Caregivers' experiences on the effects of screen-time on social interactions of South African children in the intermediate phase

Jacqueline Allison Seiler

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By

Jacqueline Allison Seiler

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree.

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(Play-Based Intervention)

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Supervisor:

Dr. J. Chiba

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Jacqueline Seiler

13 December 2023

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Abstract

The exposure and use of digital devices and screen-time has become an integral part of families' lives (Anuradha, 2019:105). The COVID-19 pandemic restricted people's movement and social interactions (October et al., 2021:221). The strict restrictions have contributed to a shift in where people became more reliant on technology to keep in touch with family and friends as well as employers moving to online platforms and systems for work purposes. Schools in South Africa also promoted online schooling in order to keep up with the school's curriculum. With the restricted movements and the shift to online platforms for work and school, children's social interactions were greatly impacted (Wiederhold, 2020:481).

The research study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of caregivers on how screen-time affects the social interaction of their intermediate-phase children. A qualitative research design was used, which was exploratory, and used an interpretivist lens, this assisted in describing the unique perspectives of caregivers. Using an instrumental case study design, allowed the research to gain an in-depth insight into each case. In total six participants, comprised of caregivers were selected for the study using non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide, which assisted the researcher in engaging in open and meaningful discussions with the participants.

The study's main conclusions revealed valuable insights into how caregivers and their children in the intermediate phase handle screen-time, education, and social interactions. The findings reveal that caregivers had a collective understanding of the definition of screen-time aligning with the literature. Caregivers actively set limits on screen-time acknowledging the importance of monitoring online experiences. COVID-19 increased screen-time posing challenges to social interactions. Despite some mainstream concerns about screen-time, most caregivers acknowledged that it was integral to everyday life, but more awareness could be taught around the differences between active and passive screen-time. A further finding was that parenting styles significantly influence screen-time and the various approaches impact how children engage with their devices. Lastly it was discovered that caregivers mainly felt responsible for education during online schooling.

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List of Key Concepts

- Caregiver
- Intermediate-phase Learner/Child
- Screen-time
- Social interaction

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Social interaction is a fundamental aspect of human development, enabling individuals to communicate, cooperate and establish relationships with others (Cummings & Karraker, 2016:471). It occurs in various settings including family, school, work and social activities. Social interaction can take many forms such as verbal and nonverbal communication and is essential for social, emotional, and cognitive growth (Cummings & Karraker, 2016:471).

Middle childhood or the intermediate-phase is a particularly important time for social interaction and development (Louw & Louw, 2019:8). During the intermediate phase of a child's schooling, children experience significant cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth as they transition from being primarily under the care of their families to developing a greater sense of independence and exploring their identities and interests (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:275). Additionally, this phase is characterised by a child's problem-solving skills, thinking logically, social skills, emotional regulation and physical coordination (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:275). The intermediate-phase typically occurs between grades four and six when children are between the ages of nine and twelve (Department of Basic Education, 2012).

According to Erikson's (1950:247) theory of psychosocial development, children between the ages of nine and twelve go through the stage of "industry vs. inferiority" where they develop a sense of competence and mastery over tasks and a sense of belonging to a wider community. This is in line with the development stage of an intermediate-phase learner and their ability to develop social and academic skills which are needed to succeed in the world (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:275).

Over recent years, both globally and nationally there has been an increased use of digital devices within society. This increased use of digital technology and screen-time has affected the child's development and social interaction (Hu, Johnson & Wu, 2020:183). Screen-time is the use of digital media for entertainment purposes - this excludes video chatting and online learning (Council on Communications and Media et al., 2016). Literature further differentiates between passive and active screen-time (Dunckley, 2015:17; Hu et al., 2020:183; Oswald et al., 2020).

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In recent years there has been a surge in the use of screen-time by intermediate-phase children which was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Clair, 2023). This research addresses the gap in understanding how increased screen-time impacts the social interactions of South African children in the intermediate-phase, nine to twelve years of age. The literature review indicates a lack of comprehensive knowledge in this area, emphasising the under-researched nature of this phenomenon. Consequently, the study aims to shed some light on the impact of screen-time on social interactions with a specific focus on the unique circumstances participants face in the South African context.

To fully understand the complexities of screen-time's impact, the research makes use of two pivotal theoretical frameworks namely Bronfenbrenner's ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory. Bronfenbrenner's perspective allows for an examination of screen-time effects across various ecological settings, offering further insight into the risk and resilience factors which can be used to guide caregivers in promoting positive social interactions. Simultaneously Vygotsky's theory explores the role caregivers play in fostering a child's social interactions in the midst of screen-time challenges. Central to Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development emphasising collaborative learning and scaffolding in cognitive development.

In this study, the following key concepts will be understood as follows:

Caregiver

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (South African Government, 2005) describes a caregiver as any person other than the parent or guardian who is taking care of the child including foster parents, community caregivers or even the eldest child in a child-headed household. The White Paper on Families (Department of Social Development, 2021:180) furthers this by explaining that a caregiver is someone who takes care of a child's most basic needs which encompasses caring about and for a child, as well as their physical care. For the purpose of this research study, a caregiver will be considered as any adult person including parents, grandparents or relatives who tends to and provides the basic safety, educational and social needs of the child who is an intermediary-phase learner.

Intermediate-phase Learner/Child

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According to the Department of Basic Education (2012:8), children in the intermediate-phase refers to a child who is in grades four to six, aged between nine and twelve years. In terms of psychosocial development, a child between these ages is considered to be in middle childhood in Erickson's (1950:247) theory of development. For the purpose of the study, an intermediate-phase learner/child is considered to be a child in grades four to six.

Screen-time

Screen-time is defined as any time spent in front of a device with an electronic screen such as a television (TV), tablet, cell phone and computer (Dunckley, 2015:19; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017:461). This may include the use of screens for activities related to work, school or pastime. In this research, screen-time will be referred to as any amount of time a child spends using or looking at electronic devices with a screen, such as smartphones, tablets, computers or TV for entertainment, education, browsing the internet, texting, chatting, games and other activities such as social media and social communication channels (Priya & Veena-Kumari, 2021:1529).

Social Interaction

This is defined as a process of reciprocal influence by individuals over one another through face-to-face encounters with the purpose of learning, shared feelings, and thoughts (Little, 2016:913). Others refer to social interaction as a stimulation and response process that occurs between two or more individuals through the use of culturally approved methods of communication to share, act appropriately in a way that facilitates social roles, and how children react to one another (Hoppler, Segerer & Nikitin, 2022:1–2). However, in this research study, social interaction considers face-to-face contact amongst individuals and will also include the technological communications that happen through the use of electronic devices such as smartphones.

1.2. Problem Statement and Rationale

Over recent years, there has been an increased use of screen-time by children. This has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which changed how children make use of digital media platforms (Clair, 2023). There is a need to explore how the increased use of screen-time has affected the intermediate-phase child's social interaction.

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Having searched the literature on various databases, it was discovered that there is a dearth of knowledge around screen-time and its effects on children's (in the intermediate-phase) social interaction in South Africa. Given the lack of knowledge, this highlights how under-researched the phenomenon is.

The rationale of the study is to explore and describe the extent to which screen-time affects children's social interaction with others in their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a faster transition of many South Africans relying heavily on the use of digital technology for the purposes of work, school and keeping contact with friends and family. Post-COVID-19 still sees the increased use of screen-time amongst people, including children. Many studies have indicated the effects that increased use of screen-time has on individuals. Social workers are at the front line of providing services and interventions to families and children (Wiederhold, 2020:481–482). In undertaking this study, the research will provide valuable information on the potential risk factors associated with screen-time and children's social interaction with others in their lives, as well as strategies to promote social interaction with others in a child's life. This information could inform social workers' interventions with families and children whose social interactions are impacted by the increased use of screen-time.

