

Research For Learning

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How does the use of technology influence the social development of young children in the early years?

Section 1

Literature Review

Understanding how technology influences young children's social development is increasingly important as digital devices become part of everyday life. Children now encounter screens in both home and early years settings, shaping how they communicate and interact with others. This topic was chosen because social development is essential for children's wellbeing, confidence, and future relationships. John and Bates (2024) explain that technology can shape social development in both positive and negative ways, depending on how it is used. Highlighting that when children engage with high-quality, interactive digital tools that encourage turn-taking, empathy, communication, and shared problem-solving, technology can positively support their social development. However, too much screen time and overstimulating content can reduce opportunities for children to experience real-world play, communication, and emotional regulation.

John and Bates (2024) research links closely with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as it focuses on adult scaffolding throughout the research. Emphasising that children's social development benefits the most when adults guide digital experiences and encourage shared interaction through helping children understand emotions, talking about what they see and help them navigate and make sense of the situation (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). While John and Bates (2024) suggest that technology may reduce face-to-face communication and social opportunities, Disney and Geng's (2022) observational study provides evidence that digital play can still create meaningful social moments. The information from their observational study shows that even without adult direction, children naturally interact socially during digital play by helping each other, seeking help, and engaging through gestures, facial expressions and shared attention. Although findings showed verbal language was the lowest-rated engagement area, the children still demonstrated meaningful social connections in non-verbal ways.

Research by Bahaudin, Masnan and Zain (2021) shows that technology can support young children's social development when it is used interactively and collaboratively. Baharudin, Masnan and Zain (2021) found that interactive whiteboard technology

encourages children to communicate, take turns and work together during learning activities, creating a socially rich classroom environment. They explain that interactive whiteboards enable a more child-focused learning experience through shared visual, auditory and tactile interactions, helping children stay engaged and connected with others. The technology also supports social aspects of literacy learning, as children discuss answers, help friends and participate in group tasks. While the impact depends on how teachers use the tool, the study demonstrates that interactive whiteboards can strengthen cooperation, confidence and peer interaction by offering opportunities for joint problem-solving and collaborative exploration. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises how children's development is shaped by the immediate environments and interactions they experience, including technology-rich classrooms that promote positive social exchanges (Bronfenbrenner, 1996 and Hayes, Halpenny, and O'Toole, 2017). It also reflects the Curriculum for Wales, which highlights digital competence, collaboration and communication as essential skills, encouraging technology use that supports meaningful interaction rather than passive screen time (Welsh Government, 2020).

However contradictory to the previous research, an investigation by Bozzola, *et al.* (2018) about the positive and negatives of technology on children suggests that the risk of using too much technology can out-way the benefit of them greatly, when it comes to children's development. Bozzola *et al.* (2018) demonstrate that technology can limit the meaningful, face-to-face interactions children rely on to develop early communication and emotional skills. They found that when screens are present, children and caregivers talk less, make less eye contact, and share fewer moments of connection, reducing opportunities to learn key social behaviours such as turn-taking, empathy, and emotional regulation. This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which emphasises that young children require consistent love, belonging, and emotional connection for their basic needs to be met (Pichère and Cadiat, 2016). When these early social needs are not met, children may experience reduced confidence, behavioural difficulties, and challenges forming healthy relationships later in life (Lemish, 2016). These studies suggest that excessive screen exposure may affect the basic but essential social skills children need for healthy long-term development.

Çiftçi's (2025) research investigates the positive effect of the use of technology with SEN children. Suggesting that technology can increase motivation, interaction, and shared engagement for children with additional need. Çiftçi's (2025) highlights that through technology SEN children have a lot more access to visual and multisensory tools that help regulation and stimulation as well as supporting communication, turn taking, problem solving and give non-verbal children the opportunity to make those relationships with others through using technological boards of communication such as pecs. However, Starks and Reich (2023) suggest over reliance on technology for communication could lead to some children not wanting to talk or be sociable with others as everything they need is on the screen in front of them. Another issue from the over reliance of technology could be the device not working, meaning the only form of communication a non-verbal child could have is gone. Barriers such as these can lead to frustration, overstimulation, or withdrawal, reducing opportunities to practise essential face-to-face social skills such as reading emotions or negotiating conflict, possibly impacting not only children's social skills but overall development (Starks and Reich, 2023). Together, the two articles show that while technology can enhance young children's social development through engagement and interaction, excessive access, overstimulation, and dependence on digital communication can limit social growth for SEN children.

