

Digital Parenting, Adolescent Mental Health, and Risk Behaviours: A Theoretical Framework for Parental Monitoring and Parent–Child Communication in Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital technology has become an important developmental environment for adolescents, shaping learning, identity, peer relationships, entertainment, communication, and exposure to psychological and behavioural risks. This theoretical paper argues that digital parenting should be understood as a multidimensional relational process through which parents guide, monitor, support, educate, and model adolescents' digital engagement. The paper develops an integrative framework linking digital parenting with adolescent mental health and risk behaviours through four psychological mechanisms: observational learning, perceived parental availability and trust, voluntary disclosure and psychological safety, and the development of self-regulation. Social Learning Theory, ecological systems theory, family-systems thinking, parental-mediation scholarship, and developmental perspectives are

integrated to explain why monitoring may be protective when embedded in warmth and communication but counterproductive when experienced as intrusive surveillance, inconsistent control, or parental disengagement. The paper also distinguishes digital parenting from simple restriction and emphasizes that online behaviour is multidimensional: the same digital environment may provide social support and educational opportunity while also enabling problematic use, cyberbullying, social comparison, harmful content, or exploitation. Nigerian psychological-services implications are developed for family counselling, school-based prevention, digital-safety education, and culturally responsive mental-health practice. The paper concludes with theoretical propositions and directions for future empirical research. It does not report a sample, raw data, statistical results, or causal findings; its contribution is conceptual: to position digital parenting as a psychological and family-process intervention relevant to adolescent wellbeing in Nigeria.

Keywords: digital parenting, adolescents, parental monitoring, parent–child communication, mental health, risk behaviours, Nigeria

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by increasing autonomy, identity exploration, stronger peer relationships, cognitive change, and growing independence from parents. These processes now occur within a digital environment. Smartphones, social-media platforms, online gaming, internet-based communication, video services, and digital learning are not simply technological additions to adolescent life; they are part of the social ecology in which young people form relationships, interpret themselves, encounter information, and make behavioural choices.

Digital environments provide substantial opportunities. Adolescents may access educational materials, communicate with family members, maintain friendships, obtain health information, participate in collaborative learning, express creativity, and seek social or psychological support. At the same time, digital participation may expose them to cyberbullying, harmful or misleading content, online harassment, privacy violations, social comparison, sleep disruption, problematic internet use, excessive gaming, online sexual exploitation, and contact with individuals who encourage risky behaviours. The psychological significance of digital technology therefore depends on the interaction among the adolescent, the technology, the family, the peer group, and the wider cultural and socioeconomic environment.

The family remains a central developmental context even when important adolescent interactions occur online. Parents may know where an adolescent is physically located while knowing little about the adolescent's online contacts, emotional experiences, viewed content, or exposure to risk. This creates a contemporary challenge for psychological services: parents must remain involved in adolescents' digital lives without destroying trust, privacy, autonomy, or open communication.

The central argument of this paper is that digital parenting should not be reduced to controlling screen time. It is better understood as a psychological and relational process that includes monitoring, active discussion, rule-setting, co-use, emotional support, online-safety education, parental modelling, and the gradual development of adolescents' capacity for responsible digital self-regulation. This argument maintains the original concern of the manuscript—namely, that parental monitoring and parent–child communication may shape

adolescent mental health and risk behaviour—but reframes the concern as a theoretical problem rather than an empirical protocol.

Conceptual Meaning of Digital Parenting

Digital parenting refers to the ways parents guide, regulate, monitor, support, and model children's and adolescents' engagement with digital technologies. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the construct is multidimensional and that existing measures have not always distinguished clearly among different forms of parental involvement (Modecki et al., 2022). Digital parenting may include restrictive mediation, active mediation, co-use, monitoring, safety education, emotional support, technical assistance, privacy negotiation, and parental modelling of technology use.

This multidimensional definition is important because the same parental behaviour may have different psychological meanings in different families. A clear rule negotiated with an adolescent may communicate care, structure, and protection. The same rule imposed without explanation may be experienced as mistrust or coercion. A parent who asks about online experiences with genuine interest may encourage disclosure, whereas a parent who checks a phone primarily to punish may stimulate secrecy. Digital parenting is therefore not defined only by what parents do but also by how adolescents interpret the behaviour and how it affects the relationship.

