

A Survey of Mothers About the Challenges They Face and the Actions They Take to Reduce Their Children's Mobile Phone Usage: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background

Mobile addiction among children has emerged as a significant public health and social concern worldwide. Parents, particularly mothers, are often blamed for allowing excessive screen exposure among children. However, many parents are deeply concerned about the adverse effects of mobile phone use and actively attempt to regulate their children's screen time. Despite their efforts, they encounter numerous challenges that are frequently overlooked. This qualitative study explored mothers' concerns regarding children's mobile phone use, the factors contributing to excessive usage, challenges faced while restricting screen time, and strategies adopted to reduce mobile dependence among children.

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted among 120 mothers residing in Khed Taluka, Ratnagiri District, Konkan Region, Maharashtra, India. Participants had children aged between 6 and 10 years. Individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. Emerging themes were identified and interpreted by the research team.

Results

Most participating mothers belonged to the 36–45 years age group (43%). Children aged 10 years constituted the largest subgroup (38%). Ninety percent of households owned multiple smartphones, while all households had televisions. Additionally, 19% possessed laptops/desktops

and 12% had tablets. Half of the children used mobile phones for 1–2 hours daily, and gaming was reported as the primary activity by 50% of participants. Mothers expressed considerable concern regarding the impact of mobile usage on children's physical, mental, social, and academic development. Family-related barriers, particularly inconsistent support from fathers and grandparents, emerged as major obstacles to reducing screen time. Mothers reported implementing various strategies including activity substitution, strict schedules, outdoor play promotion, and family discussions.

Conclusion

Mothers are making persistent efforts to reduce mobile phone addiction among children; however, their success is often limited by broader family dynamics and environmental influences. Effective prevention and management of excessive mobile use among children require collective family involvement, community awareness, and supportive parenting practices.

Keywords: Mobile Addiction, Parenting Challenges, Children's Screen Time, Qualitative Study, Family Support

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way children learn, communicate, and entertain themselves. Mobile phones, particularly smartphones, have become an integral part of modern family life. While these devices offer educational opportunities and facilitate communication, excessive and uncontrolled usage has raised serious concerns among healthcare professionals, educators, and parents.

Children today are introduced to digital devices at increasingly younger ages. Mobile applications, online videos, games, and social media platforms are designed to attract and retain users' attention, making children particularly vulnerable to excessive engagement. Research has shown that prolonged screen exposure can negatively affect sleep quality, physical activity, academic performance, social interactions, and emotional well-being.

Parents, especially mothers who often serve as primary caregivers, are frequently criticized for failing to regulate children's screen time. However, such criticism often overlooks the practical

difficulties they face in balancing household responsibilities, childcare demands, educational needs, and technological realities. Many mothers actively attempt to reduce their children's mobile usage but encounter resistance from children, inconsistent family support, and societal influences.

The present study aimed to explore mothers' experiences, concerns, challenges, and strategies related to managing mobile phone usage among children aged 6–10 years in Khed Taluka of Ratnagiri District, Maharashtra. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing family-centered interventions that promote healthy digital habits among children.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of mothers' perspectives regarding children's mobile phone use and addiction-related behaviors.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Khed Taluka, located in Ratnagiri District of the Konkan region of Maharashtra, India. The region comprises both rural and semi-urban communities where smartphone penetration has increased substantially in recent years.

Participants

A total of 120 mothers participated in the study. Eligibility criteria included:

- Being the mother or primary caregiver of a child aged 6–10 years.
- Residing in Khed Taluka.
- Willingness to participate in the interview process.

Data Collection

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews focused on:

- Children's mobile usage patterns.

- Types of content accessed.
- Situations in which children demanded mobile phones.
- Mothers' concerns regarding screen time.
- Perceived causes of mobile addiction.
- Challenges encountered while restricting usage.
- Strategies adopted to reduce screen dependence.
- Behavioral and developmental changes observed in children.

Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach. Researchers repeatedly reviewed transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes. Similar responses were grouped into categories, and overarching themes were developed through collaborative discussion among the research team.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of participating mothers belonged to the age group of 36–45 years (43%). Children aged 10 years represented the largest proportion of participants (38%).

Regarding digital device availability:

- 90% of households possessed multiple smartphones.
- 100% had television access.
- 19% owned laptops or desktop computers.
- 12% possessed tablets.

The widespread availability of digital devices highlights the highly connected environment in which children are growing up.

Mobile Usage Patterns

Half of the participating mothers reported that their children used mobile phones for approximately 1–2 hours daily. However, several mothers indicated significantly longer durations during weekends, vacations, or when schools were closed.

Gaming emerged as the most common activity, reported by 50% of respondents. Other frequently accessed content included:

- Cartoon videos
- Educational videos
- YouTube content
- Music and entertainment applications
- Online learning resources

Many mothers observed that educational use often gradually shifted toward entertainment-oriented usage.

Situations Triggering Mobile Phone Demand

Several common situations prompted children to request mobile phones:

- During meals
- When parents were occupied with household work
- After school hours
- During travel
- Before bedtime
- During holidays and weekends

Many mothers admitted that mobile phones were occasionally used as a convenient tool to keep children occupied while completing domestic responsibilities.

Major Themes Emerging from Interviews

Theme 1: Mothers' Concerns About Children's Future

A dominant theme across interviews was concern regarding children's overall development.

