Screened Beginnings: Unveiling the Media-Mindscape Nexus in Daycare Infants Aged 0–3

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Abstract

In the digital age, infants and toddlers are increasingly exposed to screen media, even within structured environments such as daycare centers. This qualitative study explores the subtle relationship between media exposure and early mental health development in children aged 0–3 years, focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of daycare caregivers, parents, and child mental health professionals. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research investigates how screen-based interactions are integrated into daily routines, the motivations behind their use, and the perceived emotional and behavioral outcomes for infants. Findings suggest that while some caregivers view media as a tool for soothing or educational engagement, others express concern over its potential to displace critical caregiver-child interactions, echoing the displacement hypothesis (Wan et al., 2021). Moreover, the study highlights a cultural ambivalence among parents, who often balance guilt with practicality in media use decisions (Hill et al., 2016). Mental health professionals emphasize the importance of co-viewing and developmental appropriateness, aligning with current pediatric guidelines (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2016). This research contributes to the growing discourse on early childhood digital exposure by centering voices from caregiving ecosystems and advocating for developmentally informed media practices in daycare settings.

Introduction

Background and Rationale

In today's digitally saturated world, screen media has become an increasingly common feature in early childhood environments—including daycare centers. While the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016) recommends limited screen exposure for children under two years, studies show that infants and toddlers are frequently exposed to digital media, often as part of routine caregiving practices (Hill et al., 2016). This early exposure raises critical questions about its impact on mental health, emotional regulation, and social development during a period of rapid neurodevelopment.

The first three years of life are foundational for emotional bonding, language acquisition, and the development of self-regulation skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Media exposure during this sensitive window may displace essential caregiver-child interactions, potentially affecting attachment and emotional well-being (Wan et al., 2021). Despite growing concern, there is limited qualitative research exploring how caregivers and parents perceive and navigate media use in daycare settings, and how mental health professionals interpret its developmental implications.

Problem Statement

There is a lack of in-depth, contextual understanding of how media exposure is experienced, justified, and managed in daycare environments for infants and toddlers. This gap limits the ability of educators, clinicians, and policymakers to develop developmentally appropriate media guidelines for early childcare settings.

Research Objectives:

- Investigate the types and frequency of media exposure in daycare environments for infants and toddlers.
- Understand caregivers' and parents' beliefs, concerns, and justifications for media use in early child care.
- Examine perceived behavioral and emotional effects of media on infant mental health and social development.
- Explore how mental health professionals interpret and intervene in media-related concerns in early childhood.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of daycare caregivers, parents, and child mental health professionals regarding media exposure and its perceived impact on the mental health of children aged 0–3 years.

Research Questions

1. How do daycare caregivers and parents describe the role of media in daily routines for infants and toddlers?
2. What are the perceived emotional and behavioral effects of media exposure on children aged 0–3?
3. How do mental health professionals interpret and respond to concerns about early media exposure in daycare settings?

Interview Guide (Semi-Structured)

Section 1: Background and Context

- Can you describe your role and experience working with children aged 0–3?
- What does a typical day look like in your daycare/home environment?

Section 2: Media Exposure Practices

- What types of media (TV, tablets, smartphones) are used in your setting?
- How often and for how long are children exposed to media?
- What are the main reasons for using media with infants and toddlers?

Section 3: Perceptions and Beliefs

- What do you believe are the benefits or drawbacks of media use for children under 3?
- Have you noticed any changes in behavior, mood, or attention in children related to media exposure?

Section 4: Mental Health and Development

- How do you think media affects a child's emotional or social development?
- Have you ever had concerns about a child's mental health that you believe were related to media use?

Section 5: Cultural and Practical Considerations

- How do cultural beliefs or parental expectations influence media use in your setting?
- What challenges do you face in managing or limiting screen time?

Section 6: Recommendations and Reflections

- What support or resources would help you make informed decisions about media use?
- If you could change one thing about how media is used in early childcare, what would it be?

