



Parental Involvement in the Selective Provision of Digital Access for Young Children

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Abstract

This research explores parental involvement through the selective provision of children's access to digital technologies. Employing a qualitative exploratory case study design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with six parents of kindergarten-aged children in a private school context. Interviews were carried out in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded, and transcribed word for word. Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the data for patterns in parental decision-making and regulation practices. The findings reveal three interconnected themes. First, parents enacted involvement through evaluative judgments of age appropriateness, focusing on children's readiness and content suitability. Second, parents carefully determined the timing of children's first digital exposure, often introducing devices gradually and intensifying access in response to schooling demands. Third, parental involvement was sustained through conditional access, where device use was regulated through supervision, time limitations, and purpose-driven rules. Overall, the study emphasizes that the digital access decision in early childhood is not a one-time thing, but rather a continual practice by the parents, influenced by the child's development and the specific circumstances. The study contributes to early childhood digital parenting literature by conceptualizing digital access as selective provision and offers policy implications for strengthening age-appropriate guidance and school-parent collaboration in managing children's digital engagement. Furthermore, the novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing digital access not as mere availability, but as a socially mediated and developmentally negotiated practice of selective provision in early childhood. This study is novel in that it shifts the analytical focus from post-use regulation to pre-access decision-making, highlighting selective provision as a key dimension of parental mediation in early childhood.

Keywords: *Digital Access, Early Childhood, Parental Involvement, Selective Provision*



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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have been integrated within the daily routines of young children, influencing how they encounter and engage information, entertainment, and learning resources (Gjelaj et al., 2020; Sungwa, 2025). Educational and policy discussions often respond to concerns about digital inequality by framing digital access as the availability of devices and internet connectivity (Australia, 2025). Although such perspectives are important for understanding and addressing

structural inequalities, access in early childhood settings remains limited. In contrast with older learners, young children do not access digital technologies autonomously. Rather, their use is determined by adults who control the provision, the time, and the conditions of use (Helsper & Blum-Ross, 2018; Kervin et al., 2018). As a result, access in early childhood should not be viewed merely in terms of availability, but should be reconceptualised as a socially mediated and relational process rather than a mere technical condition.

In early childhood settings, parents are key in guiding and mediating how children engage with digital technology (Enes et al., 2025). When it comes to young children and the use of digital technology, it is important to consider that they usually do not use these technologies by themselves. Instead, it is the parents and caregivers who act as gatekeepers and monitor not only the access to the devices, but also the situations in which they can be used (Banić & Orehovački, 2024). These everyday decisions constitute an important, yet often under examined, form of parental involvement. Although there is substantial body of literature examining that deal with parental strategies of mediation and digital parenting with relation to monitoring, supervision and risk management (Goodall et al., 2025; Swit et al., 2023) there is little literature that examines the specific ways in which parents understand and practice digital access. As a result, digital access is often regarded as a passive, background condition rather than an active practice through which parental involvement is exercised.

Most existing research on young children's digital media use has focused on the issues of screen time, parental supervision, and ways for mitigating potential risks (Lauricella et al., 2015; Nevski & Siibak, 2016; Nikken & Schols, 2015). While these studies provide important insights, they predominantly foreground regulation and control after access has already been established, rather than examining how access itself is initially and selectively constructed within families. To date, limited attention has been given to how parents make decisions regarding age appropriateness, the timing of children's first encounters with digital technologies, and the conditional provisions of devices as foundational dimensions of parental access. Emerging discussions within early childhood scholarship further suggest that children's digital engagement is closely intertwined with parental guidance and the structuring of home learning environments (Hasanah et al., 2021; Khasanah et al., 2023). As a result, there remains insufficient understanding of how access in early childhood is shaped through parental beliefs, value orientations, and interpretations of developmental readiness (Aranas et al., 2021; Connell et al., 2015). By foregrounding selective provision, this study shifts the analytical focus from usage management to conceptualizing access as socially constructed and relational process within the family context.

Despite the growing body of research on parental mediation and young children's digital media use, limited scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how digital access itself is initially constructed and selectively provided within families. Existing studies largely emphasize post-access regulation, such as monitoring screen time or supervising content, while overlooking the decision-making processes that precede children's digital engagement. Consequently, there remains insufficient theoretical and empirical understanding of how parents determine age appropriateness, negotiate the timing of first exposure, and establish conditional access as foundational forms of involvement in early childhood digital experiences.