The overarching research question the study sought to answer was "*How do South African caregivers experience the effect that screen-time use has on the social interactions of their children?"*

1.3. Goal and Objectives for the Research Study

The goal of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of caregivers on how screen-time affects the social interaction of their intermediate-phase children.

To achieve the goal of the study, the following objectives were pursued:

- To explore and describe the positive and negative experiences of caregivers on the use of screen-time by their children in the intermediate-phase.
- To explore and describe how the use of screen-time has affected the social interaction of children in the intermediate-phase.
- To explore and describe measures promoted by caregivers to engage intermediate-phase children, in social interaction with friends and family.

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1.4. Overview of the Research Methodology

Building on the foundation laid by the literature review which led to some gaps in understanding as explained above, the methodology is a detailed plan of how the researcher plans to unravel the complex nature around the screen-time effects on the social interactions of the intermediate phase children.

Grounded in interpretivism (Maree, 2019:66–68) the research seeks to provide a profound understanding of human behaviour within the participants' natural environment. Qualitative research methods are used in the study to explore caregivers' experiences of the impact of screen-time on their intermediate-phase children's social interactions (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:189; Cooper & White, 2012:6; Trainor & Graue, 2013:129). This approach facilitates in-depth exploration and flexible interpretation of the collected data allowing a rich understanding of the phenomenon.

The study adopts an applied research design, aiming to expand existing knowledge for practical applications. Applied research proves valuable in social work allowing for the development of interventions based on real-life challenges (Hilton et al., 2019:8). The focus is on providing insights that can guide practitioners who assist caregivers of these children in the intermediate-phase to educate them and assist them in managing children's screen-time to promote positive social interactions.

A descriptive and explorative design, specifically an instrumental case study, was chosen to help gain comprehensive information within a real-world context. This approach fosters collaboration between the researcher and the participants (De Vos et al., 2021:96). The study population consisted of caregivers in Johannesburg South Africa residing with and caring for children between the ages of nine and twelve. The research used a purposive sampling method (Fouche, Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:392) through the organisation of the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method allowing participants to share their experiences freely. Thematic analysis guides the interpretation of the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The ethical considerations in this study included ensuring no harm or deception, voluntary participation with informed consent, and maintaining privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. Steps were taken to establish trustworthiness, addressing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole,

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2013:238; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:143). A pilot study was conducted to refine the research process and all ethical considerations were adhered to (Bless et al., 2013:394). The researcher acknowledges and addresses her own values and beliefs that might have influenced the study in order to ensure reflexivity and minimise potential biases, this also enhances the validity of the research (Crowe et al., 2011:7; Parker, 2016:223).

Finally, limitations of the study are included recognising the potential constraints that may have impacted the research outcomes.

1.5. Chapter Outline

The research report will be structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter will provide a brief overview and background of the study and will include the definition of the key concepts that were used in the research. The research statement, rationale, research question, goal and objectives as well as a brief discussion on the methodology that was used in the research will be presented.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter two will provide a comprehensive literature review on the effect screen-time has on social interactions of children during the intermediate-phase, analysing both passive and active screen-time and its effects on attention, behaviour, language development and physical health. The influence of COVID-19 on screen-time and social interaction will also be highlighted in the discussion. This chapter will also present the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The third chapter will summarise the research methodology undertaken in the research, including the research approach, research design and research methods used in the study. Additionally, the ethical considerations that guided the study will be presented.

Chapter 4: Research Findings,

This chapter will be a presentation of the key findings that emerged from the research. This chapter serves as a culmination of the study providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact screen-time has on the social interactions of intermediate-phase children.

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Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter of this research will be a synthesis of the key findings. The conclusions uncover insights drawn from the research and include behaviour, child development, health impacts, the influence of COVID-19 on screen-time patterns and the subsequent effects on social interactions of children in the intermediate-phase. These findings can be used to make practical recommendations to professionals to help caregivers navigate the balance between screen-time and healthy social development. These recommendations along with recommendations for future research are included in this chapter.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In today's digital age, the prevalence of screen-time among children has significantly increased. This can be attributed to various factors. One key reason is the role of screens in communication, as they serve as a means for maintaining and building social connections within families. Video calls with relatives and friends have become common, allowing children to interact through screens from an early age (Bergmann et al., 2022:272). Caregivers also utilise screen-time as a strategy to redirect children's attention. For instance, while occupied with household chores or work, caregivers may permit their children to watch videos or play games on electronic devices (Huang et al., 2021:4521). Additionally, safety concerns, particularly in regions with poverty leading to high crime rates like South Africa, may lead caregivers to limit outdoor play and encourage indoor activities, thereby increasing children's reliance on screens for entertainment (Bergmann et al., 2022:10).

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified screen-time among children. School closures and the shift to remote learning resulted in increased screen usage for educational purposes (Wiederhold, 2020:481–482). Even as schools reopen, technology continues to be integrated into teaching and learning, prolonging children's exposure to screens (Wiederhold, 2020:481–482).

Importantly, the prevalence of screen-time cuts across socio-economic boundaries in South Africa. Children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to screens, although the quality and quantity of access may vary (September, Rich & Roman, 2016:1060–1065; Huang et al., 2021:4521). This sets the stage for the subsequent literature review, which aims to explore the topics of screen-time and social interaction within the context of middle childhood. It begins by conceptualising middle childhood, specifically focusing on the intermediate-phase and the developmental stage of social development. Next, the chapter delves into social interaction, discussing its conceptualisation in middle childhood and its manifestation across various systems. It also examines the impact of COVID-19 on social interaction and explores the relationship between mental health and social interaction during this stage of development. Following that, the concept of screen-time is introduced and analysed within the context of middle childhood. The chapter highlights the roles of

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caregivers in managing screen-time and promoting healthy social interaction among children.

To provide a theoretical framework for understanding the research, the chapter outlines the ecosystems theory and Vygotsky's social interaction theory. These theories offer valuable insights into the interplay between screen-time, social interaction and child development during middle childhood. By examining these aspects, this chapter aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between screen-time, social interaction, and child development in middle childhood.

2.2. Socio-Economic Context of South African Children

Children of South Africa have a unique context in terms of high inequality and a complex socio-economic landscape. When individuals experience deprivation of essential necessities such as food, shelter, and education due to their low socio-economic status, a consequential outcome often emerges in the form of heightened frustration and desperation. Consequently, some individuals may find themselves compelled to engage in criminal activities as a means of addressing their unmet requirements or enhancing their overall life circumstances (Stober, 2016). Moreover, the presence of restricted economic prospects within underprivileged communities can create an environment wherein criminal pursuits appear as a viable means of seeking an escape from their predicament. The risk of crime contributes to safety concerns, leading caregivers to consider using screen-time as a means to keep children indoors and safe (Draper et al., 2020:8). This phenomenon can be attributed to the desire to protect children from potential dangers in the outside environment.

The "digital divide" in Africa and developing countries, including South Africa, has historically limited internet access and affordability (Munsamy, Chetty & Ramlall, 2022:9). However, South Africa, as an upper middle-income country has an increased amount of mobile phone subscriptions and internet usage, especially in urban areas (Munsamy et al., 2022:9) Despite these increases, rural settings still face challenges in terms of access and usage. Rural areas have limited infrastructure and connectivity, leading to challenges in adopting digital technology. Despite these challenges, screen-time is still a prevalent factor, with some rural adolescents regularly using mobile phones and engaging with electronic screens (Munsamy et al., 2022:9). One such study conducted within a rural setting in the Western Cape of South Africa showed that

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at least a third of teenagers regularly used mobile phones and other electronic devices, of these teenagers fifteen percent reported waking up during the night due to a mobile phone at least once a week which means they may be at risk for sleep disturbances and other poor quality of life factors such as anxiety and depression (Munsamy et al., 2022:9). Furthermore, just under half of South Africa's population has been using the internet since 2014 (Jāhāna, 2015:7).These rates are comparable to certain European and North American contexts where one study found a significant increase in screen-time over a nine-year period where the initial usage went from an average of seven hours a day on digital devices to nine hours a day (Larson et al., 2019:967).

