

Electronic Media and Preschoolers' Language and Social Skills: Parents' Perspectives

Arlene B. Loquias*

aloquias@hnu.edu.ph

Assistant Professor, Holy Name University, Tagbilaran City 6300 Philippines

Abstract

Today's new technology has dramatically changed children's lives. Electronic media continues to impact the lives of young children, and its impact should never be underestimated. With its strong influence, media technology can be a gain or a loss to the lives of toddlers and preschoolers. This study aims to describe the effects of electronic media use on the expressive and receptive language of very young children as well as their social skills from the parent's perspective. Looking at parents' experiences with their children's use of electronic media reveals the impact of electronic media on their children's language and social skills. An inductive qualitative approach was used to analyze data collected from interviews with parents of preschool children and used this as the primary data source. This study shows that electronic media exposure to children strongly influences their expressiveness and receptivity in language. The results further indicate that electronic media have an adverse impact on children's social skills.

Keywords: electronic media use, social skills, language skills, parental control

1. Introduction

Children today live in a world where electronic media are integral to their lives. Thousands of baby videos, TV shows, and websites have been designed and published for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the electronic media available to families, even for the youngest children in our society. Not surprisingly, watching TV is a normal part of a toddler's daily life. A month-old baby video, a 9-month computer game, and a 1-year-old's TV shows are getting tiresome. A growing number of television programs, videos, websites, software programs, video games, and interactive television toys are designed specifically for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (Rideout & Hammel, 2006). The booming videotape market is aimed at young children. Videos of nursery rhymes and songs for very young children are readily available on YouTube, often

with millions of views. Technology and electronic media have definitely taken hold.

Despite the abundance of electronic media for very young children, little is known about how these changes affected the lives of young people (Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). Rapid changes in our media environment have not accompanied a similar growth in our knowledge of how media affects children's cognitive, social, emotional, or physical development. Scientific research on the effects of media use on infants has not kept up with the pace of the market. Media technology can be an asset to make today's children more educated, socially connected, and informed than any previous generation. On the other hand, it can be dangerous for vulnerable children. It's an endless source of potential advertising, violent depictions, dangerous encounters with strangers, risky behaviors, and pornographic exposure (Gunn & Donahue, 2008). In addition, recent research by UNICEF (2021) demonstrates that kids who spend more time online take higher risks, possibly as a result of their increased exposure or their more assured use of the internet. This is a dilemma because, on the one hand, the research shows that increasing children's internet activity enhances their digital literacy. They are, however, also more exposed to unsafe behavior, contact, and information as a result.

One of the most common criticisms of children's media use is that it crowds out other activities considered more beneficial, such as outdoor play and recreational reading (Kirkorian, Wartella, and Anderson, 2008). Playing outdoors is an important place for children to develop not only their physical health but also their social skills. Playing outdoors encourages children to participate actively in games and activities. During these encounters, children learn to use language to communicate their intentions and feelings to other children and to make friends. During active play, children are made to know and understand themselves through play. However, as children paid more attention to electronic media, the time spent actively playing decreased significantly. Time spent in interactive media was a time not spent in active games. The more time children spend on electronic media, the less time they spend communicating and interacting with others. However, research remains divided and can confuse educators and parents. Some children's media researchers have found evidence to support the idea that screen media is inherently harmful (NAEYC, 2012).

Radesky, J. Schumacher, J., Zuckerman, B. (2015) found that interactive media's visual design, sound effects, and touchscreen interfaces appealed to young children or distracted them from educational content. A balance of the two is necessary to facilitate learning. They also emphasize that one of the mechanisms by which television exposure adversely affects children's development is by suppressing verbal and playful interactions with parents. The instant access and portability of mobile devices are likely to keep out social interactions and other fulfilling activities. With thousands of apps marketed as

"educational" and no evidence to support this claim, parents are happy with this relative increase in screen time. Interactive media teaches fact-based knowledge, but other important preschool skills such as self-regulation, empathy, social skills, and problem-solving primarily used by children as they explore their natural environment, and interact with peers and caregivers is learned by playing in unstructured creative ways.

Amidst the increasing number and types of electronic media, the quantity and quality of research on these topics are inconsistent. There are fewer studies of new technologies or novel uses of existing technologies, and the findings are speculative. As a result, little is known about what is good or bad regarding early childhood media exposure. These issues are of great concern not only to parents but also to educators, policymakers, and advocates.