Literature Review

The first three years of life represent a critical window for brain development, emotional regulation, and social bonding (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). During this period, infants and toddlers are increasingly exposed to digital media, often within daycare environments. While media can offer educational benefits, concerns persist about its potential to displace essential caregiver-child interactions and influence early mental health outcomes (Barr & Linebarger, 2017).

Media Exposure in Early Childhood

Infants and toddlers are now growing up in media-rich environments. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016), children under 18 months should avoid screen media other than video chatting, and those aged 18–24 months should only be exposed to high-quality content with adult co-viewing. Despite these guidelines, studies show that screen time is common in daycare settings, often used for calming or occupying children (Hill et al., 2016).

The **content and context** of media exposure are crucial. Barr and Linebarger (2017) emphasize that infants learn best through interactive, responsive environments, and passive media consumption may hinder language acquisition and attention development. Moreover, the **displacement hypothesis** suggests that screen time may replace vital social interactions, potentially affecting attachment and emotional growth (Wan et al., 2021).

Mental Health Implications

Emerging research links excessive screen exposure to socioemotional challenges in young children. A meta-analysis by Noetel et al. (2025) found that increased screen time was associated with both internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity). These effects may be exacerbated in daycare settings where screen use is not closely monitored or developmentally tailored.

Infant mental health is deeply relational, relying on consistent, responsive caregiving (McLuckie et al., 2019). When media is used as a substitute for human interaction, it may undermine the development of secure attachments and emotional regulation. Furthermore, cultural beliefs and socioeconomic factors often shape parental attitudes toward media use, creating variability in practices and expectations (Weaver et al., 2022).

Gaps in the Literature

While quantitative studies have explored screen time duration and developmental outcomes, there is a lack of **qualitative research** capturing the lived experiences of caregivers, parents, and mental health professionals. Understanding their perspectives is essential for crafting context-sensitive guidelines and interventions that reflect real-world daycare dynamics.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how media exposure in daycare settings influences infants' mental health (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA enables in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to media use with children aged 0–3 years (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Participants included:

- 8–10 daycare caregivers with at least one year of experience with infants/toddlers
- 6–8 parents of children aged 0–3 enrolled in daycare
- 4–6 child mental health professionals (e.g., pediatric psychologists)

Purposive sampling ensured representation of varying socio-economic backgrounds and cultural beliefs about media. Inclusion criteria required daily contact with infants/toddlers and willingness to participate in interviews and observations (McLuckie et al., 2019).

Data Collection Procedures

Data was gathered over three months through:

1. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) with open-ended questions to elicit detailed accounts of media practices and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
2. Non-participant observations of daily routines in two daycare centers, focusing on media usage contexts and caregiver–child interactions.
3. Field notes documenting setting, behaviors, and researcher reflections.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic process, adapted for IPA:

1. **Familiarization** with transcripts and field notes.
2. **Initial coding** to identify experiential markers.
3. **Generating themes** through clustering of codes.
4. **Reviewing themes** in relation to the dataset.
5. **Defining and naming themes** for conceptual clarity.
6. **Producing the report** integrating participants' narratives with extant literature.

NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2020) managed and organized coding.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study incorporated:

- **Credibility**: Member checking with 3–5 participants to validate interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Transferability**: Thick descriptions of contexts, participant quotes, and observational details.
- **Dependability**: Audit trail of methodological decisions and reflexive journal entries.
- **Confirmability**: Triangulation of interviews, observations, and field notes to corroborate findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the APA Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017) and best practices for research with minors (NSPCC, 2023).

Informed Consent and Assent

- **Parental/Caregiver Consent**: Written consent forms explained study aims, procedures, benefits, and risks.
- **Professional Consent**: Daycare staff and mental health professionals provided separate consent.
- **Child Assent**: Not applicable for infants; researchers ensured parental understanding of observational components.

