

Research Paper

## Impact of Children's Continuous Exposure to Instant Rewards through Digital Media on Tantrums and Increased Parental Stress

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### ABSTRACT

Children today are increasingly immersed in digital environments that provide quick rewards through games, videos, and interactive apps. While these platforms can foster both learning and recreation, research increasingly points to concerns about their effects on children's behaviour and family well-being. The present study investigated links between children's engagement with reward-based digital media, tantrum behaviours, and parental stress in a sample of 170 participants. Parents provided detailed reports on their children's screen exposure, behavioural concerns, and their own stress levels using standardised questionnaires. Results indicated that frequent use of instant-reward media was associated with more tantrums and elevated parental stress. The study also revealed a two-way pattern: children's tantrums heightened parental stress, which in turn contributed to greater child dysregulation. These findings suggest that children's screen habits shape not only their individual development but also wider family dynamics. Supporting caregivers with strategies for balanced screen use and effective behaviour management may help promote both emotional stability and resilience within families.

**Keywords:** *Children, digital media, instant-reward content, problematic media use, tantrum behaviours, parental stress, parent-child relationship, emotional regulation, family systems, behavioural dysregulation, screen time management, family-centered interventions*

The integration of digital technology has profoundly reshaped children's developmental contexts in the 21st century. Smartphones, tablets, video games, and streaming platforms have become central to daily routines, offering opportunities for entertainment, learning, and creative expression. At the same time, studies consistently associate excessive or poorly regulated screen exposure with difficulties such as disrupted sleep, diminished physical health, social adjustment problems, and lower emotional well-being (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Kabali et al., 2015; Christakis, 2016; Radesky et al., 2016).

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A central concern relates to the reward-driven design of much digital content. Features such as instant likes, quick wins in games, or automatic video recommendations provide immediate reinforcement that encourages repeated use. For young children, whose self-regulatory abilities are still developing, these patterns of reinforcement can weaken patience, persistence, and frustration tolerance (Uhls et al., 2014; Diamond, 2013). In contrast, traditional play—through which children naturally practice skills such as negotiation, persistence, and delayed gratification (Fisher, 1992; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998)—offers slower, more effortful rewards. Digital environments, by emphasizing speed and instant outcomes, raise questions about possible long-term developmental risks (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017).

These challenges also affect family dynamics. Parents often report difficulties in moderating children's media use, particularly in contexts where clear societal guidelines and support systems are lacking (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Attempts to set boundaries can trigger irritability and tantrums when access is denied (Domoff et al., 2019), contributing to higher caregiver stress and strained family relationships (Coyne et al., 2017; Nathanson, 2018; Nanda, 2023).

In light of these issues, the present research examines how children's engagement with instant-reward media relates to tantrum behaviour and parental stress. By exploring these connections, the study seeks to clarify how digital habits influence both developmental outcomes and family well-being, while pointing toward strategies for healthier and more balanced media engagement.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study examines how children's interactions with reward-driven digital media relate to tantrum behaviours and parental stress within 170 parent-child pairs. Specifically, it investigates three questions: (1) whether extended digital use is associated with tantrum frequency, (2) how problematic media engagement affects parental stress, and (3) the reciprocal relationship between tantrums and caregiver stress. Understanding these dynamics can guide parents and practitioners in fostering healthier digital environments at home.

#### *Theoretical frameworks*

Several psychological perspectives illuminate the ways children's media use affects behaviour and family dynamics. From an operant conditioning viewpoint, digital games and apps maintain engagement by delivering frequent, small rewards (Skinner, 1953; Granic et al., 2014). Classical conditioning suggests that notifications can themselves become cues that trigger anticipation of rewards (Pavlov, 1927). Social learning theory highlights that children often emulate digital habits modeled by parents, siblings, or favorite online figures (Bandura, 1977; Uhls et al., 2014).

Cognitive perspectives offer additional insight. Piaget's developmental stages indicate that young children have limited impulse control, making them particularly vulnerable to reward-based content (Piaget, 1952; Radesky et al., 2020). Executive function research further suggests that frequent exposure to fast-paced, rewarding media can compromise attention, memory, and self-control (Diamond, 2013). Broader frameworks—including uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and delay of gratification studies (Mischel, 1972)—demonstrate how social context and individual choices interact with digital environments. Neuroscience research also shows

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that reward-heavy media activates dopamine pathways, reinforcing engagement and making it difficult for children to disengage (Kühn & Gallinat, 2015; Radesky et al., 2020).

