

POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 5)

Preschool Children's Media Use, Parental Engagement and Prosocial Behaviour

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Background

Young children today are growing up in environments where televisions, tablets, and smartphones are integral to daily family life. This widespread exposure has become a growing concern for parents, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote healthy early development. A key developmental domain of policy relevance is **prosocial behaviour**—children's ability to share, cooperate, show empathy, and interact positively with peers—which underpins school readiness, social cohesion, and long-term mental and physical health^[1].

While policy discussions often emphasize limiting screen time, growing evidence suggests that *how* children use media—particularly the role of parental engagement—may be more consequential than duration alone.

A recent study by Chen and Yeung (2026), published in *BMC Public Health*^[2], examines the associations between preschool children's prosocial behaviour, screen time, parental co-engagement in media use, and parental rule-setting. The findings provide timely evidence to inform family guidance and early childhood policy in digitally connected societies.

Data and Methods

The study uses two waves of the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS), a nationally representative study of families with young ^[3]. The present analysis is based on 2,449 children aged 3–6 at baseline who were successfully followed up at ages 4–9. The study used children's time diaries to estimate children's screen time and percentage of screen time with parental engagement.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to answer the research questions. Propensity score weighting was used to account for differences between children in their screen exposure and parental engagement.

Key Findings

- About 10–25% of children under age 6 spent more than 3 hours a day on screens. Among children aged 7-9, this rose to around 40%.
- More than one-third of preschool children used screens without any parental engagement. Among 7-9-year-olds, 42% had no parent involved during screen time.
- Screen time on its own was not linked to children’s prosocial behaviour after accounting for baseline difference.
- Setting rules alone —such as limits on screen time or content—was not linked to better sharing, helping, or empathy.
- Children whose parents used digital media together with them—by watching, playing, talking, or guiding—showed more positive prosocial behaviours.
- These early prosocial behaviours were positively linked to later prosocial behaviour.

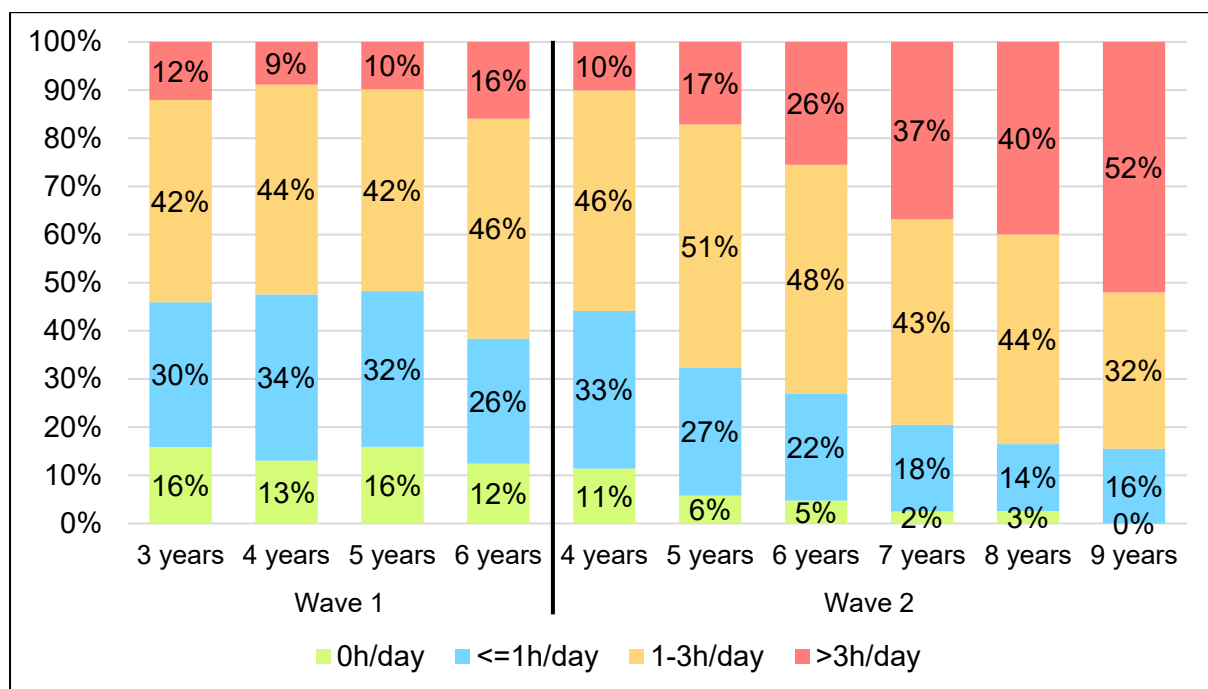


Figure 1. Distribution of Screen Time by Age (weighted)

