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BETWEEN ATTRACTIONS, GAMES AND ACCESS LIMITS: meanings attributed by parents and guardians to screens

ENTRE ATRAÇÕES, BRINCADEIRAS E LIMITE AO ACESSO: sentidos atribuídos por mães/pais e responsáveis sobre as telas

ENTRE ATRACCIONES, JUEGOS Y LÍMITES DE ACCESO: sentidos atribuidos por madres/padres y responsables sobre las pantallas

Viviane de Bona[1]
Débora Hyngrid Gomes do Nascimento[2]
Claudilene Maria da Cunha[3]

Abstract
Children's access to digital screens has increased substantially, driven by ongoing technological transformations in contemporary society. Based on this observation, the present study aims to understand the meanings attributed by mothers, fathers, and/or legal guardians to screen use during early childhood, a phenomenon intensified by the pandemic context. Exploratory in nature and grounded in a qualitative approach, the investigation employed a Google Forms virtual questionnaire containing both open and closed-ended questions, as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire was completed by 250 adults responsible for children aged 0 to 6 years. The collected data were categorized according to the Content Analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011). This analytical technique enabled the identification of two groups of meanings: justifications for children's screen time and participants' opinions regarding screen use. The findings indicate that family structure significantly influences children's access to screens; however, some parents and guardians express disagreement with the frequency of such exposure. Few participants support unrestricted use of digital devices. Most respondents advocate for limiting and supervising children's screen use, whether for educational purposes or entertainment.

Keywords: Early childhood. Access to technology. Families. Digital culture.

[1] Doctor of Education. Department of Socio-Philosophical Foundations of Education, Center for Education, Federal University of Pernambuco. Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. Email: viviane.bona@ufpe.br
[2] Postgraduate degree in Childhood and Early Childhood Education from FUNDAJ. Early Childhood Education teacher at Colégio Boa Viagem, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. Email: debora.hyngrid@ufpe.br
[3] Postgraduate degree in Teaching for Professional and Technological Education from IFES. Permanent teacher of Early Childhood Education in the municipality of Caruaru, Pernambuco, Brazil. Email: claudilene.maria@ufpe.br

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Resumo
O acesso às telas pelo público infantil tem crescido significativamente, estimulado pelas transformações tecnológicas da sociedade. Com base nessa constatação, a presente pesquisa tem por objetivo compreender os sentidos atribuídos pelas mães/pais e/ou responsáveis por crianças ao uso de telas na primeira infância, potencializado pelo contexto pandêmico. De caráter exploratório e abordagem qualitativa, a investigação utilizou, como instrumento de coleta de dados, um questionário virtual do *Google Forms*, com questões abertas e fechadas, preenchido por 250 adultos, responsáveis por crianças de 0 a 6 anos. Os dados coletados foram categorizados segundo a Análise de Conteúdo proposta por Bardin (2011). Essa técnica permitiu classificar dois grupos de sentidos: as justificativas do tempo de acesso às telas e a opinião dos colaboradores sobre o uso delas. Como resultado, foi identificado que a estrutura familiar impacta consideravelmente o acesso às telas, porém, existem mães/pais e responsáveis que não concordam com a recorrência de tal exposição. Poucos aquiescem ao uso livre desse artefato, e o maior quantitativo dos colaboradores defende limitar e supervisionar a utilização das telas pelas crianças, seja para uso pedagógico ou entretenimento.

Palavras-chave: Primeira infância. Acesso à tecnologia. Famílias. Cultura digital.

Resumen
El acceso a las pantallas por parte de la población infantil ha crecido significativamente, impulsado por las transformaciones tecnológicas de la sociedad. A partir de esta constatación, la presente investigación tiene por objetivo comprender los sentidos atribuidos por madres/padres y/o responsables de niñas y niños al uso de pantallas en la primera infancia, potenciado por el contexto pandémico. De carácter exploratorio y enfoque cualitativo, la investigación utilizó, como instrumento de recolección de datos, un cuestionario virtual de Google Forms, con preguntas abiertas y cerradas, respondido por 250 personas adultas responsables de niñas y niños de 0 a 6 años. Los datos recogidos fueron categorizados según el Análisis de Contenido propuesto por Bardin (2011). Esta técnica permitió clasificar dos grupos de sentidos: las justificaciones del tiempo de acceso a las pantallas y la opinión de las/los participantes sobre su uso. Como resultado, se identificó que la estructura familiar impacta considerablemente en el acceso a las pantallas; sin embargo, hay madres/padres y responsables que no están de acuerdo con la recurrencia de tal exposición. Pocos consienten el uso libre de este artefacto, y la mayoría de las/los participantes defiende limitar y supervisar el uso de las pantallas por parte de las niñas y los niños, ya sea con fines pedagógicos o de entretenimiento.

Palabras clave: Primera infancia. Acceso a la tecnología. Familias. Cultura digital.

Introduction

Digital technology in its various formats has been taking up space in society over time. In the midst of the third decade of the 21st century, it is very difficult to find someone who has never heard the word *internet*, as it has been used both for work and leisure. According to Pimentel (2017, p. 38), "the changes resulting from technological advances and digital media are taking place throughout society, leading it to new ways of working, communicating, learning, thinking, and living". From one

perspective, such advances enable rapid communication and bring together individuals from diverse locations; on the other hand, these tools may generate social isolation, harm health due to excessive use, and affect aspects related to child development.