The Curriculum for Wales places a strong emphasis on wellbeing, relationships, and play-based learning. While the curriculum recognises the importance of developing digital competence, it also stresses that early learning must remain rooted in social interaction, encouraging technology only when it enhances collaboration, creativity, or communication. By promoting this balanced approach, the Curriculum for Wales ensures that digital tools support, rather than replace, the rich social experiences that underpin healthy social development (Welsh Government, 2022). When considered alongside the research within this review, this makes it clear that technology is not automatically a negative thing or isolating, its impact on children's social development depends on how it is used and whether children are given meaningful opportunities to interact around it in the early years.

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Section 2

Methodology

This study was conducted with reception aged children, 4-5years old attending a mainstream primary school. This age range was chosen because it is seen as a crucial age of development. Children are becoming increasingly exposed to technology both at home and in school, yet are still developing foundational social skills such as cooperation, communication, turn-taking, and peer interaction (Davies and Troy, 2020). This makes the age group particularly relevant for exploring how technology may support or hinder early social development. The sample included children with a range of social abilities, varying levels of familiarity with technology, and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the children's rights act that all children have the right to inclusion, participation, and equal opportunities in education (UNICEF UK, 2019). This diversity allowed the study to capture a broad and realistic picture of how technology influences social development within an early years classroom (El Boghdady, 2025).

A convenience sampling method was the most appropriate approach for selecting a group of 3–4 children from the reception class. Convenience sampling involves choosing participants who are readily accessible and through using the already formed class it allowed the practitioner to observe authentic interactions during both activities as children were in a familiar environment, reducing anxiety and supporting natural interaction (Makwana, *et al*, 2023). A small group of 3–4 children was selected because smaller groups minimise background noise and distractions, making communication clearer and social behaviours easier to interpret. Children also tend to interact more directly in small groups, producing richer, more focused social behaviour suitable for qualitative analysis (King and Dockrell, 2016). Alternative sampling strategies such as purposive sampling, was not used because research from Andrade (2021) highlights that purposive sampling introduces practitioner judgement into the selection process which can hinder the data collected.

Research Methods

Two methods were used to collect data the first was structured observations of children completing collaborative tasks in both technology free and technology

supported sessions, and semi structured questionnaires completed by teachers. Together, these methods provided direct behavioural evidence and professional insight, offering a fuller understanding of how technology influences young children's social development (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The first observation session involved a non-technology task using classroom resources, giving a baseline of natural interaction such as communication, turn-taking, negotiation, and shared problem-solving. The second session used the interactive whiteboard to observe how digital tools shaped cooperation, screen-sharing, and navigation behaviours. Semi-structured questionnaires, combining open and closed questions, added wider practitioner perspectives and supported triangulation (Taherdoost, 2022).

Observations and questionnaires both produce qualitative research as the two methods provide detailed and descriptive information about children's social interactions and teachers' views. Qualitative methods are known to be better suited to exploring social development, as they help capture the real-life behaviours, communication, and peer dynamics that occur when technology is used (Lim, 2025). Quantitative research would not have been needed for this study as it is data that focuses on quantities and not meaning and to understand children's social development, numbers alone cannot show the depth or meaning behind behaviours such as turn-taking, cooperation, or negotiation. A mixed-methods design was considered but not used as the qualitative focus already provided enough depth to meet the aims of the research (Lim, 2025).

Observations were chosen because they provide direct access to authentic behaviour, allowing the researcher to witness real-time interactions such as turn taking, negotiation, conflict, and cooperation, behaviours that cannot be fully captured through adult reports (Kumar, 2021). Observing children in their natural classroom environment also provides rich data, revealing how social behaviours unfold within familiar routines and peer groups. Using two contrasting sessions, one without technology and one using the interactive whiteboard, allowed for a clear comparison of how children's social interactions differed depending on the presence or absence of digital tools (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Wilson *et al.* (2023) highlight that observations also capture non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, gestures, and shared attention, which are essential components of social development and are best recorded through direct observation. Finally, observations

are developmentally appropriate for children aged 4-5, who may struggle to articulate their thoughts verbally.

Questionnaires were chosen because they provide access to long-term insights. Teachers observe children daily and can comment on patterns of behaviour that may not appear during short observation sessions. Their professional expertise allows them to identify subtle changes in social development linked to technology use. Questionnaires are time efficient being able to collect efficient data from multiple teachers to without taking up much of their time (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Lambert (2019) highlights the semi-structured format provides flexibility, allowing teachers to elaborate on their answer and have the full freedom to express their experience and views on the topic. Importantly, questionnaires support triangulation, offering a second data source to compare with observational findings and strengthening the study's credibility (Flick, 2018).

