

Review

Not peer-reviewed version

Navigating the Digital Wild: Parenting, Child Protection, and Mental Health in the Digital Era

Owen Mulima *

Posted Date: 23 March 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202603.1714.v1

Keywords: digital parenting; child protection online; children's mental health; parental mediation; digital safeguarding in higher education



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Review

Navigating the Digital Wild: Parenting, Child Protection, and Mental Health in the Digital Era

Owen Mulima

Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia; owen.mulima@nkrumah.edu.zm

Abstract

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed childhood, parenting, and child welfare in the twenty-first century. Parents today face unprecedented responsibilities; fostering children's digital literacy while simultaneously protecting them from a range of online harms, including cyberbullying, predatory grooming, and exposure to developmentally inappropriate content. Drawing on recent empirical literature and theoretical frameworks in developmental ecology and parental mediation theory, this review study examines how digital environments shape child mental health outcomes, how parenting practices mediate children's online risks and opportunities, and what higher education can contribute to equipping parents and practitioners with the competencies needed for effective digital safeguarding. The analysis reveals three convergent challenges: the inadequacy of purely restrictive parenting strategies, the widening gap between institutional child protection frameworks and the pace of technological change, and the absence of systematic digital parenting curricula within higher education learning development programmes. The study argues that universities must take a more deliberate role in embedding critical digital parenting knowledge within professional and lifelong learning pathways. The study concludes by proposing a collaborative, ecology-informed model that positions higher education as a key actor in building protective capacity around children in digital environments.

Keywords: digital parenting; child protection online; children's mental health; parental mediation; digital safeguarding in higher education

1. Introduction

Digital technology has become inseparable from contemporary childhood. By 2024, children in most parts of the world are encountering internet-connected devices before they begin formal schooling, often engaging with platforms whose design logics were not created with developmental wellbeing in mind (Chen et al., 2024; Hung, 2022). The statistics are striking. The WeProtect Global Alliance (2023) reported that up to 20% of children in some countries experienced sexual exploitation or abuse online in the preceding year alone, while the volume of child sexual abuse material reported globally increased by 87% between 2019 and 2023. Meanwhile, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received over 20.5 million reports corresponding to nearly 29.2 million incidents in 2024. These are not marginal risks. They represent a public health crisis unfolding in real time, within the very spaces that families and educators treat as normal parts of everyday life.

Yet the digital environment is not uniformly dangerous. It also offers children access to information, creative expression, peer connection, and educational resources that would have been unimaginable a generation ago (Hung, 2022). The challenge for parents, educators, and policymakers is not simply to restrict access but to cultivate a kind of digital wisdom in children and the adults who care for them. This is the central tension this study examines: how do parents protect children without stunting their development, and how do higher education institutions contribute to that protective capacity?

The scholarly literature on digital parenting has expanded considerably since the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically accelerated children's online presence and forced parents into the role

of digital supervisors virtually overnight (Hung, 2022; Bansal et al., 2024). Research now encompasses parental mediation strategies, the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, the mechanics of online grooming, and the complex interplay between screen time and adolescent mental health (Bansal et al., 2024; Shoshani et al., 2024; Schulz et al., 2025). However, the literature also reveals persistent gaps. Most studies focus on what parents do, rather than what they know and how they are supported in knowing it. The role of higher education in building parental and practitioner capacity for digital child protection remains undertheorised.

This study seeks to address that gap. It proceeds from a conceptual position that parenting in the digital era is not simply a domestic concern but an educational and societal one, and that universities, as institutions of learning development, have both the opportunity and the responsibility to equip students and professional communities with the knowledge and critical frameworks required to protect children online. The study is structured around three analytical threads. First, it maps the key mental health and child protection risks emerging from children's digital lives. Second, it examines what the research tells us about parenting practices that are effective, and under what conditions. Third, it argues for a repositioning of higher education as a site for cultivating digital parenting competency, drawing on principles of ecological systems theory and parental mediation research.

