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PERMISSIVE PARENTING AND UNCONTROLLED SMARTPHONE USAGE HABITS IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The increasing use of smartphones among preschool children has raised concerns regarding habit formation and behavioral development. This study aimed to analyze the role of permissive parenting in shaping uncontrolled smartphone usage habits in preschool children. This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at Tunggur Kindergarten. The participants consisted of 5 parents and 5 children aged 5–6 years, supported by a teacher and a principal. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using an interactive analysis model. The findings revealed that parents tended to provide smartphone access without consistent supervision or clear time limits. As a result, children developed repetitive usage habits characterized by high frequency, prolonged duration, and signs of dependency. Children also showed emotional responses such as crying and resistance when smartphone use was restricted. This study concludes that permissive parenting contributes significantly to the formation of uncontrolled smartphone usage habits. Active parental involvement is therefore essential to establish boundaries and ensure appropriate smartphone use in early childhood.

Keywords: early childhood, permissive parenting, smartphone usage habits, uncontrolled smartphone use, parental supervision

Abstrak: Peningkatan penggunaan *smartphone* pada anak prasekolah menimbulkan kekhawatiran terkait pembentukan kebiasaan dan perkembangan perilaku. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran pola asuh permisif dalam membentuk kebiasaan penggunaan *smartphone* yang tidak terkontrol pada anak prasekolah. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di TK Tunggur. Partisipan terdiri dari 5 orang tua dan 5 anak usia 5–6 tahun, serta didukung oleh seorang guru dan kepala sekolah. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa orang tua cenderung memberikan akses *smartphone* tanpa pengawasan yang konsisten dan tanpa batasan waktu yang jelas. Akibatnya, anak mengembangkan kebiasaan penggunaan yang berulang dengan frekuensi tinggi, durasi yang lama, serta menunjukkan kecenderungan ketergantungan. Anak juga menunjukkan respons emosional seperti menangis dan menolak ketika penggunaan *smartphone* dibatasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pola asuh permisif berkontribusi signifikan terhadap terbentuknya kebiasaan penggunaan *smartphone* yang tidak terkontrol. Oleh karena itu, keterlibatan aktif orang tua diperlukan untuk menetapkan batasan dan memastikan penggunaan yang sesuai dengan tahap perkembangan anak.

Kata-kata Kunci : anak usia dini, pola asuh permisif, kebiasaan penggunaan *smartphone*, penggunaan *smartphone* tidak terkontrol, pengawasan orang tua

Background

The development of digital technology in the era of globalization has brought about significant changes in various aspects of human life, including patterns of social interaction and child-rearing practices. Smartphones, as one of the products of modern technology, are now used not only by adults but have also become part of the lives of young children. This phenomenon indicates a transformation in the environment in which children grow and develop, where digital technology plays a role as a source of developmental stimulation (Andriani, 2024; Yuniarni et al., 2024).

Young children are in a critical stage of development, often referred to as the “golden age,” during which various aspects of development such as cognitive, social, emotional, and language skills develop rapidly. At this stage, children are in great need of appropriate stimulation from their surroundings, especially from their families as their first and primary environment (Hurlock, 2007; Susanto, 2017). Therefore, the role of parents in guiding and monitoring various stimuli, including the use of digital technology, is of utmost importance.

As access to technology has increased, smartphone use among young children has also risen. Research shows that children use smartphones not only as a learning tool, but primarily for entertainment activities such as playing games and watching videos (Haq, 2021; Khan & Dwiyantri, 2022). Uncontrolled use can lead to various negative effects, including a decline in social interaction, difficulty concentrating, and a tendency toward gadget addiction (Srinahyanti et al., 2019; Rachmat, 2022). In fact, recent studies show that excessive smartphone use can affect the cognitive development of young children (Juniati et al., 2025).

Recent studies further highlight that excessive screen time in early childhood is associated with problems in self-regulation, attention, and behavioral control (Domoff et al.,

2017; McNeill et al., 2019). In addition, parental mediation and supervision are considered key factors in determining whether digital media use has positive or negative effects on children (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

In this context, parenting styles play a key role in determining how children interact with technology. Parenting styles refer to the interactions between parents and children that involve setting rules, providing guidance, and offering supervision in daily life (Handayani, 2021; Firdausi & Ulfa, 2022). Every parenting style has different characteristics and has a different impact on a child's development (Tridhonanto, 2014).

