereby shaping their digital literacy, autonomy, and online behavior. In addition, studies have emphasized the evolving roles of parents in digital environments and the importance of awareness and guidance in digital parenting practices (Akçay & Çoklar, 2018; Erişti & Erdem, 2017).

Active or supportive digital parenting involves guiding children through open communication, discussing online content, and modeling appropriate digital behaviors. This approach is consistently associated with higher levels of digital literacy, safer online practices, and healthier patterns of digital

engagement among children (Livingstone et al., 2017; Livingstone et al., 2018; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). By fostering dialogue and critical thinking, active mediation supports the development of self-regulation skills and promotes a more reflective engagement with digital environments.

In contrast, restrictive digital parenting focuses on setting rules and limits regarding screen time and online activities. While such strategies may reduce children's exposure to online risks, excessive restriction without adequate explanation or emotional support may lead to resistance, reduced trust, or covert internet use (Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Odabaşı, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2013). The effectiveness of restrictive mediation therefore depends on how it is implemented and whether it is combined with supportive communication.

Permissive digital parenting, on the other hand, is characterized by minimal supervision, limited rule-setting, and unrestricted access to digital devices. Studies indicate that permissive or inconsistent parenting styles are associated with lower levels of parental monitoring and guidance, which may increase children's vulnerability to problematic internet use (Coyne et al., 2019; Çelik, 2020; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). In such contexts, children may lack the necessary boundaries and support required to develop effective self-regulation skills in digital environments.

Overall, the conceptualization of digital parenting highlights the importance of balance and adaptability. Both overly restrictive and overly permissive approaches may produce unintended negative outcomes, whereas balanced strategies that integrate guidance, communication, monitoring, and appropriate boundaries tend to foster healthier digital behaviors (Livingstone et al., 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Moreover, digital parenting practices should be understood within a broader socio-cultural and developmental context, as parental mediation strategies may vary depending on children's age, cultural norms, and technological environments (Aral & Doğan Keskin, 2018).

### **Problematic Internet Use in Children**

Problematic internet use is commonly defined as excessive or poorly controlled engagement with online activities that leads to negative consequences in an individual's daily functioning (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Young, 2017). In children, this phenomenon may manifest as difficulties in regulating online behaviors, neglect of academic responsibilities, emotional dysregulation, and increased family conflicts related to technology use (Anderson et al., 2017; Odabaşı, 2016). Given the developmental characteristics of childhood, such patterns may have more pronounced and long-lasting effects compared to adults, as children have not yet fully developed the cognitive and emotional capacities required for effective self-regulation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

A growing body of research indicates that children exhibiting problematic internet use are more likely to experience a range of adverse outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, attention difficulties, and social withdrawal (George & Odgers, 2015; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Twenge, 2019; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013;). In addition, excessive screen time has been associated with disruptions in sleep patterns, reduced physical activity, and diminished face-to-face social interactions, all of which may negatively affect children's overall well-being (Çelik, 2020; Radesky et al., 2015; Radesky & Christakis, 2016; Rideout, 2017; Przybylski, 2019). These findings suggest that problematic internet use is not only a behavioral issue but also a multidimensional phenomenon with significant psychological, social, and developmental implications (Domoff et al., 2020).

Children's vulnerability to problematic internet use is shaped by a complex interaction of individual, social, and environmental factors. These include personal characteristics such as self-regulation capacity, developmental stage, and emotional resilience, as well as peer influences and broader family dynamics (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Valkenburg et al., 2013). Moreover, recent studies emphasize the role of contextual and environmental factors, including access to digital devices, parental monitoring, and socio-cultural norms, in shaping children's digital engagement patterns (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2018).

Among these factors, parental attitudes and practices play a particularly significant role in shaping children's digital habits, behavioral regulation, and capacity to engage with technology in a balanced manner (Aral & Doğan Keskin, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2017). These findings reinforce the importance of understanding problematic internet use not as an isolated behavioral issue, but as a phenomenon embedded within broader family, social, and developmental contexts.

### **Relationship Between Digital Parenting and Problematic Internet Use**

A substantial body of research indicates a strong and consistent relationship between digital parenting practices and children's problematic internet use (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). Supportive and guiding parental strategies such as open communication about online experiences, clear rule-setting, and joint media engagement are generally associated with lower levels of problematic internet use (Coyne et al., 2019; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valkenburg et al., 2013). These practices contribute to the development of children's self-regulation skills, digital literacy, and more responsible and balanced patterns of online behavior (Çelik, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2018).

In contrast, permissive digital parenting approaches have been identified as a significant risk factor for problematic internet use. Children who are granted unrestricted access to digital devices without adequate parental guidance or monitoring are more likely to exhibit excessive and uncontrolled internet use (Anderson et al., 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Similarly, inconsistent rule-setting and limited parental involvement may undermine children's ability to regulate their online activities effectively, increasing their susceptibility to problematic usage patterns (Odabaşı, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2013). These findings are consistent with broader evidence linking unregulated media use to negative developmental outcomes (Domoff et al., 2020).

At the same time, the literature suggests that overly restrictive digital parenting, particularly when implemented without emotional support or open communication may produce unintended negative consequences. Such approaches can lead children to conceal their online behaviors, reduce trust in parent-child relationships, and ultimately increase the risk of problematic internet use (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). These findings indicate that parental control alone is insufficient and may even be counterproductive when not accompanied by relational support.

Moreover, recent studies emphasize that the effectiveness of digital parenting strategies depends on their consistency, flexibility, and alignment with children's developmental needs (Livingstone et al., 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Contextual factors, including family environment, socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms, also play a significant role in shaping how parenting strategies influence children's digital behaviors (George & Odgers, 2015).