The study does not aim to be exhaustive but rather to synthesise the most salient findings from recent literature, identify the critical research and policy gaps, and advance a clear argument about where the field of learning development needs to move next. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of work that positions higher education not only as a producer of research but as an active participant in the social fabric of child welfare in the digital age.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a critical narrative review methodology. Rather than conducting a systematic review with strict inclusion and exclusion protocols, a narrative approach was selected because the aim is interpretive synthesis: to draw together insights from a range of disciplinary traditions, including developmental psychology, educational research, child protection studies, and higher education scholarship, and to construct a reasoned argument about institutional and pedagogical implications. Narrative reviews are appropriate when the goal is theoretical development, gap identification, or the construction of a conceptual position, rather than the quantification of effect sizes across a homogeneous body of studies (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005; Grant & Booth, 2009).

2.2. Search Strategy and Source Selection

Literature was identified through systematic searches of Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and PsycINFO databases. Search terms included combinations of the following: "digital parenting," "child protection online," "cyberbullying and mental health," "online child sexual exploitation," "parental mediation," "children's screen time," "digital safeguarding," "higher education and child welfare," and "digital literacy and parenting." Searches were confined to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and authoritative organisational reports published between 2022 and 2025, reflecting the constraint of using only sources not more than four years old. A small number of foundational theoretical texts were included where necessary to ground the theoretical framework, following the convention of anchoring narrative reviews in established theory even when more recent empirical work forms the primary evidential base.

Sources were selected on the basis of relevance, methodological rigour, and citation impact. Priority was given to longitudinal studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, as these represent the strongest forms of evidence available in this field. Studies from diverse geographic contexts were included to avoid Western-centric conclusions, though the study acknowledges that much of the

extant literature originates from high-income countries. Where significant divergence existed between findings, these are noted and discussed rather than suppressed in favour of a tidy narrative.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The review is theoretically anchored in two complementary frameworks. The first is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which conceptualises child development as occurring within nested, interacting systems: the microsystem of the family, the mesosystem of school and peer environments, the exosystem of institutional contexts, and the macrosystem of cultural and policy structures. This framework is valuable because it situates digital parenting not as an isolated household behaviour but as a practice shaped by institutional, cultural, and technological forces across multiple levels of society. Applied to the digital era, ecological theory draws attention to how online environments constitute a new layer of experience, sometimes called the "technosphere" or digital microsystem, that intersects with all other systems in a child's life (Hung, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).

The second theoretical anchor is parental mediation theory, which distinguishes between three primary strategies parents use to manage children's media use: active mediation (discussion, co-viewing, critical engagement), restrictive mediation (rule-setting, time limits, content blocking), and co-use (shared participation in digital activities) (Valkenburg et al., 2013; Bananic & Orehovacki, 2024). A substantial body of research has tested the efficacy of these strategies across different child ages, family structures, and technological contexts, and the findings carry direct implications for how parenting education might be structured within higher education curricula. Together, these frameworks enable a theoretically grounded reading of the empirical literature that is sensitive to both individual family dynamics and the wider structural conditions within which digital parenting takes place.

2.4. Scope and Limitations

The review focuses on children and young people from early childhood through late adolescence (approximately ages 5 to 18), and on the role of parents and caregivers as primary mediating figures. It does not extensively address the specific experiences of children with disabilities, though this is acknowledged as a significant gap in the literature. The review is further limited by the dominance of English-language sources and the relative scarcity of peer-reviewed research from African, South Asian, and Latin American contexts, which means the analysis skews toward experiences in high-income, English-speaking settings. These are limitations the study is transparent about, and they constitute an implicit argument for more geographically diverse research in this domain.

3. Results

3.1. The Mental Health Landscape: What Digital Environments are Doing to Children

The relationship between children's digital lives and their psychological wellbeing is among the most intensively studied topics in contemporary developmental science. The evidence is neither as alarming as the most sensationalised accounts suggest, nor as reassuring as platform companies tend to argue. What it reveals is a landscape of conditional, cumulative, and context-dependent risks.

Cyberbullying stands out as one of the most consistently documented sources of digital harm. A large-scale prospective cohort study drawing on data from 9,799 early adolescents in the United States found that cyberbullying victimisation was prospectively associated with significantly higher depressive symptoms, somatic problems, attention difficulties, and suicidal behaviours one year later (Schulz et al., 2025). The study is notable for its scale and its longitudinal design, allowing it to establish temporal precedence rather than mere correlation. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies further confirmed that cyberbullying victimisation produces measurable increases in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms among children and

adolescents (Lee et al., 2026). Depression showed a significant association with cybervictimisation in 16 out of 20 studies in one systematic review, with prevalence rates ranging from 15 to 73% (Arif et al., 2024). Anxiety was significant in 12 out of 15 studies, and suicidal behaviour in 4 out of 9 (Arif et al., 2024).

