

Family Communication in the Digital Era: Parent-Child Interaction Patterns in Building Family Harmony

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Abstract

Family disharmony is often associated with ineffective communication, and this issue has become increasingly complex with the widespread use of digital technology, particularly mobile devices, which may reduce direct interaction among family members. This article examines the importance of family communication, analyzes parent-child interaction patterns, and identifies the challenges posed by digital technology in fostering healthy family relationships. Using a narrative literature review with thematic synthesis, the study integrates evidence from various sources concerning family communication processes. The findings indicate that technoference is associated with increased conflict, weaker family cohesion, and problematic media use, whereas intentional co-use and family-oriented communication can support trust and connectedness. The synthesis identifies several key practices for strengthening family harmony in the digital era, including open communication, negotiated boundaries, protected periods of undivided attention, active parental mediation, parental modeling, and relational repair. The article concludes that digital technology does not inherently determine family harmony; rather, its effects depend on whether it supports shared family purposes or displaces responsive interpersonal attention. Families may therefore benefit from relationally informed digital practices that position technology as a supportive tool within family relationships rather than as a competing presence.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are not merely individuals but also social beings who require communication with others (Dubois-Sage et al., 2023). Communication therefore functions as a means of establishing shared connections between two or more people, exchanging ideas, conveying information, and developing mutual understanding.

Etymologically, communication refers to connection or relationship. The term originates from the Latin word *communis*, meaning “common” or “shared,” and reflects the process of establishing common meaning regarding a particular matter. Communication has become an essential part of human interaction. Moreover, information and communication technologies now enable people to communicate and exchange information more easily, regardless of time and location, making communication increasingly important for maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships within society.

Family communication is a crucial element in maintaining family harmony. In recent years, various issues involving family members, ranging from parent-child tensions to conflicts between spouses, have become increasingly visible. Family disharmony may also contribute to

behavioral problems among adolescents when communication, supervision, and emotional support within the household are inadequate.

Such disharmony is frequently associated with ineffective communication, which may escalate into family conflict and, in some cases, domestic violence. This situation can also negatively affect children, who may experience emotional insecurity within an unstable family environment and consequently feel more comfortable seeking companionship and support outside the home than within their own families.

This situation is further complicated by the influence of information technology, particularly mobile devices, within the family environment. Although these devices are designed to facilitate communication and information exchange, they can also disrupt direct interaction among family members. Excessive engagement with gaming, streaming videos, social media, and other digital activities may reduce opportunities for face-to-face communication when individuals prioritize their devices over direct interaction with other family members.

The home and family unit should provide a supportive and secure environment for all members, particularly children. Parents therefore play a pivotal role in shaping family communication because communication patterns within the household can influence children's emotional adjustment and social behavior. The family serves as the primary environment in which children learn communication, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and appropriate behavioral conduct. The values that parents communicate and demonstrate in daily life serve as models for children, particularly through parental attitudes and child-rearing practices. A child's personality development is therefore closely related to how parents communicate, interact, and behave within the family (Setyowati, 2005; Rahmawati & Gazali, 2018).

The family also serves as the primary setting for a child's socialization process, preparing the child to participate in the broader community and social structure. It provides a context for the transmission of moral, ethical, and social values and therefore plays an important role in shaping enduring patterns of personality and behavior. Parent-child interaction, particularly communication, is consequently essential. Parents need to develop effective communication and child-rearing practices to support children's optimal growth and development (Sarnoto, 2022).

Several studies have examined family communication patterns and child development outcomes. Koerner and Schrodtt (2014) developed Family Communication Patterns Theory, which distinguishes between conversation orientation, characterized by open discussion, and conformity orientation, characterized by hierarchical uniformity. These orientations influence how communication norms and technology-related rules are established within families. Clark (2011) contributed to Parental Mediation Theory by examining active mediation, restrictive mediation, monitoring, and co-use. Research on technoference has also expanded considerably. McDaniel and Coyne (2016) introduced the concept in the context of couple relationships, while McDaniel and Radesky (2018) extended it to parent-child relationships and found that parental technology-related distraction was associated with child behavioral problems. Zhang et al. (2025) conducted a meta-analysis of 42 studies ($N = 47,212$) and identified a positive association between parental technoference and children's problematic media use ($r = 0.282$). Studies examining mediating mechanisms have further shown that parental phubbing is associated with lower psychological need satisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and depressive

symptoms (Xiao & Zheng, 2022), with parent-child cohesion and self-control serving as mediating pathways (Mi et al., 2023; Niu et al., 2020).