One parenting style that is relevant in the context of smartphone use is the permissive parenting style. This style is characterized by minimal parental control and few restrictions placed on children, giving them considerable freedom to determine their own behavior (Tobing & Nurjannah, 2024). In practice, a permissive parenting style often leads parents to allow their children to use smartphones without adequate supervision, and even to use them as a means of distracting their children.

Several studies have shown that parenting styles are significantly associated with children's smartphone usage. A study by Adha and Ramadhani (2025) and Putri et al. (2025) found that permissive parenting is associated with an increased tendency toward gadget addiction in children. This finding is supported by the research of Rizqiyah (2024) which indicates that excessive smartphone use among young children is closely linked to the parenting styles employed by their parents. Furthermore, parenting styles also influence children's emotional and social development, so mistakes in their application can have long-term effects on children's behavior (Karomah & Widiyono, 2021; Arsini et al., 2023).

On the other hand, parents' perceptions and understanding of smartphone use also influence how they regulate their children's use of these devices. Several studies indicate that parents hold diverse views on smartphone use, both as a learning tool and as a potential source of risk for children (Sholikhah, 2023; Yuniarni et al., 2024). These differences in perception ultimately influence the parenting practices applied in daily life.

Although various studies have examined smartphone use among young children as well as parenting styles, most of these studies still focus on quantitative approaches that emphasize relationships between variables. For example, a study by Fajriyanti et al. (2024) and Atikah et al. (2023) indicates a link between parenting styles and smartphone use, but does not provide an in-depth description of how these parenting practices play out in everyday life. Yet a deep understanding of parents' experiences and practices is essential to comprehensively understanding this phenomenon. However, these studies do not sufficiently explain how permissive parenting is implemented in real-life contexts and how it shapes children's daily smartphone usage habits from a behavioral perspective.

A qualitative approach is essential for exploring phenomena in greater depth and within their context, as it enables researchers to understand the meanings, experiences, and dynamics at play in the parenting process (Moleong, 2022; Sari et al., 2024). However, research that specifically examines the relationship between permissive parenting and smartphone use among young children using a qualitative approach remains limited. Therefore, there is a need for in-depth qualitative studies that explore parenting practices directly within family environments.

Based on the above discussion, a research gap can be identified: there is a lack of in-depth studies that examine permissive parenting practices regarding smartphone use among young children in the context of real-life family settings. Furthermore, a more comprehensive understanding is still needed regarding how permissive parenting influences children's smartphone usage habits.

The urgency of this study lies in the importance of understanding the long-term effects of uncontrolled smartphone use among young children. If not properly managed, smartphone use can hinder children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as foster a dependency on technology. Therefore, this study is crucial for providing a clearer picture of this phenomenon.

This study contributes by providing a contextual and in-depth understanding of how permissive parenting is practiced and how it directly influences children's smartphone usage behavior in everyday life. Thus, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of permissive parenting styles and their relationship to smartphone usage habits among young children. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the advancement of early childhood education and serve as a reference for parents in adopting more appropriate parenting approaches in the digital age.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design. This approach was chosen to conduct an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of permissive parenting regarding smartphone use among young children, based on the experiences of the research subjects (Moleong, 2022; Sari et al., 2024). Case studies were used because the research focused on specific phenomena within a family context. The qualitative case study design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore real-life parenting practices in depth and within their natural setting, enabling a comprehensive understanding of behaviors, interactions, and meanings constructed by participants.

The research subjects were parents of young children who use smartphones in their daily lives. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

(1) having a child aged 5–6 years, (2) the child actively using a smartphone, and (3) willingness to serve as informants. The total number of informants in this study consisted of 5 parents, 5 young children, a classroom teacher, and a school principal. Data sources consisted of primary data obtained through interviews and observations, as well as secondary data from documentation and literature. The population of this study includes parents of preschool children who are exposed to smartphone use. The sample was limited to selected participants who met the criteria and were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation, where no new significant information emerged from additional data collection.