### *Impact of Instant Rewards on Behaviour*

Heavy use of instant-reward media has been linked to impulsivity, irritability, and shortened attention spans (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Gentile et al., 2012). Variable reward schedules—where children cannot predict the next “win”—make resisting media particularly difficult (Schultz et al., 1997). Compared with traditional play, which nurtures patience and persistence, digital environments emphasize speed and immediate gratification, sometimes at the expense of emotional regulation (Christakis et al., 2004). Children exposed to such environments may resist transitions or exhibit oppositional behaviour when devices are removed, contributing to tantrums (Radesky et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2007).

### *Parental Stress and Screen Regulation*

Managing children’s screen time is a significant source of parental stress. Inconsistent guidance about “appropriate” screen use can create uncertainty (Common Sense Media, 2019; Nanda, 2023). Attempts to limit access often lead to conflict, with tantrums escalating caregiver frustration (Lauricella et al., 2015; Nathanson, 2018). While handing over a device may temporarily reduce stress, it can reinforce dependency, making regulation increasingly challenging (Konok et al., 2024). This cycle of conflict, stress, and reliance on screens can strain both parent and child.

### *Digital Media and Executive Functions*

Children’s executive functions (EF)—including memory, self-control, and sustained attention—are sensitive to the effects of digital exposure (Diamond, 2013). High levels of screen use have been associated with reduced working memory and cognitive overload from multitasking (Uncapher et al., 2017; Christakis, 2019). Neuroimaging studies indicate decreased activity in brain regions supporting self-regulation among children with heavy media exposure (Kong et al., 2023). Importantly, this appears to be a bidirectional relationship: children with weaker EF may seek more stimulating media, further undermining regulation (Uzundağ, 2022; I.Family Study, 2025). Some interactive apps can support EF development if used intentionally (Bavelier & Green, 2019), but unregulated exposure more often reinforces impulsivity and distractibility.

### *Gaps in Existing Literature*

Despite extensive research on screen use, several questions remain:

- **Reward-specific effects:** Many studies focus on total screen time, overlooking features like “likes,” in-game achievements, or push notifications (Christakis, 2019; Griffiths, 2005). These reward mechanisms may uniquely influence tantrums and frustration via reinforcement and dopamine activity (Volkow et al., 2011).
- **Reciprocal dynamics:** Parental stress is often treated as an outcome, but fewer studies examine how stress affects inconsistent rule-setting and, in turn, intensifies children’s reactions (Radesky et al., 2020; Uzundağ, 2022). Longitudinal and cross-cultural research is limited (Park & Lee, 2020; Byrne et al., 2021).
- **Cognitive and emotional regulation:** The impact of reward-driven media on patience and emotional control is underexplored, leaving gaps in understanding tantrums beyond digital contexts (Bavelier & Green, 2019; Christakis, 2019).

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- **Parental coping strategies:** While some mediation techniques have been described (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Clark, 2013), evidence on which strategies most effectively reduce stress—across ages and cultures—is limited.
- **Cross-cultural insights:** Most research is Western-focused, though digital exposure is global. Cultural norms shape parenting and children's responses to reward-driven content (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2011). Comparative studies could inform culturally sensitive guidance.

Addressing these gaps is essential for developing interventions that support children's emotional growth, reduce family stress, and respect diverse parenting contexts.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Research Design*

This study employed a quantitative design to systematically examine and quantify relationships among key variables. This approach allows for measurable patterns to be identified between children's exposure to reward-driven digital media, tantrum behaviours, and parental stress, while supporting generalizability across diverse demographic groups. Data were collected using structured, validated questionnaires to ensure robustness and reproducibility.

#### *Sample Selection*

The sampling process was designed to obtain diverse and representative participants, enhancing the validity and applicability of the findings.

