

Using digital media to relax is related to lower-quality parenting

August 24 2022



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Caregivers who consume digital media for relaxation are more likely to engage in negative parenting practices, according to a new multinational study.

The new study led by the University of Waterloo aimed to investigate the relationship between [caregivers'](#) use of [digital media](#), mental health, and parenting practices at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, caregivers spend three to four hours a day consuming digital media.

"All members of the family matter when we try to understand families in a society saturated with technology," said Jasmine Zhang, lead author of the study and a master's candidate in [clinical psychology](#) at Waterloo. "It's not just children who are often on devices. Parents use digital media for many reasons, and these behaviors can impact their children."

To conduct the study, the researchers surveyed 549 participants who are parents of at least two children between the ages of five and 18. Caregivers provided information about their digital use, their own [mental health](#) and their children's, [family functioning](#), and parenting practices.

The researchers found that caregivers with higher levels of distress engage in more screen-based activities and were more likely to turn to devices for relaxation. This consumption was correlated with negative parenting practices such as nagging and yelling. They also found that negative parenting behaviors were more likely when technology interrupted family interactions. The experiment didn't focus on specific apps or websites that caregivers use but rather found that caregivers who spend time on screens were retreating from being present with their family, which is correlated with negative parenting practices.

However, not all media consumption was correlated with negative outcomes: maintaining [social connections](#) through digital channels was related to lower levels of anxiety and depression and higher levels of positive parenting practices such as listening to their children's ideas and speaking of the good their children do.

"When we study how [parents](#) use digital media, we need to consider caregivers' motivations for using devices in addition to how much time they spend on them," Zhang said.

Dillon Browne, Canada Research Chair in Child and Family Clinical Psychology and professor of psychology at Waterloo, expects these patterns to continue after the pandemic.

"The family media landscape continues to grow and become more prominent," said Browne, a co-author of the study. "Going forward, it's important to consider the nuances of digital media as some behaviors are related to well-being, and others are related to distress."

The researchers plan to build on these findings and hope that their work will aid in creating guidelines that will help caregivers manage their screen-based behaviors.

The paper, "Caregivers' [psychological distress](#), technology use, and parenting: The importance of a multidimensional perspective" appears in the journal *Computers and Human Behaviour*.

More information: Jasmine Zhang et al, Caregivers' psychological distress, technology use, and parenting: The importance of a multidimensional perspective, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2022.107324](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107324)

Provided by University of Waterloo

Citation: Using digital media to relax is related to lower-quality parenting (2022, August 24) retrieved 24 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-08-digital-media-lower-quality-parenting.html>

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