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Social Cognitive Dynamics and Interpersonal Interaction among Primary School Children in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Digital technology shapes both learning and social experience during childhood, yet studies often examine cognitive outcomes separately from interpersonal functioning. This critical narrative review revisits a fixed corpus of 30 publications dated 2019–2026 to consider how digital activity, family mediation, educational context, and peer interaction are related to these two domains. A thematic comparison distinguishes observational associations, qualitative accounts, reviews, and educational interventions rather than treating them as equivalent causal evidence. The literature reports concerns involving attention, learning routines, emotional regulation, and face-to-face interaction; however, findings vary by context, use type, age, and study design. Positive educational uses and supportive parenting complicate an exclusively risk-based interpretation. The review proposes a contextual framework linking digital-use characteristics, adult mediation, learning engagement, and opportunities for social practice. Because the original source-selection audit trail and full bibliographic records are incomplete, the synthesis is non-exhaustive and should not be interpreted as a systematic review or proof of neurological harm. Its principal contribution is a cautious integration of cognitive and interpersonal evidence and a set of proportionate implications for families and schools.

Keywords

cognitive development, digital parenting, interpersonal interaction, primary education, screen time.

1. Introduction

Digital devices are embedded in many children's routines, supporting learning, entertainment, communication, and access to information. Their educational significance is therefore not reducible to the number of hours spent with a screen. The developmental relevance of use also depends on the type of content, whether the activity is active or passive, and the opportunities available for offline learning and social participation. Studies of Indonesian school contexts have raised concerns about prolonged recreational use, while also identifying possibilities for educational engagement and creativity (Rini et al., 2021; Romadhon et al., 2025; Yusuf & Darmasnyah, 2025).

Cognitive functioning and interpersonal participation are frequently treated as separate topics. On the cognitive side, the literature discusses concentration, learning motivation, recall, language, and

school performance (Fitri et al., 2026; Priyoambodo & Suminar, 2021; Suryani, 2026). On the interpersonal side, it addresses empathy, peer communication, cooperative behavior, and forms of social withdrawal (Septina & Ain, 2022). These outcomes are related in everyday education: a child's engagement in classroom dialogue can support learning, while opportunities to collaborate and communicate may be affected by how digital activities displace or supplement face-to-face experiences.

The evidence should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. Some primary-school studies report negative relationships between intensive gadget use and concentration, whereas Fajri et al. (2026) found no statistically significant direct association between screen-time intensity and motivation or concentration in a small fifth-grade sample. Similarly, an association between gadget-use category and social interaction in Mediari et al. (2025) was modest, indicating that exposure alone cannot account for the complexity of children's relational experience. A responsible review must therefore ask when, for whom, and under which conditions digital participation is associated with beneficial or unfavorable outcomes.

The existing literature addresses cognition, sociability, parenting, and classroom technology, but its contribution has not been established merely by discussing these topics together. This review instead makes their intersection the object of analysis. It considers how digital-use conditions and family or classroom mediation could simultaneously shape attention to learning and opportunities for interpersonal practice, without presuming a direct causal pathway. In this sense, the intended contribution is a contextual interpretive framework rather than a pooled effect estimate or a claim to have identified new empirical evidence.

Three guiding questions structure the synthesis: (1) What types of cognitive and interpersonal outcomes are reported in the available literature on digital-device use among children? (2) How do study design, age group, content, and adult mediation qualify apparently contradictory findings? (3) What educational and family-level implications can reasonably be drawn without overstating causality? Although the central population is primary-school children, selected early-childhood studies are examined as contextual literature and are not treated as directly interchangeable with primary-school evidence.

2. Research Methods

This article is a critical narrative literature review with thematic synthesis. It is not designated a systematic review, meta-analysis, or scoping review because the available source manuscript does not document a reproducible search strategy or a formal study-selection audit trail. The synthesis examines the fixed set of 30 bibliographic works assembled for this article, published between 2019 and 2026; no new comprehensive database search is claimed. References encompass primary-school observational and qualitative studies, early-childhood studies, narrative reviews, and educational interventions. This heterogeneous evidence base is suitable for conceptual comparison but not for pooled causal estimation.