The distinction between digital parenting and surveillance is especially important. Monitoring is potentially protective when it is developmentally appropriate, transparent, consistent, and embedded in warmth. It becomes psychologically problematic when it is

secretive, humiliating, excessively intrusive, or disconnected from the adolescent's developmental capacity. The theoretical position advanced here is not that parents should know everything about adolescents' digital lives. Rather, parents should create conditions in which adolescents can seek assistance, disclose danger, and develop progressively greater responsibility.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory proposes that behaviour is acquired and maintained through observation, modelling, reinforcement, and interaction with the social environment. Digital platforms expose adolescents to a large and rapidly changing range of behavioural models, including peers, influencers, celebrities, online communities, gaming groups, and unknown users. These models may normalize aggression, risky challenges, substance use, sexualized behaviour, consumerism, or disinformation; they may also model cooperation, learning, creativity, prosocial action, and help-seeking.

Parents participate in this learning environment in at least two ways. First, they model technology use through their own habits. A parent who is constantly disengaged from family interaction because of a phone may communicate that digital attention is more valuable than face-to-face presence. A parent who uses technology responsibly, observes boundaries, checks information, and demonstrates respectful online communication provides an alternative model. Second, parents can mediate the meaning of digital content through discussion. Active mediation helps adolescents evaluate what they see rather than merely

obey a prohibition. From this perspective, digital parenting is partly a process of

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strengthening critical observation and self-regulation.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective situates adolescent development within interconnected systems, including family, school, peer group, community, media, and broader sociocultural structures. Digital technology cuts across these systems. A digital platform may connect the adolescent's home, school, peer group, religious community, and wider society within a single interactional space.

The ecological framework explains why digital parenting cannot be understood as an isolated parent-child activity. Family income influences device access and data availability. School policy shapes acceptable use. Peer norms influence online participation. Community values influence beliefs about privacy, gender, sexuality, obedience, and risk. National regulation and platform design influence the opportunities and hazards adolescents encounter. Psychological services should consequently avoid blaming either parents or adolescents for problems generated through a wider ecological system.

Family-Systems Perspective

Family-systems thinking treats adolescent behaviour as embedded within patterns of interaction among family members. Problematic digital behaviour may reflect not only individual impulsivity or poor self-control but also family conflict, parental unavailability, unclear expectations, inconsistent discipline, emotional distance, or a lack of safe communication. Conversely, an adolescent's digital difficulties may become a signal through which unresolved family problems are expressed.

This perspective helps explain why parental monitoring and communication should be considered together. Monitoring provides information, but communication determines whether information is voluntarily shared and whether it can be used constructively. In a family characterized by trust, an adolescent may disclose cyberbullying or harmful contact before the problem becomes severe. In a family characterized by ridicule or punitive reactions, the adolescent may conceal the experience. Monitoring without relational safety may therefore generate concealment rather than protection.

Parental-Mediation Theory and Contemporary Evidence

Parental mediation scholarship distinguishes among restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-use. Restrictive mediation establishes boundaries; active mediation involves discussion and interpretation; co-use involves shared engagement with digital content. Modecki et al. (2022) argue that digital parenting requires clearer conceptualization and measurement because the term has been used to describe diverse practices.

Recent review evidence suggests that positive parent–child relationships and a positive family climate may be more consistently associated with lower problematic social-media use than internet-specific rules alone (Vossen et al., 2024). The same review indicates that restrictive mediation may have different effects depending on whether it involves predictable rule-setting or reactive restriction after conflict. Active mediation findings are mixed, and parental phubbing—parents’ preoccupation with their own phones during family interaction—may be associated with problematic social-media use. These findings support the theoretical claim that the relational meaning and consistency of parenting are central.

Psychological Mechanisms Linking Digital Parenting to Adolescent Outcomes

Trust, Disclosure, and Psychological Safety

Parent–child communication may influence adolescent outcomes through trust and voluntary disclosure. Adolescents are more likely to share information when parents listen, avoid immediate humiliation, explain rules, and respond proportionately to problems. Psychological safety does not mean the absence of boundaries. It means that the adolescent expects that disclosure will lead to assistance rather than automatic punishment.