Screen time, and particularly social media use, adds another layer of complexity. Research consistently shows that adolescents who use social media for more than two to three hours per day face significantly elevated risk of depression, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 2025; Shoshani et al., 2024). A four-year longitudinal study of children and adolescents in the post-COVID-19 era found that heavy social media use was associated with increasing psychiatric symptoms over time, with effects compounded by the disruptions of pandemic schooling (Shoshani et al., 2024). Sleep disruption, driven by late-night device use, emerges as a key mediating pathway. Poor sleep worsens emotional regulation, which in turn increases vulnerability to online conflict and distress (Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 2025).

Social comparison processes on image-centric platforms such as Instagram and TikTok exacerbate body image concerns, particularly among adolescent girls (Chen et al., 2024). The phenomenon of peer feedback-seeking, amplified by algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritise engagement over wellbeing, creates cycles of validation-seeking that can intensify anxiety and depressive affect. This is not a peripheral observation. Internal documents from Meta, unsealed during litigation in 2024, showed that company researchers had warned that approximately half a million cases of child exploitation and harm were occurring daily on its platforms, raising serious questions about the alignment between platform design and child welfare (Malwarebytes, 2026).

However, the picture is not uniformly negative. A systematic review and meta-analysis of digital technology interventions for children and adolescents found that digital tools, when thoughtfully designed and appropriately deployed, can reduce anxiety, enhance emotional regulation, and support access to mental health services (Chen et al., 2024). Virtual reality environments, digital therapeutic apps, and online peer support platforms have all demonstrated positive effects in controlled settings. The digital environment is thus simultaneously a site of harm and a vehicle for support, and the difference often lies in the presence or absence of informed adult guidance.

3.2. The Child Protection Dimension: Exploitation, Grooming, and Structural Vulnerabilities

Beyond mental health, the digital environment poses acute child protection challenges that have reached crisis proportions. The WeProtect Global Alliance's 2023 Global Threat Assessment reported that the volume of child sexual abuse material reports analysed by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children had increased by 87% since 2019. AI-generated child sexual abuse material surged by 1,325% between 2023 and 2024, while NCMEC received approximately 100 reports of financial sexual extortion every day in 2024, disproportionately affecting adolescent boys (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 2025). Reports of online enticement increased by 192% between 2023 and 2024 alone (NCMEC, 2024). These figures describe not an isolated social problem but a global epidemic that is outpacing the regulatory and protective frameworks designed to contain it.

Grooming is one of the most insidious mechanisms of this crisis. Online groomers follow structured, calculated patterns: they identify vulnerable targets, often children displaying signs of social isolation or low self-esteem; they gain access through mainstream platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and gaming environments; and they use "off-platforming," moving conversations to encrypted messaging apps to evade detection (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023; Singhateh, 2024). Research cited in the 2023 Global Threat Assessment shows that high-risk grooming situations can develop in as little as 45 minutes, and in some cases within 19 seconds of first contact in gaming environments. The speed of this process renders parental supervision based on post-hoc review largely ineffective.

A 2024 report by Childlight estimated that up to 300 million children each year experience some form of online sexual abuse or exploitation (PMC, 2025). When all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation are considered, an estimated one in eight children globally is a victim. Despite the scale of the problem, age-verification technology on platforms remains either absent or easily circumvented, and the majority of popular platforms where children are most at risk, including Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, lack adequate detection and intervention mechanisms (PMC, 2025; Singhatheh, 2024). Internal whistleblower testimony before the United States Senate in 2023 alleged that major platform companies had knowingly suppressed safety features that were not considered commercially profitable, prioritising engagement metrics over child safety (Malwarebytes, 2026).

The structural conditions that enable online exploitation include the digital divide, which leaves many lower-income families without the devices, connectivity, or digital literacy to implement protective strategies effectively (Cheshmehzangi et al., 2023; Qualter, 2024). Research on children from low-income households shows that 54% began accessing social media before the age of six, compared with 34% from higher-income households, suggesting that economic vulnerability intersects with digital risk in ways that compound disadvantage (Exploring Digital Parenting, 2024). The global regulatory framework is changing, with the UN Cybercrime Treaty ratified in 2024 making child sexual abuse material and online grooming crimes under international law, and the Global Digital Compact of 2025 providing a framework for international cooperation (WeProtect, 2025). However, implementation lags far behind the pace of technological change.