Studies carried out by the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP) (2019) recommend that children aged 2 to 5 should not spend more than one hour per day exposed to screens and must always be supervised. The Coronavirus pandemic, established in 2020, however, brought a new lifestyle to the global population, and children were not spared from this change. Parents working from home and children attending remote classes found themselves exposed to longer screen time. Since this phenomenon could no longer be prevented or avoided, it is therefore necessary that the individuals responsible for these children value skills conducive to their full development, ensuring their rights to protection and play, with the aim of enabling the child to experience diverse situations that provide a variety of knowledge.

The Scientific Committee of the Center on Science for Early Childhood (NCPI) states that:

> It is important to elucidate the positive impact that healthy interactions in early childhood have on the formation of citizens. Experiences and opportunities for good relationships in the first years of life help create a strong foundation, generating values, cognitive skills, and sociability (NCPI, 2016, p. 4).

In view of this contextual situation and also considering reflections on the use of technologies disseminated by Pierre Lévy (2010), who argues that we are living the opening of a new communicational space, it is our responsibility to explore the positive potential of this space in economic, political, cultural, and human dimensions. From this perspective, we aim to examine the thoughts surrounding children born from 2010 onwards who coexist daily with digital devices. These children were termed Generation Alpha by sociologist Mark McCrindle (2009), symbolizing the beginning of major transformations.

Discussions presented by Girardello, Fantin, and Pereira (2021) and by Nobre *et al*. (2021) highlight the use of technology in relation to children's learning and the

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social impact resulting from screen exposure, given that children interact less with the environment and with people around them. The authors problematize the effects of this exposure, reflecting on the connections between childhood and media. Other studies (Souza; Marques; Reuter, 2020) also evidence negative effects on physical health, since screen time reduces active play.

Aligned with this understanding, the investigative interest in constructing this study also arises from considering it necessary to understand how mothers/fathers or guardians perceive the presence of digital technologies in the lives of their children. Provided with this information, that is, knowing how these adults think about the topic, we will seek to understand their actions regarding the regulation or lack thereof of children's screen use.

We start from the assumption that reflecting on how children's insertion into the digital world occurs, and to what extent the impacts of this insertion affect their social lives, allows us to consider possible positive or negative consequences. It is necessary to clarify that this study does not intend to pass value judgments regarding children's use of technologies, nor with respect to the families' attitudes toward this process. Our interest lies in understanding the motivations that lead to such use. In summary, the present research aims to understand the meanings attributed by mothers/fathers or guardians of children regarding screen use in early childhood, intensified by the pandemic context. Exploratory in nature and with a qualitative approach, the investigation used as its data collection instrument a virtual questionnaire created in Google Forms containing 12 open and closed questions, completed by 250 adults responsible for children aged 0 to 6 residing in the metropolitan region of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco. The collected data were categorized according to the Content Analysis proposed by Bardin (2011).

1 Childhoods, the Pandemic Context, and the Use of Technologies by Young Children

For a long time, children were viewed as passive beings in the socialization process, frequently ignored and devalued. As Heywood (2004, p. 10) states, "the child was, at most, a marginal figure in an adult world". Shaped by the erudition of

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the period, they were considered future citizens who internalized prevailing knowledge, not being allowed to interfere in their own social, cultural, or intellectual formation. Sarmento (2000) argues that children were not seen as full social beings; this perception remained for a long time, and only at the end of the twentieth century was childhood regarded as a social category. The perception of the child as protagonist emerged from a shift in thought: the child ceased to be seen as a passive actor and became an active actor, producer of culture. Although the conception of child and childhood is not recent, contemporary perspectives have brought a new lens: "childhood is changing, yet remains a social category with its own characteristics" (Sarmento, 1997, p. 7). Thus, when thinking about childhood, we cannot consider it uniform and singular, but constituted by diverse aspects such as social class, race, gender, place of residence, and economic condition, which leads us to conclude that there are multiple childhoods. This diversity makes each child's experiences different, especially regarding access to essential rights such as education, health, leisure, and safety.

In order to facilitate the construction of an active identity in children, Corsaro (2011) introduces the expression "peer culture," used to dialogue with children's cultures regarding face-to-face interactions within a group, that is, "this learning is eminently interactive; above all, children learn with other children, in shared spaces" (Sarmento, 2004, p. 9, sic).

From the perspectives of child protagonism, we observe how the many cultures of childhood have been introduced into contemporary society. Scientific evidence of this introduction can be seen in Sociology, for example, the child at the beginning of this field's studies is not the same child of the twenty-first century. In other words, different generations are characterized within society, and we are forming yet another: the one comprising children born between 2010 and 2025, termed Generation Alpha by Mark McCrindle (2009).

