Family Psychology and Mental Health in the Context of Children's Digital Addiction: A Clinical Study

علم نفس الأسرة والصحة العقلية في سياق إدمان الأطفال على البيئة الرقمية: دراسة سريرية

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Introduction

In recent years, families have increasingly expressed concern about their children's addiction to smart screens, particularly in Arab countries, and notably in Algeria, which has emerged as one of the most affected nations by digital dependency and cyber-related issues. A combination of factors—including the absence of psychological support within families, a lack of sensitivity to children's developmental needs, communication breakdowns, role confusion, rapid urbanization, the spread of modern lifestyles, and the erosion of cultural identity—contributes to a withdrawal from the physical world toward the virtual sphere.

This withdrawal is not limited to children; it affects all age groups—including adolescents, adults, and even the elderly—regardless of gender. At its core, this behavior often stems from low self-esteem and psychological vulnerability, which may later manifest as a weakened moral framework and value system. When the family's foundational values are destabilized and the parental relationship becomes fragile, children may seek refuge in virtual environments as a compensatory mechanism.

These digital spaces begin to fulfill emotional needs in maladaptive ways. During screen exposure, the child receives a high volume of sensory and emotional stimulation while remaining largely passive. This stimulation is misinterpreted as emotional gratification. Once screen time ends, the previously absorbed energy is released in a disorganized and unconscious manner, often resulting in emotional imbalance. This internal dissonance may lead to psychological fragmentation, manifesting in compulsive behaviors that vary depending on the duration and type of screen exposure.

1. Theoretical Grounding and Research Design

1.1. Problem Statement

A screen is any device within an individual's field of vision. Smart screens—such as televisions, smartphones, and game consoles—not only affect the visual and auditory systems but also have a profound impact on the central nervous system and higher cognitive functions, including memory, language acquisition, and reading skills (Lallem & Nini, 2017).

While such devices may offer cognitive benefits when used appropriately—such as enhancing focus, critical thinking, and analytical abilities in children—excessive or unregulated use may lead to adverse outcomes. These include progressive memory deterioration, diminished logical reasoning, and the erosion of family relationships. Many digital programs contain violent content or foster emotional detachment, which can, over time, result in social alienation and, in extreme cases, a desire to escape one's environment through illicit means such as illegal migration.

Research has examined whether exposure to violent content increases children's aggression and whether educational content fosters prosocial behavior. One pertinent question arises from this debate: What are the consequences of constant exposure to fluctuating auditory and visual stimuli—both human and artificial—on children's mental health and on family dynamics? These stimuli bypass interactive dialogue and instead promote passive reception. Over time, they may generate nervous tension, anxiety, irrational fears, and even altered eating behaviors. Hence, this study seeks to explore how such exposure impacts the psychological stability of family life when a child becomes immersed in a digital environment.

1.2. Conceptual Framework and Research Orientation

1.2.1. Research Hypotheses

This study is based on a set of hypotheses formulated from clinical observation and data from the specialized literature on childhood digital addiction. These hypotheses guided the methodological protocol and were subjected to empirical validation through the prolonged observation of three children from the same family unit.

- Hypothesis 1. Addiction to smart screens—particularly competitive games—disrupts family dynamics, especially when the affected child is male. This hypothesis was confirmed. Sami's case, observed after prolonged exposure to screens, revealed a significant increase

in aggressive behavior and a deterioration in his communication skills. This change disrupted family harmony, suggesting that boys may exhibit more disorganizing reactions than girls in the context of digital addiction.

- Hypothesis 2. The stimuli produced by electronic addiction are illusory, difficult to regulate, and exert a more detrimental effect on family mental health than tangible stimuli. This hypothesis was also corroborated. Longitudinal observations revealed a progressive shift from positive behaviors to negative emotional states, characterized by affective instability, increased irritability, and disruption of family routines. Prolonged exposure to digital content resulted in behavioral regressions and attention disorders, weakening emotional regulation within the family unit.