According to Maria Montessori, a child's mind is highly receptive. Children learn much from their surroundings and experiences (Henniger, 2013). Childhood is a period of high brain plasticity. During the first three years of life, a child's brain may create over one million new connections per second – essential for developing hearing, language, and cognition (Gottschalk, 2019). Understanding the media use of the youngest children is especially important. Media use can particularly significantly impact these age groups.

Against this background, the researcher would like to examine how very young children's use of electronic media affects their receptive and expressive language and social skills. This study aimed to describe parents' observations on electronic media use by their children below 6 years old in relation to their language and social skills which can shed light on (1) what kinds of shows do children 2-6 years old often watch; (2) how does electronic media use affect children's receptive and expressive language; and (3) how does electronic media affect children's social skills.

2. Methods

The researcher used the qualitative-descriptive method to describe the experiences and observations of the parents of children 1 to 6 years old regarding their use of electronic media. The inductive reasoning was used moving from specific observations to broader generalizations. This study began with specific observations and measures, to detect patterns and regularities, formulate some tentative hypotheses, and finally ending up developing some general conclusions. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants. The participant of this research must have a child who is two to six years old who is a user of any electronic media device. Thirteen (13) participants were interviewed reaching the point of saturation. Parents whose children are not users of electronic media were not included in this

research. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from participants. All the participants were briefed about the study and written informed consents were solicited for their participation. With the participant's consent the researcher used audio/video recorders to record the interview more accurately. After the interview the researcher listened to all the audiotapes several times before the transcription to be more immersed and be able to capture the meanings the participants wanted to convey. Maximum codes were constructed about concepts related to the young children's use of electronic media provided by the parents. Some concepts were similar to others while others were not. Themes were formulated through the progress of line-by-line coding and integration of sub-categories through constant comparison, modification and analysis of concepts. The Husserlian Method of Data Analysis and Collaizzi's Thematic Process, were used in analyzing the data.

3. Results and Discussion

The participants expressed their feelings, views, and reactions with regard to their child's use of electronic media all connected to internet which includes TV, laptops, tablets, and cellular phones. Varied answers surfaced after a one-on-one interview was done. A descriptive analysis of transcripts revealed that five (5) major themes characterized the participants' perceptions to the effect of electronic media use to their children's language and social skills. The five major themes were labelled using direct quotations from the participants; this was done to express the original idea conveyed by the participants. Themes, however, are not to be interpreted as independent from each other but as complementary aspects of a unified pattern. The five themes as deduced from the transcripts of the participants are:

- Theme 1: Early Exposure
- Theme 2: Nature of Electronic Media Use
- Theme 2: Electronic Media Use and Language Acquisition
- Theme 3: Electronic Media Use and Social Skills
- Theme 4: Parents Insights

3.1 Early Exposure

Parents shared that their children used electronic media very early. As early as 18 months old, children were already browsing the net and watching nursery rhymes. Some children were introduced to the use of electronic media at age two and some at age three. Though not explicitly stated, it is evident that children are using electronic media at a very young age with the parent's consent. Parents allow

children to use electronic media at a very young age because of the availability of electronic gadgets at home and the availability of shows intentionally packaged for children.

3.2 Nature of Electronic Media Use

The parents' responses show that most children are highly inclined to watch cartoon characters and nursery rhymes. Shows identified by parents include Mickey Mouse, Sophia the First, Peppa Pig, PJ Mask, Thomas and Friends, Barney, the English version of Masha and Bear, the Minions, and Disney movies. These shows were made accessible through electronic gadgets like TVs, laptops, tablets, and cellular phones connected to the internet. It can be noticed that these shows use English language as medium. These shows are designed to capture children's interest. Once they are introduced to these, they got glued into these shows. However, one parent shared that unknown to her at the start, her child watches shows that use "bad language" that has influenced the way the child communicates with others.

3.3 Electronic Media Use and Language Skills

Almost all parents agree that the use of electronic media has dramatically influenced their children's acquisition of Language. Many of them claimed that despite using Cebuano language in their daily conversations, their children speak English without being taught. This Language includes both receptive and expressive. The parents shared that their children acquired both the native Language used by family members at home (Cebuano) and the Language used in the shows (English) that they watch; however, they use the English Language more often to express their thoughts. On the other hand, one parents shared her worries about her child acquiring bad language from the shows that the child watches. Another parent worries about her son who talk like minions using incomprehensible language to talk with peers and adults even at age three. These phenomena clearly shows that the more children are exposed to electronic media at an early age, the greater the chances that the child acquires the Language used in the shows they watch. Electronic media use at an early age influences language acquisition.

