



The Association Between Electronic Media and Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Late Childhood

Lisa K. Mundy, PhD; Louise Canterford, MBIostat; Timothy Olds, PhD; Nicholas B. Allen, PhD; George C. Patton, MD

From the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (Drs Mundy, Canterford, and Patton); Centre for Adolescent Health, The Royal Children's Hospital (Drs Mundy, Canterford, and Patton); Department of Paediatrics, The University of Melbourne (Drs Mundy and Patton), Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; Alliance for Research in Exercise, Nutrition and Activity (ARENA), University of South Australia (Dr Olds), Adelaide, South Australia, Australia; and Department of Psychology, University of Oregon (Dr Allen), Eugene, OR

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Address correspondence to Lisa K. Mundy, PhD, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, 50 Flemington Rd, Victoria 3052, Australia (e-mail: lisa.mundy@mcri.edu.au).

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: There is growing concern that rising rates of electronic media use might be harmful. However, the extent to which different types of electronic media use might be associated with emotional and behavioral problems is unclear. In this study we examined associations between emotional and behavioral problems and electronic media use during late childhood, in a large community sample.

METHODS: Participants were 876 8- to 9-year-old children taking part in the Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study in Australia. Parents reported on their child's emotional and behavioral problems using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and on their child's duration of electronic media use (in hours: television, video games, general computer use).

RESULTS: Logistic regression analyses were conducted with adjustments for age, socioeconomic status, and body mass index z score, separately for male and female participants. Boys who played more video games had significantly greater odds of

scoring borderline/abnormal on conduct (odds ratio [OR], 1.07; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.02–1.12) and emotional problems (OR, 1.07; 95% CI, 1.04–1.11) for each additional hour of weekly use. This equates to 2.58-fold greater odds for a boy who plays on average 2 hours per day per week. Television viewing was associated with greater odds of hyperactivity/inattention in boys (OR, 1.04; 95% CI, 1.00–1.07). There were no significant relationships for girls.

CONCLUSIONS: Because of the increasing rates of electronic media use in children, these results might have important implications for child mental health. Future interventions might be more effective if they are targeted at specific types of electronic media use.

KEYWORDS: behavior problems; CATS study; electronic media use; emotional problems

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WHAT'S NEW

To our knowledge, this is the first large population-based study to show that electronic media use is associated with emotional as well as behavioral problems in late childhood and that specific types of electronic media use might be associated with emotional and behavioral problems.

RATES OF ELECTRONIC media use are rising and are an increasingly powerful influence in children's lives.¹ However, the extent to which these technologies might affect children is hotly debated.² Although international guidelines recommend that children have no more than 2 hours per day of screen time,³ 12% of 9- to 16-year-old Australians met the guidelines on all days of the week.⁴ Electronic

media use in children has been linked to concurrent and long-term physical health problems.⁵

Although there is some evidence that accessing violent media might be linked with aggressive behavior,^{6–8} the extent to which different types of electronic media and duration of use might be linked with mental health problems is unclear. Although most research has focused on the potentially negative effects of electronic media use, there is also evidence for positive outcomes, such as its use as a tool for emotional regulation.⁹ However, previous studies have been limited to focus on overall screen time, or on only 1 or 2 types of electronic media.^{10,11} Different media might have different effects, for example, playing video games has been linked with mental health problems, but computer use was protective against psychological distress.¹² Television viewing is