Indonesian studies have similarly examined family communication dynamics. Wardyaningrum (2013) explored communication in conflict resolution; Lestari et al. (2015) found that gadget use often disrupted direct family communication; Setyowati (2005) examined family communication patterns and children's emotional development in Javanese families; and Sarnoto (2022) investigated effective communication with young children from an Islamic perspective. Turhan et al. (2026) found that parents in Türkiye identified both digital risks and parenting practices that supported resilience, while Janssens et al. (2025) reported that adults may underestimate how children experience technology-related interruptions, with shared and proximal technology use potentially supporting trust from the child's perspective. Despite these contributions, several gaps remain, including limited research on Indonesian family dynamics, insufficient integration of communication patterns and technology use, a predominance of cross-sectional research designs, and limited synthesis across developmental stages to support age-specific digital parenting guidance.

Despite the growing body of research on family communication and digital technology, several research gaps remain. First, many studies have been conducted in Western contexts, while research on Indonesian family dynamics remains limited, particularly regarding how cultural values, extended family structures, and socioeconomic conditions shape digital parenting practices. Second, although many studies have examined communication patterns or technology use separately, fewer have integrated these perspectives to investigate how digital technology can simultaneously function as both a connector and a disruptor within family relationships. Third, the predominance of cross-sectional research designs limits causal inference regarding the long-term effects of technofence on family harmony. Fourth, limited research has synthesized evidence across developmental stages, from early childhood through adolescence, to provide age-specific guidance for digital parenting.

This article addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive narrative review that integrates conceptual frameworks, including Family Communication Patterns Theory, Parental Mediation Theory, and a family systems perspective, with empirical evidence from both international and Indonesian studies. The review examines the dual role of digital technology as both a connector and a disruptor in family communication, identifies key mechanisms, including displacement, observational learning, and compensatory pathways, that link technology use to child and family outcomes, and proposes a practical framework for strengthening family harmony in the digital era that is sensitive to the Indonesian context. By synthesizing evidence across developmental stages and cultural contexts, this article contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for parents, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote healthy family communication in the digital era.

METHOD

This study employed a narrative literature review with thematic synthesis to integrate conceptual, quantitative, qualitative, experimental, and review evidence concerning family communication in the digital era. Literature searches used relevant terms related to family communication, parent-child interaction, digital parenting, parental phubbing, technofence, parental mediation, and family harmony. Recent peer-reviewed publications were prioritized,

while selected earlier studies were retained when they provided foundational concepts or relevant Indonesian contextual evidence.

Studies were included when they directly addressed parent-child communication, relational quality, child or adolescent well-being, problematic media use, parental digital distraction, or family-based strategies for managing digital media. Publications without a clear empirical or conceptual basis and studies focused solely on technical aspects of digital devices were excluded. The selected literature was comparatively reviewed and synthesized into recurring themes related to the dual role of digital technology, family communication patterns, the relational mechanisms of technoference, and constructive digital mediation. As this study used a narrative review design, the synthesis did not claim exhaustive coverage or apply a formal risk-of-bias assessment.

The analysis was conducted by comparing study populations, research designs, principal constructs, and relational outcomes across developmental stages and methodological approaches. Findings were interpreted according to the strength of the underlying evidence, with cross-sectional associations distinguished from longitudinal, observational, experimental, and meta-analytic findings. Convergent and divergent findings were subsequently organized into broader thematic categories, while potential alternative explanations, including parental stress, work demands, children's media behavior, and differences between parent and child reports, were considered in interpreting the evidence.