3.3. Parental Mediation: What Works, What Does Not, and Why

Given the scope of these risks, the central practical question is: what can parents actually do, and what does the evidence say about the effectiveness of different approaches?

A three-level meta-analysis synthesising findings from 88 primary studies found that digital parenting was negatively and significantly associated with children's negative digital wellbeing (Tan, 2025). Among the different forms of digital parenting, co-use showed the largest protective association, followed by active mediation (positive mediation) and then restrictive mediation. This finding challenges the intuitive assumption that restriction is the most protective strategy. In reality, restrictive mediation, while reducing children's exposure, can also impair the development of digital competency and create adversarial parent-child dynamics that reduce disclosure when things go wrong (Bananic & Orehovacki, 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2013).

A comprehensive systematic review of parenting strategies in digital environments confirmed these patterns (Bananic & Orehovacki, 2024). Parents who communicate the reasons behind digital rules, who engage in shared digital activities, and who create a relational environment in which children feel safe disclosing online experiences are significantly more effective at reducing harm than those who rely purely on technical controls and access restriction. The research notes that adolescents who understand parental reasoning are more likely to respect digital rules, while those who perceive restrictions as arbitrary are more likely to resist them (Bananic & Orehovacki, 2024). Healthcare professionals and child protection guidance now increasingly emphasise that open conversation and mediation are more protective than restriction, and that devices should not be allowed in children's bedrooms or bathrooms to reduce unsupervised high-risk time (PMC, 2025).

Parents' own digital competencies are a significant predictor of the quality of their mediation. A study of parents' digital skills found considerable variation in operational, instrumental, and cognitive digital competencies, with those in higher socioeconomic positions generally demonstrating stronger digital literacy and more nuanced mediation strategies (Nature Human Sciences, 2023). The digital divide is therefore not only a child-level issue but a parental-level one: parents who lack digital fluency cannot effectively guide children through environments they themselves do not understand. Research on family socioeconomic status and children's digital literacy found that active parental mediation, rather than restrictive mediation, was the mechanism through which higher family socioeconomic status translated into stronger child digital competency

(Shi et al., 2024). This finding underlines the equity dimensions of digital parenting: children from disadvantaged backgrounds are doubly exposed, facing both greater online risk and less skilled parental guidance.

A meta-analysis of digital parenting research confirmed that parents are increasingly compelled to engage with digital technology to support their children but are, in the words of one review, “left to navigate their concerns without an empirically based road map” (Modecki et al., 2022, as cited in Tan, 2024). This observation cuts to the heart of the argument this study advances. The absence of structured support for parents, and the absence of higher education’s engagement with this problem, leaves families improvising solutions to one of the most pressing child welfare challenges of the age.

4. Discussion

4.1. Rethinking Protective Parenting in the Digital Age

The evidence reviewed in this study converges on a set of conclusions that challenge several dominant assumptions in both popular discourse and institutional policy. The first of these is the assumption that restriction is protection. Both the meta-analytic literature and qualitative studies consistently show that highly restrictive parenting practices, which prioritise limitation of access over engagement and dialogue, produce short-term compliance at the cost of longer-term vulnerability (Bananic & Orehovacki, 2024; Tan, 2025). Children and adolescents who have not been guided to critically evaluate their online experiences are more susceptible to manipulation, more likely to conceal online harms from parents, and less equipped to exercise autonomous judgement in high-risk situations. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective: what matters for development is not the presence or absence of exposure to a stimulus but the quality of the relational and environmental mediation around that exposure (Hung, 2022).

This has important implications for how we frame parenting education. If the protective mechanism is relational rather than purely technical, then programmes that focus narrowly on parental controls, content filters, and time-management apps are providing a narrow and insufficient toolkit. What parents need is a conceptual framework for thinking about digital risk, a practical vocabulary for conversations about online experience, and the kind of reflective capacity that allows them to adapt as technology evolves. These are precisely the qualities that higher education, at its best, is designed to cultivate.