- Hypothesis 3. Addiction to smart screens, particularly competitive games, increases aggression levels more significantly in boys than in girls. The comparative analysis of the observed cases shows that although all three children were exposed to similar content for comparable durations, the boy exhibited much more pronounced aggressive behavior. This data tends to confirm the existence of a gendered effect in the way digital addiction affects children's behavior.

1.2.2. Objectives of the Study

This section specifies the main aims of the investigation. The general objective is to better understand the psychological implications of digital addiction on children and its impact on family balance.

- Identify the main psychological disorders affecting preschool and middle childhood children.
- Analyze the specific factors promoting smart screen addiction in children, with an emphasis on competitive games.
- Study the mechanisms through which this addiction affects family systems, particularly the mental health of the family as an entity.

1.2.3. Significance of the Study

This work is situated within a multidisciplinary perspective at the intersection of family psychology, sociology of education, and digital sciences. It is relevant on several levels:

- It explores the impact of smartphones, ubiquitous objects in contemporary households, on the emotional and educational dynamics of the family.

- It draws attention to the massive use of screens among children, a population particularly vulnerable in terms of neurocognitive development, and offers avenues for reflection for families, educators, and clinicians.

1.2.4. Study Boundaries

To ensure methodological clarity, this research is delimited by a set of specific boundaries:

- Objective Boundaries. The study is limited to the analysis of the effects of smart screen addiction in children and its impacts on family mental health. • Human Boundaries: The sample consists of three children, all from the same family unit and in the preschool/pre-adolescent age range.
- Temporal Boundaries. The investigation was conducted throughout 2023, with observations spread over several months.
- Spatial Boundaries. Data were collected within a single family setting, ensuring the contextual homogeneity required by the adopted clinical approach.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Digital Addiction

2.1. Addiction and Related Concepts

To understand the psychological and familial consequences of smart screen addiction among children, it is essential to define the foundational concepts framing the study. This section offers a synthesis of key theoretical definitions—linguistic, clinical, and psychological—related to the phenomenon of addiction. Particular attention is given to the specificities of smart screen use, the role of the family as a psychosocial unit, and the implications for family mental health. These interrelated notions not only provide the necessary conceptual background for the clinical analysis but also inform the study's hypotheses concerning behavioral transformations and intra-family dynamics.

- Linguistic Definition. Addiction refers to a habitual dependence characterized by the inability to refrain from using a substance or engaging in an activity. A person is said to be addicted when they find it difficult to stop such behavior (Ismaili Yamna & Baa'ib Nadia, p. 35).
- Terminological Definition. Addiction is defined as the persistent and repetitive use of a substance or the engagement in a behavior over

a prolonged period, usually aimed at achieving a state of euphoria or avoiding negative emotional states such as sadness or depression (Abd Al-Aziz Abdullah Al-Barthein, 2014, p. 16). The World Health Organization (1973) defined addiction as:

> "A psychological and sometimes physiological condition resulting from the interaction between a living organism and a substance. It is characterized by specific responses and behavioral patterns, always involving a strong compulsion to continuously or periodically use the substance or engage in the behavior, either to experience its psychological effects or to avoid the discomfort associated with its absence. A person may be addicted to more than one substance." (Hassan Abd Al-Ma'ati, 2004, p. 146)

According to Doron and Parot (2005), in the Dictionary of Psychology, addiction is:

> "A behavioral disorder marked by an intense urge to obtain a psychoactive substance—primarily to escape the unpleasant effects of withdrawal, even more so than for the pleasurable effects it may initially provide." Chronic use typically results in both dependency and tolerance. (Waheed Hida Sayel, 2015, p. 22)

- Smart Screens. Smart screens refer to any electronically controlled display device, whether operated via a remote control (e.g., televisions) or by direct touch (e.g., smartphones, tablets).

- Family. The family is considered the foundational social unit and the first educational environment in which human development occurs. It is where a child's personality is shaped—both individually and socially—and where emotional, intellectual, and social needs are met. The family is also the space for intergenerational dialogue and the transmission of values, fulfilling mutual roles among its members. As a dynamic system, the family is both shaped by and contributes to cultural, social, and normative structures. It plays a central role in ensuring personal identity, emotional security, and societal cohesion.