In rural settings, parents are less likely to set rules around screen-time and are not as confident in influencing their child's screen-time behaviour (Draper et al., 2020:7).However, considering the transitioning nature of rural settings in South Africa and potential increases in screen access, this aspect requires monitoring into later childhood (Draper et al., 2020:7). In general, excessive screen-time, while serving as a means to keep children indoors as well as a form of learning and entertainment, can have significant implications on their well-being, mental and physical health. Issues such as headaches, decreased physical activity, loneliness, and social isolation are common consequences of prolonged screen-time (Larson et al., 2019:967).Children may spend more time engaging with screens and less time interacting face-to-face with peers and family members which is essential for healthy development (Munsamy et al., 2022:9).However, while mental health issues are possible due to screen-time one must also consider other reasons particular to South Africa such as a high level of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as TB, HIV and other factors such as absent or deceased parents and poor nutrition (Ranjit et al., 2022:495). Nevertheless, outdoor play is essential for children's physical development, social interaction, and overall well-being. Encouraging children to engage in outdoor activities under supervised and safe conditions can help mitigate some of the negative impacts of excessive screen-time. Building a sense of community and trust within neighbourhoods can also contribute to creating safer outdoor spaces for children to enjoy (Tomaz et al., 2020:7).

In light of the complex context of poverty leading to high crime rates and the impact of screen-time on South Africa's youth safety and well-being, it becomes essential to explore how these factors influence the intermediate phase of middle childhood within

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the South African context. While many existing studies predominantly focus on adolescents or preschool children, there is a significant gap when it comes to contextualising these issues for the unique age range of middle childhood, specifically children in the intermediate-phase.

2.3. Conceptualising Middle Childhood

Middle childhood, also known as preadolescence or late childhood, marks the period between early childhood and adolescence. During this phase, children typically range from six to twelve years old (Louw & Louw, 2019:8). This stage of development is where children transition from the growth and development of early childhood to the onset of puberty. This phase is often associated with significant cognitive maturation, emotional regulation, and the formation of social relationships (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:275; Arnett & Maynard, 2013:329; Louw & Louw, 2019:262).

It is a crucial period for building foundational skills that will shape their identities and interactions in the years to come (Zembar & Blume, 2009:4). Children in middle childhood experience a remarkable shift in their cognitive abilities, enhancing their learning capabilities enabling them to tackle more intricate problem-solving tasks. They also begin to understand complex social dynamics and start to learn social norms, adjust to academic and other school requirements l and navigate peer relations (Louw & Louw, 2019:299).Children in the middle childhood phase are in a crucial period of social and emotional growth, their exposure to new social learning experiences significantly impacts their development. They form meaningful peer relationships, engage in cooperative play, and start developing a sense of empathy and perspective-taking (Carr, 2017:85). These children would rather independently regulate their emotions and rely on their own abilities to work with peers than turn to their caregivers to help them manage daily activities (Carr, 2017:85). As children progress through middle childhood and move closer to adolescence, their efficiency increases in creating and using strategies such as distancing or distraction to autonomously regulate intense emotional states and emotionally challenging situations. Carr (2017:85) further explains there is an increased use of skills to face their own emotions as well as those of others. Children also become aware of multiple conflicting feelings, sometimes for the same person, for example being angry at a friend. Friendships with peers in middle childhood provide social support and an opportunity to learn how to manage relationships (Carr, 2017:86). It is important for

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caregivers and educators to be mindful of children's evolving self-esteem and emotional states, as the challenges of navigating peer relationships and personal emotions can impact their overall well-being (Chung et al., 2017:122).

During middle childhood, children enter the intermediate-phase at school, which in South Africa is categorised as grades four to six, aged between nine and twelve years (Department of Basic Education, 2012). In terms of psychosocial development, a child between these ages is considered to be in middle childhood in Erikson's (1950:247) theory of development. For the purpose of the study, an intermediate-phase learner/child is considered to be a child in grades four to six.

Traditionally, research (Zembar & Blume, 2009:63)has concentrated on early childhood and adolescent development, leaving a noticeable gap in understanding the nuances of the intermediate-phase. However, this pre-adolescent period between early childhood and adolescence plays a vital role in shaping a child's development (Zembar & Blume, 2009:63). Investigating the factors that contribute to both risk and resilience during this stage offers invaluable insights. For example, exposure to risk factors like unstable environments such as those plagued by substance abuse and violence, as well as adverse socio-economic conditions can hinder their progress (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004:214). On the other side, protective factors such as strong mentorship, a sense of belonging, and supportive communities can foster resilience and contribute to positive outcomes (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004:214). Understanding the interrelation of these factors is essential for devising interventions that promote healthy development and equip children with the tools to overcome obstacles (Zembar & Blume, 2009:63).

2.4. Social Developmental Milestones for the Intermediate-phase Child

Theorists such as Piaget, Freud and Erikson describe childhood development from various perspectives, however, all three theorists highlight the importance of social interaction during middle childhood (Louw & Louw, 2019:20).

Piaget focused on the cognitive development of the child and categorised middle childhood as the concrete operational stage where children learn various skills to aid their interaction with people, things, and events (Parish, 2014:112). Henderson & Thompson's (2016:37) list of cognitive traits applicable to this age range includes

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conversation skills, being able to differentiate between fantasy and reality, increased capacity for concentration and memory and the ability for reversible thinking.

Freud's psychosexual development theory, groups children in middle childhood in the latency stage, where their sexual urges subside, and their focus moves to the development of social and cognitive skills. Children are understood to acquire new social values from interacting with peers and adults (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:19–20; Louw & Louw, 2019:21–22).

Louw & Louw (2019:22) explain that this stage is where children learn basic skills such as reading, writing and physical self-care and interact with others. Arnett & Maynard (2013:20–21) suggest that children in this phase also begin to explore culture and they gain knowledge and skills to work with other people. As mentioned above, children gain competence when they learn new skills, and one such area is establishing peer relationships, which is a strong predictor of social competence later in life (Louw & Louw, 2019:256). These skills learned during middle childhood lay the foundation for children to form relationships with caregivers, educators, and peers.

- **Physical Development**

In this developmental phase, children undergo dynamic physical growth impacting their well-being and capabilities (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301). Notable milestones include changes in eyesight, hearing, motor skills, and the onset of pubertal developments. Increased academic demands, like reading and writing, may lead to myopia, highlighting the importance of balanced screen-time and proper visual care (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301).

Physical development involves the refinement of gross and fine motor skills (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301; Louw & Louw, 2019:230). Rapid growth spurts may result in a somewhat lanky appearance, with improved athletic abilities and engagement in active play. Children participate in activities like active games, dance routines, and sports during school breaks (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301). Fine motor skills advance, encompassing tasks like tying shoes, drawing, and writing (Arnett & Maynard, 2013; Louw & Louw, 2019:230).

In the intermediate phase, around nine to twelve years, some children may begin puberty, with some beginning as early as nine years in some cases subsequently

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marking physical changes associated with adolescence (Zembar & Blume, 2009:82). Gender differences in motor skills become pronounced, with boys typically exhibiting more advanced skills like running and throwing. Maturation of the frontal lobes contributes to improved decision-making and impulse control (Zembar & Blume, 2009:82; Louw & Louw, 2019:230).

- **Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development in the intermediate phase encompasses language and intellectual growth, marked by a gradual increase in logical reasoning and the acquisition of various learning strategies (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301). Children in this stage exhibit heightened memory skills and refine their abilities to adopt new learning techniques, such as reading and writing (Louw & Louw, 2019:230). Studies suggest that older children generally exhibit more advanced logical thinking patterns than their younger counterparts (Zembar & Blume, 2009:158; Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301; Louw & Louw, 2019:229).