According to Menetti (2013), Generation Alpha represents the third generation of the digital era, favored by technological agility and accelerated development, influencing parents who, although part of this universe, appear as learners accompanying these transformations, some already mastered by the children. This

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makes them more independent in their choices, which may lead to excessive use of technologies. This possibility indeed exists, however, anything involving innovation and overcoming the unknown remains imbued with risks, even when its benefits are recognized and proven. It is therefore necessary to understand the motivations underlying children's use of technologies and how this use can be balanced, that is, without excess. Furthermore, the situation must be viewed more broadly to avoid placing exclusive responsibility on parents, as they are also agents in a new social history and are not the only individuals in children's lives. In agreement with Sarmento (2005, p. 373, sic), what stands out is the fact that children are "[...] competent and able to formulate interpretations of society, of others, and of themselves, of nature, of thoughts and feelings, to do so in distinct ways and to use such interpretations to deal with everything around them".

Beyond the social movement itself marked by intense and progressive use of technologies, in 2019 the first case of severe acute respiratory syndrome caused by coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was recorded in China. The virus rapidly spread worldwide and resulted in a global pandemic, transforming life on a global scale. These changes demanded new routines and teaching methods, without giving society time to prepare for such a powerful adversary. According to UNESCO (2020), children and youth were among the most impacted, needing to adapt to an emergency model that blended school, home, and work environments.

With new rules of coexistence and physical isolation, possibilities for leisure activities were reconfigured. Without physical contact, online life remained as an option. In addition to having to adapt to remote learning adopted as an emergency measure by Federal, State, and Municipal governments in an attempt to minimize the damage caused by social distancing, children had limited resources to develop their social, motor, and sensory skills.

Considering parents' need to continue working, their professional activities were relocated to the home environment whenever work demands allowed it. Even at home, however, parents were not always able to manage their children, (who had access to mobile phones, tablets, computers, and the internet) who spent long hours engaged in remote learning and, once freed from school activities, were often placed in front of screens as a means of distraction and entertainment (also functioning as

an alternative occupation so parents could work without interference). It is increasingly common in today's world, with technological advancement, that children have access to such resources, especially when they do not enjoy regular interaction with other children. This trend intensified in the pandemic context.

1.1 From Immersion to Defining Limits of Technology Use in Early Childhood

Children have been in contact with technology at increasingly younger ages and are connected to this universe from early childhood (ages 0 to 6). This occurs because technological transformations over time have reached children, surrounding them in various ways, whether through television, mobile phones, or other digital devices.

Based on this, Buckingham (2010, p. 42) states that "[...] contemporary childhood is permeated by and, in some senses, even defined by modern media". In other words, children are experiencing childhood propagated by the media, altering their interactions. For Souza (2019), children who enter the digital universe early take adults, who already make use of these virtual means, as references, seeking to make interactions increasingly accessible in order to manage many commitments.

Knowing that access to screens and other technologies is influenced by parents or guardians, we understand that children, from infancy, already have interactions with these resources in everyday situations, such as when a family member uses the television or a mobile phone, exposing the child to these devices. Although digital technologies offer varied and extensive access to pedagogical resources for development, on the other hand, they deprive the child of physical contact, social interaction, and imaginative development (Estigarribia, 2019).

Studies such as those by Setzer (2014) cite other negative effects related to health, such as weight gain leading to obesity; poor sleep quality; decreased mental activity; poor eating habits and inactivity due to long periods in front of screens. The large flow of information and the speed with which it is presented also have harmful effects, as this overload may generate mixed feelings and provoke sensory

impressions that result in anxiety and hyperactivity, harming critical thinking and imagination, among other disorders.

From another perspective, however, technology promotes access to knowledge, facilitating information and enabling immersion in educational connections at any time and place. According to Souza and Souza (2010) and Oliveira and Marinho (2020), this informational tool technology in childhood has been regarded as positive for the improvements it brings to cognitive development and psychomotor activities, reshaping learning.

It is necessary, however, to establish limits for such use. According to the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP) (2016, p. 3): "Balancing hours of online games with sports activities, play, outdoor exercises, or direct contact with nature ensures the necessary elements for growth and development with affection and joy".

We understand that it is not possible to ignore the need to learn about and integrate various technological resources as new forms of learning in children's environments, whether as pedagogical tools or playful entertainment, but always paying attention to appropriate use and respecting the user's age. This is the principle underlying the Pedagogy of Connection which, according to Almeida and Cerutti (2025, p. 4), aims to ensure "that digital interactions do not replace in-person experiences, but rather enhance them, promoting more meaningful learning". The authors add that the Pedagogy of Connection does not advocate indiscriminate use of technological resources, but rather planned practices that foster balanced child development and respect learning rights.

2 Methodological Approach

This research is exploratory in nature and adopts a qualitative approach. We employed a questionnaire for data collection, distributed to mothers, fathers, and guardians of children aged 0 to 6. The tool used for distribution was a virtual form created on Google Forms, as it allows reaching a considerable number of respondents. To disseminate the study, we used social networks (Instagram and WhatsApp) to share the link to the form and reach a greater number of collaborators. The survey was shared beginning on January 13, 2023, and by January 21, we had

reached 250 respondents. We observed saturation (repetition) of responses and thus ended the collection. We noticed that the dissemination method was highly effective, as we obtained a substantial number of participants in a short period, given society's frequent use of social networks and the practicality of the instrument used.