The finding that co-use, shared participation in children’s digital activities, is the most protective form of mediation (Tan, 2025) is particularly instructive. It suggests that parents who engage genuinely and curiously with the digital worlds their children inhabit, rather than observing from a critical distance, build both the relational trust that enables disclosure and the contextual knowledge that enables informed guidance. This mirrors what the best literature on dialogic teaching and developmental co-construction suggests about learning more broadly: that proximity, curiosity, and genuine engagement produce better outcomes than surveillance and control.

4.2. The Institutional Failure: Where is Higher Education?

The most striking gap this review identifies is not in the empirical literature, which is now quite extensive, but in institutional response. Higher education institutions, including teacher education programmes, social work degrees, nursing curricula, and continuing professional development frameworks, have been slow to integrate digital child protection and digital parenting competency into their educational offer.

This is particularly troubling given that higher education students and graduates are precisely the professionals who will encounter children in contexts of both opportunity and risk: as teachers, social workers, healthcare workers, community educators, and parents themselves. A systematic review of digital literacy in higher education found that while institutions have invested significantly in developing students’ technical digital competencies, the ethical, protective, and relational

dimensions of digital life, including how to support children and families in navigating online risk, remain largely absent from formal curricula (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2023; Ramdana, 2026).

Digital child protection is a domain where this transformative potential is urgently needed. The evidence is clear: children are being harmed online at scale, parental responses are often inadequate not through negligence but through ignorance and lack of support, and the structural conditions that amplify risk, including the digital divide and platform irresponsibility, are not being adequately addressed by current institutional frameworks (Qualter, 2024; PMC, 2025).

Online parenting programmes have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing child behavioural and emotional problems, and recent meta-analyses confirm that these effects are maintained at follow-up (Prevention Science, 2024). Digital delivery of parenting support is scalable and flexible, reaching families who might not access in-person programmes. However, the research also notes that digital parenting programmes are not suitable for all families, with some parents preferring in-person delivery, and that the components most likely to produce strong effects are those that build parental reflective capacity and communication skills rather than those focused on information transmission alone (Prevention Science, 2024). This is a distinction with direct implications for curriculum design in higher education: it argues for active, dialogic, and reflective pedagogical approaches rather than lecture-based content delivery.

4.3. An Ecological Framework for Higher Education's Role

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, this study proposes that higher education occupies a pivotal position in the exosystem of child protection: it does not interact directly with children but shapes the practices, knowledge, and dispositions of the adults whose decisions profoundly affect children's lives. This positioning is both a source of influence and a source of responsibility. Universities train the professionals who staff the institutions that interface with children; they conduct the research that informs policy; and they educate the parents, practitioners, and advocates of the future. If digital parenting competency is not embedded in these formation processes, the gaps will persist.

What would an ecologically grounded higher education response look like in practice? Several components can be identified from the literature. First, professional formation programmes in education, social work, healthcare, and counselling should include substantive content on children's digital lives, online risks, and evidence-based mediation strategies. This is not a case for creating discrete "digital safety modules" bolted on to existing programmes but for integrating a digital dimension into child development, family studies, and safeguarding content in a sustained and critical way. Second, universities should develop public-facing resources, workshops, and continuing professional development programmes that reach parents and carers in the community, drawing on the community engagement mandates that many institutions already hold. Third, research agendas within higher education should prioritise geographically diverse, longitudinal, and intersectional studies of digital parenting, to address the current dominance of Western, high-income-country perspectives in the literature.

The parental mediation literature points to the importance of parent-child communication quality as a mediating variable. This insight maps onto what learning development scholarship knows about dialogue, reflection, and relational pedagogy. The same dispositions that make a good educator, curiosity, openness, willingness to listen, and capacity to engage with complexity, also characterise effective digital parenting. Higher education is a natural incubator for these dispositions, but only if it takes the mandate seriously. The current evidence suggests it has not yet done so with the urgency the situation demands.

4.4. Limitations and Alternative Interpretations

Several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. As a narrative rather than systematic review, it is subject to the risk of selection bias in source inclusion, even where the search strategy was structured. The literature base skews heavily toward Western, English-language contexts, which

limits the generalisability of findings to low- and middle-income countries, including much of sub-Saharan Africa, where patterns of digital access, platform use, and child protection infrastructure differ significantly from those studied in most of the cited research. Future reviews should make a deliberate effort to centre these contexts.