Methodological quality was assessed based on the clarity of the study design, appropriateness of measurement, use of multiple informants where applicable, and consistency between the reported data and conclusions. Cross-sectional studies were used primarily to identify recurring associations, whereas longitudinal, experimental, observational, and meta-analytic evidence received greater interpretive weight when examining possible mechanisms. Indonesian studies were also retained to provide relevant cultural and practical context regarding local family structures, communication patterns, and digital parenting practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Conceptual Foundations: Family Systems and Communication Patterns

A family systems perspective views the family as an interdependent relational unit. A change in one person's behavior can alter the responses of others and eventually reshape the interaction pattern of the whole household. In digital life, a parent's frequent checking may prompt a child to intensify bids for attention, withdraw, or turn to another screen. The parent may then interpret the child's response as misbehavior and become more controlling, creating a reciprocal cycle. This perspective discourages simple blame because technoference is rarely an isolated act; it is embedded in routines, stress, expectations, and feedback between family members.

Family Communication Patterns Theory adds a more specific explanation. Conversation orientation refers to the extent to which a family encourages frequent, spontaneous, and wide-ranging discussion, whereas conformity orientation concerns the pressure to maintain agreement and hierarchical uniformity. These dimensions influence how technology rules are introduced and interpreted. A high-conversation family may negotiate the purpose of a rule and discuss an online experience, while a strongly conformity-oriented family may emphasize obedience. The latter approach can be efficient in urgent situations, but without explanation it

may reduce disclosure and make it harder for children to seek help after encountering online difficulties (Koerner & Schrod, 2014).

Parental mediation theory complements these perspectives by focusing on what parents actually do around media. Active mediation involves discussion and explanation; restrictive mediation establishes limits; monitoring checks use after it occurs; technical mediation uses filters or settings; and co-use places parent and child in a shared activity. No strategy is universally effective in isolation. Restriction can reduce exposure but may not build independent judgment. Active mediation supports understanding but requires time and parental knowledge. Co-use creates opportunities for conversation, yet its value depends on genuine engagement rather than two people silently sharing a screen. A coherent approach therefore combines strategies according to age, risk, and family capacity (Clark, 2011).

Digital Technology as Both Connector and Disruptor

The literature consistently shows that the consequences of digital media are context-dependent. Technologies facilitate distant contact, rapid coordination, access to information, and shared activities. They may be especially valuable when family members live apart or when parents and children use media jointly to learn, play, or communicate. The qualitative findings reported by Turhan et al. (2026) illustrate this duality: parents described risks and regulatory challenges, but also identified digital parenting practices that could support resilience and recovery. Thus, the relevant analytical question is not simply how many minutes a device is used, but why, when, and with whom it is used.

This relational interpretation helps explain why co-use and isolated use can produce different outcomes. Family-oriented use makes the device part of a shared interaction, whereas technofence makes the device a competitor for attention. Janssens et al. (2025) found meaningful differences between parents' and children's reports, showing that adults may underestimate how interruptions are experienced by children. Their findings also indicate that proximate shared use can support trust and enjoyable time together from the child's perspective. Parents should therefore evaluate digital routines not only by content and duration, but also by whether those routines create or displace reciprocal engagement.

Technology can support at least four constructive family functions. First, coordination tools help organize transport, school schedules, household duties, and safety. Second, communication platforms allow emotional contact when family members are separated by work, migration, education, or divorce. Third, digital content can become a shared learning resource when parents and children search, create, or evaluate information together. Fourth, photographs, messages, and family archives help preserve memories and intergenerational stories. These benefits are strongest when the technology serves an explicit relational purpose and does not permanently replace richer forms of interaction.

The disruptive potential is equally varied. Notifications fragment attention; algorithmic feeds extend use beyond the original intention; personalized devices reduce visibility into one another's activities; and online entertainment may compete with sleep, study, chores, and conversation. Disruption can occur even when the content itself is harmless. A parent answering work messages may have a legitimate purpose, yet the child may experience only the withdrawal of attention. Relational consequences therefore depend on whether the interruption is acknowledged, explained, and repaired. Purpose alone does not determine the child's experience, but transparent communication can reduce misunderstanding.