This study aims to explore how parents enact involvement in the selective provisions of digital access for young children. Using qualitative interview data, the study examines parental decision-making regarding the age appropriateness, the age of first digital exposure, and the condition of access to digital devices. Furthermore, the study aims to advance a more refined comprehension of digital access as a socially mediated and relational practice in early childhood settings. In doing so, the study contributes to the parental mediation scholarship by foregrounding pre-access decision-making as an integral dimension of mediation practices. It further refines the conceptualization of digital access by emphasizing its socially mediated and relational character in early childhood contexts. By reframing digital access as selective provision, this study contributes to early childhood digital parenting scholarship in two important ways. First, it extends parental mediation theory by foregrounding pre-access decision-making as an integral dimension of mediation practices, rather than limiting mediation to post-use regulation and control. Second, it offers conceptual refinement by positioning digital access as a relational and developmentally informed process embedded within family life, rather than mere technical condition of availability.

METHODOLOGY

Context and Participants

This study employed an instrumental qualitative case study design to explore parental involvement in the selective provision of digital access for young children. Given the relational and contextual nature of parental decision-making regarding digital access, which operates as a process in the context of family routines and home learning environments, a case study approach was considered suitable. The phenomenon and its context were treated as inseparable, as parental decisions were shaped by children's characteristics, family principles, and situational factors. By utilizing an instrumental case study design, this study was able to gain understanding and capture valuable in-depth insights of how and why parents make decision about age appropriateness, timing of first exposure, and conditions of accessibility, which would be difficult to examine through more decontextualized research approaches. This design works well for understanding intricacies that are situated in specific contexts that are not easily understood using metrics or survey instruments as expressed by (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Robert K. Yin, 2018).

This instrumental qualitative case study was conducted at a private kindergarten in Jambi, Indonesia. The school was selected to accomplish certain specific criteria relevant to the aims of the study. The selected kindergarten adopts a technology-based approach to learning and integrates digital tools into early childhood education. Moreover, English serves as the main language of instruction during the daily classroom activities, fostering an environment where children engage with bilingual or multilingual practices on a routine basis. The school has a diverse parent population, including parents from different socio-economic and educational background, who support their children's learning at home. The research context provided a deeper understanding of how parents think about and practice involvement when it comes to learning with technology.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who were considered most relevant to the research objectives. This sampling strategy was appropriate because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of parental involvement as enacted through selective decisions about children's digital access, rather than to

achieve statistical generalization. The criteria outlined below were used to select the participants: (1) parents of kindergarten-aged children enrolled in the identified private school; (2) parents who were acquainted with the use of digital devices to assist their children’s learning; (3) parents who expressed willingness to take part in in-depth interviews and recount their personal journeys; and (4) parents representing diverse social and economic backgrounds to capture a range of perspectives. The participant selection process involved coordination with the school to identify parents who met the established criteria. Information about the study was distributed to potential participants, followed by a brief screening process to confirm eligibility. Following this process, six parents who met the inclusion criteria and consented to participate were selected as participants in this study. Regarding research ethics, they were asked to read, complete, and sign an inform consent form which indicated that their participation in this study was voluntary. They also deserved the right to withdraw their participation in any phases of this study. The following table shows the overview of six parent participants.

Table 1. Overview of the Research Participants

Participant	Parental Role	Estimated Age Range	Experience Supporting Learning Using Digital Devices	Language Practice at Home	Occupational Background
P1	Primary caregiver	Mid 30s	Experience supporting children’s learning using digital devices	Bilingual	Entrepreneur
P2	Primary caregiver	Mid 30s	Experience supporting children’s learning using digital devices	Bilingual	Entrepreneur
P3	Primary caregiver	Mid 30s	Experience supporting children’s learning using digital devices	Multilingual	Entrepreneur
P4	Primary caregiver	Early 30s	Experience supporting children’s learning using digital devices	Multilingual	Homemaker
P5	Primary caregiver	Early 40s	Experience supporting children’s learning using digital devices	Bilingual	Civil Servant
P6	Primary caregiver	Mid 30s	Experience supporting children’s	Multilingual	Entrepreneur

Data sources and analysis

For this study, empirical data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with parents of early childhood-aged children over a period of approximately about two months. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the flexibility of the parents' experiences while retaining focus on major components of parental involvement concerning digital access across participants. The interview guidelines included questions pertaining to parents' involvement in their children's learning at home, especially the ways parents made their decisions regarding children's digital access. Interview topics included parents' considerations of age appropriateness, the timing of children's first exposure to digital devices, and the conditions under which digital access was permitted or restricted. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences using probing questions, along with examples that were more specific to their daily decision-making.