Piaget categorised middle childhood as the concrete operational stage (Parish, 2014:112). During this period, children acquire a repertoire of skills to interact with people, objects, and events more effectively. At this stage, they begin to engage in mental operations for systematic problem-solving and reasoning (Henderson & Thompson, 2016:37). For instance, they grasp concepts like reversibility, understanding that actions can be reversed to their original state. They also start comprehending hierarchies of classes, distinguishing relationships between broader categories, for example, Bruno is a Labrador is a dog is an animal (Louw & Louw, 2019:225). Abstract thinking and hypothetical situations however remain limitations to this stage of thinking as children in this age only care about what is real or concrete and what is in the here and now (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301; Louw & Louw, 2019:225). Cognitive development is not a one-size-fits-all process, as it interacts with various cultural and contextual factors. One limitation of Piaget's theory is how applicable is it to an African or other cultural context as his studies were based in Switzerland in a more Westernised society (Louw & Louw, 2019:225). In South Africa, where cultural and socio-economic dynamics play a significant role, research indicates that parents' education levels and children's exposure to certain educational materials, like mathematics and science, can significantly impact a child’s cognitive development (Louw & Louw, 2019:229). The language aspect of cognitive development in South

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Africa is particularly unique due to the country's linguistic landscape (Zembar & Blume, 2009; Arnett & Maynard, 2013; Louw & Louw, 2019). The majority of children navigate their cognitive growth while being bilingual, reflecting the multilingual nature of the nation with its eleven official languages. This linguistic richness adds layers of complexity to their cognitive processes and interactions (Zembar & Blume, 2009:158; Louw & Louw, 2019:246). For example, studies in rural areas of South Africa Louw & Louw (2019:246) show that language plays a role in how children contextualise things such as Western children referring to plants and then different subspecies or names whereas a rural child in an agricultural context may categorise as edible plants and those that are not edible.

Socio-economic status and the quality of education also intertwine with cognitive development (Louw & Louw, 2019:246). Children's access to quality schooling, learning materials and even nutritional support depends heavily on their socio-economic circumstances (Louw & Louw, 2019:246). Neighbourhood conditions can determine the availability of resources, impacting the overall learning experience. For instance, access to books, a quiet study space, and nutritious food can directly influence a child's cognitive growth (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt 2004:214). This emphasises that cognitive development is influenced by a multitude of factors across various levels, ranging from personal to societal, highlighting the complex interplay between micro, meso, and macro entities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:38).

Cognitive development lays the foundation for social growth, and this connection is particularly evident in social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), where children's observation and cognitive processes play a significant role in shaping their ability to engage effectively in interpersonal interactions.

- **Social and Emotional Development**

The intermediate-phase of childhood is transformative, encompassing enhanced social interactions, emotional intelligence, self-concept, and moral understanding (Arnett & Maynard, 2013; Lightfoot, Cole & Cole, 2013; Louw & Louw, 2019). Emotional development involves personality formation, ethics, motivation, and self-esteem (Zembar & Blume, 2009:258). As children progress, competencies in academics, sports, and cultural activities increase (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:301). Attachments to family and peers deepen, contributing to the construction of individual

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identities (Louw & Louw, 2019:215). Considering risk and resilience factors, personality traits may change depending on the environment, the way an adult reacts or treats a child, the neighbourhood, and values or beliefs taught at school can all influence a child's personality over time (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004:214).

Children refine their self-concept, transitioning from external evaluations to internal perceptions during this phase (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:325). Erikson's industry vs. inferiority stage reflects the struggle between children's belief in their capabilities and feelings of inadequacy (Zembar & Blume, 2009:258; Arnett & Maynard, 2013:325). Self-esteem varies based on perceived competence in different areas.

Emotional intelligence, the ability to monitor and discriminate between feelings, evolves (Louw & Louw, 2019:241). Children grasp complex emotions, recognise coexisting emotions, and identify actions leading to emotions (Lightfoot et al., 2013:465). Language plays a significant role in self-regulation development, enabling children to use cognitive strategies for emotional redirection (Ayoub, Vallotton & Mastergeorge, 2011:584; Louw & Louw, 2019:235). Improved emotion regulation, understanding of facial expressions, and moral reasoning also emerge during this phase (Louw & Louw, 2019:235).

Middle childhood introduces new challenges and dynamics for families (Arnett & Maynard, 2013; Louw & Louw, 2019). Parents face heightened demands, including facilitating extracurricular activities and coping with increased financial responsibilities, such as sports equipment and higher school fees (Louw & Louw, 2019:235). Financial constraints can impact caregivers during this phase.

Children's choices and moral understanding become crucial, influenced by their environment, behaviour, personality, motivation, and beliefs (Bandura, 1971). Peer influence plays a significant role, with observational learning shaping social skills and behaviours (Bandura, 1971). The age of middle childhood is when children start imitating peers, emphasising the importance of positive role models in their lives.

As children become more self-aware, their play preferences evolve, transitioning from parallel or associative play to more complex games and experiments (Louw & Louw, 2019:231). This phase marks a shift from self-focused behaviours to more intricate social interactions. Children engage in board games, word games, computer games,

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and role-playing activities, fostering deeper interactions and role assumptions (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:248).

Relationship dynamics intensify during middle childhood, particularly same-sex friendships, fostering a deeper comprehension of reciprocity in relationships (Zembar & Blume, 2009:260). Peer groups form, and friendships become more profound, indicating social competence through effective emotional understanding and self-control (Louw & Louw, 2019:262). Social skills, including sharing and helping, become crucial for positive interactions (Zembar & Blume, 2009:260).

Modern digital spaces provide opportunities for virtual friendships, transcending geographical boundaries (Zembar & Blume, 2009:347). Platforms like Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite offer children a space for online interactions, impacting social dynamics beyond traditional face-to-face friendships. These digital interactions raise concerns about online safety and parental involvement in children's virtual activities (Kabir, 2021).

2.4. Social Interaction

2.4.1. Conceptualising Social Interaction in Middle Childhood

Social interaction is defined as a process of a two-way impact by people over each other through face-to-face interactions with the purpose of learning, and sharing feelings and thoughts (Little, 2016:913). Alternatively, social interaction can be a stimulation and response process that happens between two or more people through the use of socially accepted ways of communication to teach children how to act appropriately and foster social roles (Hoppler, Segerer & Nikitin, 2022:1–2). However, in this research study social interaction considers face-to-face contact amongst people and will also include electronic communications that happen through the use of digital technology such as smartphones.

Social interaction in middle childhood refers to the methods children use to engage with peers and adults in their lives and how they navigate social relationships and social norms (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). These interactions may take place in a variety of contexts including school, home and extramural activities and may include cooperative play, competitive games, conversation and group activities (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). Furthermore, social interaction in middle childhood is often characterised by enhanced social awareness and empathy, as well as a growing understanding of

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the complexities of social relationships (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). For this research, the context of social interaction will be discussed based on children's interactions with caregivers, educators, and peers.

2.4.2. Social Interaction Across Various Systems

In the complicated web that is human social interactions, the dynamics of Micro, Meso, and Macro ecosystems play a pivotal role in shaping the way we connect, communicate, and navigate the world around us. It is therefore essential that we consider various systems in understanding social interactions. Caregivers, as the first point of contact, play a pivotal role in shaping their children's understanding of social norms, roles, and interactions. They lay the initial foundation through guidance, setting examples, and providing a safe space for exploration (Singer & Singer, 2012:304). However, it is important to recognise that these teachings do not exist in isolation. As children grow, they become exposed to a broader range of influences, such as school environments, peers, and extended family. These external systems introduce new perspectives, values, and ways of interacting. School environments, for instance, expose children to diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of empathy and adaptability (Singer & Singer, 2012:304). Peer interactions offer opportunities for social learning and the development of interpersonal skills. Extended family dynamics further shape children's understanding of social roles within a broader community context. Acknowledging these various systems helps us appreciate the multifaceted nature of social interactions and enables a more holistic approach to nurturing well-rounded individuals (Wentzel, 2022:586).