- **Target Population:** Primary caregivers of children aged 4–11 years with regular access to digital media, capturing a developmental period critical for executive function and media engagement.
- **Sample Size:** A total of 170 participants were included, determined via power analysis for correlational studies targeting a statistical power of 0.8 and a medium effect size.
- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified random sampling was applied, dividing participants into age groups (4–6, 6–8, 8–11 years) and socioeconomic strata, followed by random selection within each subgroup.
- **Recruitment:** Participants were recruited primarily through online parenting communities and social media platforms to maximize reach.
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Participants had to be primary caregivers of children within the target age range and willing to complete the survey fully.

#### *Data Collection Instruments*

Three validated psychometric measures were used:

1. **Parental Stress Scale (PSS):** An 18-item measure assessing emotional and practical demands of parenting, evaluating overall caregiver stress.
2. **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – Short Form (SDQ-SF), Parent Report:** A 25-item instrument assessing children's emotional and behavioural difficulties across five subscales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour.
3. **Problematic Media Use Measure – Short Form (PMUM-SF):** A 9-item measure assessing patterns of screen media use and its perceived impact on child development, particularly related to instant-reward content.

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### *Data Collection Procedure*

Data were collected via online questionnaires for convenience and efficiency.

- **Participant Engagement:** Parents reported on children's media habits (duration, frequency, type), behavioural tendencies (tantrums, emotional regulation), and parental stress levels.
- **Duration:** Data collection occurred over four weeks, allowing sufficient recruitment and survey completion within a consistent timeframe.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using SPSS, a standard software for social science research.

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated to summarize demographics and measure scores.
- **Inferential Statistics:** Pearson's correlation coefficients and linear regression analyses examined relationships between variables. Correlations identified the strength and direction of associations, while regression analyses assessed predictive effects.
- **Hypothesis Testing:** Statistical significance was evaluated at  $p < 0.05$ , guiding acceptance or rejection of the null hypotheses.

### *Research Objectives and Hypotheses*

#### **Objectives:**

1. To examine the relationship between exposure to instant-reward digital media and the frequency of tantrums in children.
2. To investigate associations between children's problematic media use and parental stress.
3. To explore the link between children's tantrums and parental stress.

#### **Hypotheses:**

- **H0 (Null Hypothesis 1):** No significant relationship exists between exposure to instant-reward digital media and tantrum frequency in children.
- **H1 (Alternative Hypothesis 1):** Greater exposure to instant-reward digital media is positively associated with increased tantrum frequency.
- **H2 (Alternative Hypothesis 2):** Higher exposure to instant-reward digital media correlates with elevated parental stress.
- **H3 (Alternative Hypothesis 3):** Increased tantrums due to digital media consumption contribute to higher parental stress and burnout.

This chapter presents the findings from statistical analyses of data collected from 170 parent-child dyads. The study aimed to examine: (1) the relationship between children's problematic media use and tantrum frequency, (2) the association between children's problematic media use and parental stress, and (3) the link between children's tantrums and parental stress.

## **INTERPRETATION AND RESULTS**

### *Demographics of the Children*

The sample included 170 children with a moderately balanced gender distribution: 95 males (55.9%) and 75 females (44.1%). The mean age was 8.38 years (SD = 2.07), indicating a diverse age range spanning 4–11 years. This distribution supports analysis across gender and age groups.

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Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	95	55.9
Female	75	44.1

***Parental Perceptions: Child Age and Psychological Measures***

Parents reported on children’s behaviours and their own stress levels. Mean scores were as follows:

Measure	Mean	SD
Age of child	8.38	2.07
Parental Stress Scale (PSS)	2.29	0.54
Problematic Media Use Measure (PMUM-SF)	2.50	0.84
Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-SF)	1.80	0.20

These results indicate moderate parental stress and problematic media use, with children generally exhibiting positive behavioural profiles according to parent reports.

***Parental Stress Scale (PSS) Analysis***

Analysis of individual PSS items revealed:

- **Low stress:** Positive items such as “I feel close to my child(ren)” (M = 1.58, SD = 0.64) and “I enjoy spending time with my child(ren)” (M = 1.57, SD = 0.70) suggest strong parental bonding.
- **Moderate stress:** Items concerning time and energy demands scored higher, particularly “Caring for my child(ren) sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give” (M = 3.87, SD = 1.02) and “I sometimes worry whether I am doing enough for my child(ren)” (M = 3.72, SD = 1.13).