It was also observed that respondents showed great interest in the topic during data collection, which explains the quick return of completed questionnaires and the feedback we received after participants filled out and returned the forms. The questionnaire contained 12 questions, both open and closed. A point that merits consideration is that based on participant feedback, we noticed the need to add an option indicating "no screen use", which had not been considered previously, as our focus had been on children who used screens and other technologies.

The questionnaire included questions about the neighborhood of residence, educational level, the child's age, and the degree of kinship between the respondent and the child. Regarding the questions specifically related to the topic, respondents answered which devices the child had access to, how the devices were used, how much time was spent on them daily, and the reasons that justified this duration. There was also a question in which respondents compared screen use at the time of the study with the use during pandemic related social isolation; questions about the main activities performed by the child during social isolation and those performed at the time of the survey; and lastly, what the respondents think about children's use of technology.

After data collection ended, we began data analysis using Content Analysis (Bardin, 2011). After the initial phase, we developed categories of analysis based on the content of open questions, grouping recurring themes. After reading all responses to each question, we regrouped identical or similar answers to facilitate understanding and inference. These groupings (categories) were named based on the meanings present in the responses. Closed-ended questions were organized quantitatively and represented in graphs that helped us understand which activities were most used by children or the profile of respondents (parents, mothers, grandparents, uncles/aunts, other relatives, caregivers), which is also relevant to the study.

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3 Technology in Children's Lives: Uses and Meanings Shared by Mothers/Fathers and Guardians

The group that voluntarily collaborated with data collection consisted mostly of mothers (200 individuals), followed by fathers (23), and guardians such as grandparents, uncles/aunts, other relatives, and caregivers (27) of children aged 0 to 6. It is noteworthy that mothers constituted the largest group of participants which comes as no surprise, given that women have historically been the primary and habitual caregivers of children. Despite changes in family structures, the idea of women's responsibility as caregivers persists. According to studies by Fiorin, Patias, and Dias (2011), despite historical changes and the increasing presence of women in various social spheres, motherhood is still attributed to women as their main responsibility, reinforcing the patriarchal family model. Accordingly, we observe that, even today, maternal presence in childcare remains prominent, as shown in the collected data.

Regarding educational level, there was a predominance of: completed high school (85 individuals), some higher education (42), completed higher education (51), and postgraduate education (53). Most responses were from neighborhoods adjacent to Recife, Olinda, and Jaboatão dos Guararapes, municipalities in the state of Pernambuco.

Regarding the age of the children under respondents' care, the most frequent responses were from those responsible for 6-year-old children (59 individuals), followed by parents/guardians of children aged 0–1 year old and those of children aged 3 years old (49 individuals each).

When asked which technological devices their children used, the television led the responses with 217 mentions, followed by mobile phones with 184 mentions, and tablets with 41. Multiple alternatives could be selected. The results and corresponding percentages are presented in Graph 1.

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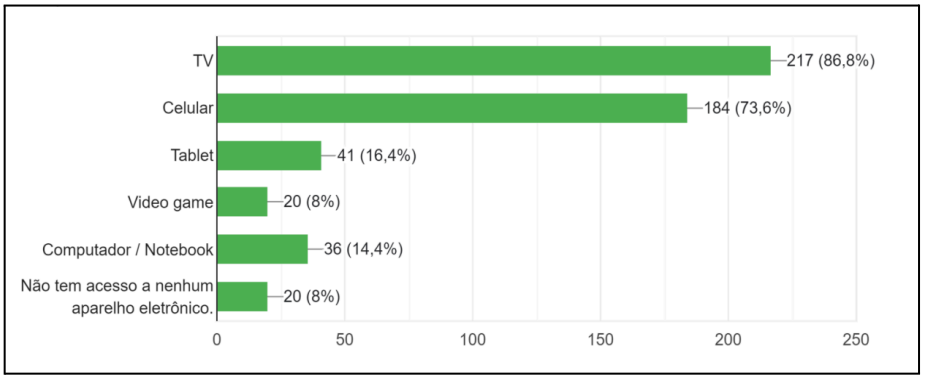
Graph 1 – Children's Access to Screens



Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

TV	*TV*
Celular	*Cell phone*
Tablet	*Tablet*
Video Game	*Video Game*
Computador/Notebook	*Computer/Notebook*
Não tem acesso a nenhum aparelho eletrônico	*No access to any electronic device.*

Attending to the collected data, the television stands out as the most used technological device, confirming Buckingham's (2007) assertion that since the twentieth century, television has been the device most widely used by children. This parallels the same author's statement that childhood is often determined by media, since access to television programming is linked to advertisements and commercial content that influence children's thinking and behavior (Buckingham, 2007).

Regarding what children most frequently access through technological devices, the YouTube application for watching videos was the most cited, with approximately 195 responses. Next were films and animations (120 responses), and in third place, games (112 responses). Multiple choices were also possible in this question. These data appear in Graph 2.