The literature set was assembled for topical relevance to children's digital technology exposure, cognitive or emotional development, and social or interpersonal interaction. The underlying study records available for the present synthesis do not identify the original databases, exact search strings, retrieval dates, duplicate-removal procedures, excluded-record counts, or independent screening arrangements. These details cannot be reconstructed reliably from the final bibliography alone and are therefore not presented as established methodological facts. The 30 works therefore constitute a purposively assembled, non-exhaustive literature corpus, not a verifiable PRISMA-style selection process.

Thematic comparison was organized into four analytic domains: cognitive and learning-related observations; peer and interpersonal outcomes; family and educational mediators; and potential benefits of purposeful digital activities. Within each domain, findings were contrasted by population (primary school versus preschool or older students), design (correlational, case-based, review, or intervention), measured outcome, and inferential limits. Claims were phrased as associations or study-specific observations when the cited design did not warrant causal attribution. The selected evidence map in Table 1 is a concise interpretive aid, not a formal quality-appraisal instrument or a complete database of all 30 works.

A formal risk-of-bias or certainty-of-evidence assessment was not performed, and quantitative effect sizes were not aggregated. This is a substantive limitation, particularly where studies differ in exposure definitions, sampling, parental reporting, and outcome measures. Source details verified against publisher records were normalized in the reference list, while records lacking sufficient publication metadata remain a bibliographic limitation requiring confirmation from the original publications. The conclusions are therefore framed as patterns and hypotheses for practice and future research, rather than definitive developmental effects.

Table 1. Selected evidence characteristics and interpretive limits

Study and population	Reported design or focus	What the evidence can support
Suryani (2026): grade IV pupils (n = 24)	Quantitative school survey/regression; gadget use and concentration	Within-sample negative association; no demonstration of neurological change or broad causality.
Fajri et al. (2026): grade V pupils (n = 20)	Quantitative survey; screen time, motivation, concentration	No significant direct association reported; small sample limits generalization.
Azzahra et al. (2026): grade V pupils (five students and teacher)	Qualitative school case study; entertainment-oriented screen exposure	Context-specific descriptions of distraction; not a population effect estimate.
Mediari et al. (2025): grades IV–VI (n = 97)	Correlational questionnaire study of gadget use and social interaction	Reported association is modest; measure and coding require careful interpretation.
Bhakti et al. (2024): grade III pupils (n = 20)	Descriptive qualitative school study of device use and peer relations	Contextual insights on peer interaction; causal direction unresolved.
Anggita & Haryanto (2026): three primary-school cases	Qualitative observations/interviews across reported addiction categories	Illustrates severe-use contexts but should not establish prevalence.
Hanifah et al. (2026): preschool children, 3–6 years	Cross-sectional parental survey of parenting, screen time, emotions	Contextual early-childhood evidence, not directly primary-school generalizable.
Alimuddin et al. (2024): senior high-school students	Pretest–posttest sociodrama intervention	Potential communication activity; does not directly establish an effect for primary pupils.
Widyani et al. (2026): grade V pupils (n = 20)	One-group pretest–posttest interactive teaching media	Promising classroom results without a comparison group; causal attribution limited.
Nufus et al. (2025): preschool storytelling activities	Classroom action/community-engagement report	Practical illustration; preschool context and design constrain inference.

3. Results and Discussion

Across the reviewed literature, the most defensible conclusion is heterogeneity rather than a uniform developmental effect. Some studies identify difficulties in attention or face-to-face interaction, while others report null associations or educational benefits. The following sections compare these findings and distinguish explanatory propositions from established evidence.