The overall mean PSS score of 37.36 (range 18–90) reflects a moderate level of parental stress in the sample.

***Problematic Media Use Measure (PMUM-SF) Analysis***

Parents reported that children occasionally showed preoccupation with screen media:

- Highest scoring item: “My child is preoccupied with screen media” (M = 3.03, SD = 0.99)
- Next highest: “My child continues to use screen media despite knowing it causes problems” (M = 2.85, SD = 1.21)

Overall, children were not frequently engaged in problematic digital media use, although some concerning behaviours were noted.

***Objective 1: Relationship between Problematic Media Use and Tantrum Frequency***

Pearson correlation revealed a moderate positive relationship between problematic media use and tantrum frequency (r = 0.448, p < 0.001). This supports **H1**, indicating that higher exposure to instant-reward digital media is associated with more frequent tantrums.

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Linear regression confirmed this association:

- $F(1,168) = 43.634, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.206$
- Beta coefficient = 0.362,  $t = 6.606, p < 0.001$

Thus, approximately 20.6% of the variability in tantrum frequency is explained by problematic media use.

### ***Objective 2: Correlation between Problematic Media Use and Parental Stress***

A significant moderate correlation was observed between children's media use and parental stress ( $r = 0.416, p < 0.001$ ), supporting **H2**. Linear regression results:

- $F(1,168) = 37.386, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.182$
- Beta = 0.275,  $t = 6.114, p < 0.001$

This indicates that 18.2% of parental stress variance is predicted by children's problematic media use.

### ***Objective 3: Correlation Between Children's Tantrums and Parental Stress***

The correlation between tantrum frequency and parental stress was moderate and significant ( $r = 0.363, p < 0.001$ ), supporting **H3**. Linear regression analysis:

- $F(1,168) = 31.576, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.158$
- Beta = 0.492,  $t = 5.619, p < 0.001$

This indicates a reciprocal relationship where higher parental stress predicts more frequent tantrums, explaining 15.8% of the variance.

Findings demonstrate that children's problematic media use is positively associated with both tantrum frequency and parental stress. Moreover, parental stress and tantrum behaviours show a reciprocal dynamic, highlighting the interplay between child behaviour and caregiver well-being.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study examined the interrelationships among children's problematic digital media use, tantrum behaviours, and parental stress in a sample of 170 parent-child dyads. The results supported all three hypotheses, demonstrating that intensive engagement with fast-paced, instant-reward digital media is linked to greater emotional dysregulation in children, which, in turn, contributes to elevated parental stress. Furthermore, tantrum behaviours and parental stress appear to reinforce one another in a reciprocal, bidirectional cycle.

### ***Problematic media use and child behaviour (Hypothesis 1)***

Children who frequently engaged with reward-driven digital content exhibited more frequent tantrums, lower frustration tolerance, and heightened emotional reactivity. These outcomes align with operant conditioning theory, which posits that intermittent reinforcement strengthens reward-seeking behaviours (Skinner, 1953). When digital media access is limited, children may experience frustration resembling withdrawal, resulting in tantrum behaviours. Neurobiological evidence further suggests that digital rewards activate dopaminergic pathways, similar to other addictive behaviours (Volkow et al., 2011). These findings build on previous research linking excessive screen exposure to deficits in self-regulation and increased behavioural challenges (Christakis, 2019; Domingues-Montanari, 2017; Radesky et al., 2020).

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### ***Media use and parental stress (Hypothesis 2)***

The study confirmed that problematic media use predicts higher parental stress. Caregivers of children with heavier screen use reported more frequent conflicts related to rule enforcement, resistance, and discipline. This pattern aligns with family systems theory, which highlights the interdependence of parent and child behaviours (Minuchin, 1974). Prior research also identifies disputes over screen time as a common source of parent–child tension (Lauricella et al., 2015; Coyne et al., 2020). The continuous demands of monitoring digital content, setting limits, and managing pushback can exacerbate stress, particularly in households balancing multiple responsibilities.