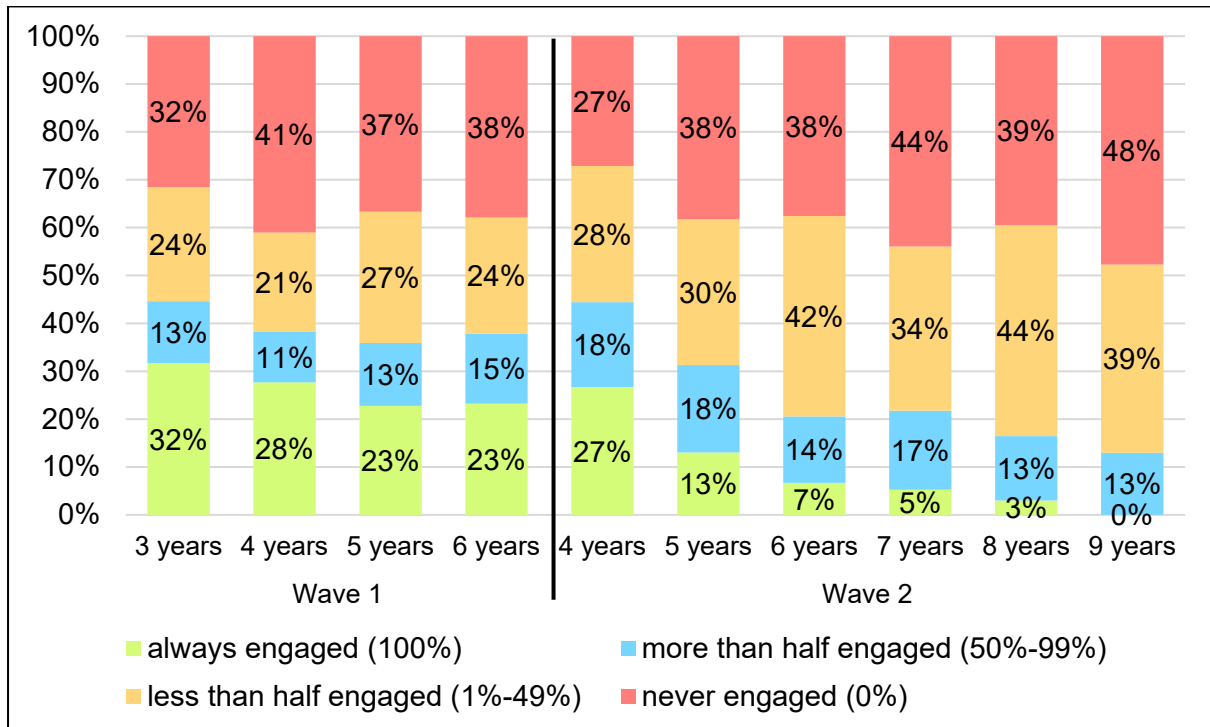


Figure 2. Distribution of Parental Engagement by Age (weighted)

Policy Recommendations

1. **Move beyond screen time limits alone**
 - Policies and guidelines should not focus exclusively on the number of hours children spend on screens.
 - Screen time guidelines should also address **how screens are used**.
2. **Promote early parental media engagement**
 - Encourage parents to co-use media, discuss content, and engage actively with children during screen time in early childhood.
3. **Integrate guidance into parenting and early childhood programs**
 - Parenting workshops, preschool curricula, and public health campaigns can provide practical tips on co-viewing and discussion, and emphasize quality interaction over strict rule enforcement
4. **Reframe digital media as a shared activity**
 - When used with active parental involvement, digital media can serve as a context for interaction and social learning

Read more details in [the paper](#), and about [SG-LEADS](#) too.

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References

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