

Research Paper

Parenting Styles as Moderators of Parental Digital Stress on Child Mental Health: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid expansion of digital technology has introduced parental digital stress, characterized by anxiety related to managing children's screen use, online safety, and technology-related conflicts. While parenting stress and child mental health are well studied independently, their interaction through parenting styles remains underexplored.

Objective: This review aimed to (a) synthesize evidence on parental digital stress and its impact on child mental health, (b) examine the moderating role of parenting styles, and (c) contextualize findings within the Indian setting.

Methods: A systematic search of six databases (2006–2025) identified 68 eligible studies following screening. Findings were synthesized narratively across four domains, guided by ecological and contextual parenting frameworks.

Results: Parental digital stress is a multidimensional construct including screen time concerns, online safety anxiety, technoference, and digital parenting challenges. Parenting style significantly moderated child mental health outcomes (anxiety, behavior, sleep, and social-emotional development). Authoritative parenting showed protective effects, while authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved styles were associated with poorer outcomes. Indian findings indicate high adolescent smartphone addiction (64.6%), notable sleep issues (especially among girls), and low parental digital literacy.

Parenting style is a key modifiable factor influencing the impact of digital stress on child mental health. Authoritative parenting acts as a protective buffer.

Keywords: *parental digital stress, parenting styles, child mental health, screen time, technoference, digital parenting, India, systematic review*

The digital revolution has transformed childhood and parenting, with children increasingly exposed to screens, smartphones, and online environments from an early age. Global evidence indicates high levels of screen use, with a majority of young children engaging with screens and adolescents averaging several hours daily. In India, screen exposure is also substantial, often exceeding recommended limits.

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This shift has introduced *parental digital stress*—the anxiety and pressure associated with managing children’s screen time, online safety, and digital behaviors. Parents report concerns related to cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and device overuse, with many perceiving parenting as more challenging in the digital age. Parenting stress operates within the broader context of parenting style. Established typologies—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved—differ in responsiveness and control, and are known to influence child developmental outcomes. However, their role in moderating the relationship between parental digital stress and child mental health remains underexplored.

Child mental health is a critical global concern, with many disorders emerging early in life. In India, prevalence rates among adolescents are notable, highlighting the need to understand emerging risk factors such as digital stress. Accordingly, this review aims to (a) synthesize evidence on parental digital stress and its impact on child mental health, (b) examine the moderating role of parenting styles, and (c) contextualize findings within the Indian setting to identify gaps and inform interventions.

Theoretical Framework

This review is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 1986) positions the family at the center of the microsystem, with parents' digital attitudes and stress constituting critical elements that directly shape child developmental outcomes. Digital technology functions as a disruptive exosystemic force that permeates the microsystem and may alter parent–child relational quality. Darling and Steinberg's (1993) contextual model of parenting proposes that parenting style is a moderating variable — shaping the degree to which specific parenting stressors translate into child outcomes. This distinction between parenting style (the emotional climate) and parenting practices (specific behaviors) is precisely what makes it ideal for understanding how the same degree of parental digital stress may produce very different child outcomes depending on whether parents adopt authoritative versus authoritarian approaches.

Together, these frameworks generate the central moderation hypothesis: parenting styles function as significant moderators of the relationship between parental digital stress and child mental health, such that authoritative parenting buffers children from adverse effects of parental digital stress, while authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved styles amplify risk.

METHODS

1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of electronic databases was conducted in June 2025. Databases searched included PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, and the Cochrane Library. Boolean search terms included combinations of: ('parental digital stress' OR 'parenting stress' OR 'technofence' OR 'parental smartphone use') AND ('parenting style' OR 'authoritative' OR 'authoritarian' OR 'permissive' OR 'uninvolved') AND ('child mental health' OR 'child anxiety' OR 'depression' OR 'behavioral problems' OR 'sleep disturbance' OR 'social-emotional development'). Additional hand-searches were performed on reference lists of included articles and relevant review papers.