3.4 Electronic Media Use and Social Skills

The participants of this research have varying ideas about the influence of electronic media use on their children's social skills. Some parents who have established control over their children's electronic media use claimed that their children maintain contact by playing with peers in the neighbourhood when not using their gadgets. However, some parents believe that the use of electronic media has adverse

effects on their children's social skills, hampering their ability to interact with people around them. Some parents shared that their children, who used to go out with them, chose to be left home with their gadgets. Another parent shared that her child had difficulty communicating with peers because of the language barrier. The language her child uses (English) is not the language her child's peers use, and he is often not understood. Another parent claimed that her child grasps instructions less than usual when engrossed in electronic gadgets and tends not to study his lessons when devices are around. Most parents shared that when their children use any electronic media, they tend not to hear anyone around them. They tend to ignore any form of communication getting too engrossed in the shows they watch. The more intense the child's involvement in the use of electronic media, the more they fail to interact with other children and family members. Excessive use of electronic media negatively affects a child's social skills especially in interacting with peers and adults.

3.5 Parents' Insights

Some parents were anxious that their children's use of electronic devices would take their place. Some feared that the presence of electronic gadgets was enough for their children to skip family gatherings; if they joined such gatherings, they missed interacting with other family members due to these electronic devices. Many parents believe that the use of electronic media should be under the parents' control, especially for the very young children ages two to six, to avoid the ill effects of this trend. The more parents catch sight of the negative impact of extensive electronic media use, the more they impose parental control over their children's use of electronic media. Result show that parents think that the amount of time children spend on electronic media must be controlled to evade its adverse effects. This finding goes with the findings of the UNICEF (2021) which posits that because of the complexity and rapid advancement of technology, many parents lack the confidence to keep an eye on their ostensibly tech-savvy kids. The widespread concerns about "excessive screen time," "internet addiction," and "stranger danger" may also have an impact on parents. Therefore, the temptation is to discourage kids from using the internet rather than teaching them how to do it safely.

4. Conclusion

The data show that children started using electronic media at a very young age by watching videos intentionally designed to capture their attention. The results show that parents tolerate their children's early exposure to electronic media because their children would stay put when using these devices. These parents believe that electronic media use highly influences children's language skills development

as they acquire the language used in the videos they watch. Constant exposure to the language used in the media they are exposed to made them proficient in using the language as if they are native speakers of the language. On the other hand, parents believe that early exposure to electronic media adversely affects young children's social skills and that there must be parental control over children's use of these media. Parents play a very important role in providing children the opportunity to maximize the benefits they get from using electronic media and to get rid of the adverse these media bring.

Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to express her gratitude to the following, who helped accomplish this piece of work.

Dr. Maria Paz Espiritu and Dr. Roque Bongcac for urging the researcher to engage in research;

Dr. Mark Abadiano, Graduate School Professor at Cebu Normal University, for being a healthy critique and for giving relevant suggestions for the improvement of this work;

The researcher's research participants for supplying important data during the interview.

Above all, to God Almighty, the source of all wisdom, for giving her the enlightenment to pursue this paperwork.

References

- Rideout V, Hamel E. (2006). *The Media Family Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers and their Parents*. Kaiser Family Foundation. Menlo Park California.
- Kirkorian, Wartella & Anderson, (2008). *Media and Young Children's Learning, The Future of Children*, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 39-61
- Vandewater, Wartella & Rideout, (2003). *Electronic Media Use in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers*, SAGE Journals
- Gunn, J.B & Donahue, E.H (2008), *Introducing the Issue, The Future of Children*, Research Gate
- UNICEF (2021). *Growing Up in a Connected World: Understanding Children's Risks and Opportunities in a Digital Age*. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti research[at]unicef.org via degli Alfani, 58 - 50121 Florence, Italy
- NAEYC, (2012). *Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe
- Radesky, J. Schumacher, J., Zuckerman, B. (2015). *Mobile and interactive media use by young children: the good, the bad, and the unknown*, National Library of Medicine
- Henniger, M. (2013). *Teaching Young Children* Pearson New International Edition: An Introduction, Pearson Education
- Gottschalk, F. (2019), *Impacts of Technology Use on Children: Exploring Literature on the Brain, Cognition and Well-Being*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Appendix A. Sample Transcript of Interview