- **Social Interaction with Caregivers**

Although children who are in middle childhood spend a significant amount of time at school, their family remains the core of the child’s life and provides the base and security that is needed for their development (Louw & Louw, 2019:262).

Caregivers naturally have an influence on a child’s development, however during middle childhood children become less dependent on their caregivers for active help – for example with homework, getting ready for school, studying and peer interactions. Arnett and Maynard (2013:329) and Louw and Louw (2019:262) explain this shift in family dynamics as coregulation, which is explained as the caregiver-child relationship in which children are able to engage in independent, self-directed behaviour while their caregiver provides broad guidelines. A cooperative caregiver-child relationship based

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on give-and-take and mutual respect develops through the shift to coregulation (Louw & Louw, 2019:262).

- **Social Interaction with Educators**

In middle childhood, teachers/educators play a critical role in shaping children's social interactions (Verschueren, 2015:83). Teachers fostering secure attachments positively impact students' social and emotional development (Verschueren, 2015:83). Creating an inclusive, supportive environment with emotionally responsive and consistent teaching builds trust and security, enhancing social competence (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009:295–296).

To promote positive social interaction, teachers can encourage cooperative learning and instil positive social norms like sharing and taking turns (Verschueren, 2015:84). However, challenges exist, with a 29:1 learner-teacher ratio in public schools in South Africa, hindering individualised attention (Department of Basic Education, 2012:3). Awareness of biases, beliefs, and effective communication with caregivers is crucial for fostering inclusivity (Wells, 1978; Verschueren, 2015:86).

Recommendations include teachers building strong relationships, providing social skill practice, and using positive reinforcement (Verschueren, 2015:86). Ongoing professional development on attachment theory and social-emotional development is beneficial (Verschueren, 2015:86). Teachers, more than caregivers, should actively facilitate friendships and arrange constructive seating plans (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009:296).

- **Social Interaction with Peers**

In middle childhood, children are motivated to interact with peers for friendship and fellowship (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). These peer interactions can shape identity positively or negatively (Bruce & Hansson, 2011:315; Louw & Louw, 2019:274). Wentzel (2022:586) highlights the crucial role of peer relationships, offering companionship, entertainment, emotional support, and problem-solving skills. Research also shows that good peer relationships correlate with better academic performance (Wentzel, 2022:586).

Social interaction with friends refines children's social skills more effectively than that with adults (Louw & Louw, 2019:274; Singh & Verma, 2021:424). Positive peer

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experiences are vital for language, cognitive, and social development (Bruce & Hansson, 2011:314–315). Understanding and being understood are key for accessing peer interactions, and fostering listening, comprehension, and expressive skills (Singh & Verma, 2021:424).

Disconnection in peer interaction may arise when a child avoids relationships (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). In this way, screen time is linked to social disconnection, reducing in-person interactions, and compromising social relationships (Paulich et al., 2021:1).

2.4.3. COVID-19 and the Impact on Social Interaction

Children's lifestyles and routines have been affected by COVID-19 safety measures. Some of these measures in South Africa included heavy lockdown levels and, if infected, a quarantine period (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020:164). This impacted the increase in unemployment rates, closure of schools, the inability to visit and socialise with family and friends, increased inequalities for those living in poverty, food insecurity and increased mental health and psychosocial challenges in both adults and children (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020:164). With COVID-19, children were unable to play freely with friends and thus crucial peer social interactions were affected (Irwin et al., 2022:110). In addition, many children were isolated from family and friends contributing to feelings of loneliness, which adversely affected self-esteem and motivation (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020:164).

Another regulation for preventing the spread of COVID-19 was the mandatory use of masks in public spaces. In South Africa, where the lockdown levels decreased and public places including schools resumed, both adults and children were still expected to wear masks (Ruba & Pollak, 2020; Irwin et al., 2022:111). An important aspect of communication is the ability to see a person's non-verbal communication including their facial expressions (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020:164). Ruba & Pollak's (2020) study on children and the wearing of masks, found that children were still able to make accurate inferences about emotions, even when parts of the face were covered. The findings further suggest that masks are unlikely to dramatically impair children's social interactions in their everyday lives. The children made inferences from facial configurations that were not covered, such as eyes (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020; Ruba & Pollak, 2020). However, (Irwin et al., 2022:111) argued that mask-wearing posed issues for young children trying to communicate and socialise, as masks conceal important identifying facial features and facial expressions. In addition, children may

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have more difficulty recognising people and reading emotions when interacting with others (Irwin et al., 2022:111; Ruba & Pollak, 2020).

As a result of the heavy lockdown levels and limited opportunities to interact with friends and family, children's use of screen-time increased and has continued post-COVID-19.

2.4.4. Mental Health and Social Interaction

Human beings, inherently social creatures, thrive on connections and relationships with others, shaping their identity and well-being (Alkire et al., 2018:3928). Social interaction encompasses cooperation, competition, status, social roles, group dynamics, leadership, and conformity (American Psychological Association, 2018).

However, a dichotomy exists between social isolation and social connection. Social isolation, experiencing poor-quality and insufficient social relationships, can lead to loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Huang et al., 2021:4521). In contrast, strong social connections are linked to higher happiness levels, reduced stress, and better physical health (Saeri et al., 2017:365). Social connection is also subjective and has been defined as an experiential feeling of belongingness, relatedness, and connection based on quantitative and qualitative feedback from others (Van Bel et al., 2009:1). Research (Saeri et al., 2017:365) has shown that people that have strong social connections tend to experience higher levels of happiness, reduced stress, and even better physical health. On the other side, social isolation, or being disconnected from meaningful relationships, can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Saeri et al., 2017:365).

In the digital age, screen-time has transformed the concept of social interaction, incorporated electronic devices and altered how children communicate with peers. This shift underscores the evolving nature of social engagement in contemporary society.

2.4.4.1 Cyberbullying and Its Impact on Social Interaction

Yang et al. (2021:9) note the difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, which are both forms of intentionally harmful aggressive behaviours directed at individuals with weaker physical or psychological strength. Traditional bullying involves more face-to-face interaction and includes verbal abuse, physical attacks, and social exclusion. Whereas cyberbullying involves bullying through the means of electronic

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devices and social media in order to threaten, harass, or otherwise humiliate a person, online bullying allows the perpetrator to remain relatively anonymous and harmful content to spread quicker (Mantey, Yockey & Springer, 2023:2). A study by Ranjit et al. (2022:459) confirms the connection between screen-time and depression in adolescents, they note that various aspects such as reduced time spent on fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, sleep quality due to extended screen-time use, decreased physical or recreational activities which can lead to social isolation, insecure attachment styles, and low self-esteem which can hinder their ability to engage in both online and offline interactions. Approximately half of South African teenagers in their mid to late teens experienced depressive symptoms as reported by both themselves and their caregivers. Of this half, teenagers with severe depressive symptoms were reported to have higher levels of screen-time, particularly over weekends (Ranjit et al., 2022:459).

In terms of the social isolation and social connectedness discussion, victims of cyberbullying can feel isolated and emotionally disconnected due to the threats, rumours or other hateful comments received (Mantey et al., 2023:2). This may cause them to withdraw from both online and offline interactions to avoid further harm which increases the feelings of isolation and loneliness (Mantey et al., 2023:2). On the other hand, if the victim is supported by their online connections who rally to support their friend, which may lead to solidarity and connectedness, although this can also lead to negative and hostile online interactions between groups which may overshadow any positive ones (Van Bel et al., 2009:5). The section which follows will look at conceptualising screen-time and explore the effect of screen-time use on children and their development.