- Family Mental Health. According to Mohammed Miyas (1997), mental health refers to an individual's capacity to adapt to themselves and their social environment in a stable and fulfilling way, free from psychological distress. Family mental health, more specifically, is indicated by the absence

of dysfunctional and repetitive behavioral patterns. It reflects the existence of clear boundaries, mutually accepted rules, adaptable roles, and balanced emotional bonds among family members. From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, family mental health is expressed through cooperative parenting, constructive communication, emotional regulation, and effective problem-solving skills. A psychologically healthy family also demonstrates the capacity to differentiate itself from extended family influences.

2.2. Previous Studies on the Topic

Numerous empirical studies have explored the psychological and social consequences of digital screen exposure among children, highlighting the implications for individual development and family dynamics. This literature review synthesizes a selection of relevant investigations that address various facets of screen-related behavioral disturbances. The studies are presented in chronological and thematic order to illustrate the evolving scholarly discourse—from early concerns about traditional television (Singer, 1998) to more recent findings concerning smartphones and mobile devices (Divan, Al-Qasiri et al., Shahin). Taken together, these contributions provide a foundational framework for understanding how screen addiction may influence children's behavior, emotional well-being, and family mental health, thereby justifying the need for more context-specific and clinically oriented research like the present study.

- Shahin Study (2014). The study entitled "The Role of Smart Devices in Family Breakdown and Juvenile Delinquency" by Shahin (2014) investigates the contribution of smart device usage to the disintegration of family structures, examined through the lenses of social, religious, and psychological dimensions. Adopting a descriptive-analytical methodology, the research was conducted on a sample of 50 participants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. The findings underscore a significant correlation between the increased use of smart devices and the erosion of familial bonds. Notably, the study highlights how such devices foster emotional detachment among spouses, resulting in a diminished sense of mutual responsibility and weakening the foundational roles within the family unit. Furthermore, the study suggests that these dynamics may indirectly contribute to the rise in juvenile behavioral issues, including moral deviation and delinquency.

- Al-Qasiri et al. (2014). The study conducted by Al-Qasiri et al. (2014), titled "Behavioral Problems Resulting from the Use of Smartphones by Children: Parents' Perspectives in Light of Selected Variables", sought to identify the behavioral disturbances associated with children's smartphone use, as perceived by their parents, while examining the influence of specific demographic variables such as gender and age. The researchers employed a descriptive-analytical approach using a structured questionnaire composed of three dimensions—social, psychological, and educational—administered to a randomly selected sample of 112 parents. The findings revealed that social problems were the most frequently reported, followed by behavioral and psychological issues. Statistically significant differences emerged in favor of male children and those aged between 2 and 12 years. Additionally, children who used smartphones for 1 to 3 hours per day exhibited a higher incidence of reported problems, underlining the potentially disruptive impact of excessive screen exposure during critical developmental periods.

- Divan Study (2012). Conducted on a large sample of 32,000 children aged seven, the study by Divan (2012) investigated the relationship between the use of cellular devices and the emergence of behavioral problems in children. Using data collected through questionnaires completed by the children's mothers, the research identified a significant correlation between early exposure to mobile devices and the onset of various behavioral symptoms. These included increased irritability, mood swings, difficulties in concentration, and emotional apathy. The study notably emphasized that the earlier the child was exposed to such devices, the more severe the psychological disturbances became.

- Singer Study (1998). In a study conducted two decades earlier, Singer (1998) focused on the psychological and social implications of prolonged television viewing among children. The findings revealed a direct link between excessive screen time and the development of a range of mental health issues, including heightened levels of aggression, persistent anxiety, and depressive symptoms. This research underscored the broader societal concern that, beyond mobile devices, even traditional forms of screen-based entertainment may contribute substantially to psychological distress and social maladjustment in children.

3. Theoretical Overview of Electronic Addiction

3.1. The Medical Explanation of Smart Screen Addiction

From a medical standpoint, smart screen addiction is understood as a multifactorial condition, involving genetic predispositions, neurochemical imbalances, and disruptions in neurotransmitter systems. These include changes in chromosomes, hormonal regulation, and neurochemical processes that govern the brain and central nervous system.