Conversation Orientation, Responsiveness, and Family Harmony

Family communication pattern theory distinguishes a conversation orientation, in which members are encouraged to discuss ideas and feelings, from a conformity orientation, in which agreement and obedience are emphasized (Koerner & Schrodtt, 2014). These orientations can coexist, but a strong conversation orientation gives children space to ask questions, disclose difficulties, and participate in rule formation. In digital contexts, open discussion is particularly important because children encounter risks and social situations that parents cannot manage through surveillance alone. Rules are more likely to become meaningful when the reasons behind them are discussed and adjusted to the child's age and needs.

Responsiveness is the behavioral core of this communication climate. A child's attempt to gain attention is a relational bid. Observational research found that maternal mobile-device use during a structured task was associated with fewer verbal and nonverbal exchanges (Radesky et al., 2015). When parents repeatedly delay or ignore such bids because of a device, children may interpret the behavior as rejection, even if the parent's purpose is legitimate. Conversely, pausing, making eye contact, acknowledging the child, and explaining when attention will be available preserve recognition. Effective communication therefore does not require parents to be permanently device-free; it requires predictable moments of undivided attention and clear repair when interruptions occur.

Open communication also shapes the quality of parental monitoring. Monitoring conducted secretly or punitively can communicate distrust, while transparent monitoring can be framed as temporary guidance linked to developmental readiness. Parents can explain which risks they are concerned about, what information they may review, and when greater privacy will be granted. This approach turns supervision into a negotiated educational process. It also makes rules easier to revise as children demonstrate responsibility, rather than fixing the family in a permanent cycle of suspicion and concealment.

Emotional validation is another essential element. When children report an online conflict, embarrassment, or mistake, an immediate lecture may stop future disclosure. A more constructive sequence is to listen, identify the child's emotion, clarify what happened, assess immediate safety, and then discuss options. This does not mean accepting harmful behavior. It means preserving the communication channel through which parents can understand risk and guide decisions. The same principle applies when a child complains about parental phone use: acknowledging the experience can prevent defensiveness from becoming a second source of disconnection.

Technoference, Conflict, and Child Outcomes

Evidence linking parental technoference with poorer relational and developmental outcomes has expanded. Mackay et al. (2022) mapped research concerning interruptions to parent-child relationships and child outcomes, while Zhang et al. (2025) synthesized 42 studies involving 47,212 participants. Their meta-analysis identified a positive association between parental technoference and children's problematic media use ($r = 0.282$, 95% CI [0.250, 0.313]). The association was stronger at older child ages and when both parents engaged in technoference. This does not establish that parental phone use alone causes problematic media use, but it supports a consistent relational and modeling pathway.

Several mechanisms may operate simultaneously. First, displacement occurs when device use replaces conversation, joint activity, or emotional support. Second, observational learning

occurs when children reproduce the high-priority status that adults assign to devices. Third, perceived rejection may lead children to seek comfort, stimulation, or social recognition online. Parental phubbing has been associated with lower satisfaction of psychological needs, diminished self-esteem, and depressive symptoms (Xiao & Zheng, 2022). Parent-child cohesion has also been identified as a pathway linking phubbing with adolescent mobile-phone addiction (Mi et al., 2023). A separate moderated mediation study similarly connected parental phubbing with problematic mobile use among adolescents (Ma et al., 2024). Other evidence emphasizes the roles of attachment and adolescent self-control (Xie et al., 2019). The quality of the parent-child relationship can also mediate problematic mobile-phone use (Niu et al., 2020). These findings should be interpreted carefully because many studies are cross-sectional and rely on self-report, making reverse or reciprocal influence plausible.