Consistent with the qualitative research that values depth and reflection, the interviews were structured to facilitate the in-depth narration of participants' lived experiences. As stated by [van Manen \(1997\)](#), when researchers want to gain clearer insight into participant perspectives and meanings, they conduct in-depth and exploratory interviews. In order to ensure clarity and openness of communication, all interviews were carried out in Bahasa Indonesia, which was the preferred language of the participants. Each participant interview was approximately about 45 minutes. All interview sessions were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. This allowed the sessions to be reviewed and transcribed with greater precision. Pseudonyms were utilized in the transcripts and the findings to ensure confidentiality.

Data were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach that combined deductive and inductive strategies. Initially, interview transcripts were read multiple times in order to establish a solid understanding and to achieve familiarity with the data. Provisional codes were developed deductively based on the research focus and interview topics, particularly those related to parental involvement and decision-making in providing digital access. At the same time, the analysis remained open to inductively identifying patterns and meanings emerging from parents' accounts. During data reduction, relevant data were organized, refined, and focused to facilitate interpretation, while data unrelated to the research topic were set aside ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). Through this iterative process, broader themes were constructed by integrating theoretically informed codes with patterns emerging from the data.

The displayed coded data were analysed to identify relational patterns among the codes and to develop broader categories. These categories were further refined into themes that represented distinct forms of parental involvement in the selective provision of digital access. Particular attention was given to how parents described their involvement through decisions about age appropriateness, timing of first exposure, and conditional access to digital devices. To improve analytical rigor, themes were compared across participants to discern both repetitive patterns and contextual differences. The process of drawing conclusions and verification involved going back to the data to confirm that the themes were reliably backed by the participants' accounts. The final themes were verified from this iterative analysis and were used to structure the findings presented in the Results section. Trustworthiness of the study was ensured through member checking. Participants were provided with

access of their interview transcripts and were asked to assess and review them for accuracy and clarity. Participants were also able to provide additional comments and explanations, to verify the accuracy and representations of their viewpoints. The findings were anchored in participant's experiences through reflexive engagement with the data, and aligned with the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on how parental involvement was enacted through the selective provision of digital access for young children. Analysis of the interview data revealed that parental involvement was not expressed as a single, uniform practice, but rather took multiple forms shaped by parents' decisions regarding age appropriateness, the timing of first exposure, and conditional access to digital devices. These forms of involvement reflect how parents actively structured their children's digital access within everyday family contexts.

Determining Age Appropriateness as a Form of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement was first evident in how they decided whether children were to be given access to digital devices. Parents mentioned not basing their decisions solely on a child's chronological age, but rather on the parent's assessment regarding the child's apparent readiness, behaviour, and level of meaningful interaction with digital materials. Many parents emphasized that digital device access was not provided freely and that they had to determine if their children were "ready" to use digital devices. Such decisions were based on the parents' assessments of their children's emotional reactions, attention, and learning needs.

Parent #2

There are all sorts of videos out there that seem like they could be for kids, but they're really not, so I decide what videos my kid can watch. I've seen so many videos that are not appropriate for toddlers, even though they seem like they are. My daughter is a little over 4 years old, so I make sure I choose videos that are for 4 year olds. I don't want to take the chance and let her watch videos that are for older kids. I take that more seriously than most people. I would rather pick videos that are educational and designed for toddlers than let her watch random videos. She has educational videos that help her learn her numbers and colours that I really like (Parent 2, In-depth interview, 16 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #3

As a dad, I don't think it's just about age when it comes to giving kid digital access. If my child can use it to learn something new, I think it's fine, even if she's still a toddler (Parent 3, In-depth interview, 18 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #5

Digital media is not always ok for kids, so what my kid sees has to be for his current age, and right now he is almost five. I get advice about what is appropriate and how much screen time he should have from a friend who is a child development specialist, so it is pretty reliable. My concern is when the media is not age appropriate, my kid may see things he is not prepared to see (Parent 5, In-depth interview, 15 June 2025, Researcher Translation)

The finding indicates that parental involvement in their children's digital access is a reflection of parents' evaluative judgements regarding age appropriateness. Before giving permission, parents considered children's emotional control, learning

objectives, and overall readiness, rather than just assessing their age. Moreover, parents highlighted the suitability of the content, suggesting that access was not understood as the presence of a device, but rather the possibility of interacting with content that was appropriate for the children's developmental level. This illustrates that in early childhood, digital access is fundamentally determined by adults particularly that parents define the boundaries what children can access and interact with (Goodall et al., 2025; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