According to Mohamed Al-Noubi Mohamed Ali (2010), referencing Griffiths (1998), internet and smart screen addiction are classified as behavioral (non-substance) addictions, yet they share core characteristics with substance-based dependencies. These include compulsive behaviors, withdrawal symptoms, mood disturbances, and a pattern of psychological tolerance and dependence.

Such addictions may manifest through compulsive involvement in activities like gambling, excessive gaming, or the obsessive pursuit of financial gain. Common symptoms include emotional instability (e.g., mood swings), intense craving, and a persistent urge to engage in the activity despite negative consequences. Over time, the user may exhibit tolerance, requiring increased screen time to achieve the same level of emotional gratification (Mohamed Al-Noubi Mohamed Ali, 2010, pp. 76–77).

3.2. Diagnostic Criteria for Electronic Addiction

The DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), outlines several key criteria associated with electronic or behavioral addiction, which can be adapted to smart screen use:

- Mood Modification. A shift in emotional state—typically from distress or boredom to perceived relief or stimulation—resulting from screen use. The individual may progressively disconnect from reality, experiencing a loss of temporal and spatial awareness and diminishing social engagement.
- Craving. A strong and recurrent desire to engage with the screen, often escalating over time. The pleasure obtained tends to increase in proportion to the time spent interacting with the device.
- Tolerance. The need for increasingly prolonged screen interaction to attain the same level of satisfaction or relief, indicative of psychological dependence.

- Withdrawal Symptoms. These emerge when screen time is reduced or eliminated. Symptoms can persist for several days to a month and may include emotional distress, impaired social interaction, difficulty concentrating, and a return to screen use as a coping mechanism. In such cases, smart screens become a substitute for unmet psychological or emotional needs (Mohamed Al-Noubi Mohamed Ali, 2010, p. 55).

4. Methodological and Practical Aspects

This study adopts a clinical qualitative methodology, specifically the case study approach, which enables an in-depth understanding of psychological dynamics in natural contexts. The case study framework is particularly suitable for analyzing individual behaviors and relational patterns within a family unit.

4.1 Research Group

The study was conducted with a purposive sample of three children, selected from the same family and within a close age range (4 to 6 years). The following table presents the participants' demographic and behavioral characteristics:

Table 1. Profiles of Children in the Study: Gender, Activities, and Digital Consumption Habits

Child	Gender	Age	Preferred Physical Activities	Preferred Digital Content	Device Used
Thiziri	Female	4	Playing with fabric dolls, soap, and play-dough	Puzzle games; occasional ghost games and online competitions	Smartphone (YouTube and games)
Anya	Female	5	Playing with doll accessories; role-playing as a teacher	Doll games; occasional ghost games and online competitions	Smartphone (YouTube and games)
Sami	Male	6	Biking; playing football with friends	Car racing games; online competitions; wrestling games	Smartphone (YouTube and games)

4.2 Research Techniques

Two primary qualitative tools were employed:

- Clinical Interviews. According to Adeb Mohammed Al-Khaddadi (2006, p. 103), clinical interviews are structured, goal-oriented dialogues

used in psychological assessment and diagnosis. They involve active questioning, behavioral observation, and the identification of personal and environmental factors affecting the subject's development. In this study, interviews were conducted with the children's parents, focusing on observable changes in behavior before and after smartphone use.

• Systematic Observation. As described by Hussein Abdul Hamid Rashwan (2006, p. 136), observation is a fundamental method in psychological research, engaging both sensory perception and cognitive processing. It supports the interpretation of psychological phenomena through structured visual and auditory input, and is a key tool for understanding behaviors in situ. Observation sessions were carried out over a six-month period and guided by a pre-established observation grid targeting behavioral, communicative, and emotional variables.

4.3 Application of Techniques to the Research Group

To assess behavioral and emotional changes, a custom-designed observation grid was implemented across two timeframes: pre-exposure and post-exposure to smartphone usage. The grid captured daily behaviors during different periods of the day, allowing for the comparison of observable changes over time.

Observation sessions extended over a six-month period. During this time, children were given access to smartphones at scheduled, intermittent intervals, while one full day per week was designated as a "no-device" day. This structure aimed to assess patterns of digital dependency and behavioral reactivity to screen exposure.