The evidence also cautions against technological determinism. In an experiment with parent-child dyads, both tablet-based and paper-based distraction reduced interaction quality, with no clear additional penalty for the digital condition (Chamam et al., 2024). However, longitudinal and correlational evidence indicates that repeated technology-based distraction can be related to children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Parent technology use may also influence child outcomes indirectly through reduced interaction and increased child screen time (Wong et al., 2020). Problematic parental smartphone use has additionally been related to executive-function difficulties through technofence (Yang et al., 2023). The broader lesson is that children need contingent attention. Focusing only on the device may obscure work stress, mental load, or other sources of divided attention.

A displacement pathway explains how small interruptions can accumulate. A single glance at a phone is unlikely to determine a relationship, but repeated interruptions may reduce the total number of conversational turns, shared observations, and opportunities for emotional coaching. These micro-interactions are developmentally important because children learn language, self-regulation, and social expectations through repeated responsive exchanges. When displacement becomes routine, both parent and child may adapt by expecting less conversation, thereby normalizing a lower level of engagement.

A social-learning pathway operates alongside displacement. Parents communicate priorities through visible behavior. If adults respond immediately to every notification while asking children to delay their own device use, the inconsistency weakens the credibility of the rule. Children may imitate not only the amount of use but also the habit of using a device to escape boredom, discomfort, or conflict. Consistent modeling is therefore more persuasive than prohibition alone. Parents who narrate their own choices—such as silencing notifications during dinner—make self-regulation visible and teachable.

A compensatory pathway may emerge when children use digital media to meet needs that feel insufficiently supported offline. Online activity can offer stimulation, belonging, achievement, or relief from tension. These benefits are not inherently negative, but risk increases when they become the primary response to loneliness, rejection, or unresolved family conflict. The meta-analytic association between parental technofence and problematic media use is consistent with this possibility, although reciprocal influence remains plausible because children's intensive media use may also increase parental frustration and withdrawal (Zhang et al., 2025).

Developmental Differences Across Childhood and Adolescence

Age changes both the meaning of technology and the child's dependence on parental responsiveness. Infants and young children rely heavily on face-to-face cues, joint attention, and immediate feedback. For them, repeated interruption can directly reduce the interactive experiences through which language and emotional regulation develop. School-age children have greater cognitive independence but still require scaffolding to evaluate content, manage routines, and understand online social behavior. Adolescents seek autonomy and peer connection, making rigid surveillance more likely to generate conflict if it is not accompanied by respect and explanation.

Rules should therefore evolve developmentally. For young children, parents carry most responsibility for selecting content, structuring time, and remaining physically involved. For school-age children, guided choice and co-created routines can gradually increase responsibility. For adolescents, the emphasis should shift toward negotiated expectations, privacy, consequences, and help-seeking. A rule that is appropriate for a six-year-old may communicate disrespect when applied unchanged to a sixteen-year-old. Developmentally responsive mediation protects the relationship while still recognizing genuine online risks.

Children also differ within the same age group. Temperament, neurodevelopment, digital skills, peer experiences, and previous exposure to risk shape the support each child needs. Some children may manage transitions away from a device easily, while others require warnings and structured alternatives. Some may disclose online problems spontaneously, while others need gentle and repeated invitations. Effective family policy is therefore consistent in values but flexible in implementation. Equity does not always mean identical rules; it means matching support and responsibility to the child's circumstances.

Constructive Digital Mediation in Everyday Family Life

The synthesis suggests four complementary practices. First, families can establish protected interaction periods, such as meals, short daily conversations, and bedtime routines, during which devices are silenced or placed out of reach. Second, parents can use active mediation by discussing online content, emotions, advertising, privacy, and social consequences. Parental mediation theory stresses participatory learning rather than relying only on control (Clark, 2011). Enabling mediation can broaden online opportunities when it is supported by adequate digital skills (Livingstone et al., 2017). Third, co-use can turn media into a shared activity through collaborative searching, learning, gaming, or discussion. Fourth, parents should model the same boundaries they expect from children.