Two key effects were considered throughout the study, the Hawthorne effect and the Halo effect. Oswald, Sherratt and Smith (2014) describe the Hawthorne effect as children altering their behaviour because they know they are being monitored. In this study, children may have behaved differently in both observation sessions, perhaps becoming more cooperative or more reserved. To minimise this, observations were conducted in familiar classroom environments, and the researcher maintained a low profile (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

The Halo effect occurs when a practitioners positive or negative impressions of a child influence how their behaviour is interpreted (Gabrieli *et al*, 2021). For example, a child perceived as confident may be assumed to have good social skills, even if their behaviour does not consistently reflect this. To reduce this risk, the practitioner used descriptive language when recording information and focused on the actions they observed instead of collecting data based on assumptions.

Limitations

Lambert (2019) highlights observations are subject to the Hawthorne effect, where children may change their behaviour because they know they are being observed. The practitioner's presence may lead to increased cooperation or even increased self-consciousness. The data collected through observations may be limited as practitioners cannot write all findings and research down while simultaneously

always watching the activity (Kumar, 2021). Children will only be observed for two sessions meaning the practitioner may not account for external factors that can influence children's learning and behaviour (Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.).

Questionnaires also can have several limitations that may influence the quality of the data. Lambert (2019) states because questionnaires rely on written responses, teachers may misinterpret questions if wording is unclear, they cannot seek clarification through a questionnaire, which increases the risk of inaccurate or inconsistent answers. Also, Kuphanga (2024) suggests participants may provide socially desirable responses, particularly in a school environment that promotes technology use and some people may also skip or partially complete questions due to the length of it or not having the time to do it, creating gaps in the data. These limitations highlight the importance of using questionnaires alongside observational methods rather than relying on them alone (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

Several alternative methods were considered but not used as part of the study such as structured interviews with children were deemed inappropriate due to their young age as reception aged children may struggle to express their thoughts about technology or social behaviour in a formal interview setting (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Adult interviews were not used because they would not provide direct evidence of children's social interactions. Interviews rely on adults recalling or interpreting behaviour, which can introduce bias and may not accurately reflect what happens in real time. They are also time-consuming to organise in a busy school setting, making them less practical for a small study (Parrish, Abigail, and Shaikh, 2024).

In this study, methodological triangulation was used through combining two contrasting observation sessions with questionnaires. Flick (2018) defines triangulation to the use of multiple methods, sources, or perspectives to enhance the credibility of the study's findings. This allows the practitioner to cross check behavioural data with professional insights, strengthening the validity of the conclusions. Triangulation was particularly valuable because social development is complex and cannot be fully understood through a single method. Observations provided direct evidence of how children interact in both technology free and technology supported contexts, while teacher questionnaires provided useful

information and long-term perspectives. Together, these methods created a more comprehensive picture of how technology influences social development in the early years (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

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Section 3

Ethical Considerations

Early Education (2021) highlights ethical practice as a standard requirement in educational research, particularly when studies involve young children and practitioners in school settings. Research in early years settings requires heightened sensitivity due to children's developmental stage, their limited capacity to fully understand research processes, and the power dynamics inherent in school environments (Early Education, 2021). This section critically examines the ethical considerations relevant to a study exploring children's social development through observations in an early years reception class and questionnaires completed by teachers within the school, addressing informed consent and assent, recognition of non-participation, openness, confidentiality, risk reduction, and data protection.

Informed consent is widely recognised as a fundamental requirement within ethical research practice. British Educational Research Association (2024) states that researchers must secure fully informed, freely given, and continuously reviewed consent from participants, understand the study's purpose, their role within it, and how their data will be used. In this study, consent must be obtained from two groups which are children aged 3-4 years old in a reception class and teachers that complete the questionnaires. For teachers, consent will be gained through a clear and concise information sheet outlining the aims of the study, the participants choice to take part in the study, the anonymous treatment of all questionnaire data and how data will be stored. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) emphasise that questionnaires can create a sense of obligation, particularly in workplace settings, so researchers should reassure teachers that participation is optional and unrelated to performance or school expectations.

For children, the process is more complex. The NSPCC Research Ethics Committee (2020) stresses that consent for children under eight must be obtained from parents or guardians but children must also be asked if they are happy to take part. This aligns with the UN convention of children's rights, which states that children have the right to express their views (Article 12) and the right to be heard in matters affecting them. In practice, assent can be gained by explaining the researcher's presence in simple, age-appropriate language and observing children's reactions (UNICEF, n.d.). Lambert (2019) highlights that young children often show assent or dissent through

behaviour rather than words. Therefore, the researcher must remain attentive to signs of discomfort, avoidance, or withdrawal.

The NSPCC's (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Hanson & Branigan, n.d.) guidance on reinforces the importance of enabling children to make informed choices about participation. It warns against professional limitation, where adults prevent children from being approached due to assumptions about vulnerability. To avoid this, the researcher will ensure that all children whose parents have consented are given the opportunity to agree or say no themselves.