The finding is particularly important because it shifts digital access discussions away from the usual framing of “availability of devices” toward a more complex understanding of access as selective provisioning. Parents deciding on content suitable for certain ages are a kind of an involvement that is both protective and developmental, as parents are balancing concerns of learning opportunities while simultaneously attempt to reduce exposure to inappropriate content (Fidan & Olur, 2023; Stoilova et al., 2024). This also indicates that children’s access is not homogeneously configured across families, since the parents’ perceptions are shaped by their experiences, concerns, and resources. This supports the suggestion that the inequalities that shape digital experiences may not only be a function of the digital divide of ownership, but also how parents perceive and exercise control over what is considered “appropriate” access (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). Therefore, age appropriateness serves as an evaluative dimension of parental involvement, positioning parents as gatekeepers, controlling access to content and define developmental boundaries. Unlike prior studies that primarily conceptualize gatekeeping as the monitoring and restriction of children’s media use after access has been granted, this finding suggests that in early childhood, gatekeeping operates as a pre-access evaluative mechanism grounded in developmental reasoning. In this sense, parental mediation extends beyond usage management and becomes foundational in structuring the very conditions under which digital access is made possible.

Deciding the Timing of Children’s First Digital Exposure

Another form of parental involvement was seen in the decisions parents made about when to allow their children to use digital devices for the first time. Parents mentioned purposefully postponing or introducing digital access at particular moments associated with learning demands or situational requirements. Some parents noted that their children's initial digital exposures were not entertainment-driven, but rather part of instructional activities, especially in relation to their children's first schooling experiences. In this context, exposure timing was correlated with parental involvement in home learning support.

Parent #1

My daughter started using technology for the first time when she was about two and a half years old. I first let her use a device just to do family video calls to talk to family members and to her dad. Once she began using a tablet to do schoolwork provided by her teacher in kindergarten, her use of technology increased (Parent 1, In-depth interview, 16 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #2

When my daughter was about two and a half, she started watching online videos, which I thought of as a form of stimulation. Mrs Rachel's videos, for instance, helped her learn her first words. However, she was only allowed to watch videos for short periods of time, and once she started kindergarten, her screen time increased (Parent 2, In-depth interview, 16 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #4

I did not let my child have digital devices right away, even though she was old enough. I watched to see if she was able to listen to directions and if she could control her outbursts. After I assessed she was ready, I granted her some screen time when she started kindergarten (Parent 4, In-depth interview, 13 June 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #6

At first, I didn't want to give my kids any screens, but when the school started giving homework that needed internet access, I didn't really have a choice, so I did it little by little. I mean, they are Gen Alpha, the kids who are basically glued to screens, but I think its fine as long as the kids' screens are monitored by involved parents (Parent 6, In-depth interview, 16 June 2025, Researcher Translation).

These findings reflects that children's first digital exposure was often introduced gradually and shaped by both developmental considerations and school-related demands however, once access was granted, parental involvement continued through the establishment of specific conditions and boundaries that regulated how digital devices could be used. Parents noted that early exposure was beginning through more restricted practices, such as video calls with family, and that it became more frequent as their child entered kindergarten. Importantly, it was often school-related demands, such as homework and learning materials created by the teacher, which were associated with increased access. This pattern suggests that mediation begins prior to routine media engagement, positioning timing itself as a regulatory strategy. This extends traditional mediation frameworks, which typically focus in use rather than initiation (Hidaayah et al., 2024; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). The finding is also in line with recent research that highlights the fluid and context-dependent nature of mediation in early childhood, especially during the initial stages of exposure (Goodall et al., 2025).

The finding underscores the importance of digital access available during early childhood is the result of both family decision-making and institutional expectations. Parents who initially avoided the use of devices had to introduce access because of the demands of schooling, suggesting that the environments of early childhood education may indirectly influence the digital habits of families. This finding contributes to the growing concern that early schooling increasingly assumes children's familiarity with technology, thereby placing new responsibilities on parents (Joshkun et al., 2024; Trinh et al., 2022). The gradual access described by parents also shows that the parents' involvement is enacted not only in the control of everyday usage, but also in determining when access should start and for what purposes it should be provided. Additionally, the growing availability of resources during kindergarten illustrates how parental engagement is influenced by larger socio-educational frameworks, reinforcing the notion that digital parenting is not merely an individual decision, but rather a practice that balances familial values and institutional demands. In the same manner, Parental involvement and school expectations point to the mechanism of selective access, in which the timing of first exposures is crucial in attempting to balance cognitive and developmental readiness with the expectations of formal schooling.

Conditional Access as On-going Parental Involvement

Parental involvement did not cease after children were given digital access. Instead, parents articulated setting certain parameters within which their children could use digital devices. These conditions encompassed limitations regarding time, the presence of a supervisor during its use, and content restrictions. Parents noted that access to the resources was described as a dynamic process that was adjusted in relation to children's behaviours and learning requirements. This illustrates involvement from parents as a continuum rather than a singular event.