Mothers expressed worries about:

- Declining academic performance
- Reduced concentration and attention span
- Lack of interest in studies
- Poor communication skills
- Social isolation
- Physical inactivity
- Sleep disturbances

Several mothers reported that their children became irritable, restless, or aggressive when denied access to mobile devices.

One mother stated:

"My son becomes angry and cries continuously if I take away the phone. Earlier he used to play outside, but now he prefers mobile games."

Another participant shared:

"I am worried about his future studies because he thinks only about games."

Theme 2: Perceived Causes of Mobile Addiction

Mothers identified multiple factors contributing to excessive mobile usage.

Family Environment

Many respondents believed that children imitate adults who frequently use smartphones.

Several mothers reported that fathers spent considerable time on mobile phones, unintentionally encouraging similar behavior among children.

Easy Availability

The presence of multiple smartphones within households significantly increased accessibility.

Lack of Outdoor Activities

Limited play spaces, academic pressure, and safety concerns reduced opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Online Education

Some mothers indicated that mobile dependence increased substantially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic due to online learning requirements.

Entertainment Appeal

Games, cartoons, and videos were described as highly attractive and difficult for children to resist.

Theme 3: Challenges Faced by Mothers

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study was the wide range of obstacles encountered by mothers while attempting to reduce mobile usage.

Lack of Family Support

Many mothers reported that family members undermined their efforts.

Common examples included:

- Fathers giving phones to children despite restrictions.
- Grandparents allowing screen time out of affection.
- Family disagreements regarding screen time rules.

One participant stated:

“When I say no, his grandfather secretly gives him the mobile. Then all my efforts become useless.”

Children’s Resistance

Mothers frequently described emotional outbursts when devices were removed.

Reported behaviors included:

- Crying
- Anger
- Tantrums
- Refusal to eat
- Persistent demands

Household Responsibilities

Several mothers explained that managing domestic work limited their ability to continuously supervise children.

Social Influence

Children often compared themselves with peers who had unrestricted access to mobile devices, creating additional pressure on parents.

Theme 4: Strategies Used by Mothers to Reduce Mobile Usage

Despite these challenges, mothers demonstrated considerable determination and creativity in managing children’s screen exposure.

Establishing Rules and Time Limits

Many mothers introduced fixed schedules for mobile use and attempted to enforce daily time restrictions.

Encouraging Outdoor Activities

Outdoor play was viewed as one of the most effective alternatives to screen time.

Activities included:

- Cricket
- Cycling
- Walking
- Traditional games
- Sports participation

Engaging Children in Productive Activities

Mothers encouraged:

- Drawing
- Reading
- Storytelling
- Homework
- Household assistance
- Hobby development

Family Interaction

Some respondents emphasized spending more quality time with children through conversations, games, and shared activities.

Reducing Personal Mobile Use

A small number of mothers consciously reduced their own smartphone usage to serve as positive role models.

One mother explained:

“I realized that my child copies me. So I also started using my phone less when he is around.”

Theme 5: Observed Effects of Excessive Mobile Usage

Mothers reported several behavioral and physical changes they believed were associated with prolonged screen exposure.

Behavioral Changes

- Irritability
- Impatience
- Reduced social interaction
- Increased stubbornness
- Difficulty following instructions

Educational Impact

- Reduced attention during studies
- Poor concentration
- Less interest in reading

Physical Health Concerns

- Eye strain
- Headaches
- Reduced physical activity
- Disturbed sleep patterns

These observations align with findings from previous studies examining the consequences of excessive screen time among children.

Discussion

The present study provides valuable insights into the experiences of mothers attempting to manage children's mobile phone use in a rapidly digitizing society. The findings demonstrate that mothers are not passive observers of the problem but active participants in efforts to control excessive screen exposure.

The widespread availability of smartphones within households creates an environment where complete restriction is impractical. Similar to previous studies, gaming emerged as the primary reason for mobile use among children. Mothers consistently reported concerns regarding academic performance, behavioral changes, and social development.

A particularly important finding was the role of family dynamics. Many mothers identified fathers and grandparents as significant barriers to implementing consistent screen-time rules. This suggests that interventions targeting mobile addiction should move beyond individual parenting strategies and involve the entire family system.

The study also highlights the resilience and adaptability of mothers. Despite numerous challenges, participants employed a variety of approaches including time restrictions, activity substitution, and increased family engagement. These findings indicate that parents require support, guidance, and community-level awareness programs rather than blame.

Healthcare professionals, educators, and policymakers should recognize the complexity of managing children's digital behaviors. Evidence-based parenting programs and family-centered interventions may improve outcomes by promoting consistent household rules and healthy technology use.

Conclusion

This qualitative study demonstrates that mothers are deeply concerned about the growing problem of mobile phone addiction among children aged 6–10 years. Although they actively implement various strategies to limit screen time, they face numerous challenges including children's resistance, easy access to digital devices, and insufficient support from other family members.

The findings emphasize that reducing mobile addiction cannot be the responsibility of mothers alone. Successful management requires cooperation from fathers, grandparents, schools, healthcare professionals, and the wider community. Family-centered approaches that encourage consistent rules, positive role modeling, and alternative recreational activities may help children develop healthier digital habits and support their overall well-being.

Recommendations

1. Conduct parental education programs on healthy screen-time practices.
2. Encourage family-wide digital usage guidelines.
3. Promote outdoor play and recreational opportunities for children.
4. Strengthen school-based awareness initiatives regarding digital wellness.
5. Develop community support programs for parents facing screen-time management challenges.
6. Conduct longitudinal research to examine long-term impacts of mobile usage among children.

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Conflict of Interest

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