Ethical research requires sensitivity to signs that participants do not wish to take part. British Educational Research Association (2024) emphasises that consent is an ongoing process, not a one-off event. In the early years observations, children may show dissent through non-verbal cues such as moving away, avoiding eye contact, or appearing distressed. The NSPCC (2020) states that a child's refusal of assent must override parental consent. Therefore, if a child shows any sign of discomfort, the researcher must immediately stop observing them.

For teachers completing questionnaires, withdrawal may be indicated by incomplete responses or a decision not to return the questionnaire. Cohen *et al.* (2018) argue that participants must be free to skip questions or withdraw entirely without explanation. The questionnaire instructions will therefore emphasise that teachers do not need to include any information they do not wish to share.

Transparency is recognised as a key principle in ethical research. The British Educational Research Association (2024) stresses that researchers must be honest about the aims, methods, and implications of their work. In this study, openness is demonstrated by providing clear information sheets, offering opportunities for questions, and explaining how findings will be shared (Parrish, Abigail. and Shaikh, 2024). Voluntary participation is particularly significant in school settings, where power dynamics may influence a participant's willingness to engage. Teachers may feel obliged to participate because the research is conducted within their workplace. To mitigate this, the researcher will emphasise that participation is optional and unrelated to professional evaluation. The NSPCC (2020) highlights the importance of avoiding coercion, especially when senior leaders are involved in recruitment. For children, voluntary participation is ensured through assent and the recognition of

non-verbal dissent. UNICEF (n.d.) reinforces that children must not be forced to participate in activities against their wishes. The researcher will therefore adopt a child-centred approach, ensuring that participation is comfortable, non-intrusive, and respectful.

Confidentiality and anonymity are recognised as important for maintaining trust and protecting participants' identities. British Educational Research Association (2024) states that researchers must anonymise data and remove identifiable details from publications. In this study, false names will be used for all children and teachers, and the school will be referred to generically.

Observations in an early years class could possibly present challenges because children who are not the focus of the study may appear in the field notes. Lambert (2019) notes that researchers must anticipate incidental involvement and obtain consent from all parents where possible. Therefore, the school will distribute information sheets to all families, offering an opt-out option for children not to be included in observational notes. The NSPCC (2020) also highlights the importance of safeguarding disclosures. If a child reveals information indicating harm or risk, confidentiality must be broken in line with safeguarding procedures. This will be clearly explained during the consent process so that participants understand the limits of confidentiality.

Ethical research must minimise potential harm. British Educational Research Association (2024) emphasises the need to protect participants from physical, emotional, or reputational harm. In this study, risks include discomfort during observation, concerns about confidentiality, or misinterpretation of questionnaire responses. To reduce risk to children, observations will be non-intrusive and conducted during normal classroom activities. The researcher will avoid interfering with learning and will withdraw immediately if a child appears uncomfortable. Taquette and Souza (2022) highlight that qualitative research often involves unpredictable ethical dilemmas, therefore the researcher must remain aware and be prepared to adapt.

To reduce risk to teachers, questionnaires will avoid sensitive or evaluative questions. Responses will be anonymised, and the information will be grouped together so no individual person can be recognised (Cohen *et al*, 2018). To reduce

risk to the researcher, UWTSD's Research Ethics and Code of Practice requires the researcher to follow safeguarding procedures, professional boundaries, and appropriate conduct in school settings (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, n.d.). To reduce risk to the university, the researcher should follow the ethical approval processes, comply with data protection legislation, and ensure responsible reporting of findings (British Educational Research Association, 2024).

Data protection requirements mean that personal information must be handled safely and lawfully. The General Data Protection Regulation (European Union, 2018) and the Data Protection Act (UK Government, 2018) require data to be collected fairly, used only for the research purpose, kept to essential data only, stored securely, and deleted as soon as the information is no longer needed. In this study, digital data will be stored on secure, password-protected university systems, while paper documents will be kept in locked storage. Any audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed, and all data will be kept only for the period set by UWTSD policy before being securely destroyed (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, n.d.). Participants also have rights to access their data, request corrections, or ask for deletion where appropriate, and these rights are explained in the information sheets.

Ethical considerations are a required part of planning and conducting educational research, particularly when working with young children and school staff. This study aligns with recognised ethical expectations to ensure that participants' rights, dignity, and welfare are protected. Through informed consent and assent, recognition of non-participation, openness, confidentiality, risk reduction, and data protection practices, the research will be conducted ethically, responsibly, and in line with professional standards. This approach not only safeguards participants but also supports the credibility and integrity of the research exploring the impact of technology on children's social development through observations and questionnaires (British Educational Research Association, 2024 and European Union, 2018).

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