Below is a reconstructed version of the observation grid:

Table 2. Observation Grid (Behavioral Indicators by Time Period)

Time Period	Behavioral Indicators	Positive Behavior	Negative Behavior
Morning	Sitting posture		
	Speech style and vocabulary		
	Completion of basic tasks		
Leisure	Individual and group play		
Meal Time	Eating habits		
	Sitting posture during meals		

Time Period	Behavioral Indicators	Positive Behavior	Negative Behavior
Evening	Speech style and vocabulary		
	Sitting posture		
	Task completion frequency		
	Pre-sleep activities		

This observation grid enabled a systematic and comparative analysis of each child's reactions to both the presence and absence of digital devices. Special attention was paid to verbal fluency, motor behavior, play interactions, and emotional responses.

5. Observation Results

5.1 Behavioral Comparison Before and After Smartphone Exposure

The table below summarizes the behavioral observations for each child before and after exposure to smartphones:

Table 3. Behavioral Evolution of Participants (Pre- and Post-Smartphone Exposure)

Child	Pre-Exposure Behavior	Post-Exposure Behavior
Thiziri (4 years)	Calm speech; normal sitting posture; effective task completion. No notable bedtime activities, attributed to her age and limited parental engagement.	Limited phone usage overall. Notable increase in fear and anxiety, likely caused by exposure to age-inappropriate content such as ghost games.
Anya (5 years)	Well-behaved; enjoyed bedtime storytelling (e.g., Kalila wa Dimna) with her mother.	No marked behavioral deterioration. However, began imitating visual content (e.g., hairstyles, dance moves, and speech patterns).
Sami (6 years)	Highly articulate; demonstrated emotional intelligence and maintained strong family relationships.	Became addicted to violent digital games. Displayed significant behavioral deterioration, increased irritability, and reduced communication quality with family members.

5.2 Discussion of Hypotheses

The following section presents a structured analysis of the hypotheses formulated at the outset of the research. Drawing upon six months of systematic observation and clinical engagement with the selected child participants, the discussion integrates both behavioral outcomes and gendered variations in digital engagement. Each hypothesis is assessed in light of the observed transformations in familial interaction, emotional regulation, and cognitive behavior, with particular attention to the differential impact of competitive smart screen content. This comparative approach highlights not only the validity of the stated assumptions but also the nuanced psychosocial dynamics at play in cases of early electronic addiction.

- Hypothesis 1. Addiction to smart screens, particularly competitive games, disrupts family dynamics, especially when the user is male.
- This hypothesis is supported. Sami's post-exposure behavior changed notably, revealing increased aggression and deteriorated communication. This suggests that male children may exhibit more disruptive reactions, negatively affecting family harmony.
- Hypothesis 2. The stimuli generated by electronic addiction are illusory, unregulated, and more damaging to family mental health than tangible inputs.
- Confirmed. The observation revealed a consistent shift from neutral or positive behaviors toward negative emotional states, especially with prolonged screen exposure. These digital inputs produced behavioral regression, restlessness, and weakened family routines.
- Hypothesis 3. Addiction to smart screens, especially competitive games, makes boys more aggressive than girls.
- Supported by comparative observation. Although all three children had access to similar content and screen time, Sami (male) demonstrated significantly more aggressive tendencies, reinforcing gender-differentiated effects in digital behavior patterns.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the psychological impact of smart screen addiction—particularly among young children—on family mental health. The results indicate that early and excessive exposure to digital content can lead to various behavioral disturbances, with notable differences observed based on age and gender (Lallem & Boubekiria, 2024). Pre-school-aged children appear to be especially vulnerable, exhibiting more intense behavioral and emotional reactions.

The findings highlight how smart screen addiction may compromise core parenting functions and introduce instability into family structures. These disruptions manifest as diminished emotional bonding, inconsistent parenting styles, and weakened communication patterns. The earlier such addiction begins, the more difficult it becomes to address or reverse its effects in later developmental stages.