2.5. Conceptualising Screen-time

Screen-time refers to the time spent watching TV, cell phone, computer and any other use of electronic screens for both educational and non-educational purposes (Dunckley, 2015:19; Anuradha, 2019:105; Kaye et al., 2020:3661; Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Dunckley (2015:19) indicates that screen-time includes time spent on texting, video chatting, browsing the internet, gaming, emailing, engaging in social media, using apps, shopping online, writing and word processing, reading from a device and even scrolling through pictures on a phone.

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Dunckley (2015:19) and Huang et al. (2021:4521) identify two types of screen-time interactions which are passive and active screen-time use.

Passive screen-time refers to watching TV or other electronic devices (Dunckley, 2015:19). This is normally associated with inactivity, apathy, and laziness (Dunckley, 2015:20). Excessive passive screen-time has been linked to attention deficits, social and behavioural concerns, cognitive difficulties, language delays, sleeping disorders, eating concerns and obesity in children (Huang et al., 2021:4521). This type of screen-time has been associated with multifaceted challenges. The rapid visual and auditory stimuli characteristic of screen-based entertainment can condition a child's attention span to frequent shifts, potentially leading to difficulties in sustaining focus on tasks demanding prolonged concentration (Dunckley, 2015:20). Furthermore, passive screen-time can be linked to diminished social skills. Extended periods of solitary screen engagement may inhibit the development of face-to-face interpersonal abilities, as well as the capacity to interpret non-verbal cues and maintain nuanced social interactions (Louw & Louw, 2019:282). The proclivity towards sedentary behaviours during passive screen engagement can also disrupt sleep patterns and dietary habits, potentially leading to issues such as sleep disorders and obesity.

Active screen-time refers to screen activities in which the user regularly interfaces with an electronic screen device such as work, education and research (Dunckley, 2015:19). Educational content and interactive applications can be powerful tools for learning during middle childhood, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills in engaging formats (Dunckley, 2015:19). However, even within the context of active screen-time, moderation remains crucial. Excessive engagement in active screen-time activities, such as prolonged use of digital learning platforms, could inadvertently lead to the displacement of outdoor physical activities and unstructured play. These forms of engagement play a pivotal role in fostering creativity, social interaction, and holistic physical development (Huang et al., 2021:4521).

2.5.1. Screen-time and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way families and children interact with technology (Kanekar & Sharma, 2020:336). Globally and in South Africa, human interactions were limited as schools, public places and offices were closed. People were required to stay at home and work from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions implemented by the government (October et al., 2021:221;

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Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Mesce, Cerniglia & Cimino, 2022:255). Thus, the pandemic created a unique situation where families and children had a lot of free time on hand, resulting in children entertaining themselves for long hours in front of the TV, playing video games, using smartphones and tablets instead of the usual outdoor activities they were used to at school, extramural activities or otherwise (Al-Balushi & Essa, 2020:164; Ruba & Pollak, 2020; Irwin et al., 2022:111). Children and caregivers also relied heavily on screens for homeschooling, shopping, work, and social events over video conferencing platforms such as Zoom (Pandey & Pal, 2020:2; Wiederhold, 2020:481; Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Desai & Burton, 2022:113; Mesce et al., 2022:255). A survey conducted during the early stages of the pandemic indicated an over fifty per cent increase in internet use globally (Beech, 2020:1).

2.5.2. Effects of Screen-time

As indicated above, the rise in technology during the COVID-19 pandemic found children spending more time in front of screens. Various research studies were conducted to understand both the negative and positive effects of screen-time use (Guernsey, 2007; Sigman, 2012:935; Hu, Johnson & Wu, 2018:183–185; Allen, Walter & Swann, 2019:9; Rahman et al., 2020:13; Chauhan, Sharma & Sikka, 2021:2605; Mesce et al., 2022:255; Munsamy et al., 2022:3). Louw & Louw (2019:247), and Munsamy et al. (2022:2) note that media technologies can provide some benefit to young children. These may include exposure to new ideas and skills through TV programmes. Playing computer and video games may develop computer literacy skills in children. It is however important to note that not all computer games and TV programs are appropriate, and some can be harmful to children (Mesce et al., 2022:255).

Furthermore, children may also be at risk for cyberbullying, where they may be bullied or exposed to traumatic pornographic/sexually explicit images (Desai & Burton, 2022:113; Mesce et al., 2022:255). Additionally, the excessive use of digital technology could pose a risk for children developing an internet addiction later in life (Ho et al., 2014:183; Dunckley, 2015:21). Dunckley (2015:17) notes that excessive screen-time use includes the disruption in the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain, leading to a range of mental and emotional symptoms such as moodiness, irritability, anxiety, insomnia and difficulties with focusing and attention.

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Lastly, as mentioned above, screen-time also displaces time spent engaging in real-life social interaction where children develop communication, cognitive and social skills through their relationship with caregivers and peers (Sigman, 2012:935). This displaced time can negatively affect the development of social and relational skills of children (Munsamy et al., 2022:2–4).

2.5.3. Balancing Screen-time

Technology has had a major impact on what it means to be social and the universal confusion on screen-time caused many debates, one in particular between Sigman (2012:935) and Ashton and Beattie (2017:293). Sigman (2012:935) argues that children should have limited screen-time, while Ashton and Beattie (2017:293) suggest that the evidence is inconclusive and that caregivers should use their judgment on how children use screen-time.

It is the reality that all are exposed to some form of screen-time and therefore caregivers are to take a more balanced approach to screen-time, encouraging children to engage in other activities, such as outdoor play, socialising with friends and family and engaging in hobbies and interests (Sigman, 2012:938; Cohen, 2018:278; Hu et al., 2020:3; Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Munsamy et al., 2022). The authors also emphasise the importance of setting limits on screen-time, both in terms of duration and content, and suggest that caregivers should be aware of the negative effects of excessive screen-time. Dunckley (2015:22) stresses that screen-time affects children differently and caregivers must be cautious about trying to distinguish between good and bad screen-time or between too much and only a little.

2.6. Roles of Caregivers When It Comes to Screen-time and Social Interaction

In the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a caregiver is defined as any individual, aside from the parent or guardian, who assumes responsibility for a child's care. This encompasses foster parents, community caregivers, and even the eldest child in a child-headed household. The White Paper on Families (2021:180) further explains that a caregiver is an individual who tends to a child's fundamental requirements, including both their emotional and physical well-being. This entails not only physically caring for the child but also genuinely caring about them. For the purpose of this research study, a caregiver will be considered as any adult person including parents, grandparents or

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relatives who tends to and provides the basic safety, educational and social needs of the child who is an intermediary-phase learner.

Parenting styles are crucial in shaping the parent-child relationship and manifest through various approaches involving behaviours, attitudes, and expectations (Zembar & Blume, 2009:266). There are four discernible parenting styles, each impacting screen-time and social interaction, which will now be discussed briefly.

Firstly, authoritative parenting adopts a balanced and nurturing approach, establishing clear expectations while remaining responsive to the child's needs. Encouraging open communication, authoritative parents set reasonable limits on screen-time, and provide explanations. This style promotes a healthy equilibrium between screen-based activities and other engagements, fostering well-rounded skills (Veldhuis et al., 2014:3). Contrastingly, Authoritarian Parenting is characterised by strictness, emphasising obedience and discipline with rigid rules. This style may impose strict rules on screen-time without thorough explanations, potentially limiting responsible usage. Social interactions might be encouraged if they align with the parent's expectations, but there might be less emphasis on allowing the child to make their own choices in this regard (Halpin et al., 2021:826).