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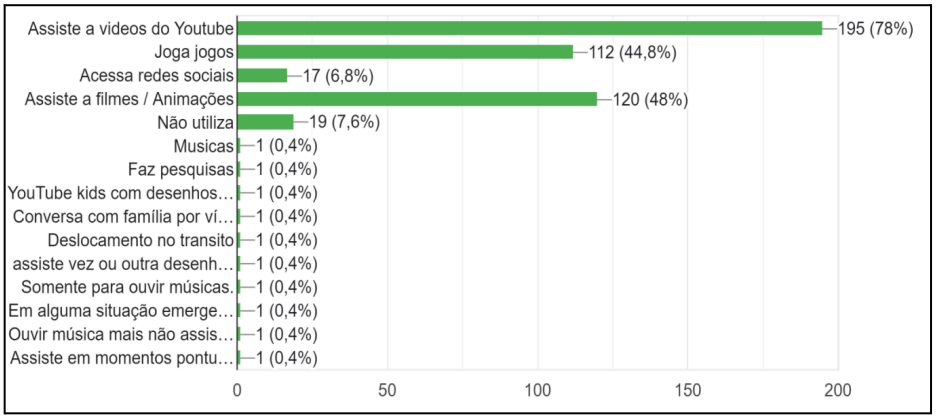
Graph 2 – Use of Technological Devices by Children

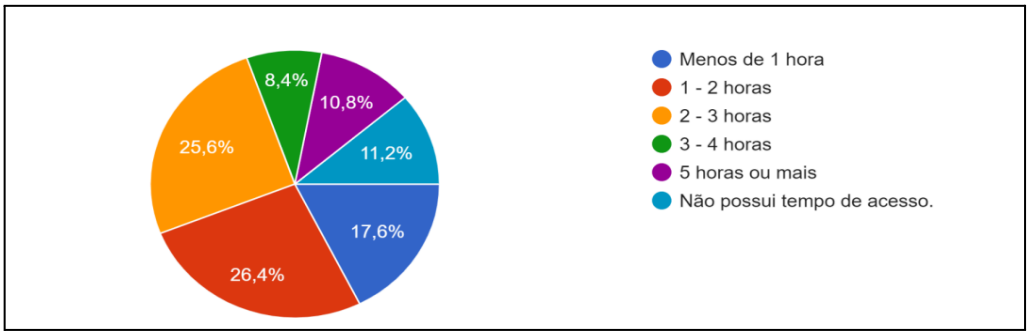


Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

Assiste a videos do Youtube	*Watch Youtube Videos*
Joga jogos	*Play games*
Acessa redes sociais	*Social Media access*
Assiste a filmes/animações	*Watch movies/animations*
Não utiliza	*Does not use*
Músicas	*Music*
Faz pesquisa	*Research*
Youtube Kids com desenhos	*Cartoon on YouTube*
Conversa com família por vídeo	*Video chat with family*
Deslocamento no trânsito	*Commuting in traffic*
Assiste vez ou outra	*Watches occasionally*
Somente para ouvir músicas	*Only listening to music*
Em alguma situação emergencial	*Emergency only*
Ouve música mas não assiste vídeos	*Listens to music but doesn't watch videos*
Assiste em momentos pontuais	*Watches at specific moments*

Considering the analysis above concerning access to and utilization of technological devices, Figure 3 presents the duration of daily screen exposure among children.

Graph 3 – Children's Daily Screen Time



Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

Menos de 1 hora	*Less than 1 hour*
1-2 horas	*1-2 hours*
2-3 horas	*2-3 hours*
3-4 horas	*3-4 hours*
5 horas ou mais	*5 hours or more*
Não possui tempo de acesso	*No access time*

According to the questionnaire, approximately 44 respondents stated that children spent less than one hour daily in front of screens. The most common duration- reported by 66 respondents, was between 1 and 2 hours, followed by 64 responses indicating 2 to 3 hours. A total of 21 respondents indicated 3 to 4 hours. Regarding 5 hours or more, there were 27 responses.

Based on the data on screen time, only 28 children do not use screens in their daily lives. Most of these are between ages 0 and 2, which aligns with SBP recommendations regarding daily exposure. Two mothers reported that their children do not have access to screens except in situations described as "emergency": performing household chores or cases of extreme necessity-although these were not specified. Some children of other ages also have no screen exposure- two aged 5 and one aged 6, similar to what was previously noted. In isolated cases, one mother of a 4-year-old and two mothers of 3-year-old reported limited access to screens without providing further clarification.

Regarding children who spend 5 hours or more in front of screens, these belong mostly to the 5–6 age group, meaning that older children consume more screen time. The reasons for this duration are varied, as noted by mothers/fathers and guardians: work, distraction, lack of time to give attention, lack of creativity, using technology to calm the child, household organization, a feeling of safety at home, among others.

To better understand the reasons behind excessive screen use, we organized the responses into seven categories presented in Table 1. Participants are referenced using the letter "C" (collaborator) followed by the response number. Table 1 presents each category with corresponding themes, summarizing parents' justifications for allowing or regulating screen time. The most frequently mentioned category was "free time and established time," with 63 responses.

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Table 1 – Justification for Screen Time and Use of Technological Devices

CATEGORY	THEMES
ENTERTAINMENT	Watching films, gaming, music, videos, culture.
FREE TIME AND ESTABLISHED TIME	Time, limitation, segmentation, availability, control, permission.
NO ACCESS	No, harmful, not applicable, does not have.
DOMESTIC TASKS	Household, hygiene, eating, routine, daily activities.
PLAY	Stimulation, fun, development, priority.
KEEPING QUIET	Distraction, distract, stopping.
LACK OF OPTIONS	Work, lack of support, occupation, space, lack of friends.

Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

Analyzing Table 1 confirms Buckingham's (2007) assertion that although children live in traditional nuclear families, they spend increasingly less time with their parents, often under the care of others, and are less likely to have siblings for company.

In the same Table 1, we observe how this assertion is confirmed by the responses received, revealing that some children are exposed to this amount of screen time due to the lack of leisure options, such as outdoor play spaces, limited household space, and the absence of companionship from other children, whether relatives or friends.

Other highly relevant issues regarding screen time relate to the necessity for parents to work outside the home (even when working remotely, the home-office system demands the worker's attention, preventing them from attending to their children); thus, childcare becomes outsourced. In current family arrangements, many mothers need to work and are unable to maintain the desired "access control". As one respondent, C-147, states: *"She stays with another person so I can work, and to keep her entertained they use a cellphone".*

In parallel, there are mothers who do not work outside the home but lack a support network and therefore resort to screen use to accomplish household tasks,

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as expressed by C-249: *"As a mother, I have no support network and end up relying on screens so I can complete some domestic chores".*

According to the responses, we observed that several family members understand the consequences of this type of exposure; however, due to the various demands of daily routines, they end up resorting to this resource. This phenomenon is already part of the lives of contemporary families, who have begun to integrate the use of internet into their daily practices, recognizing both the conveniences and challenges that this tool entails (Wagner, Mosmann, Dell'Aglio, and Falcke, 2010).

Some collaborators reported that screen time varies by day; there is no established daily limit. Some days have higher use, others lower. Participant C-64 explains: "Depending on the day's logistics, this time is segmented, so I am giving an average; I cannot specify daily usage. Some days the duration is shorter". Thus, screen use depends heavily on daily needs — at least regarding household responsibilities.

Conversely, we obtained responses regarding the time limit on screen use, in which parents expressed a certain level of concern about this period. This can be observed in the statement of participant C-2: "Because my husband and I understand the importance of engaging in activities beyond screens. Play activities that stimulate her in diverse ways, including physically". Another mother, C-47, explains how she mediates this usage: "To develop skills and competencies such as emotional regulation, fine motor skills, attention, logical-mathematical reasoning, aesthetics, planning, and strategy, even though he thinks he is just playing. It is a monitored strategy to complement school activities". It is possible to perceive, according to the first statement (C-2), the strategy employed to ensure that the child has certain limits and can use time in diverse ways, such as exploring the environment through play, which reinforces the second statement regarding guidance on usage, where the mother views technology as an ally and employs it as a resource for developing the aforementioned skills.

According to Patrão, Machado, and Brito (2016), it is important for parents to establish rules for technology use at home and outside, protecting children from risks.

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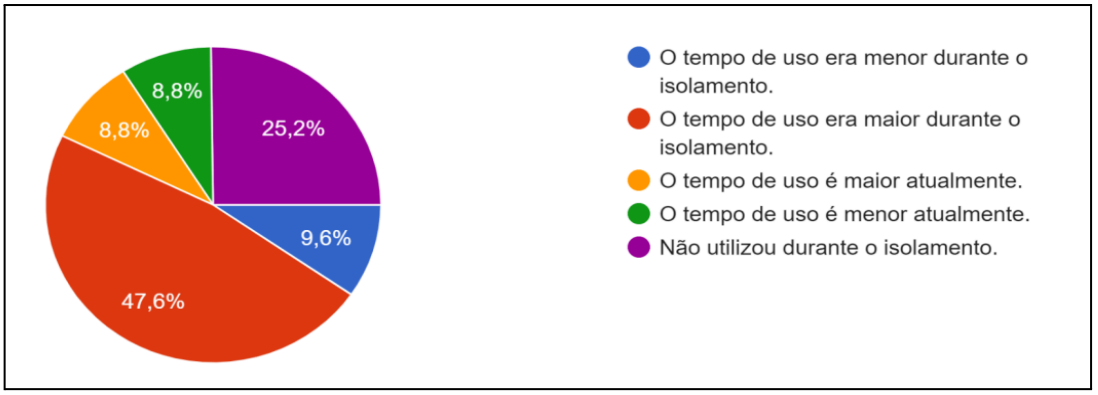
Regarding the analysis of screen time before social isolation and after the return to the so-called "normal," we obtained responses illustrated in Graph 4 in the form of percentages.

Graph 4 – Comparison of Screen Time Before and After Social Isolation



Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

O tempo de uso era menor durante o isolamento	*The time of use was shorter during isolation*
O tempo de uso era maior durante o isolamento	*The time of use was longer during isolation*
O tempo de uso é maior atualmente	*The time of use is longer nowadays*
O tempo de uso é menor atualmente	*The time of use is shorter nowadays*
Não utilizou durante o isolamento	*Did not use it during solation*

According to the collected data, 119 parents reported that children's screen time increased during the period of social isolation, whereas 24 responses indicated a reduction in screen use during the same period. Notably, 63 parents stated that their children did not use screens at all during social isolation. A closer analysis reveals that these children were predominantly within the 0–2 age range, which suggests that, during the pandemic, they were either not yet born or were infants.