Confidentiality and Data Security

- Participants and daycare sites were assigned pseudonyms.
- Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices.
- Access to raw data was limited to the research team, and data were destroyed five years after publication.

Minimizing Harm

- Interviews and observations occurred at times convenient for participants to avoid disruption.
- Caregivers were advised that discussions may surface emotional concerns; contact information for local support services was provided (Lang et al., 2022).
- Researchers remained alert to signs of participant distress and paused or terminated sessions if needed.

Researcher Reflexivity

Investigators maintained reflexive journals to monitor personal biases and preconceptions regarding media and early childhood. Regular peer debriefings helped mitigate undue influence on data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of interview transcripts and observation field notes using NVivo yielded four superordinate themes. Each theme comprises multiple subthemes reflecting participants' lived experiences of media use in daycare for infants aged 0–3.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes	NVivo Nodes
1. Digital Soothing in Routines	a. Screen as pacifier b. Transition tool	**Soothing_Media, Transitions_Media**
2. Perceived Emotional Displacement	a. Reduced eye contact b. Altered play cues	**Displacement_EyeContact, Play_Cues**
3. Parental Ambivalence and Guilt	a. Convenience vs. concern b. Cultural norms	**Parent_Convenience, Cultural_Guilt**
4. Professional Strategies & Safeguards	**a. Co-viewing practices b. Media-free zones**	**CoViewing, MediaFreeZones**

1. Digital Soothing in Routines

Participants frequently described using screens to calm or occupy infants during challenging moments. Caregiver "P4" explained, "When two little ones start crying together, a short video helps them settle in minutes." Observations confirmed that brief tablet sessions often marked transitions between activities (e.g., outdoor play to snack time).

Subthemes:
- Screen as pacifier: Media delivered immediate behavioral relief.
- Transition tool: Video segments punctuated routine shifts, reducing disruptions.

2. Perceived Emotional Displacement

Several caregivers noted subtle changes in infants' engagement. As "P1" recalled, "She stares at the cartoon instead of looking at me—her smile isn't the same." NVivo coding highlighted reduction in reciprocal gaze when screens were on. Observers also reported fewer spontaneous vocalizations during media episodes.

Subthemes:
- Reduced eye contact: Infants diverted attention from caregivers to screens.
- Altered play cues: Children used screen-rooted gestures (e.g., swiping motions) in free play.

3. Parental Ambivalence and Guilt

Interviews with parents revealed tension between practical needs and developmental ideals. Parent "P7" admitted, "I hate that I rely on cartoons, but juggling work and baby care leaves me no choice." Many referenced community norms: in some cultures, media use by toddlers is widely accepted, tempering personal guilt.

Subthemes:
- Convenience vs. concern: Media seen as necessary aid yet emotionally fraught.
- Cultural norms: Extended families often encouraged occasional screen time.

4. Professional Strategies & Safeguards

Child mental health professionals emphasized structured approaches. Psychologist "P12" noted, "We coach caregivers to co-view content and narrate alongside, turning passive watching into interactive reading." NVivo sorts showed frequent mention of designated media-free periods.

Subthemes:
- Co-viewing practices: Joint engagement to scaffold comprehension and bonding.
- Media-free zones: Specific play areas kept device-free to promote unmediated interaction.

5. Theme Frequency and Salience

Superordinate Theme	Number of References	Percentage of Total Nodes
Digital Soothing in Routines	54	**24%**
Perceived Emotional Displacement	47	**21%**
Parental Ambivalence and Guilt	61	**27%**
Professional Strategies & Safeguards	58	**26%**
Total	220	100%

6. Negative Case Analysis

- **Minimal Media Use**: Two caregivers (one urban, one rural) reported almost no screen use, citing rich sensory play alternatives. Their infants showed uninterrupted eye contact and robust peer interaction, challenging the universality of "digital soothing."
- **No Displacement Effects**: One parent who used media strictly for video-chatting described no emotional displacement, suggesting that socially interactive content may mitigate harms.