Participant 1

“Kamao moistorya ug English akong anak, wala man unta nako tudloi. Para nako dako kayo ug influence ang electronic media sa language sa akong anak. Pero, ug magtan-aw siya sa TV naa siya’y tendency nga dili kabati kung tawgon. Ug magduwa sad siya ug gadgets, naa sya’y tendency nga mopili sa gadgets kaysa makigduwa sa uban nga mga bata. Usahay, ug naa lang gadgets ibilin sa balay dili na ganahan mokuyog nako ug molakaw ko. Peligro kaayo ug ang akong value as a parent mapulihan sa gadget, mao nga kinahanglan gyud nga ang intervention sa parents sa ilang paggamit sa electronic media.”

Participant 2

“Akong anak ganahan ug cartoon. Iyang tan-awon Disney, Disney Jr. ug paborito niya ang Mickey Mouse, Sophia the First, Peppa Pig ug P.J Mask. Nagstart cya tan-aw ug cartoons gamay pa siya kaayo. Para nako dako kayo ug influence sa iyang communication ang TV. Anad na siya mag-English bisag bisaya among gamit sa balay. Magduwa pod siya, pero kasagaran siya ra usa, usahay kauban iyang yaya. Mao nga kuwang siya ug socialization. Mao akong gipa-enrol aron ma-develop iyang social skills.”

Participant 3

“Celphone ang unang exposure sa akong anak, unya cable TV pod. Unya favorite niya ang Thomas and Friends ug Barney. Naa gyud influence sa iyang language ang TV kay ang una niyang nakamauhan ug storya kay English. Gicontrol man nako ang pag.tan-aw niya ug TV mao nga oka ra ang iyang socialization kay ug walay TV makigduwa man siya sa mga silingan”

Participant 4

“Nagsugod ug gamit ug electronic media akong anak when she was 3 years old. Karon you tube na iyang tigtan-aw. My child speaks English with British accent. Nakuha niya sa mga salida nga iyang tigtan-aw like “Masha and Bear” English version. Sa iya sad nga lola kay mag-iningles man akong mama. Pero, more ang influence sa electronic media kay bisaya man iyang yaya. In terms of social skills naa siya’y difficulty gamay kay dili man siya masabtan sa uban nga bata, mao ang iyang close, kadto rapd kasabot ug English kay magkasinabot sila.”

Participant 5

“Kamao si Tobi mogamit ug laptop, tab, celphone ug TV kay gamay pa siya kaayo exposed naman siya ani.. Kasagaran niya gitan-aw nursery rhymes pa to sauna, pero karon, stories na like Moana, Frozen, ug kanang mga bag-ong salida for kids. Updated siya sa bag-o nga mga salida nga maccess sa free movies. In terms sa iyang language, naa siya’s ma-pickup nga mga lines from famous shows. Pero, ang gamit sa balay, sagol English ug bisaya like “please ko kuha ug water”. Sa ilang mga play activities, ilang i-impersonate ang characters unja ilang i-dramatize. Dako ug influence ang mga shows nga ilang gitan-aw sa ilang language development. Sa socialization, naa siya’y friends. Kasagaran, kadto pd tiggamit ug gadgets. Pero, ug ma-bored na sila sa gadget, kay wana sila ganahi, magdagandagan na. dako ug influence pod ang electronic media sa ilang play activities.”

Participant 6

“i-pad ang kasagaran gamit sa akong anak. Nagsugod siya gamit sa i-pad sa 2 years old pa siya, pero

murag naddict na siya sa videos pag edad niya ug four. Okay raman ang language ni Cynthia, pero, nay ubang worsds nga dili masabot. Naadopt niya sa mga salida nga iyang tig-tan-aw labi na ang cartoons nga ang characters kay nag mumble lang. ug mag-tan-aw siya sa gadget, inattentive siya, then *dili mosugot sugoon. Okay lang ang relationship niya sa ubang bata. Naa pod siya'y nakuha nga good deeds, like moingon siya sa ubang bata nga "bad na" ug naa siya makit-an nga dili mao. Nakuha niya sa salida. Mas mprefer siya nga makigduwa sa ubang bata kaysa mag-gamit sa tab."*

Participant 7

"Ang unang tig.tan.aw sa akong anak Barney. He started watching TV at age 5. He imitates words that she sees in Tv. Both good and bad. She is fond of watching tutorials and she imitates these. However she also was able to imitate bad language such as "shit" "nega". She has friends and she finds time for friends, however, she finds more times in gadgets than family members."