2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) focused on parental digital stress, parental screen time stress, parenting challenges related to children's technology use, or technofence in parent–

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child interactions; (b) examined parenting styles or dimensions (warmth, demandingness, control, responsiveness) as a variable; (c) reported child mental health outcomes including anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, sleep disturbances, or social-emotional development; (d) were peer-reviewed and published in English between 2006 and 2025; and (e) studied children and/or adolescents aged 0–18 years. Seminal theoretical works predating 2006 (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling & Steinberg, 1993) were retained as foundational references but were not counted among the 68 empirical studies.

Studies were excluded if they: (a) focused exclusively on parental mental health outcomes without reference to child outcomes; (b) examined children's own digital stress without reference to parenting context; (c) reported only physiological or neurological outcomes without psychological measures; or (d) were editorials, opinion pieces, or grey literature without peer review.

3 Study Selection and Data Extraction

Following database searches, 421 potentially relevant records were identified. After removing duplicates ($n = 89$), title and abstract screening ($n = 332$) was performed independently by two reviewers. Full-text review of 146 articles was conducted, and 68 studies met all inclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Data extracted included: study design, sample characteristics (country, age group, sample size), digital stress measure, parenting style measure, child mental health outcome measure, key findings, and limitations.

4 Quality Assessment

Study quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT, 2018). All included studies met a minimum threshold of three out of five quality criteria. Studies were categorized into four thematic groups for narrative synthesis: (1) prevalence and nature of parental digital stress; (2) parenting styles and digital mediation; (3) child mental health outcomes; and (4) intervention and policy studies.

RESULTS

1 Parental Digital Stress: Nature, Prevalence, and Manifestations

Parental digital stress is a multidimensional construct encompassing concerns about excessive screen time, online safety risks, parent–child conflicts over technology, parental screen guilt, and perceived inadequacy in managing children's digital environments (Auxier et al., 2020; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018a; Wolfers et al., 2025). Evidence indicates high prevalence, with most parents expressing concern about children's screen use and many reporting difficulties regulating both their child's and their own device use.

A key component is *technoference*, referring to the intrusion of parental device use into parent–child interactions. Studies show that technoference is associated with increased child behavioral problems and operates bidirectionally, where child difficulties and parental stress reinforce each other over time (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018a, 2018b; Zhang et al., 2025). Additionally, *parental screen guilt* has emerged as an important factor, with research indicating that perceived overuse— independent of actual screen time— contributes to higher parental stress and poorer parent–child relationship quality, often shaped by societal expectations (Wolfers et al., 2023, 2025).

2 Parenting Styles: Overview and Relevance to the Digital Context

Baumrind (1971) identified three parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive—later expanded by Maccoby and Martin (1983) to include uninvolved parenting based on responsiveness and demandingness. These typologies are widely validated across cultures, including in India (Sahithya et al., 2019).

Authoritative parenting is associated with positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem and lower anxiety, whereas authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved styles are linked to poorer behavioral and emotional outcomes, including aggression, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022).

In digital contexts, permissive and uninvolved parenting are consistently associated with higher child media use, while positive parenting styles are linked to lower problematic internet use (Valcke et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2022; Niu et al., 2023). Notably, restrictive control without warmth may be counterproductive in adolescence, increasing the risk of problematic internet use (Lukavská et al., 2022).

3 Child Mental Health Outcomes: Evidence Across Domains

3.1 Anxiety and Depression

Excessive screen time and problematic digital media use have been significantly associated with increased anxiety and depression across childhood and adolescence. Racine et al. (2021), in a systematic review and meta-analysis (29 studies; $N = 80,879$), found that during the first year of COVID-19, the global prevalence of clinically elevated depression and anxiety symptoms reached 25.2% and 20.5% respectively — approximately double pre-pandemic estimates. Twenge et al. (2022) found substantially larger negative associations between social media use and mental health, particularly among adolescent girls. The moderating role of parenting style is well-supported: Niu et al. (2023) found positive parenting styles were significantly negatively associated with PIU while negative parenting styles showed a stronger positive association. Authoritative parenting — through positive emotional regulation, higher self-esteem, and open communication about online risks — consistently buffers children against anxiety and depression in digitally stressed family environments.