Interestingly, some evidence suggests that digital dependency may, in certain contexts, be more resistant to intervention than substance-based addictions, given the omnipresence and accessibility of screens (Kaour, Touati, & Lallem, 2024). Although digital platforms may offer temporary cognitive stimulation, they can also foster long-term maladaptive behaviors if not appropriately monitored.

Rather than targeting developers or manufacturers, this study underscores the pivotal role of parents and caregivers in managing digital exposure. Many caregivers unintentionally contribute to excessive screen use by introducing children to potentially harmful content, often with educational intentions. However, children's minds, especially at an early age, lack the critical capacity to filter or process complex stimuli appropriately.

Therefore, it is essential to promote informed, balanced, and developmentally appropriate digital habits within families. Monitoring screen time should not be equated with control but with the promotion of psychological well-being and resilience. Ultimately, preserving family mental health is fundamental to sustaining broader emotional, intellectual, and social development.

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychological effects of smart screen addiction on children and its repercussions on family mental health. The research focuses on three children aged 4 to 6, all from the same family, over a one-year period. Using a mixed-method clinical approach, data were collected through structured observational grids and clinical interviews with parents. The findings highlight three main results: (1) addiction to smart screens, particularly competitive games, significantly disrupts family dynamics, especially when the child is male; (2) digital stimuli induced by screen addiction are illusory, non-verbalizable, and beyond parental control, thereby intensifying their impact on family psychological stability; and (3) boys exhibit greater levels of aggression than girls following exposure to competitive screen-based content. These results underscore the need for early parental intervention and structured digital exposure strategies.

Keywors

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الآثار النفسية الناتجة عن إدمان الشاشات الذكية لدى الأطفال، وانعكاساتها على الصحة النفسية للأسرة. شملت العينة ثلاثة أطفال تتراوح أعمارهم بين 4 و6 سنوات من نفس الأسرة، وتمت متابعتهم لمدة عام كامل. استُخدمت منهجية إكلينيكية نوعية، جمعت بين شبكات ملاحظة مُنظَّمة ومقابلات سريرية مع أولياء الأمور. كشفت النتائج عن ثلاث خلاصات رئيسية: (1) يُسبب الإدمان على الشاشات، خاصة الألعاب التنافسية، اختلالاً في التوازن الأسري، لا سيما إذا كان الطفل من الذكور؛ (2) تعتبر المحفزات الرقمية الناتجة عن الإدمان وهمية، يصعب التعبير عنها أو التحكم فيها، مما يزيد من تأثيرها على الاستقرار النفسي للأسرة؛ (3) يظهر الذكور سلوكًا عدوانيًا أعلى مقارنة بالإناث بعد التعرض لمحتوى تنافسي. تؤكد هذه النتائج على أهمية التدخل الأسري المبكر وتنظيم استخدام الشاشات عند الأطفال.

الكلمات الرئيسية

إدمان الشاشات، الأجهزة الذكية؛ سيكولوجية الأسرة، سلوك الطفل، الصحة العقلية، الفروقات بين الجنسين

Résumé

Cette étude examine les effets psychologiques de la dépendance aux écrans intelligents chez les enfants, ainsi que ses répercussions sur la santé mentale familiale. L'étude a porté sur trois enfants âgés de 4 à 6 ans issus d'un même foyer, suivis pendant un an. Une approche clinique mixte a été utilisée, combinant des grilles d'observation structurées et des entretiens cliniques menés avec les parents. Les résultats principaux sont les suivants : (1) la dépendance aux écrans intelligents, en particulier aux jeux compétitifs, perturbe significativement la dynamique familiale, surtout lorsque l'enfant est de sexe masculin; (2) les stimuli numériques liés à l'addiction sont illusoires, difficilement verbalisables et incontrôlables, ce qui accentue leur impact sur l'équilibre psychologique familial; (3) les garçons présentent des comportements plus agressifs que les filles après exposition à des contenus compétitifs. Ces résultats plaident en faveur d'une régulation précoce de l'exposition numérique au sein du foyer.

Mots-clés

Dépendance aux écrans, Appareils intelligents, Psychologie familiale, Comportement de l'enfant, Santé mentale, Différences de genre