Permissive Parenting is characterised by lenience and indulgence and embraces nurturing acceptance of children's desires while avoiding strict boundaries. Struggling with setting limits on screen-time, permissive parents may inadvertently foster excessive usage. However, since permissive parents are nurturing, they may also encourage social interactions to ensure their child's well-being. They might be lenient with their child's social engagements, prioritising their happiness (Halpin et al., 2021:826). Lastly, Uninvolved or Neglectful Parenting lacks emotional engagement and responsiveness, potentially leading to neglect and behavioural issues. Uninvolved parents may not closely monitor screen-time or social interactions, resulting in excessive screen-time and limited guidance on balanced usage and social interactions (Veldhuis et al., 2014:3).

Therefore, the authoritative parenting style is associated with socially responsible children, emphasising realistic demands for intellectual growth with a moderate level of tension (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:277). Research highlights the enduring impact of

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parenting styles on children's development, emphasising the necessity to adapt approaches as children grow (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:277).

In the intermediate phase of childhood, parents play a crucial role in nurturing their children's growth, development, and social interactions. As children transition from being directed in their behaviour to becoming more responsible and adult-like, parents step into the role of monitors and guides (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:276). This section explores the multifaceted responsibilities of parents in supervising screen-time and fostering healthy social interactions during middle childhood, drawing from research and literature.

Modern-day parenting involves co-regulation, which means that parents are still the overall supervisors and controllers but can involve children in day-to-day decision-making (Louw & Louw, 2019:263). As children start to manage daily tasks on their own, parents shift control and responsibility onto the child, however, this does not mean a parent should let go altogether (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:276; Louw & Louw, 2019:263). The focus shifts towards achievement and industriousness and away from behavioural control to help the child transition to adulthood (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:276). Modern-day parents seek to be more involved with education, monitoring children's social interactions, and assigning household chores and responsibilities (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:276).

Smetana (1999:311) discusses how parents socialise their children and how this socialisation can affect their moral reasoning and behaviour. For example, parents may use different strategies to teach their children moral values, such as reasoning, punishment, or moral emotion socialisation (Smetana, 1999:311). Additionally, parents who use positive reinforcement and rewards to reinforce moral behaviour tend to have children who are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour.

Parents also play a crucial role for children's friendships and social development. In their study, Hollingsworth and Buysse (2009:295) discuss the roles of parents in establishing friendships for young children. Parents who provided support and opportunities for socialisation, as well as fostered inclusive and supportive environments, positively affected children's friendships and social skills. Most parents believed specific friendships to be important emotional resources for children, helping them fit in and giving them confidence. Some respondents saw these friendships as

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contexts for children's learning about relationships, while others believed that the lack of exposure to same-age peers outside of school made these friendships crucial for children's social development (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009:295). In line with this Wells (1978) highlights the importance of listening to children and valuing their contributions to conversations. This can help children develop their communication skills and build confidence in their ability to express themselves.

In managing children's behaviours, including screen-time, parents exert influence, setting rules and impacting overall well-being (Tomaz et al., 2020:8). Integrated guidelines for physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep collectively known as 'movement behaviours' emphasise the holistic approach needed for children's cognitive development and psychosocial health (Draper et al., 2020). These guidelines recognise the natural integration of these behaviours throughout a 24-hour period, offering a more unified message for parents, caregivers, teachers, and practitioners. Emphasising the significance of these movement behaviours for cognitive development and psychosocial health in early childhood, the guidelines align with the WHO Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Reports, addressing the prevention and management of obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (Draper et al., 2020). South Africa (SA), known for its high burden of NCDs and the highest obesity prevalence in Africa, has become the first low- and middle-income country (LMIC) to establish 24-hour movement guidelines for children aged birth to five years. The guidelines effectively present recommendations for physical activity, sedentary behaviour (including screen-time), and sleep in a cohesive manner (Draper et al., 2020).

Culture also plays a role in how children are raised and therefore describes the level of monitoring and expectations that parents have on their children (Zembar & Blume, 2009:266). In rural settings, despite limited access to screens, parents were least likely to set rules about screen-time and were less confident in influencing their child's screen-time behaviour (Tomaz et al., 2020:8). However, considering the transitioning nature of rural settings in South Africa and potential increases in screen access, this aspect requires monitoring into later childhood (Tomaz et al., 2020:8).

The role of parents in supervising screen-time and fostering social interactions during middle childhood is multifaceted and dynamic. From nurturing attachments and moral

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development to managing screen-time and encouraging communication, parents provide the foundation for their children's healthy growth and development. The evolving parent-child relationship and cultural influences further shape this phase of childhood, highlighting the need for thoughtful and supportive parenting strategies.

Having considered the above literature it is worth delving into prominent theories that shed light on the complex interplay between children, their environments, and their cognitive development. The effect of screen-time on the social interactions of children in the intermediate phase will be explored in this study from two specific theoretical frameworks.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks that the study will adopt are Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive approach to understanding human development through the process of reciprocal interaction between humans, the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994:38) and the effects of screen-time on the social interaction of intermediate-phase children.

2.7.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystems Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994:38) emphasises that child development occurs within the context of multiple interconnected systems, and children are exposed to various risk and protective factors within these settings. Using the ecological risk model, stemming from this theory, will provide insight into the effects of screen-time on the social interaction of intermediate-phase children in different ecological settings, including the individual, family, school, community and socio-cultural levels (Olson & Goddard 2010:1-2; Tolan, Gorman-Smith & Henry, 2003:276-277). By understanding the risk and protective factors related to screen-time in these settings, we gain insights into how caregivers can promote positive social interactions among children in the face of the potential negative effects of excessive screen-time.

Mbedzi (2019:87-93) highlights the inseparable nature of the different systems that influence human development. It is noted that an imbalance in one part of the system can have a ripple effect throughout the entire ecosystem, leading to psychological tension and social problems in other parts of the system. When studying the effect of screen-time on children's social interactions in the intermediate-phase (nine to twelve

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years), the ecosystems theory can provide a useful framework for analysis. The theory suggests that human development is influenced by various systems or environments and recognises the imbalances that exist (Mbedzi 2019: 96-97, Bronfenbrenner 1994:38).

In the case of screen-time, the microsystem includes the immediate environment in which the child interacts with screens, such as the home, school, and peer group (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017:902). The mesosystem includes the connections between these microsystems, such as the relationship between a child's home and school environments. The exosystem includes the external factors that indirectly affect the child's screen-time, such as media policies and cultural attitudes towards technology (Mbedzi, 2019:96-97). The macrosystem includes the larger cultural and societal context that shapes attitudes towards screen-time and technology (Mbedzi, 2019:96-97). By applying the ecosystems theory to the study of screen-time and social interactions, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between a child and their environment.

Additionally, the concepts of energy and adaptation can be useful in understanding how screen-time affects social interactions (Mbedzi, 2019:91-92). Energy refers to the force that drives transactions in the ecosystem and can be positive or negative (Mbedzi, 2019:91). In the case of screen-time, energy can be transferred between the child and their environment, influencing their social interactions. Adaptation refers to the ability of a child to adjust to changes in their environment, including changes in screen-time (Mbedzi, 2019:92).

Finally, the concept of interdependence can be useful in understanding the broader societal effects of screen-time on social interactions (Mbedzi, 2019:92). By recognising the interconnectedness of all elements in the ecosystem, including individuals, families, communities and social systems, the researcher can develop a more nuanced understanding of the effects of screen-time on social interactions and can identify opportunities for collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual support within the ecosystem.

Van Breda (2018:13) argues that the ecological perspective is useful for understanding the complex and dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, and for recognising the influence of various systems and contexts on individual

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development and well-being. Van Breda (2018:13) notes that the ecological perspective emphasises the importance of considering the social environment and its effect on individual functioning. In the case of screen-time and social interactions in children, this means recognising how the use of screens (microsystem) may be influenced by factors such as family dynamics (mesosystem), community norms (exosystem) and cultural values and beliefs (macrosystem).