When asked about the activities performed by children both during and after social isolation, it was observed that they continued to engage in play-based and recreational activities such as playing with dolls, participating in educational games, watching videos, drawing and painting, playing soccer, engaging in electronic games, playing with toy cars, riding bicycles, among other physically oriented activities.

The transition to remote schooling introduced additional reasons for children to access screen-based devices, thereby increasing their exposure and interaction with digital media. In summary, if prior to social isolation children were already

experiencing substantial exposure to screens, the implementation of remote learning — whether synchronous or asynchronous—further intensified this trend. Moreover, given the positive acceptance of these practices, screen exposure did not significantly decline once isolation measures were lifted.

3.1 Reflections on Screen Use in Early Childhood: Parental and Caregiver Perspectives

Based on parents' and caregivers' perceptions regarding children's screen use, five thematic categories were identified, delineated according to convergent viewpoints. Due to saturation in the responses, descriptions were grouped by conceptual similarity. The results are presented in Table 2:

Table 2 – Categories Based on Parents' Opinions About Screen/Technology Use

1st Parents/guardians who agree with unrestricted screen use.
2nd Parents/guardians who do not agree with screen use.
3rd Parents/guardians who agree with screen use with time limits and guidance.
4th Parents/guardians who do not fully agree but allow use.
5th Parents/guardians who have no formed opinion.

Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

The first category presents parents/guardians who agree with unrestricted screen use. We grouped similar answers into nine clusters. These respondents normalize screen use, with statements suggesting that children of this generation are born immersed in the digital world and separation from technology is nearly impossible. This view is supported by mother C-62: "I think that as the world updates, we adapt to the current moment. And the new generation was born into highly advanced and easily accessible technology; I think it is understandable that they prefer technologically oriented activities".

Among those who support unrestricted screen use, another mother states: "I think theoretically everything is beautiful, but technology helps mothers manage domestic activities" (C-37). Her statement reveals that screens act as an alternative to enable domestic routines, making unrestricted use as a necessity. This reinforces earlier findings regarding justifications for screen time (Table 1).

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The second category includes parents/guardians who do not agree with screen use. This group had 56 responses. Their justifications included: (1) following SBP recommendations due to child age; (2) concerns that screen use is harmful. Many parents view screens negatively because they deprive children of play-based development, interaction, and imagination.

Regarding age, mother C-156 states: "My baby is 6 months old and does not have access to screens. I think it is harmful to her social and cognitive development. I believe children should not have access to mobile phones". She perceives the harm and follows recommendations regarding exposure, which is positive since use is not recommended for children aged 0–2.

Regarding the decision not to allow screen use due to perceived inappropriateness, the following statements are highlighted: C-48: "I believe it is not necessary and that it is highly detrimental to child development, depriving her of experiencing and developing during one of the most important stages of life, which is childhood". C-23: "Something unnecessary, as it removes focus and curiosity about the world and ends up keeping the child confined to these technologies, potentially hindering their development".

In light of these statements, and drawing from Corsaro (2011), children construct identity through peer culture, reinventing and reproducing the surrounding world. Parents' concern is evident regarding how screen use may hinder childhood development, causing children to lose the intrinsic pleasure derived from curiosity, which fosters, for example, investigation, the exploration of new knowledge, and engagement with the world around them.

In an interview with Calixto, Luz-Carvalho, and Citelli (2020, p. 129), David Buckingham states: "[…] now, our personal relationships with friends and family are influenced by digital media. Almost everything is mediated in some way. If we want to prepare children for this world, we must constantly teach them about media".

Although there are negative attitudes toward screen use, Buckingham's comment urges reflection on the importance of mediation as a form of teaching. Parents cannot disengage from mediation, i.e., controlling screen time, which leads us to the third category, consisting of parents who allow screen use but only with supervision and time limits.

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This was the largest category, with 153 responses. According to these respondents, appropriate use involves allowing screens after the recommended age, with guidance, supervision, and purpose. This perspective is expressed by C-17:

> *I believe use should be conscious and age-appropriate, considering studies showing that screen use is not recommended until 24 months. So, I think use should be considered only after that period, with monitoring and caution regarding excess, and avoiding early use. This is to prevent harm to child development and health problems.*

In this statement, we can observe the mother's care and concern not only regarding her child's cognitive development but also with respect to physical health, given that excessive use also entails bodily harm, as warned by Souza, Marques, and Reuter (2020, p. 2): "As a result of inactive lifestyles, sedentary habits are linked to screen time". This warning is reinforced in the explanation provided by another mother, C-31, who states: "I believe that electronic devices can be used depending on the child's age, but always in moderation. I think excessive use may hinder the child's healthy development (sleep, imagination, attention, creativity)". Based on these considerations, it is always worthwhile for parents or caregivers to remain attentive to possible signs that their children may exhibit, in order to identify if, or when, screen use is interfering with their development.

Analyzing another opinion expressed by parents, we have that of C-121: 'I understand that excessive screen use becomes harmful to children's development for several reasons; however, I also believe that total deprivation does not make sense, considering the highly technological society in which we are embedded. Children need to be stimulated in all aspects, which is why I consider limited and supervised use to be, in a way positive, especially when we consider caregivers who must attend to their children while managing other demands.