Cognitive Outcomes: Attention, Motivation, Language, and the Limits of Causal Claims

Several studies associate intensive or poorly regulated gadget use with lower levels of learning concentration and achievement. In a sample of 24 fourth-grade pupils, Suryani (2026) reported a negative association between gadget-use scores and concentration. Fitri et al. (2026) similarly described a negative relationship with learning outcomes. Azzahra et al. (2026), using a qualitative case-study approach involving five fifth-grade pupils and a teacher, described distraction in contexts where extended screen time centered on entertainment. These results point to a relevant educational concern; however, differences in design and small or context-specific samples make it inappropriate to treat them as a single estimate of digital technology's effect on children.

Importantly, the findings are not unanimous. Fajri et al. (2026) examined 20 fifth-grade students and did not find a statistically significant direct relationship between screen-time intensity and either motivation or concentration, while observing a positive relationship between motivation and concentration. A comparison with Suryani (2026) shows why stronger causal language is premature: the studies differ in samples, operationalization of exposure, and analytic approach. Both examine school learning but neither isolates content quality, household routines, prior academic difficulties, or the possibility that children struggling with concentration may also choose more digital entertainment. The evidence therefore favors qualified, context-dependent associations.

Concern about short-form digital content is sometimes described through the expression "brain rot." Romadhon et al. (2025) used this term in discussing classroom observations and reported concerns from teachers about attention and engagement. In the present review, "brain rot" is treated as an emerging popular or interpretive label, not as a recognized clinical diagnosis or an established measure of neurological deterioration. The reported figure concerning pupils showing such signs belongs to the particular study context; it is not a prevalence estimate for Indonesian children generally. The reviewed evidence does not justify statements that screen use directly damages neural pathways or permanently reduces cognitive capacity.

The age of participants also matters. Priyoambodo and Suminar (2021) synthesized literature concerning early-childhood language development, while Al-Shyfa and Andika (2026) described speech-delay cases with high screen exposure. Such findings may provide developmental context, but preschool language acquisition is not identical to concentration or achievement among primary-school pupils. Similarly, Dewi et al. (2024) addressed mental-health concerns through a narrative review and Mugi Rahayu (2026) discussed integrated cognitive, social, and emotional development in younger children. These sources should inform hypotheses and age-sensitive precautions, not be combined indiscriminately with primary-school achievement studies.

Together, these observations suggest that researchers and educators should differentiate recreational versus curriculum-linked activity; passive scrolling versus collaborative creation; duration versus timing; and observed attention difficulties versus tested cognitive outcomes. Future longitudinal or intervention studies are required to establish temporal direction and to test the relative importance of these factors.

Interpersonal Interaction: Peer Opportunity, Social Skills, and Developmental Context

Peer interaction is a second recurring concern. Bhakti et al. (2024) described circumstances in which frequent device use coincided with less attention to classmates, whereas Rini et al. (2021) emphasized both the communication benefits of gadgets and the possibility that prolonged use reduces face-to-face activity. Mediari et al. (2025), working with 97 pupils in grades IV–VI, reported a modest statistical relationship between their gadget-use measure and social-interaction measure. The direction and size of such a coded association must be understood with reference to how both questionnaires were scored; it should not be simplified into a claim that screen time necessarily produces antisocial behavior.

Riyandani et al. (2025) likewise discussed both adverse and potentially beneficial contexts of screen use, including its relation to social behavior and school outcomes. A small qualitative study by Anggita and Haryanto (2026) described three children with differing patterns of intensive gadget use and difficulties in emotion regulation, daily discipline, and social participation. These observations are useful for identifying possible mechanisms in families and schools, but case categorization cannot support population-level statements about addiction or causal risk.

The construct of interpersonal intelligence includes sensitivity to others, social understanding, and communication skills (Safruddin et al., 2022). Agustini et al. (2019) described uneven development across such skills among primary-school pupils, and Septina and Ain (2022) examined associations between interpersonal intelligence and verbal bullying. Neither study, taken alone, establishes that digital devices caused deficits in these skills. Rather, they clarify why peer communication and prosocial behavior deserve attention when considering possible displacement of offline activities.