Parent #1

During the week, my child can only use the tablet for school work, and not for playing around. She can use the tablet to learn, but only if I can see her and only for a certain amount of time. After she finishes learning, the tablet gets shut down and put away (Parent 1, In-depth interview, 16 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #3

My child spends time watching content on a digital device that she is already familiar with. She is able to watch what she chose, but only concerning the content that the parents preselect. We have locked the parents' choice to define the content allowed to the age-appropriate range set (Parent 3, In-depth interview, 18 Mei 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #4

Since my children started nursery, they've gotten used to digital devices, and each one of them has used a device under supervision, which I don't view as a problem as long as it's monitored. It's fine for them to use digital devices daily, and even sometimes, for learning purposes, the caregiver helps supervise their use. I just feel comfortable as long as there's supervision watching what they view and what they can access. My older child is in Kindergarten B, and the younger one is in Kindergarten A (Parent 4, In-depth interview, 13 June 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #5

To me, supervising my child is more important than their age when it comes to allowing him to use digital devices. When my child was about two, he used a cell phone to have video calls with his grandparents, and he used digital devices to do this. I do not mind that my child used digital devices because I supervise his use (Parent 5, In-depth interview, 15 June 2025, Researcher Translation).

Parent #6

I stop an activity based on the situation and on my child's focus. I always supervise her and if I notice she is distracted, I stop (Parent 6, In-depth interview, 16 June 2025, Researcher Translation).

The finding can be interpreted as parental involvement continues after access is granted, through conditional and on-going regulation of children's digital use. Parents set boundaries pertaining to time, purpose, supervision, and context. Digital access was usually allowed only for educational activities, especially during school days, while access for entertainment was restricted. Parents also reported supervising and controlling children's attention, stopping them from using the devices when they became distracted. Additionally, there were instances of shared supervision with caregivers, suggesting that access control is not always executed by parents but may be shared, remaining within the boundaries of parental oversight. This theme is consistent with literature on parental mediation that identifies restrictive mediation

(time and content restrictions), active mediation (guidance and supervision), and co-use as frameworks through which parents manage children's online activities (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Lou et al., 2024). The varying and adaptable aspects of parental control featured in this study are in line with the most recent developments which position mediation strategies as more dynamic and responsive to child actions, family circumstances, and daily activities (Lia & Băban, 2018).

The finding is particularly relevant because it illustrates that parental involvement is not diminished when children begin engaging with digital access of the technology rather, involvement tends to become a continuing in the dynamic process. Conditional access reflects how parents actively construct home digital routines, shaping digital use as part of children's learning environments. The findings also challenge simplistic narratives that parents either allow or prohibit gadget use. Instead, parents in this study positioned digital access as permissible when aligned with learning goals and when supervision could be maintained. This offers a more realistic description of parenting in the digital age, where parents face a continuous balancing act between children's needs, educational requirements, and perceived risks (Faircloth, 2014). In this light, conditional access can be seen as an on-going form of parental involvement, wherein parents constantly supervise and control access to content, ensuring it remains developmentally suitable and educationally purposeful. This confirms that digital parenting should be viewed as multidimensional and continuous, rather than as a singular decision about device ownership (Enes et al., 2025; Hasanati, 2024). By emphasizing conditional and on-going access regulation, this finding extends parental mediation theory beyond static categories of restrictive or active mediation, highlighting mediation as a dynamic and situational practice embedded in everyday family life. It also critiques the assumption that digital parenting can be reduced to binary decisions of allowance or prohibition, instead revealing the nuanced and negotiated character of access management.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital access in early childhood is not merely a matter of device availability but socially mediated practice enacted through parental decision-making. Parents' involvement was reflected in three interrelated dimensions: evaluating age appropriateness, determining the timing of first exposure, and regulating access through conditional and supervised use. These findings highlight that digital access is continuously negotiated within families and shaped by developmental considerations, schooling demands, and contextual factors. By conceptualizing access in selective provision, this study shifts the focus of digital parenting research from post-use regulation toward pre-access decision-making as a foundational dimension of parental mediation. Despite being limited to a small group of parents within a private school context, this study contributes theoretically by refining the understanding of digital access as a relational and developmentally negotiated process. The findings suggest that early childhood digital policies should move beyond screen-time restrictions and instead provide developmentally appropriate guidance and clearer collaboration between schools and families. Future research involving more diverse socio-cultural and educational contexts is recommended to further examine how selective provision operates across different family environments.

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