Boundaries must remain realistic. Parents may need devices for employment, care coordination, education, or emergencies. The perceived parental media mediation scale shows that children distinguish among autonomy-supportive, controlling, and inconsistent mediation practices (Valkenburg et al., 2013). Guidance for young children is also shaped by parental attitudes, children's skills, and the activities performed with media (Nikken & Schols, 2015). A family agreement should therefore distinguish purposeful use from habitual interruption and include exceptions. Parents can say why they need the device, specify how long the task will take, and return to the interrupted conversation.

For schools and family counselors, digital literacy programs should include communication skills rather than concentrating only on safety settings and screen-time limits.

Updated parental mediation theory recognizes that networked and interactive media require flexible strategies beyond traditional co-viewing (Jiow et al., 2017). Parents' risk perceptions and digital skills also influence how actively they mediate children's online activities (Helsper et al., 2025). A broader theoretical model further suggests that parental efficacy and knowledge should be considered alongside mediation style (Iqbal et al., 2021). Indonesian families also vary in household structure, cultural expectations, connectivity, and parental work demands; consequently, guidance should be flexible rather than based on a single universal threshold.

A Practical Framework for Strengthening Digital Family Harmony

The evidence can be translated into a five-part framework: awareness, agreement, attentive interaction, accompaniment, and adjustment. Awareness requires family members to identify when, why, and how devices interrupt interaction. A short household audit can distinguish purposeful use from automatic checking. Agreement converts awareness into explicit expectations concerning meals, bedtime, study, privacy, and urgent communication. The goal is not to create a long list of punishments but to reduce ambiguity about when attention should shift away from a screen.

Attentive interaction protects recurring moments in which family members can expect a response. Even fifteen minutes of reliable, undivided conversation may be more meaningful than long periods of physical presence combined with fragmented attention. Accompaniment involves parents entering the child's digital world through questions, co-use, and respectful interest. Parents do not need to master every platform, but they should understand the activities, relationships, and emotions that make the platform important to the child. This curiosity creates opportunities for guidance before a crisis occurs.

Adjustment recognizes that a family agreement is a living arrangement. Families can review what works, identify repeated conflicts, and change rules in response to age, school demands, employment, and emerging platforms. Review should include children's perspectives because perceived fairness affects cooperation. When a rule fails, the family can examine whether it was unclear, unrealistic, inconsistently modeled, or disconnected from the underlying need. This problem-solving orientation is more constructive than simply increasing punishment.

Relational repair completes the framework. Interruptions are unavoidable, and even committed parents will sometimes respond impatiently or overlook a child's bid. Repair involves naming what happened, acknowledging its effect, apologizing when appropriate, and returning attention to the unfinished interaction. Repair does not erase the interruption, but it prevents a momentary failure from becoming a stable message of indifference. It also models accountability, teaching children that healthy relationships are sustained not by perfection but by the willingness to reconnect.

Implications for the Indonesian Family Context

The application of these principles in Indonesia must consider extended households, religious and communal values, uneven connectivity, and diverse work arrangements. In multigenerational homes, grandparents and other caregivers may apply different rules, creating confusion unless expectations are discussed collectively. Shared devices may reduce individual privacy but increase opportunities for supervision. Conversely, personal smartphones can make activities less visible. Family agreements should therefore identify who is responsible for guidance and how adults will respond consistently across caregivers.

Economic conditions also shape digital routines. For some parents, a smartphone is an essential tool for informal work, online selling, transportation, and communication with employers. Advice that simply demands device-free parenting may be unrealistic and may unfairly blame families with limited control over work schedules. A more feasible approach distinguishes urgent livelihood use from discretionary checking, protects short but reliable interaction periods, and encourages parents to explain work-related interruptions. Quality guidance must be sensitive to constraints while still protecting the child's need for recognition.

Schools can support families by providing concise, age-specific digital parenting education. Programs should include examples of conversation starters, family agreements, privacy boundaries, cyberbullying responses, and signs of problematic use. Counselors can assess whether a technology conflict is the primary problem or a symptom of stress, marital conflict, isolation, or inconsistent parenting. Religious and community organizations may also reinforce norms of presence, responsibility, and mutual respect without presenting technology as morally bad in itself. A collaborative approach is more likely to produce sustainable change than isolated warnings.