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher as a human instrument. Supporting instruments included a semi-structured interview guide, an observation sheet, and documentation in the form of field notes and interview recordings. Data validity was tested using source and method triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation (Mekarisce, 2020). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore parenting practices, rules regarding smartphone use, and children's behavioral responses. The observation sheet was used to record children's duration, frequency, and patterns of smartphone usage.

Data collection was conducted in three stages: preparation, implementation, and data recording. The preparation stage involved developing research instruments and obtaining research permits. The implementation stage consisted of in-depth interviews with parents and observations of children's smartphone usage. Documentation was used as supporting data. All data were recorded in field notes and transcribed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a natural setting to ensure participants felt comfortable in sharing their experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Observations were conducted directly in the child's environment to capture actual behavior related to smartphone use.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive qualitative analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Saleh, 2016). Data were reduced by selecting relevant information, then presented in narrative form, and interpreted to identify patterns related to permissive parenting and smartphone use among young children. This analysis technique was chosen because it allows systematic organization and interpretation of qualitative data, enabling the identification of patterns, relationships, and meanings within the data. This study adhered to ethical considerations by obtaining informants' consent prior to data collection. Informants' identities were kept confidential, and the data were used solely for research purposes. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study involved five parents, five preschoolers, one classroom teacher, and one principal at Tunggur Preschool. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis yielded several main themes, namely: (1) patterns of smartphone access provided by parents, (2) children's smartphone usage habits, (3) children's responses to restrictions on smartphone use, and (4) school findings regarding children's behavior. These themes indicate that smartphone use among children is not a single behavior but a structured pattern influenced by parenting practices, situational needs, and environmental context. Interview results indicate that smartphones are first introduced to children between the ages of two and three. The provision of smartphones generally occurs in practical situations, such as when a child is fussy, bored, eating, or when parents cannot directly supervise the child due to domestic chores or work outside the home.

Parent 1 stated that a smartphone is given when the child starts acting fussy, saying, "I usually give it to him when he starts acting fussy." A similar statement was made by Parent 2, who explained that a smartphone is more often given when parents are busy doing household chores. Meanwhile, Parent 5 stated that a smartphone is given when parents go to the fields so the child stays calm at home. Other findings indicate that most parents have not consistently enforced rules regarding smartphone use. OT1 stated, "I haven't set any rules yet," while OT2 explained that restrictions are only imposed when the child is deemed to be using the smartphone for too long. For OT4, supervision is more focused on the types of content or games the child accesses rather than on limiting usage duration.

The observation results revealed a consistent pattern: smartphones were handed over immediately after a child asked for one or when parents were engaged in other activities. During the observation process, no consistent time limits were found to be enforced for any of the study participants. Based on the observation results, all children used smartphones for more than 30 minutes in a single session. The children appeared focused on the screen and continued their digital activities despite social stimuli from their surroundings, such as invitations to talk or play. The dominant activities performed by the children included watching YouTube and TikTok, as well as playing digital games.

A1 uses a smartphone for 30–60 minutes without a break and most often accesses YouTube and games. A2 uses a smartphone for more than 30 minutes while watching YouTube, TikTok, and playing simple games. A3 uses a smartphone while eating. A4 is seen switching between watching videos and playing Roblox, while A5 uses a smartphone while their mother works in the fields and remains focused on the screen even when called to eat.

The interview results reinforce these findings. A1 stated that after school, he usually uses his smartphone to watch YouTube and play Minecraft. A2 explained that he plays on his smartphone “until I get bored myself,” while A4 stated that the duration of smartphone use “is up to me.” These quotes indicate that children’s smartphone use occurs without clear time limits. These findings suggest that children’s smartphone use is largely self-regulated, which reflects the absence of structured parental control.

Interview data indicate that some children exhibit emotional reactions when smartphone use is stopped or restricted. A1 stated, “If I’m not done playing, I usually cry.” A3 reported that he “throws a tantrum” when the smartphone is taken away, while A5 said, “If I’m not allowed to use the smartphone, I cry.” Observational findings reveal similar patterns. A2 resisted when the smartphone was taken to be charged and demanded the device back after it was taken. A4 also demanded the smartphone be returned immediately when the device was temporarily borrowed by a parent. In general, children’s responses to the suspension of smartphone use took the form of crying, resistance, whining, or repeated requests to use the device again. These responses indicate early signs of emotional attachment and dependency on smartphones.