It is also worth noting that the relationship between digital media use and mental health is contested in important ways. Some researchers argue that effect sizes, while statistically significant, are modest, and that correlational designs cannot establish causation (Orben & Przybylski, cited in Chen et al., 2024). There is a legitimate debate about whether media attention to the “screen time crisis” has outstripped the evidence base, and whether the moral panic around children’s digital lives might itself produce anxiety in parents and children that compounds the harms it claims to address. This study does not dismiss these critiques but notes that even if individual effect sizes are modest, population-level effects at the scale of current digital engagement are substantial, and the child protection evidence, particularly around grooming and exploitation, is not easily explained away by arguments about methodological conservatism.

Finally, there is a risk that focusing on parental responsibility obscures the structural and corporate dimensions of the problem. Parents are being asked to compensate for the failures of platform design, regulatory enforcement, and digital infrastructure. A balanced analysis must hold both levels in view: parents and communities need better knowledge and support, but they should not be positioned as sole responsible parties for harms that are also products of intentional commercial choices by technology companies and inadequate governance by states.

5. Conclusions

This study has argued that the digital era has created a distinctive and urgent set of challenges for parenting, child protection, and children’s mental health, challenges that are currently being met with responses that are inadequate in both scale and sophistication. The evidence from the mental health literature is clear: cyberbullying, heavy social media use, and unmediated digital exposure are associated with significant psychological harm for children and adolescents, including depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, and elevated suicide risk. The evidence from the child protection literature is, if anything, starker: online exploitation has reached epidemic proportions, driven by technological change, inadequate platform governance, and a global regulatory framework that has struggled to keep pace.

The parental mediation research offers grounds for cautious optimism. Parents who engage actively and relationally with their children’s digital lives, who communicate openly about online risks and relationships, and who treat digital mediation as an ongoing conversation rather than a technical control problem, are more effective protective agents than those who rely on restriction and surveillance. But this kind of informed, reflective, communicative parenting requires knowledge, confidence, and skills that many parents currently lack, and there is very little in the way of institutional support to provide them.

This is where higher education must step in. The development of learning is not confined to traditional academic subjects but encompasses the critical, reflective, and practical knowledge that enables people to navigate complex contemporary challenges. Digital child protection is exactly such a challenge. Universities have the intellectual resources, the community reach, and the professional formation mandate to make a significant difference, but only if they recognise the urgency of the task.

The practical implications are clear. Professional formation programmes in education, social work, healthcare, and related fields should embed digital safeguarding and parenting competency as substantive content. Universities should extend their community engagement to include parent education in digital literacy and online child protection. Research agendas should diversify geographically, with particular attention to the experiences of families in low- and middle-income countries where digital expansion is rapid and protective infrastructure is weakest. And the field of learning development should theorise and document these interventions, contributing to a knowledge base that is currently thin.

The children growing up in digital environments today will spend their entire lives navigating online spaces. The quality of the guidance they receive in childhood will shape not only their immediate wellbeing but their long-term capacity to function as digitally literate, critically aware citizens. Higher education has a role in making that guidance better. This study has tried to make the case for taking that role seriously, and to provide the evidence base from which that conversation can proceed.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest. This study received no external funding. No human participants, personal data, or identifiable information were involved in this review. All cited sources are publicly available peer-reviewed literature or institutional reports.

