

Parental perceptions of technology and technology-focused parenting: Associations with youth screen time



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 November 2014

Received in revised form 11 February 2016

Accepted 19 February 2016

Available online 14 March 2016

Keywords:

Screen time

Technology

Parenting

ABSTRACT

In the present study we propose a model linking parental perceptions of technology to technology-related parenting strategies to youth screen time, and, finally, to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. Participants were 615 parents drawn from three community samples of families with children across three developmental stages: young childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. The model was tested at each stage with the strongest support emerging in the young childhood sample. One component of parental perceptions of technology, perceived efficacy, was related to technology-related parenting strategies across developmental stages. However, the association of these strategies to child screen time and, in turn, problem behaviors, diminished as children increased in age. Implications for intervention are considered.

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In only a few years, the use of mobile technology (e.g., smartphones, tablets, e-readers) in the United States has changed dramatically. Recent reports from the Pew Research Center found that 58% of Americans own a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2014). Tablet use especially is increasing, as the number of households with a tablet device rose 39% between 2010 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). Parents in particular appear to be adopting these new forms of technology at a rapid pace; among parents with a minor living in the home, tablet ownership has increased from 26% in 2012 to 50% in 2013 (Zickuhr, 2013a). Despite the increasing adoption rates of mobile technology, parents also acknowledge some uncertainty regarding how best to navigate the incorporation of multiple mobile devices into their children's daily lives. For example, Ortiz, Green, and Lim (2011) found that parents viewed current technology as important to their child's academic and future job success, whereas findings from several studies suggest parents worry about the negative impact of media on their child (Lampard, Jurkowski, & Davison, 2013a; Padilla-Walker, 2006), particularly regarding physical activity and especially when considering the impact of video games (Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2014). As these technological devices become more prevalent in family life, it is likely that the parent's resolution of these competing beliefs may influence how they choose to regulate their child's access to media. However, even when parents desire to place limits on their child's use of digital technology, they struggle to do so (Jordan, Hersey, McDivitt, & Heitzler, 2006).

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Parental concerns about their child's screen time, combined with an accelerating increase in media use and the subsequent potential negative impact of these media devices, place parents in the difficult position of attempting to adequately regulate their child's screen time access. To date, however, few studies have examined the link between parental perceived concern for these media devices and the management of their child's media use in the home. Utilizing a family systems framework to better understand the influence of parents on their child's media use and psychological outcomes, the current study proposes and tests a model linking parental perceptions about these media devices and their parenting strategies when their child utilizes these devices in the home. In turn, the association of these parenting strategies with youth screen time is examined. Given the rise in the uptake of a broad range of mobile devices among families, including tablet devices which prior studies have not considered, we include screen time on five devices: television, computers, smartphones, tablets, and video game consoles (both handheld and stationary). Finally, the link of screen time to youth internalizing and externalizing problems is examined. The model is presented in Fig. 1. In the following section, we present why screen time is a concern for parents. In subsequent sections we then build the case for our model, moving from parental perceptions of technology to technology-related rules in the home and, finally, to youth screen time. Subsequently, we consider the role of developmental age in screen time.

1. The negative outcomes of excessive screen time

The current literature supports parental concerns about excessive screen time in childhood. Total daily screen time, a metric of summed

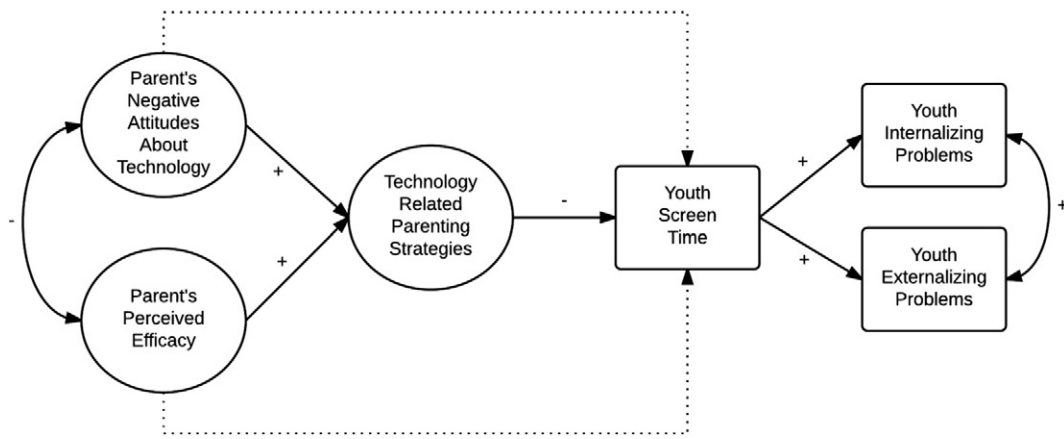


Fig. 1. Theoretical model delineating the indirect influence of parent's perceptions of technology on their technology focused parenting and their children's screen time and problem behavior.