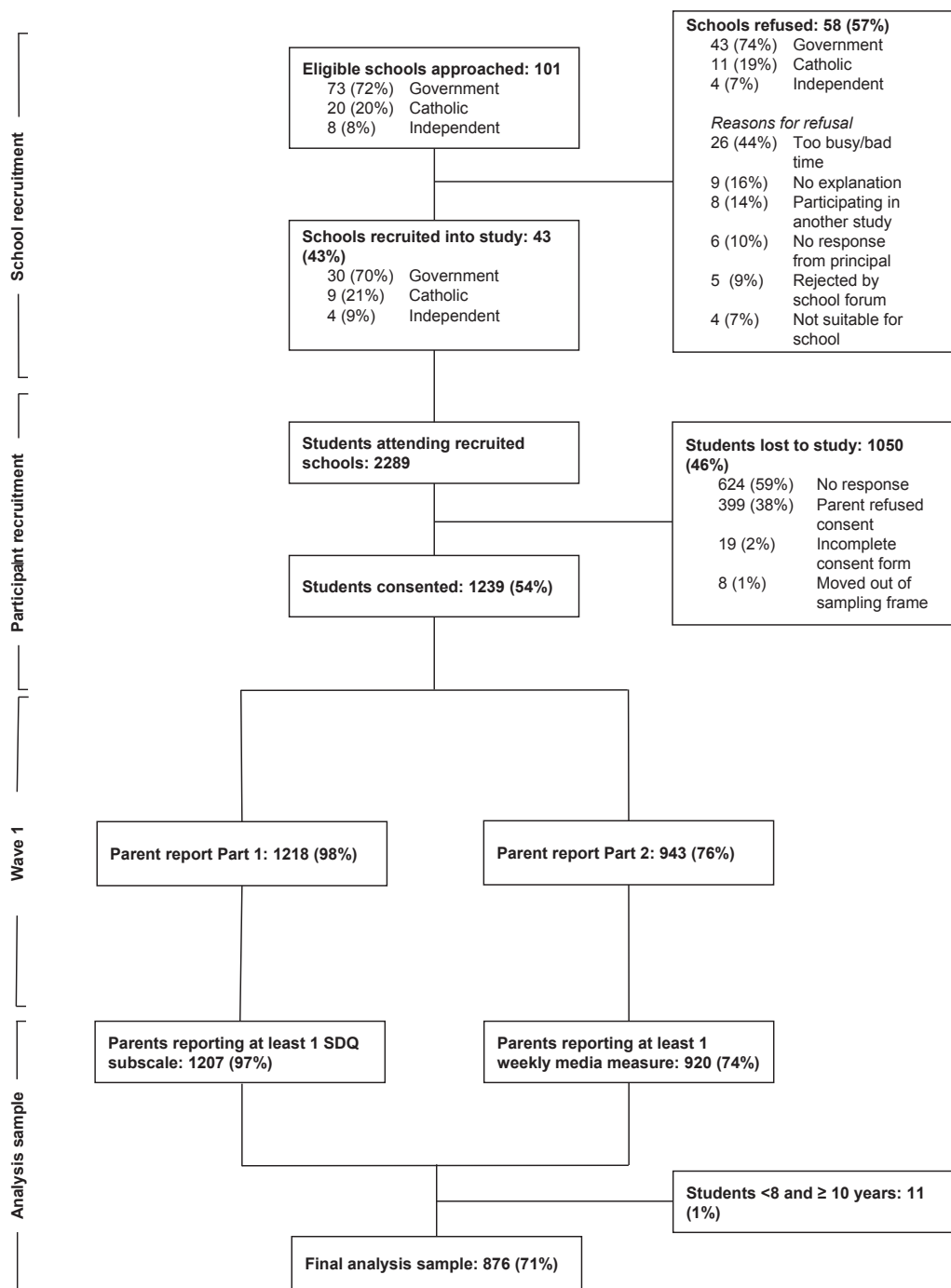


Figure. Flow chart showing participant recruitment through to final analysis sample.

linked with psychological distress, but it might also offer educational benefits or provide family time.^{12,13} Electronic media use might affect development through displacement of other more adaptive activities.^{2,14} Alternatively, media use might be a symptom of mental health problems with youth turning to media as a replacement for social activities. Excessive media use might also affect brain structure and function.^{15,16} Additionally, the viewing of content that is not age-appropriate might lead to emotional and behavioral problems.¹⁷

Previous research is limited by the inclusion of participants with wide age ranges, often in adolescence.^{12,18,19}

There has been little focus on the timing of exposure, despite evidence that younger children might be more susceptible to media violence.²⁰ Also, in older adolescents past use is likely to be an important confounder. Patterns of association between electronic media use and mental health and behavior problems might differ between boys and girls.^{21,22}

In this article we aim to overcome these limitations by exploring the average weekly time 8- to 9-year-old children spend using different types of electronic media and to quantify the association between electronic media use and common emotional and behavioral problems in late childhood.

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