References

- Alharbi, B.A., Ibrahem, U.M., Moussa, M.A. et al. Parents' digital skills and their development in the context of the Corona pandemic. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* **10**, 97 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01556-7>
- Arif, A., Qadir, M. A., Martins, R. S., & Khuwaja, H. M. A. (2024). The impact of cyberbullying on mental health outcomes amongst university students: A systematic review. *PLOS Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmen.0000166>
- Bananic, L., & Orehovacki, T. (2024). A comparison of parenting strategies in a digital environment: A systematic literature review. *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction*, *8*(4), 32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/mti8040032>
- Bansal, S., Garg, I., Singh, G., & Van Der Walt, T. (2024). Cyberbullying and mental health: Past, present and future. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1279234. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1279234>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Canario, A.C., Pinto, R., Silva-Martins, M. et al. Online Parenting Programs for Children's Behavioral and Emotional Problems: a Network Meta-Analysis. *Prev Sci* **26**, 592–609 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-024-01735-1>
- Chen, T., Ou, J., Li, G., & Luo, H. (2024). Promoting mental health in children and adolescents through digital technology: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1356554. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1356554>
- Cheshmehzangi, A., Zou, T., Su, Z., & Tang, T. (2023). The growing digital divide in education among primary and secondary children during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *33*(3), 434–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2022.2062515>
- Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. (2025, December). *Child sexual exploitation and abuse online surges amid rapid tech change*. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/news/child-sexual-exploitation-abuse-online-surges-amid-rapid-tech-change-new-tool-preventing-abuse-unveiled-path-forward>
- Deroncele-Acosta, A., Palacios-Nunez, M. L., & Toribio-Lopez, A. (2023). Digital transformation and technological innovation in higher education post-COVID-19. *Sustainability*, *15*(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15032466>
- Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, *26*(2), 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>
- Greenhalgh, T., & Peacock, R. (2005). Effectiveness and efficiency of search methods in systematic reviews of complex evidence. *BMJ*, *331*(7524), 1064–1065. DOI: 10.1136/bmj.38636.593461.68
- Hung, J. (2022). Digitalisation, parenting, and children's mental health: What are the challenges and policy implications? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(11), 6452. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116452>
- Indiana Family and Social Services Administration. (2025). *The impacts of social media on behavioral health in Indiana*. <https://www.in.gov/fssa/dmha/files/2025-SEOWImpactsofSocialMedia.pdf>
- Lee, J., Choo, H., Zhang, Y., Cheung, H. S., Zhang, Q., & Ang, R. P. (2026). Cyberbullying victimization and mental health symptoms among children and adolescents: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241313051>

- Malwarebytes. (2026, February). Child exploitation, grooming, and social media addiction claims put Meta on trial. *Malwarebytes Labs*. <https://www.malwarebytes.com/blog/family-and-parenting/2026/02/child-exploitation-grooming-and-social-media-addiction-claims-put-meta-on-trial>
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). (2024). *Online child sexual abuse and exploitation statistics*. Enough Abuse Campaign. <https://enoughabuse.org/get-the-facts/online-child-sexual-abuse/>
- Qualter, D. (2024). From digital exclusion to digital inclusion: Shaping the role of parental involvement in home-based digital learning. *Computers in the Schools*, 41(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2024.2322167>
- Ramdana, A.D., Munir & Furqon, C. Advancing digital literacy in higher education through pedagogical innovations and institutional strategies between 2014 and 2025. *Discov Educ* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-026-01256-9>
- Schulz, P. J., Boldi, M. O., & van Ackere, A. (2025). Adolescent cyberbullying and cyber victimization: Longitudinal study before and during COVID-19. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 27, e70508. <https://doi.org/10.2196/70508>
- Shi, X., He, J., & Niu, G. (2024). The association between family socioeconomic status and children's digital literacy: The explanatory role of parental mediation. *Adolescents*, 4(3), 386-395. <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents4030027>
- Shoshani, A., Kor, A., & Bar, S. (2024). The impact of social media use on psychiatric symptoms and well-being of children and adolescents in the post-COVID-19 era: A four-year longitudinal study. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 33, 4013-4027. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-024-02454-2>
- Singhateh, M. F. (2024, February 5). *Statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on sale and sexual exploitation of children on Safer Internet Day*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/un-expert-alarmed-new-emerging-exploitative-practices-online-child-sexual>
- Tan, C.Y., Xu, N., Liang, M., & Li, L. (2025). Meta-analysis of Associations between Digital Parenting and Children's Digital Wellbeing. *Educational Research Review*.
- Tan, C.Y., Pan, Q., Tao, S., Liang, Q., Lan, M., Feng, S., Cheung, H.S., & Liu, D. (2024). Conceptualization, Measurement, Predictors, Outcomes, and Interventions in Digital Parenting Research: A Comprehensive Umbrella Review. *Educational Research Review*.
- Valkenburg, P. M., Patti, M., & Jochen, P. (2013). The differential susceptibility to media effects model. *Journal of Communication*, 63(2), 221-243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12024>
- WeProtect Global Alliance. (2023). *Global Threat Assessment 2023*. <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-23/>
- WeProtect Global Alliance. (2025). *Global Threat Assessment 2025*. https://www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/GTA-2025_EN.pdf

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.