The literature also contains interventions or participation-based activities relevant to communication. Rosidah et al. (2026) linked interpersonal communication, classroom engagement, and pupil confidence. Nufus et al. (2025) reported storytelling activities among preschool children, and Agustin et al. (2021) discussed early-childhood strategies during learning from home. Alimuddin et al. (2024) described improvement following a sociodrama activity, but that intervention involved senior high-school rather than primary-school students. Such sources illustrate possible pedagogical approaches; they cannot be cited as direct proof of effectiveness for primary-school children without age-appropriate evaluation.

A central analytical distinction is therefore between device exposure and lost or gained interaction opportunities. Time spent watching isolated entertainment may compete with playground or classroom exchange, whereas interactive educational projects and communication with peers may provide a different experience. Present evidence is not strong enough to specify a universal screen-time threshold for interpersonal harm, but it supports monitoring the quality and balance of children's everyday social activities.

Contextual Mediators: Parenting, Household Practices, and School Environment

Parenting and school structures help explain why exposure measures alone produce mixed results. Sriastuti (2025) associated parenting practices with children's screen-time duration, and Hanifah et al. (2026) reported associations among parenting style, screen exposure, and emotional development among preschool children. These findings identify plausible contextual factors, not a universal causal hierarchy. Child temperament, family resources, co-viewing practices, and parental working conditions may also shape both technology use and developmental opportunities, although the reviewed studies do not consistently test these factors.

At the level of daily routines, Khoirunnisa et al. (2026) discussed the relationship between gadget use and learning discipline. Mazdalifah et al. (2025) described parent education concerning responsible screen-time management. Dinata et al. (2026) situated digital participation within broader debates about Generation Alpha and values education, while Siswohadi and Hamid (2026) described changes in young children's social behavior in contexts of intensive gadget use. Such publications broaden the interpretive context, but their heterogeneity in age, purpose, and methodology precludes treating them as evidence for one uniform model.

An integrative interpretation therefore centers on adult mediation and context: parents and teachers can help children select developmentally appropriate content, maintain predictable routines, and preserve time for conversation, play, reading, and shared problem-solving. This interpretation is consistent with the reviewed literature but remains a proposed framework until tested in comparative studies that measure both cognitive and interpersonal outcomes in the same participants.

Constructive Digital Use and Educational Opportunities

A risk-only perspective overlooks forms of digital activity that can support teaching and learning. Yusuf and Darmasnyah (2025) considered technology integration in early-childhood instruction, and Mayske et al. (2026) discussed teacher use of generative AI as a support for primary-school literacy materials. These examples suggest potential benefits when adults structure digital tasks toward particular learning objectives. They do not establish that unsupervised recreational use has comparable effects, nor should they be taken as endorsements of unrestricted AI exposure among children.

Widyani et al. (2026) reported improvement in mathematical-literacy scores following an interactive-media intervention among 20 fifth-grade pupils. Because the reported design used a single-group pretest–posttest design, the results are encouraging but remain subject to maturation, repeated-testing, and other competing explanations. As with the negative-outcome studies, a critical synthesis should avoid claiming a definitive causal effect where the design cannot isolate it.

Conceptually, digital activities may support rather than displace social learning when they involve shared inquiry, classroom discussion, and feedback. The practical distinction is not "technology versus no technology" but whether the activity encourages sustained attention, active thinking, and interpersonal exchange. This proposition merits experimental testing with appropriate comparison conditions.

An Integrated Contextual Framework for Cognitive and Interpersonal Development

The principal contribution of this review is an interpretive linkage between two outcomes often addressed separately. Digital-use characteristics—content, duration, timing, and whether the activity is solitary or collaborative—may interact with adult mediation, classroom practices, and the availability of offline peer encounters. These conditions may in turn relate to sustained learning engagement and interpersonal participation. The framework is not presented as an empirically established causal model, because the cited studies rarely measure all components jointly and differ substantially in design.