3.2 Behavioral Problems

Parental digital stress and technofence have been robustly linked to behavioral problems in children. Eirich et al. (2022), in a JAMA Psychiatry meta-analysis (87 studies; $N = 159,425$ children ≤ 12 years), found screen time duration was weakly but significantly associated with both externalizing behaviors ($r = 0.11$) and internalizing problems ($r = 0.07$), with stronger associations observed for externalizing outcomes. Neville et al. (2021), using ABCD cohort data, documented bidirectional associations between screen time and externalizing/internalizing behaviors across early adolescence. Stockdale et al. (2020), using a modified still-face paradigm with 227 parent–infant dyads, found parental smartphone distraction was associated with increased infant negative affect, self-comforting, object orientation, and escape behaviors — with infants frequently failing to return to baseline during reunion, suggesting early social-emotional disruption from even transient digital distraction.

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3.3 Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbances are among the most consistently reported consequences of excessive screen use. Evidence from multiple reviews and meta-analyses indicates that screen exposure—especially at night—is associated with shorter sleep duration, delayed sleep timing, poor sleep quality, and increased daytime sleepiness (Hale & Guan, 2015; Carter et al., 2016; Lund et al., 2021; Brautsch et al., 2022). Notably, even the presence of devices at bedtime, without active use, negatively impacts sleep.

Parenting style plays a key moderating role in these outcomes. Authoritative parenting supports healthy sleep through consistent digital curfews and structured routines. In contrast, permissive and uninvolved parenting are associated with greater bedtime screen exposure and poorer sleep hygiene, increasing the risk of sleep disturbances (Niu et al., 2023; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022).

3.4 Social-Emotional Development

Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), technofence can be conceptualized as a disruption to caregiver responsiveness and emotional availability — processes central to secure attachment. Stockdale et al. (2020) found parental smartphone distraction elicited a robust still-face-like response, with infants displaying increased negative affect, decreased positive affect, and escape behaviors during the phone distraction phase. Deneault et al. (2024), in a longitudinal cohort of 1,303 emerging adolescents across three waves, found perceived parental technofence prospectively predicted higher inattention and hyperactivity, with bidirectional associations demonstrating that higher adolescent anxiety also predicted greater perceived parental technofence. Authoritative parenting uniquely supports social-emotional development by combining warmth with consistent limits, modeling healthy digital behaviors, engaging in co-viewing, and maintaining emotional availability.

4 The Moderating Role of Parenting Styles: A Synthesis

Across the literature reviewed, parenting styles emerge as significant contextual moderators of the pathway from parental digital stress to child mental health outcomes. Darling and Steinberg (1993) propose that parenting style functions as a contextual moderator shaping how specific stressors translate into child outcomes through the emotional climate in which they operate. This is supported by Niu et al.'s (2023) meta-analytic finding that positive parenting styles significantly buffered PIU while negative styles amplified it, and by Lukavská et al.'s (2022) evidence that parental warmth showed a small but consistent negative association with PIU. Table 1 summarizes moderation patterns across outcome domains.

5 Indian Context: Specific Findings and Gaps

India presents a uniquely complex landscape for studying parental digital stress and its consequences. As of January 2024, India had approximately 751.5 million active internet users, with 886 million estimated by IMAI and Kantar — reflecting 8% year-on-year growth (DataReportal, 2024; IMAI & Kantar, 2024). India has emerged as the second-largest smartphone market globally by unit volume with approximately 690 million users (Counterpoint Research, 2024). Children and adolescents constitute a rapidly growing share of this user base, yet the regulatory and cultural environment for digital parenting remains

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underdeveloped, creating conditions where parental digital stress may be particularly salient and insufficiently buffered by institutional support.