exposure to devices capable of displaying video content (e.g., smartphones, tablets, computers, TVs, and video game consoles) for children 8- to 18-years-old, has risen from five to roughly seven and a half hours since 1999, far exceeding the American Academy of Pediatrics's recommendation of two hours or less (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). In spite of the potential benefits of technology, past research suggests that too much screen time may be associated with a host of negative outcomes for children. Research focusing on excessive screen time in childhood (e.g., television, computers, video game consoles etc.) has revealed links with physical and behavioral health problems, including increased body mass index (BMI; Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, & Murdey, 2004; Wake, Hesketh, & Waters, 2003) and academic difficulties (Rideout et al., 2010). Of interest in the present study is the potential link between youth screen time and *mental* health problems, including internalizing (e.g., depression and anxiety) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) symptoms. For example, although little research to date has examined the link between internalizing symptoms and screen time in childhood, a few studies suggest that increased screen time is associated with increased depressive symptoms and overall psychological difficulties (Breland, Fox, & Horowitz, 2013; de Wit, van Straten, Lamers, Cuijpers, & Penninx, 2011; Page, Cooper, Griew, & Jago, 2010). In contrast, a broad literature has revealed consistent links between children's exposure to violent media and increases in aggressive behavior (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Manganello & Taylor, 2009; Zimmerman & Christakis, 2007). Both longitudinal (e.g., Gentile, Coyne, & Walsh, 2011; Ostrov, Gentile, & Crick, 2006; Swing, Gentile, Anderson, & Walsh, 2010) and experimental (e.g., Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004) studies support the relationship between screen time and problem behaviors. The mental health difficulties of youth may reflect problems related to increased exposure to developmentally inappropriate content as well as decreases in exposure to other healthy activities such as exercise, creative play, or engagement with others. Overall, our focus on these broad mental health constructs reflects the concerns that (1) the prevalence of mental health challenges in childhood have increased in recent years (Perou et al., 2013), (2) media use in family households has dramatically risen in as recently as the last five years (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014), and (3) a broad literature has identified mental health challenges linked to excessive screen time (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Gentile et al., 2011; Page et al., 2010). Further, although children may use media devices for a variety of educational or creative reasons, evidence suggests they are most often consuming media that is developmentally inappropriate or lacking educational content (see Forehand & Long, 2010). Given these concerns, we expect youth screen time will be associated with more internalizing and externalizing problems.

2. Parental perceptions of technology

From a family systems framework, children's behavior in the home reflects a confluence of relationships within the household and, thus, these relationships must be understood when determining the development of various child outcomes (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). This framework has been applied to media use in the home, with researchers suggesting that children's screen time is linked to norms in the household which are determined in part by individual level variables, including parental beliefs and attitudes about how often and in what ways media devices are used in the home (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows, & Day, 2014; Calvert, Jordan, & Cocking, 2002; Jordan et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, these beliefs and attitudes are, in turn, linked to dyadic level variables that effect the parent-child relationship, particularly parenting strategies used in the household (Padilla-Walker, 2006). In the present study we examine two components of parental perceptions of technology that likely contribute to subsequent parenting strategies and may have a rippling effect on child individual level variables, specifically their child's media use and psychosocial outcomes, in the home: perceived parental efficacy with and parental negative attitudes towards technology.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999) proposes that expectations of efficacy influence the degree to which individuals put forth and sustain effort despite difficulty. This theory has been applied to parenting (see Coleman & Karraker, 1998, for a review), with evidence supporting the association between parental perceptions of their ability to influence their child's development and their subsequent success (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999). Indeed, parenting self-efficacy is associated with greater parental involvement and monitoring (Bogenschneider, Small, & Tsay, 1997; Shumow & Lomax, 2002) and interventions focusing on this construct have led to higher levels of appropriate limit setting with children (Miller-Heyl, MacPhee, & Fritz, 1998). Recent research (e.g., Lampard et al., 2013a; Lampard, Jurkowski, & Davison, 2013b) suggests that a parent's perceived self-efficacy also applies to their management of their child's screen time.

Similarly, parental attitudes about the media devices in their home may impact the quantity and quality of screen time exposure for their children. Although researchers have only begun to examine these relationships, preliminary evidence suggests that parents who exhibit negative attitudes about the use of technology in the home (e.g., harmful effects of media) are more likely to report less screen time for their youth (Nathanson, Eveland, Park, & Paul, 2002; Padilla-Walker, 2006) whereas those with positive attitudes report greater youth screen time (e.g., Vaala & Hornik, 2014). Unfortunately, much of this work is limited by a narrow age range of children studied, limited media devices

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