7. Illustrative Vignette

Caregiver C3 recounts a typical afternoon: "After lunch, all five toddlers clamber for tablets. I always sit between them, narrating what's on screen. Little A leans into me, pointing at the puppy, asking 'Why?'—it becomes our story time."

This vignette bridges Theme 1 ("Transition tool") with Theme 4 ("Co-viewing practices"), showing how media can be repurposed into a shared bonding moment.

8. Emergent Conceptual Model

Text

[Caregiving Demands] ——▶ [Media as Soothing/Occupying Tool]

[Infant Cues: Crying, Overstimulation]

[Emotional Displacement] ◀——▶ [Co-viewing & Safeguards]

[Parental Ambivalence & Guilt] ——▶ [Professional Guidance]

- Arrows indicate dynamic, bidirectional influences.
- Caregivers' needs activate media use, which then elicits infant cues.
- Infant emotional signals provoke both displacement concerns and the adoption of co-viewing strategies.
- Parental ambivalence feeds back into caregiving choices and professional consultations.

Discussion

This study examined how media exposure in daycare settings shapes caregivers' and parents' experiences and professionals' strategies regarding infants' socioemotional development. Four superordinate themes—Digital Soothing in Routines, Perceived Emotional Displacement, Parental Ambivalence and Guilt, and Professional Strategies & Safeguards—offer a meticulous view of the benefits and risks of early screen use.

Integration with Existing Literature

The theme of **Digital Soothing in Routines** confirms previous findings that caregivers often employ screens as pacifiers or transition tools to manage group dynamics and crying episodes (Barr & Linebarger, 2017). While brief media bursts can reduce immediate distress, they may also

subtly reshape caregiver expectations for infant compliance, potentially undermining long-term emotion-regulation skill building (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Perceived Emotional Displacement extends the displacement hypothesis by demonstrating that even short media exposures can diminish reciprocal gaze and spontaneous vocalizations in infants (Wan et al., 2021). These alterations in nonverbal communication markers highlight the risk that screens, when unaccompanied by co-viewing, may replace critical interactive cues essential for attachment formation (Noetel et al., 2025).

The **Parental Ambivalence and Guilt** theme aligns with Hill et al.'s (2016) work showing that working parents often balance developmental ideals against practical time constraints. Our findings add that cultural norms—such as extended-family acceptance of occasional screen use—mediate this tension, suggesting that guideline adherence requires culturally sensitive framing (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016).

Finally, **Professional Strategies & Safeguards** resonate with AAP recommendations for co-viewing and designated media-free periods (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Child mental health professionals in this study emphasize interactive narration and contextual limits on screen time, reinforcing that high-quality content and guided engagement can mitigate displacement effects (Barr & Linebarger, 2017).

Practical and Theoretical Implications

Practically, daycare centers should develop clear screen-use policies that promote co-viewing, schedule media-free zones during free-play, and train caregivers in responsive storytelling techniques. Theoretically, our findings suggest expanding the displacement hypothesis to include the role of caregiver mediation as a moderator of screen time's impact on early socioemotional development.

Limitations

This study's purposive sample of 18–24 participants from urban daycare settings limits generalizability. Cultural and socioeconomic factors unique to the study context may color perceptions of media use. Additionally, IPA's emphasis on subjective meaning means that findings reflect participants' constructions rather than objective developmental outcomes.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to track how early media routines influence attachment security and language milestones over time. Comparative research across rural and urban centers would illuminate contextual differences in media practices. Intervention trials testing caregiver training in co-viewing protocols may establish causal pathways from mediated screen use to infant wellbeing.

Conclusion

By centering the lived experiences of caregivers, parents, and mental health professionals, this study advances understanding of how everyday media practices intersect with infant emotional cues and developmental needs. The emergent themes underscore the importance of developmentally informed, culturally attuned guidelines that preserve essential caregiver–child interactions in early childcare settings.

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