A systematic review of adolescent-rated parent–child communication found relationships between communication quality and several mental-health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and problematic internet or gaming use (Zapf et al., 2024). The theoretical implication is that communication is not merely a channel for transmitting parental instructions. It is a psychological resource that may influence help-seeking, emotional regulation, and the interpretation of online experiences.

Self-Regulation and Gradual Autonomy

Digital parenting should ultimately support self-regulation rather than permanent external control. Adolescents must learn to manage attention, impulses, emotions, privacy, online conflict, and exposure to persuasive or harmful content. Parents can support this development by establishing predictable routines, discussing consequences, modelling balanced use, and gradually transferring responsibility as adolescents demonstrate readiness.

Overly controlling parenting may undermine internal regulation if the adolescent

follows rules only when surveillance is present. In contrast, supportive structure may help adolescents understand why boundaries exist and internalize responsible practices. Digital parenting is therefore most developmentally appropriate when it moves from greater external guidance toward increasing autonomy.

Social Learning and Norm Formation

Online environments provide repeated opportunities for norm formation. Adolescents learn what is admired, mocked, rewarded, or ignored. Likes, comments, views, reposts, and group approval may reinforce behaviour even when it conflicts with family or school values. Parents cannot remove all alternative models, but they can help adolescents question them. Discussion of online content can develop media literacy, moral reasoning, perspective-taking, and resistance to harmful group norms.

Stress, Social Comparison, and Mental Health

Digital engagement may influence mental health through displacement, comparison, conflict, sleep disruption, and exposure to negative social interaction. However, a simple claim that technology is inherently harmful is theoretically inadequate. The effects of digital participation depend on content, intensity, purpose, individual vulnerability, social context, and available support. In a Nigerian study, Onyemaechi et al. (2022) reported a significant relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among undergraduates. Because the study involved university students and used a correlational design, it should be used as contextual evidence rather than as proof of a causal effect among secondary-school adolescents.

Similarly, Onyemaechi and Okafor (2025) reported differentiated relationships among dimensions of social-media addiction, perceived attractiveness, and healthy social interaction among university students. This finding is relevant to the present theory because it suggests that digital behaviour should not be treated as a single uniform exposure. Psychological services should examine whether digital engagement is educational, relational, compulsive, avoidant, conflictual, or supportive.

Risk Behaviour and Protective Processes

Risk behaviours may include substance use, aggression, delinquency, truancy, unsafe sexual behaviour, dangerous online activities, problematic internet use, and exposure to harmful content. The theoretical position of this paper is not that digital parenting directly determines these behaviours. Rather, parenting may influence the psychological processes through which risk becomes more or less likely: access to information, perceived norms, emotional regulation, supervision, opportunity, peer influence, and willingness to seek help.

Parental monitoring may provide information about risk, but communication may determine whether the information becomes an opportunity for prevention. A monitoring system characterized by secrecy and punishment may push behaviour out of parental awareness. A transparent and supportive system may increase disclosure and allow earlier intervention. This is why the proposed framework treats monitoring and communication as complementary rather than interchangeable.

An Integrative Theoretical Model

The model proposed in this paper can be expressed as follows:

Digital parenting practices → trust, communication, modelling, and self-regulation → adolescent interpretation of digital experiences → mental-health and behavioural outcomes.

The model includes four propositions. First, digital parenting is multidimensional; restrictive rules, active mediation, co-use, monitoring, support, and modelling should not be treated as equivalent. Second, the protective value of monitoring is likely to depend on relational climate, perceived fairness, developmental appropriateness, and the adolescent's willingness to disclose. Third, digital behaviour is heterogeneous: the same technology may support education and connection while also creating risk. Fourth, psychological services should target family processes and adolescent capacities rather than focusing exclusively on screen duration.

The framework predicts that parental monitoring will be more protective when accompanied by warmth, clear explanation, and open communication. It also predicts that reactive restriction, parental hypocrisy, emotional unavailability, and intrusive surveillance may weaken trust and reduce disclosure. These are theoretical propositions for future testing, not empirical findings.