### ***Reciprocal cycle of tantrums and parental stress (Hypothesis 3)***

The results also revealed a bidirectional relationship between child tantrums and parental stress. Tantrum behaviours predicted elevated parental stress, which subsequently undermined consistent parenting and further exacerbated child dysregulation. This dynamic reflects Patterson’s coercive cycle model, where maladaptive parent–child interactions reinforce one another (Patterson, 1982). In digital contexts, reliance on media as a calming strategy may provide short-term relief but can perpetuate dependency and conflict (Radesky et al., 2016). These findings highlight the importance of understanding digital media challenges within a transactional framework, where child behaviour and parental well-being are mutually influential.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The study underscores that problematic digital media use extends beyond individual children, affecting the broader family system. Key implications include:

1. **Parental strategies:** Caregivers may benefit from guidance on balancing screen use, establishing consistent routines, and promoting children’s emotional regulation. Active mediation and co-use of digital media can reduce potential negative outcomes.
2. **Clinical and policy significance:** While recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) emphasize limiting screen time, they may not fully address the impact of instant-reward digital features. Practitioners should provide nuanced guidance considering both media type and family circumstances.
3. **Family-focused interventions:** Programs addressing child behaviour and parental stress concurrently are likely to be more effective than interventions targeting the child alone. Integrative approaches may better support overall family functioning.
4. **Cultural adaptation:** Cultural factors shape media habits and parent–child interactions (Park & Lee, 2020; Byrne et al., 2021). Intervention strategies should therefore be tailored to respect cultural norms and family contexts.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Several factors limit the generalizability of these results. First, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about causality; longitudinal studies are necessary to understand how stress and behaviour evolve over time. Second, reliance on parent-reported data may introduce reporting bias. Third, the study did not differentiate between types of content (e.g., educational versus entertainment), which may have varying effects on children. Finally, the sample size restricted the ability to conduct subgroup analyses (e.g., by age or socioeconomic status), limiting broader applicability.

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### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future studies should utilize longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal relationships between children's digital media use, behavioural regulation, and parental stress. Combining objective monitoring methods with self-report measures may enhance data accuracy and reliability. Additionally, research should explore various parental mediation strategies—restrictive, active, or co-use—within diverse cultural settings (Triandis, 1995; Hofstede, 2011).

Assessing family-focused interventions that simultaneously target child behaviour and parental stress is critical for breaking the reciprocal cycle of tantrums and parental strain. Future work should examine both short-term and long-term outcomes, including children's emotional regulation and overall family functioning. Addressing the intertwined nature of media use, child behaviour, and parental stress requires systemic, culturally sensitive approaches to promote healthier developmental trajectories and relational dynamics in modern families.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study provides strong evidence for the reciprocal relationships among children's problematic digital media use, tantrum behaviours, and parental stress. Frequent exposure to instant-reward digital content was linked to increased tantrum frequency, supporting the hypothesis that repeated digital reinforcement influences children's emotional state and behaviour ( $H_1$ ). Elevated media use was also associated with higher parental stress ( $H_2$ ), demonstrating that children's digital behaviours have systemic effects on family relationships. Finally, the positive correlation between tantrums and parental strain ( $H_3$ ) underscores the bidirectional nature of parent-child interactions, where children's dysregulated actions and parental strain mutually reinforce each other.

These findings are consistent with established theoretical perspectives. Operant conditioning explains how digital reward mechanisms strengthen behavioural tendencies. The Family systems theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of parent and child behaviours; and the transactional model captures the feedback loops linking tantrums and parental stress. Together, these frameworks elucidate how digital reinforcement and parental responses interact to maintain cyclical patterns of behaviour and stress.

From a practical standpoint, the results emphasize the need for comprehensive, family-centered interventions. Approaches that focus solely on child behaviour or parental stress may be insufficient. Effective strategies should combine structured digital media guidelines—such as limiting screen time, encouraging diverse and educational content, and implementing scheduled breaks—with behavioural management support for children and stress-reduction programs for parents, including emotional coaching and media literacy education.

Promoting balanced digital habits can reduce tantrum frequency, alleviate parental stress, and improve overall family functioning. Integrated interventions addressing both child and parent factors are essential for fostering emotional resilience, enhancing parent-child interactions, and supporting optimal developmental outcomes in the digital era.

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