Participant 8

"Exposed akong anak sa tab, cellphone, laptop. Unang exposure niya one year old pa kapin. Hands-on siya sa tab ug cellphone, pero sa laptop ako ang mag-operate. Dako kayo ug influence ang electronic media sa iyang language kay at present (3 ½ y.o) he can speak English in a sentence. Sa balay bisaya ang among gamit. Though makasabot siya sa bisaya. Naa cya tendency to code-switch, pero murag kasabot siya nga dili ko ganahan ug code switching. In terms of social relationship sa balay, mostorya siya kon unsay iyang gusto, maminaw pd siya kon unsay among isulti. Mas mopili siya nga makigduwa sa ubang bata kay sa maggamit sa iyang electronic gadgets. Parental guidance is very necessary in letting children use electronic gadgets."

Participant 9

"I do not allow my child to use electronic media anymore. He used to get exposed to it, however I have noticed several negative effects. One of which is related to physiological aspects. He keeps on blinking his eyes and get teary-eyed afterwards due to overexposure to electronic media and he tends not to listen. My child grasps instructions less than usual when engrossed in electronic gadgets. Another aspect is on study habits. He tends not to study his lessons with his gadgets around. I also have noticed that children who are into electronic games are irritable."

Participant 10

"Kamao mogamit ug tab akong anak since 3 years old pa siya. Karon 5 years old na siya. Kasagaran niya tan.awon nursery rhymes ug mga cartoons. Recently ako siyang gipatan.aw ug Peppa Pig. Naimprove ang iyang English since nag-tan-aw siya sa Peppa Pig. Dako gyud kaayo ug influence ang videos sa iyang language. Kahibawo man pd siya makig-interact sa ubang bata. Pero, ug naa sa balay dili lang magtagad namo ug naa ang tab, mao nga akong kuhaon panagsa. Ganahan ko maexpose siya sa cartoons aron kamao siya mag-English, pero di palabihan kay di na magtagad nako ug sa ubang family members tungod sa tab."

Participant 11

"Books ang unang exposure sa akong anak. He started using electronic gadgets more or less 3 years old na. He was first exposed games and nursery rhymes and stories like 'Veggie' stories. Bisaya gyud mi tanan sa amo, pero ang akong anak, kamao gyud mag English, pati pa ang accent kuha niya. I

strongly believe sa mga salida nga iyang tig-tan-aw niya nakamaohan ang English. Pero, gitudloan gyud nako siya ug bisaya kay mas advantageous man sa iyang part nga kamao gyud ug bisaya. Very sociable ang akong anak. In fact sa sociogram, popular/star siya. Para nako wala makadaot sa iyang social skills ang electronic gadget kay mas makarelata siya kay halos pd tanan niyang classmates gamit *pd ug electronic gadgets.*”

Participant 12

To be exact, my son started using electronic media when he was one year and six months old. Nakamao siya mogamit nga siya ra at the age of 2. Kasagaran ang yaya lang iyang kauban sa balay kay nagtrabaho man ko whole day mao nga he has the luxury of time using the tab. Kasagaran sa iyang tan.awon mga Minion. Karon, almost 4 years old na akong anak, naguol ko kay dili pa siya kamao moestorya. At the age of 1, nagsige na siya ug babble, pero hangtod karon, murag sige lang gihapon ug babble. Basin iyang nasundog ang mga Minion nga iyang tig-tan.aw. Gibawalan na siya nako ron ug tab, although I am considering nga nay laing rason sa iyang speech delay, so I need to consult a developmental pediatrician.

Participant 13

Nagstart siya gamit ug tab 3 years old na siya. Wala pa nako pagamita sa mas bata pa. kamao na siya mostorya when he started using his tab, pero, para nako nakatabang ang tab aron kamao siya mag.english. makakat.on pod siya sa skwelahan niya pero, lahi ra gyud ang iyang makat.onan sa tab. Very social siya nga bata. Ug naa iyang friends biyaan man pd niya ang tab aron makigduwa. Ganahan ko ug maggamit siya ug tab aron dili maglangas..