Implications for Psychological Services in Nigeria

The framework has implications for family counselling, school psychology, adolescent mental-health services, and community education. Family interventions should help parents distinguish protection from surveillance, establish developmentally appropriate rules, listen to adolescents' digital experiences, and respond to disclosure without

disproportionate punishment. Counsellors can use role-play and communication training to help families discuss cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, online conflict, gaming, sleep, privacy, and harmful content.

School-based psychological services can complement family efforts through digital-safety education, peer-support programmes, media-literacy instruction, and confidential referral systems. Schools should avoid treating every digital problem as a discipline issue. Some behaviours may reflect anxiety, loneliness, bullying, trauma, social exclusion, or a need for belonging. Psychological assessment should therefore consider both the behaviour and the function it serves. In a Nigerian perspective on digital mental health, Onwudiwe et al. (2025) emphasize the potential of mobile applications and teletherapy to expand access to care while also identifying privacy, digital-literacy, infrastructure, stigma, and sociocultural barriers. Applied to digital parenting, this suggests that parents and schools should teach adolescents not only how to avoid online risks but also how to seek psychological help safely through digital channels and how to protect confidential health information.

Cultural responsiveness is essential. Nigerian families differ in household structure, religious orientation, socioeconomic resources, parental education, device access, language, and beliefs about authority and privacy. Digital-parenting guidance should not assume that Western individualism, unlimited connectivity, or private bedrooms are universal. Community support, extended-family relationships, schools, religious organizations, and local mental-health providers may all contribute to adolescent digital wellbeing. Community-based approaches are particularly important where formal psychological services are limited.

The work of Onyemaechi and colleagues provides locally relevant contextual

scholarship for this agenda. Their studies of internet addiction and psychological well-being, and of social-media addiction and healthy social interaction, do not establish the proposed digital-parenting model, but they demonstrate the value of examining digital behaviour within psychological and social contexts relevant to Nigeria (Onyemaechi et al., 2022; Onyemaechi & Okafor, 2025).

Directions for Future Research

The theoretical framework can guide future research without presupposing the results. Studies should distinguish active mediation, restrictive mediation, co-use, monitoring, support, and parental modelling. They should measure adolescents' perceptions as well as parents' reports because the same practice may be interpreted differently by each party. Future work should also examine age, gender, school type, family structure, socioeconomic conditions, disability, and urban–rural context.

Longitudinal, ecological momentary assessment, qualitative, and mixed-method designs may help clarify how digital experiences unfold in everyday life. Research should avoid reducing outcomes to device ownership or hours online. Relevant outcomes include sleep, emotional distress, social connectedness, school functioning, help-seeking, cyberbullying exposure, psychological wellbeing, problematic use, and risk behaviour. Studies involving minors must receive ethics approval, obtain appropriate parental consent and adolescent assent, protect confidentiality, and establish safeguarding and referral procedures for disclosures of harm.

Limitations of the Theoretical Paper

This paper is conceptual and does not provide new participant data, a school-student sample, statistical analysis, or causal evidence. Its propositions are derived from psychological theory and prior scholarship and require empirical examination. The literature on digital parenting also contains conceptual and measurement variation, and findings from university students or other national contexts should not be generalized automatically to Nigerian secondary-school adolescents. Finally, digital platforms change rapidly; theoretical models and psychological-service interventions will require periodic updating as technologies, social norms, and patterns of use evolve.

Conclusion

Digital parenting is a psychological and relational process through which parents help adolescents navigate an environment that offers both opportunity and risk. The central contribution of this paper is to move the discussion beyond screen-time restriction and to connect digital parenting with observational learning, trust, disclosure, psychological safety, family functioning, social norms, and self-regulation. Parental monitoring may be protective, but its effectiveness is likely to depend on the quality of parent–child communication and the adolescent’s interpretation of the monitoring process.

For psychological services in Nigeria, the goal should not be to remove adolescents from digital life. It should be to strengthen family relationships, critical digital literacy, emotional regulation, help-seeking, and responsible autonomy. A theoretical approach is appropriate because it clarifies the psychological mechanisms that future empirical work can test and provides practitioners with a framework for culturally responsive assessment and

intervention. Digital parenting is therefore best understood not as surveillance of technology but as the relational development of adolescents who can participate in digital society safely, critically, and psychologically well.

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