Overall, the findings suggest that digital parenting cannot be reduced to a single strategy. Rather, balanced approaches that combine guidance, communication, monitoring, and appropriate boundaries appear to be the most effective in reducing problematic internet use among children (Aral & Doğan Keskin, 2018; Coyne et al., 2019). These insights underscore the need for integrative, flexible, and context-sensitive parenting strategies in the digital age.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications for Family Counseling and Educational Practices**

The findings of this narrative review have important implications for both family counseling and educational practice. Family counselors play a critical role in supporting parents as they navigate the challenges associated with children's digital engagement (Çelik, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2017). Counseling interventions can focus on increasing parents' awareness of digital risks, strengthening communication skills, and promoting consistent, developmentally appropriate digital parenting strategies (Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Odabaşı, 2016). In particular, fostering open parent-child communication, encouraging balanced mediation practices, and enhancing parents' digital literacy may help reduce the risk of problematic internet use among children (Coyne et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2013).

In addition, family counseling programs may benefit from incorporating structured digital parenting modules that address boundary-setting, monitoring strategies, and emotional support in online contexts. Such interventions can support parents in adopting more adaptive and responsive approaches to children's digital behaviors, thereby strengthening both family functioning and children's self-regulation capacities (Çelik, 2020; Livingstone et al., 2017). Integrating evidence-based guidance into counseling practices may further enhance the effectiveness of both preventive and intervention-oriented approaches, particularly in addressing problematic patterns of digital media use (Domoff et al., 2020).

In educational contexts, schools can contribute significantly to prevention efforts by implementing parent education programs that promote digital literacy and responsible internet use (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). School counselors and educators can collaborate with families to develop a consistent and holistic approach to children's digital well-being (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Integrating digital parenting topics into school-based guidance and counseling curricula may further strengthen these efforts and support early intervention strategies. Such initiatives may also foster students' critical thinking skills and encourage healthier patterns of digital engagement. These efforts are further supported by national policy frameworks emphasizing digital education and responsible technology use among children (MEB, 2022; TÜİK, 2023).

These efforts can support not only children's safe and balanced use of digital technologies but also their broader psychosocial development, including emotional well-being, social competence, and academic adjustment (Aral & Doğan Keskin, 2018; Radesky et al., 2015). Overall, the findings highlight the importance of a coordinated and interdisciplinary approach that integrates families, schools, and mental health professionals in promoting healthier digital environments and sustainable digital well-being among children.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This narrative review emphasizes the critical role of digital parenting attitudes in shaping children's problematic internet use. The findings consistently indicate that supportive and guiding digital parenting practices function as protective factors, whereas permissive and inconsistent approaches increase the risk of problematic internet behaviors among children (Livingstone et al., 2017; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). These results highlight the importance of parental involvement not only in monitoring but also in actively guiding and supporting children's digital engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing digital parenting as a multidimensional construct that integrates communication, regulation, and relational dynamics (Valkenburg et al., 2013). By synthesizing existing research, the study provides an integrative framework that highlights the dynamic interplay between parental mediation strategies and children's self-regulation processes. In doing so, it extends existing approaches by emphasizing the importance of balance, flexibility, and context in digital parenting practices.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of addressing digital parenting within family counseling and educational interventions. Promoting balanced and informed digital parenting strategies, enhancing parents' awareness of digital risks, and strengthening communication within families may significantly contribute to children's healthy development and digital well-being (Çelik, 2020; Odabaşı, 2016). Moreover, the study highlights the need for structured, evidence-based programs that support parents in developing adaptive digital mediation strategies. In this regard, interdisciplinary collaboration between counselors, educators, and families is essential for developing effective preventive and intervention strategies. These efforts are also aligned with national policy frameworks emphasizing digital education and responsible technology use among children (MEB, 2022; TÜİK, 2023).

Importantly, this review suggests that problematic internet use should not be understood solely as an individual behavioral issue, but rather as a phenomenon embedded within broader family, social, and technological contexts. This perspective reinforces the need for holistic and context-sensitive approaches in both research and practice.

Finally, future research should focus on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to better understand the evolving nature of digital parenting practices and their impact on children's digital behaviors across diverse contexts. In addition, further research is needed to explore how emerging technologies and changing digital environments may reshape parenting practices and children's online experiences over time.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Building on the findings of this narrative review and its theoretical and practical contributions, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Parents are encouraged to adopt supportive and communicative digital parenting practices that promote responsible and balanced internet use among children. This includes maintaining open dialogue, setting clear and consistent boundaries, and actively engaging with children's digital experiences (Livingstone et al., 2017).

- Family counselors should integrate digital parenting education into counseling services and parent training programs in order to enhance parental awareness, strengthen communication skills, and support the development of effective digital mediation strategies (Çelik, 2020).
- Educators and school professionals should collaborate with families to ensure consistent messaging regarding healthy digital behaviors and responsible technology use. School-based initiatives may include digital literacy programs and parent-focused workshops that support early intervention and prevention efforts, in line with broader educational policy frameworks (MEB, 2022; TÜİK, 2023).
- Preventive interventions should focus on strengthening children's self-regulation, critical thinking, and digital literacy skills in order to reduce the risk of problematic internet use and promote healthier engagement with digital environments (Valkenburg et al., 2013).

These recommendations highlight the importance of a comprehensive, coordinated, and interdisciplinary approach that integrates family, educational, and counseling contexts in promoting children's digital well-being and long-term psychosocial development.

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