In this vein, Buckingham (2007, p. 65–66, sic) asserts:

> *Far from being passive victims of the media, children are seen as possessing a powerful form of 'media literacy,' a natural and spontaneous wisdom somewhat denied to adults. New media technologies, in particular, can offer children new opportunities for creativity, community, and self-realization.*

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Buckingham addresses in this statement the notion of "spontaneous wisdom", which is often denied by adults. The children in question, considered part of Generation Alpha, exhibit this characteristic, a naturalized relationship with the presence of screens.

Among the various statements regarding the ways screens are used, one in particular drew our attention, as it illustrates the positive use of this resource in a professional context (as a teacher) while also revealing her perspective as a mother. This teacher-mother, C–250, states:

> It depends on the purpose for which we use it; as a teacher, I use it to exemplify and validate some content through videos or games. As the mother of a baby, I do not like it very much; I think the child receives something too ready-made and does not use parts of the brain that stimulate creativity.

This leads us to reflect on how these resources can enhance pedagogical work in the classroom, given that school is an environment of knowledge construction and children are increasingly embedded in a technological world.

As a professional, C-250's response highlights the benefits of screen use; as a mother, however, she does not view the situation as entirely positive. Still, we observe that even though she "does not like it very much", as she states, she does make use of the resource that is, its use occurs at appropriate moments and with proper guidance, according to her perspective. This demonstrates that it is possible to use screens in a balanced way, without denying children this experience.

The fourth category concerns mothers/parents and caregivers who do not fully agree with screen use, yet whose children nevertheless engage in it. This group comprised 35 respondents. According to some mothers, even when they disagree, they end up allowing screen use for several reasons. Among them is C-108, who states:

> I know it is not good to remain passively watching for hours, but it becomes an alternative used by parents and caregivers for entertainment, since playing in the streets or in residential buildings is not as safe as before due to issues of violence. There is also the issue of parents' limited time, as they need to work extensively to obtain the financial resources necessary for survival.

This mother raises issues that emphasize the transformations in society, considering that children's forms of play a decade ago are no longer the same today. Beyond that, she also expresses the reality of many families, whose current model requires both parents to work, causing children to be exposed to longer periods of screen time, as previously discussed in this study. Reinforcing this perspective, another mother, C-176, states: "I know it interferes with development, but within the hectic and exhausting routine demanded of parents, we end up giving in to screen use". In this sense, we understand the reasons that lead many families to allow this often excessive exposure; however, each family has its own configuration, its members are affected differently by society, and they respond to this reality according to their possibilities.

The fifth and final category reveals a small group of mothers/parents and caregivers who do not have a defined opinion on the subject. Among the responses, we identified four individuals who expressed their viewpoint simply as "I don't know", thus not providing consistent or meaningful material for analysis.

Final Considerations

The advent of the internet, and with it, the optimization of time, the shortening of distances, and the facilitation of communication, enabled a major technological advancement to take root and transform multiple generations. As a result, new ways of living and thinking were established, affecting families and, undoubtedly, children, who began handling screen-based devices with great ease.

This use intensified during the pandemic period and became consolidated during and after social isolation. Thus, families reinvented themselves and began adapting to the presence of technological devices in their daily routines. Through this research, we reaffirm that we live in different realities and that each family has its own structure, which helps us understand the attitudes and positions taken by parents regarding the issue explored here.

Accordingly, we achieved the objectives of the present study, which focused on understanding how mothers, fathers, and caregivers of young children perceived screen use in early childhood during and after the pandemic. Our investigation allowed us to observe that participants' opinions were divided. Among this division, a significant number of parents recognized that children are connected to the technological world, making such contact inevitable. It was possible to identify that children predominantly use television and mobile phones, followed by tablets, computers/laptops, and video game consoles. The use of these devices is justified by mothers, fathers, and caregivers who report feeling the need to entertain children while carrying out professional or domestic activities. Some children do not have access to screens due to their age, while others though a minority, use them freely with parental agreement. Some mothers, fathers, and caregivers argue, however, that such access must be closely supervised so that limits can be established.

As demonstrated in the categories developed from the analyzed content, device use encompasses diverse functionalities: playing games, watching films, accessing social media, and viewing videos on YouTube. With this in mind, it is necessary to establish balance, as reflected in most participants' statements. For them, it is essential to consider conscious and intentional use of these resources, whether for interactive or pedagogical purposes.

Although we reached a substantial number of participants, it is still not possible to generalize the findings. Further studies may be conducted to generate additional insights into these issues, such as the influence of participants' socioeconomic conditions on screen use, a comparative analysis of the pedagogical development of children who have more or less access to screen-based devices, and the role of family organization in justifying such access.

We conclude this study by reinforcing, in alignment with national guiding documents, that children's use of digital devices should occur gradually, in accordance with the progressive development of their autonomy. Based on the *Guide on the Use of Digital Devices* (Brazil, 2025, p. 12), we therefore recommend "no use of screens or digital devices for children under the age of 2, except for video calls with family members and accompanied by an adult; and that children under the age of twelve should not have their own smartphone devices". Finally, we stress that

access to and use of screens in early childhood should be continuously monitored by responsible adults.

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