The most informative recent Indian study is Yogesh et al. (2024), conducted among 560 school-going adolescents aged 15–19 in Gujarat. The study found a smartphone addiction prevalence of 64.6% — among the highest reported in the Indian adolescent literature. Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles (in both fathers and mothers) were positively associated with smartphone addiction, while authoritative parenting was negatively associated. Critically, smartphone addiction was powerfully associated with severe stress (AOR: 10.82, 95% CI: 5.11–22.88, $p < .001$) and moderate stress (AOR: 4.63, 95% CI: 2.66–8.07, $p < .001$). Notably, urban residence, higher parental education, and higher socioeconomic status were each independently associated with increased addiction odds — complicating any simple assumption that digital safety is guaranteed by affluence.

Maurya et al. (2022), using nationally representative UDAYA survey data ($N = 16,292$), documented that adolescents spending more than two hours daily on smartphones had 1.55 times higher odds of sleep problems (AOR: 1.55; 95% CI: 1.21–1.99), while adolescent females spending three or more hours daily had 2.94 times higher odds compared to male non-users. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reveal a 32% rise in registered cybercrimes against children between 2021 and 2022 (1,376 to 1,823 cases), encompassing cyberpornography, cyberstalking, and cyberbullying. The NITI Aayog (2025) report documented that digital addiction, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate content represent leading child online safety concerns in India, and explicitly noted that Indian parents frequently lack the digital literacy needed to mitigate these risks.

Cultural dimensions add important nuance. Indian parenting is historically characterized by high collectivism, interdependence, and familial hierarchy. Chao's (1994) foundational work demonstrates that Western constructs of 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative' parenting may not fully capture culturally specific practices. However, Sahithya et al. (2019), in a comprehensive cross-cultural review of Indian parenting research, found authoritative parenting was consistently associated with better child outcomes than authoritarian or uninvolved parenting even within India — and that culture did not serve as a significant moderator of this relationship. Senapati et al. (2024), in a scoping review of 35 studies, identified academic stress (22.85%), social and lifestyle factors including digital exposure and cyberbullying (20%), and negative familial issues (34.28%) as the most commonly reported risk factors for adolescent suicide in India — underscoring the protective role that engaged, responsive parenting can play.

DISCUSSION

1 The Parenting Style Moderation Model

The evidence synthesized in this review supports a robust moderation model: parenting style functions as a critical contextual variable that determines whether parental digital stress translates into adverse child mental health outcomes or is buffered and transformed into developmental resilience. This is consistent with Darling and Steinberg's (1993) proposition that parenting style — as the emotional climate of the parent–child relationship — moderates the impact of specific stressors on child outcomes.

Authoritative parenting emerges as the most protective style. When parents experience high digital stress, authoritative responses — characterized by open family discussions about

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technology, consistent but reasoned limits, warmth-maintained correction, and co-participation in children's digital worlds — effectively buffer children from anxiety, behavioral problems, sleep disruption, and social-emotional difficulties. This is consistent with meta-analytic evidence across 119 studies and 17 countries demonstrating authoritative parenting is associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems globally (Pinquart & Kauser, 2017).

Authoritarian parenting presents a complex picture. Strict control and low warmth may reduce visible screen use in the short term, but the associated emotional climate of fear and high criticism increases internalizing problems including anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022). Evidence suggests authoritarian restriction without relational warmth may be less effective or even counterproductive as a digital mediation strategy — active mediation is most effective at reducing internet use within authoritative, not authoritarian, relational contexts (Ren & Zhu, 2022).

Permissive parenting amplifies adverse effects through the absence of boundaries. Children exposed to unregulated digital environments develop poor self-regulation, making them particularly vulnerable to compulsive digital use and its mental health sequelae (Yogesh et al., 2024; Niu et al., 2023). Uninvolved parenting represents the highest-risk configuration. The absence of both warmth and structure leaves children digitally unsupervised and emotionally unsupported, and attachment insecurity — a documented outcome of uninvolved parenting — may predispose children to seek relational substitution online, paradoxically increasing screen time while reducing the parental monitoring that could mitigate harm.

2 Technoference as the Mechanistic Bridge

A key insight from the literature is that parental digital stress affects children not only indirectly through parental well-being, but also through *technoference* in everyday interactions. Beyond device use itself, parents' preoccupation with managing children's digital behaviors—such as monitoring, conflict, and safety concerns—can reduce emotional availability and disrupt parent–child engagement.

