

Classed Family Digital Ecology: Parents' Digital Practices, Children's Digital Engagement, and Early Childhood Developmental Outcomes in China

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Digital media are embedded in children's everyday lives, making family digital practices an important context for early development. This study advances a classed family digital ecology framework to explain how socioeconomic status, parental digital practices, parent-child interaction, children's screen time, and developmental outcomes are connected. Using two complementary datasets from China, the China Family Panel Studies and the Screen Exposure in Early Childhood Survey, we analyse children aged 3–8. Results show that caregiver digital device use predicts children's screen time, while earlier screen time is not consistently associated with later self-regulation or peer relationships. Relational pathways are more consequential: parental phubbing increases children's screen time and reduces parent-led activities, whereas parent-led activities are linked to lower screen time and fewer developmental difficulties. Socioeconomic status operates in mixed ways, with parental education associated with more parent-led activities and lower child screen time, but also with some adult digital disruption. These findings show that children's screen time is shaped by classed family routines, resources, and relationships, suggesting that policy guidance should support caregivers, reduce parental distraction, and promote feasible parent-child activities alongside attention to screen time.