The classroom teacher noted that some children often talk about their digital activities at home, such as watching YouTube and TikTok, and playing Roblox and Minecraft. The teacher mentioned that the children have also occasionally imitated language, gestures, and games they encountered in digital media. Additionally, the teacher explained that some children showed easily distracted attention during learning activities because they were discussing content they had viewed on their smartphones with their friends. The principal also noted that children who frequently use smartphones appear to have a vivid imagination, yet still exhibit unstable emotional regulation. According to the principal, children’s smartphone use requires parental supervision and limits.

Table 1. Data Triangulation Display

Variable	Findings	Data Sources	Criteria
Smartphone usage time	Children use smartphones for more than 30 minutes at a time	Observation, Interview	Child High intensity
Smartphone usage guidelines	Parents have not consistently set time limits	Parent Interview	Low control
Smartphone use when parents are busy	The smartphone is given to the child when the parents are working or doing chores	Parent Interview, Observation	Frequent
Children’s reaction when restricted	Crying, anger, whining, repeated requests	Observation, Interview	Child Emotional dependency
Usage support	Children use smartphones independently	Observation, Interview	Low supervision

The table indicates a consistent pattern of high usage intensity combined with low parental control and supervision, which reflects uncontrolled smartphone usage behavior. This pattern suggests that children's smartphone use is largely unregulated and tends to develop into habitual behavior due to the absence of structured parental guidance. Furthermore, the lack of consistent rules allows children to determine their own duration and type of smartphone use, which may reinforce dependency over time. These conditions indicate that smartphones function not only as entertainment tools but also as substitutes for parental involvement in managing children's daily behavior. These findings are further reinforced by visual evidence captured during field observations, as shown in the following figures.

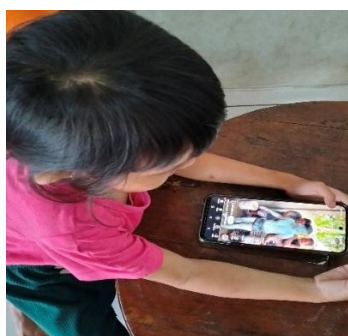


Figure1. Children using smartphones



Figure 2. Interview with parents



Figure 3. Interview with a child

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that permissive parenting plays a significant role in the development of smartphone-use habits among young children. Parents tend to grant access to smartphones without consistent usage rules, particularly when children are fussy, bored, or when parents are doing household chores or working outside the home. These findings suggest that smartphones in the family serve not only as a form of entertainment but are also used as a practical strategy for managing children's daily behavior. This pattern reflects a shift in parenting practices, where smartphones function as a behavioral management tool rather than a structured developmental medium.

These findings align with the characteristics of permissive parenting, which is marked by a high degree of freedom for children and low parental control (Handayani, 2021; Tobing & Nurjannah, 2024). In the context of this study, low parental control is evident in the absence of time limits on usage, minimal supervision of access duration, and a tendency for parents to grant children's requests to use smartphones. These conditions allow children to use digital devices more freely without clear structure. According to Baumrind's parenting theory, such conditions may hinder the development of children's self-regulation, as children are not accustomed to consistent rules and boundaries.

The relatively prolonged use of smartphones among all study participants indicates that digital devices have become part of children's daily routines. During early childhood, children are at a developmental stage where they are highly responsive to visual stimuli, sounds, colors, and movements that capture their attention. Smartphones provide various forms of instant stimulation through videos and interactive games, making it easy to repeatedly capture their interest. This explanation aligns with the view Hurlock (2007) that young children tend to be drawn to activities that provide immediate gratification and concrete experiences. From a behavioral perspective, repeated exposure to rewarding digital content reinforces usage habits through reinforcement mechanisms, making children more likely to repeatedly engage with smartphones.

The findings of this study also support previous research that identifies parental involvement as a key factor in children's smartphone use. Sholikhah (2023) explains that parents' attitudes toward smartphone use significantly influence the digital habits of young children. Khan and Dwiyantri (2022) found that some parents view smartphones as a means of calming their children or filling their free time. The findings of this study reinforce these results, particularly in the context of families who rely on smartphones when parents have limited time to spend with their children. However, unlike previous quantitative studies that emphasize statistical relationships, this study provides contextual evidence of how parenting practices are implemented in everyday life.