Privacy, Ethics, and Proportional Parental Supervision

Digital parenting raises an ethical tension between protection and privacy. Parents have a legitimate responsibility to protect children from exploitation, harmful contact, fraud, and age-inappropriate content. However, unlimited surveillance can weaken trust, discourage disclosure, and prevent children from developing judgment. Proportional supervision requires parents to consider the child's age, demonstrated responsibility, the seriousness of the risk, and the intrusiveness of the monitoring method. Checking every private conversation is not equivalent to reviewing general account settings or discussing unfamiliar contacts. The least intrusive effective measure should be preferred whenever immediate safety is not at stake.

Transparency is central to ethical monitoring. Children should know what parents monitor, why it is necessary, how the information will be used, and what conditions will lead to greater independence. A credible and serious safety concern may occasionally justify secret monitoring, but it should not become the routine foundation of digital parenting. Clear explanation turns supervision into a visible educational process and allows the child to ask questions. It also limits the possibility that monitoring tools become instruments of anger, humiliation, or excessive control.

Parents must also protect the child's digital identity. Posting photographs, school information, medical details, or embarrassing stories can create a permanent record that the child did not meaningfully consent to. Before sharing, parents can consider whether the content reveals location, routine, vulnerability, or information the child may later regard as private. As children mature, seeking their permission communicates respect and teaches consent. Responsible parental modeling therefore includes not only personal screen discipline but also careful decisions about what adults publish about family members.

Ethical guidance should acknowledge that safety decisions sometimes require rapid action. Evidence of self-harm, grooming, threats, or exploitation may justify immediate intervention and temporary limits on privacy. Even then, the response should remain focused on protection rather than punishment. Parents should preserve evidence when necessary, seek professional or legal support, and communicate that the child is not to blame for being

manipulated. Once the immediate risk is controlled, rebuilding trust and restoring age-appropriate autonomy become part of the recovery process.

Evaluating Whether Family Digital Rules Are Effective

A successful family policy should not be evaluated only by lower screen time. More meaningful indicators include fewer unresolved arguments, improved responsiveness, greater child disclosure, better sleep routines, consistent completion of responsibilities, and the ability to stop or postpone use without extreme distress. Positive use should also be considered: a child may spend substantial time creating, studying, communicating with relatives, or collaborating with peers. Evaluation should therefore examine function and consequences rather than treating every minute as identical.

Families can conduct a brief monthly review using three questions: Which digital routines helped us? Which situations repeatedly caused disconnection or conflict? What one change should we test next? Keeping the review small prevents it from becoming another source of pressure. One household might silence work notifications during dinner, another might move charging devices outside bedrooms, and another might schedule shared gaming. The change should be specific enough to observe and realistic enough to maintain. After several weeks, the family can retain, revise, or replace it based on experience.

Consistency between adults is another indicator of effectiveness. When caregivers apply contradictory expectations, children may focus on negotiating between adults rather than learning self-regulation. Adults should agree on core principles, consequences, exceptions, and the behavior they will model. Complete uniformity is unnecessary, especially across households, but major differences should be explained. A child can understand that school-night rules differ from weekend rules when the reasons are clear. Predictability, fairness, and adult accountability are more important than rigid sameness.

CONCLUSION

Digital technology does not independently determine family harmony. Its effects depend on whether it supports shared family purposes or repeatedly displaces responsive interpersonal attention. The reviewed evidence indicates that technofence is associated with greater conflict, weaker family cohesion, perceived neglect, and problematic media use, although causal interpretations remain limited by the predominance of cross-sectional research. At the same time, intentional co-use and family-oriented communication can promote trust, enjoyment, and connectedness. Families may therefore benefit from relationally informed digital practices, including open communication, negotiated and consistent boundaries, protected periods of undivided attention, active parental mediation, parental modeling, and relational repair following technology-related interruptions. These practices position digital technology as a supportive tool within family relationships rather than as a competing presence.

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