This mechanism is closely linked to parenting style. Authoritative parents, with higher self-efficacy and emotional regulation, are better able to manage digital stress while maintaining responsive interactions. In contrast, permissive and uninvolved parents may be more vulnerable to digital preoccupation, leading to reduced parental presence and less effective engagement with children.

3 Implications for the Indian Context

In India, parental digital stress is shaped by contextual factors distinct from high-income Western countries. The digital transition in India has been rapid and relatively unregulated, with children in urban areas exposed to high-speed internet, social media, and online gaming without adequate institutional guidance. The academic pressure culture well-documented among Indian adolescents — where competitive examinations, parental expectations, and fear of failure are major stressors — intersects with digital stress in complex ways (Arun et al., 2017). The cultural valorization of parental authority in Indian families means authoritarian parenting styles are more normative; however, in the digital domain, culturally normative authoritarian practices may be insufficient without the relational warmth that transforms parental control into effective guidance.

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The low digital literacy documented among Indian parents (NITI Aayog, 2025) means parental digital stress may be particularly acute and unresolved — parents who neither understand nor can control digital risks are likely to experience higher anxiety and lower self-efficacy. This calls for urgent investment in parental digital literacy programs that are culturally adapted and accessible across economic strata.

4 Developmental Specificity of Effects

The impact of parental digital stress and parenting style varies across developmental stages. In infancy and early childhood, effects are primarily mediated through disruptions in caregiver responsiveness and attachment, with evidence showing that even brief technofence can impair language development and parent–child interaction quality (Reed et al., 2017; Corkin et al., 2021). In middle childhood and early adolescence, pathways shift toward behavioral regulation, sleep, and social media exposure, while in late adolescence, risks increasingly involve problematic internet use, identity development, and social comparison (Twenge et al., 2022; Vogels, 2022).

These findings highlight the need for a developmental-contextual model of parental digital stress. Interventions should be stage-specific—emphasizing responsive caregiving in early childhood and autonomy-supportive digital guidance during adolescence. Existing parenting programs (e.g., Incredible Years, Triple P) remain relevant but require adaptation to address digital-era challenges such as technofence, screen guilt, and digital mediation. Integrating authoritative digital parenting strategies into such frameworks is essential, particularly in LMIC contexts like India.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

This review is limited by the predominance of cross-sectional studies, restricting causal inference, and by the lack of standardized measures for parental digital stress, leading to heterogeneity across studies. Additionally, few studies directly tested parenting style as a statistical moderator, and the underrepresentation of India and other Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) limits generalizability. The restriction to English-language publications may have excluded relevant regional research.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, formal moderation analyses, and the development of culturally validated measures of parental digital stress, particularly in LMIC contexts. Qualitative studies exploring lived parental experiences and research examining all parenting styles simultaneously are also needed. From a policy and practice perspective, integrating digital parenting into child mental health frameworks is essential. This includes promoting culturally sensitive parental digital literacy programs, school-based interventions combining child and parent training, and incorporating assessment of parental digital stress into routine clinical practice.

CONCLUSION

This review identifies parental digital stress as a significant and understudied determinant of child mental health in the digital age, with parenting style emerging as a critical moderator. Authoritative parenting consistently functions as a protective factor, buffering children from adverse outcomes across domains including anxiety, behavior, sleep, and social-emotional development. In contrast, permissive, authoritarian, and uninvolved styles amplify risk through reduced structure, emotional availability, or ineffective regulation.

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Parental digital stress is a pervasive, multidimensional phenomenon that affects children through mechanisms such as technofence, disrupted parent–child interactions, and inconsistent digital mediation. Parenting style determines whether these stressors translate into vulnerability or resilience.

In the Indian context, rapid digital adoption combined with low parental digital literacy and limited mental health infrastructure heightens the urgency of these findings. There is a critical need for culturally grounded, multi-level interventions and policies that integrate digital parenting into child mental health frameworks. Positioning authoritative parenting as a key protective resource is essential for promoting child well-being in the digital era, particularly in India and other LMICs.

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Conflict of Interest

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