For example, a child using an educational application with a teacher and peers has a different learning and social setting from a child watching short entertainment videos alone late at night. Both activities count as "screen time," yet their likely demands on concentration, dialogue, and sleep routine differ. The reviewed studies provide reasons to treat these dimensions separately, but direct comparisons that jointly assess cognition and social functioning remain limited.

Table 2 specifies this framework and identifies which conclusions remain hypotheses. This helps distinguish practical priorities from causal claims and demonstrates why a single measure of total device-use hours is unlikely to explain every reported outcome.

Table 2. Contextual framework linking digital activity to learning and interpersonal participation

Analytic dimension	Relevant question	Status of inference
Type and purpose of use	Is the activity recreational, educational, passive, creative, solitary, or collaborative?	Plausible effect modifier; requires direct comparative testing.
Adult and classroom mediation	Are content selection, routines, feedback, and co-use present?	Potential contextual mediator; not uniformly measured across studies.

Analytic dimension	Relevant question	Status of inference
Cognitive participation	Are attention, motivation, and learning performance operationalized separately?	Mixed observational findings; causal direction unresolved.
Interpersonal opportunities	Are peer dialogue, empathy, play, and classroom engagement observed directly?	Evidence is context-specific; no universal impairment threshold established.
Age and study design	Are results from preschool, primary school, or older pupils?	Populations and designs should not be treated as interchangeable.

Educational Implications, Evidence Gaps, and Priorities

The reviewed literature supports proportionate attention to children's digital routines rather than a technologically deterministic response. Families may benefit from shared rules, age-sensitive content selection, and continuing conversation about online experience; schools may integrate digital activities with collaborative tasks, reading, play, and face-to-face communication. These are defensible educational considerations, not tested prescriptions guaranteed to improve outcomes in every context (Khoirunnisa et al., 2026).

The most important empirical gap concerns studies that assess cognition and interpersonal functioning together while measuring what children do online and the social conditions surrounding that use. Further research should differentiate primary-school and preschool groups, use validated outcomes, document sampling and confounders, and follow participants over time. Intervention designs can assess whether replacing passive use with purposeful, collaborative engagement changes both learning and peer interaction. For evidence synthesis, future reviews should predefine search databases, exact search expressions, appraisal criteria, and screening decisions; a formal meta-analysis is appropriate only when compatible measures and sufficiently comparable designs are available.

4. Conclusion

The examined literature describes varied relationships between children's digital activity, learning, and interpersonal interaction. Some primary-school studies associate intensive gadget use with poorer attention or reduced social participation, whereas others report null associations or benefits in structured learning contexts. These differences caution against interpreting total screen time as a stand-alone cause of cognitive decline, social impairment, or neurological injury. The review contributes a contextual framework in which the nature of digital activities, family or school mediation, and opportunities for offline interaction jointly shape questions about cognitive and interpersonal development. This is a conceptual synthesis rather than a validated causal model. Evidence from preschool children and older students is treated as contextual and should not be generalized directly to primary-school populations. The corpus is non-exhaustive, lacks a documented reproducible search history, and has not undergone formal risk-of-bias appraisal; several bibliographic records require further author verification. Accordingly, practical implications should be treated as proportionate guidance and research priorities, not definitive intervention effects. More transparent longitudinal, comparative, and age-specific studies are needed before stronger conclusions can be drawn.

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Competing Interests	:	The authors declare no competing interests.
Ethics and Consent	:	This study was conducted as a critical narrative review of previously published literature. No human participants were recruited, and no new personal or identifiable data were collected. Therefore, ethics approval and informed consent were not required for the review itself.
Data Availability	:	The evidence supporting this narrative review is derived from the published studies cited in the reference list. The reviewed literature corpus and thematic evidence summaries are described in the manuscript. Additional supporting bibliographic information may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to availabilit.
AI Use Declaration	:	Generative artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with academic language refinement, sentence structure, and the presentation of scholarly arguments. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, revised, and validated by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript..

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