A child's emotional response when smartphone use is stopped—such as crying, getting angry, whining, or asking for the device back—indicates an attachment to digital activities that have become habitual. Behaviorally, this can be understood as a form of resistance when a pleasurable activity is suddenly stopped. The more frequently a child receives entertainment, attention, or a sense of calm through a smartphone, the more likely they are to resist when access is restricted. These findings align with research Putri et al. (2025) which demonstrates the relationship between parenting styles and the level of smartphone addiction among preschoolers. Adha and Ramadhani (2025) also emphasize that permissive parenting is linked to an increased tendency toward gadget addiction. These responses can be interpreted as early indicators of dependency behavior, where smartphones become a primary source of emotional regulation for children.

In the school setting, children's digital experiences appear to carry over into their social interactions and learning activities. Children talk about content they've watched at home, mimic language or movements from digital media, and show easily distracted attention during learning activities. These findings support Haq (2021) research, which states that smartphone use can influence the socialization patterns of young children. Intensive exposure to digital media has the potential to shift children's focus from direct interaction toward virtual

experiences. This indicates that the impact of smartphone use extends beyond the home environment and influences children's behavior in broader social contexts.

However, the study's findings also indicate that smartphone use does not always have a negative impact. The school principal noted that some children possess a vivid imagination. This suggests that digital devices can also stimulate creativity, particularly when the content accessed is educational, age-appropriate, and used under adult supervision. These findings are consistent with research Andriani (2024) and Yuniarni et al. (2024) which explains that smartphones have educational potential when used appropriately and purposefully. This dual finding highlights that the impact of smartphone use is not inherently negative, but depends on the context of use, parental guidance, and content quality.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the view that the family is the primary environment in shaping the digital behavior of young children. Children's smartphone use is not merely an individual decision but is influenced by parenting styles, family habits, and parental regulations at home. This study also offers a contextual contribution by demonstrating that in rural settings, smartphones can serve as practical parenting tools when parents must balance work and child care. This study contributes by providing in-depth qualitative evidence on how permissive parenting shapes children's digital behavior in real-life contexts.

In practical terms, the findings of this study have implications for parents, schools, and policymakers. Parents need to establish clear rules for smartphone use, including duration of use, access times, and the types of content permitted. Supervision while children use smartphones is essential to ensure that digital devices do not become their sole source of entertainment. Schools can play a role through digital parenting education programs, media literacy workshops, and close collaboration with families to foster healthy digital habits. Additionally, early childhood education institutions can provide more alternatives for active play and direct social interaction.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was relatively small and they were drawn from only one educational institution, so the findings cannot yet be widely generalized. Second, the study focused on permissive parenting styles and therefore did not compare the effects of other parenting styles, such as democratic, authoritarian, or neglectful. Third, the data were collected over a specific time period and thus do not reflect long-term changes in smartphone usage habits.

Given these limitations, future research is recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample of participants, from both rural and urban areas, in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Follow-up research could also compare various parenting styles regarding the intensity of smartphone use and its impact on children's social, emotional, and

cognitive development. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach could be employed to yield more in-depth and measurable findings.

Overall, this study confirms that smartphone usage habits in young children are closely associated with permissive parenting styles characterized by high freedom and low control. Therefore, strengthening parents' roles as guides, supervisors, and companions in digital media use is a critical factor in supporting children's optimal growth and development.

Conclusion

This study concludes that permissive parenting significantly contributes to the development of uncontrolled smartphone usage habits among young children due to the absence of consistent rules and supervision. Smartphones are predominantly used as a practical parenting strategy to manage children's behavior rather than as a structured developmental tool. This study contributes to the field of early childhood education by providing a contextual and in-depth understanding of how permissive parenting shapes children's digital behavior in real-life family settings, thereby extending prior research that has largely focused on quantitative relationships.

Practically, these findings underscore the importance of active parental involvement in regulating children's smartphone use through clear rules, time limits, and appropriate content selection. Schools also play a crucial role in supporting digital parenting through educational programs and collaboration with families to promote healthy digital habits. Despite these contributions, this study is limited by its small sample size and specific research context. Future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants and further examine the long-term impact of smartphone use on children's development.

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