Additionally, Van Breda (2018:13) highlights the concept of resilience from the ecological perspective, which refers to the ability of individuals and communities to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. In the context of screen-time and social interactions in children, this means considering how children may develop resilience skills in response to screen-related challenges such as cyberbullying and balancing between screen-time and natural communication or developing alternative forms of social interaction (Olson & Goddard, 2010:1).

Overall, the ecosystem theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the effect screen-time has on children's social interactions. By recognising the interconnectedness of different systems, the dynamic nature of human development and the potential for resilience in response to adversity, researchers and practitioners can develop a nuanced understanding of the effect of screen-time on social development and identify opportunities for promoting positive change and supporting the well-being of children and communities.

2.7.2. Vygotsky's Social Interactions Theory

Vygotsky's social interactions theory proposes that individuals are the product of human social activity by emphasising the importance of social and cultural factors in learning and development (Card, 2014:167). According to Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017:904), Vygotsky's theory of development is multifaceted and integrated, encompassing biological, social, cognitive, and emotional aspects. The theory emphasises that learning occurs through social interactions and children's development is enhanced by interacting with people who have more advanced knowledge and skills such as caregivers. This is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (Cherry, 2022). By exploring the role of caregivers in fostering children's learning and development, the research can provide insights into how caregivers can support children's social interaction skills in the context of screen-time use.

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The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is central to Vygotsky's theory. It refers to tasks that are too difficult for children to master by themselves, but they can accomplish them with guidance or assistance from adults or more skilled peers (Louw & Louw, 2019, 2014:168). In this way, Vygotsky emphasises the importance of collaboration and scaffolding in learning and development, rather than simply telling children what to do (Louw & Louw, 2019, 2014:168). In Vygotsky's view, children construct their own knowledge through dialogue with others in their social environment and they regulate their actions and goals through self-talk. Therefore, learning is viewed as a collaborative and socially mediated process that occurs within a social context (Card, 2014:167). In the case of screen-time children may be able to learn and interact with others through digital platforms in ways that they would not be able to do in face-to-face interactions. However, it is important to consider the quality of the interactions that occur through screen-time and whether they promote children's development of social skills.

Vygotsky's theory is particularly relevant when studying the effect of screen-time on children's social interactions between the ages of nine and twelve because it highlights the importance of considering the cultural context in which children develop their cognitive skills (Vélez-Agosto et al. 2017:904, Wang, Bruce & Hughes 2011:298). According to Wang et al. (2011:297), Vygotsky believed that children's cognitive development is influenced by the tools and concepts which are culturally and socially constructed, such as language, memory aids and scientific concepts. Hence children's social interaction and development cannot be separated from their social, cultural and historical context (Card, 2014:167). In the case of screen-time, digital technology is a significant cultural force that has become increasingly prominent in children's lives in recent years (Vélez-Agosto et al. 2017:904, Wang, Bruce & Hughes 2011:298).

The use of both Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Social Interaction Theory of Learning as theoretical frameworks for the research provides a comprehensive approach to exploring the effects of screen-time on the social interaction of intermediate-phase children. By understanding the child’s different contextual risks and protective factors related to the effects of screen-time on social interaction, and the role of caregivers in fostering children's learning and development, this research can contribute to the field of social work by providing insights and

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pointers into how caregivers can promote positive social interactions among children in the context of screen-time use.

Having reviewed the existing literature on screen time and social interactions in the intermediate phase, it is now necessary to do an empirical investigation on this topic. While previous studies have offered valuable insights into the potential implications of excessive screen-time on interpersonal relationships, there remains a gap in understanding the nuances underlying these effects. In the next section, the detailed methodology of this study is described.

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Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In recent years, there's been a noticeable surge in children's screen-time, a trend amplified by the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their digital habits (Clair, 2023). Therefore, building on the insights gained from the literature review in Chapter 2, which highlighted some gaps in understanding screen-time and the effects on children's (in the intermediate phase) social interaction in South Africa. This chapter now pivots towards the research methodology. This chapter begins with a discussion of the research approach, type of research, research design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation finally ending off with the ethical considerations. The limitations of the research will also be considered in this chapter.

3.2 Research Approach

Interpretivism serves as the underlying paradigm for this research, where the aim is to gain a better understanding of human behaviour by studying people in their natural environment (Maree, 2019:66–68). The interpretivist perspective believes that better insight is obtained when developing a sense of understanding of the meaning imparted by people to phenomena (Maree, 2019:66–68). According to Nieuwenhuis (2019:67), the researcher has to immerse themselves in the participants' perspectives and clarify how they interpret this event.

This research approach allowed for rich data to be collected by describing and exploring how people made sense of their situations. The researcher made use of a qualitative research approach (Maree, 2019:58–59). Qualitative research was suitable for exploring and describing caregivers' experiences of the effect screen-time had on their children's social interactions. While qualitative research could be time-consuming, its flexibility aligned well with the interpretivist approach adopted in this study. Combining qualitative and interpretivist approaches allowed for flexible interpretation and presentation of the comprehensive data collected from participants. The use of qualitative research methods ensured that rich data was collected to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:189; Cooper & White, 2012:6; Trainor & Graue, 2013:129).

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3.3 Type of research

An applied research design was used in this study. Applied research involves utilising data to expand upon existing knowledge of a particular phenomenon. This knowledge was then applied to benefit practitioners and policymakers, enabling them to make informed decisions and deliver services effectively (Hilton et al., 2019:8). Applied research is a type of research that seeks to solve practical problems or answer questions that are relevant to real-world situations (Adler & Clark, 2015:359). It is particularly useful in the humanities field where research findings could have a direct impact on individuals, organisations and communities (Bless et al., 2013:7). Applied research is often distinguished from basic research, which seeks to advance theoretical knowledge in a particular field (Adler & Clark, 2015:359). However, applied research could also aid in the development of theory and assist in identifying new research questions and areas of inquiry (Adler & Clark, 2015:359).

This study used applied research as the area of interest was of a practical nature (Maree, 2019:9). Applied research methods were used to gather data on caregivers' experiences of their children's screen-time and its effect on social interactions. The findings of this research could be used to develop interventions or programs that social workers could use to help caregivers manage their children's screen-time in a way that promotes positive social interactions.

3.4 Research Design

The study used a descriptive and explorative design, which allowed for an understanding (De Vos et al., 2021:96; Leedy & Omrod, 2013:94–97) of how caregivers experienced the effects that screen-time has on the social interactions of South African children in the intermediate-phase. The instrumental case study design allowed the researcher to conduct research within real-world contexts using a single or small number of cases to obtain in-depth information (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:90). This advantage benefited the researcher in meeting the paramount objective of this study.

This approach allowed for close collaboration between the researcher and the participants, enabling the participants to share their stories (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:90). This study formed part of a group research project by postgraduate students in the Masters in Social Work (Play-based Interventions) degree, which had the same goals and objectives. However, each researcher carried out their own separate study with a

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sample of participants recruited from a location of the researcher's choice. Each researcher conducted their own data collection and analysis of the datasets.

3.5 Research Methods

This section includes a discussion on the study population, sampling method, data collection and the data analysis process using thematic analysis. The data quality in this research is confirmed by trustworthiness, which comprises credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all of which will be discussed. Lastly, the limitations of the research and the pilot study are outlined.

3.5.1 Study Population and Sampling

The target population for the research were caregivers in South Africa of children between the ages of nine and twelve years, as it was believed that they could best provide information on the effect screen-time has on their intermediate-phase child.

The sample for the study was drawn using non-probability sampling, specifically making use of purposive sampling. The researcher selected participants with relevance to specific features that were of interest to the research (De Vos et al., 2021:392). This sampling method was advantageous as it ensured that thick and rich data was generated in relation to the phenomena (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:93). Furthermore, this sampling method allowed the participants to have aspects in common, enhancing the transferability of the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:93).

The researcher approached a Non-profit Organisation (NPO), Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC) that helps children and families in the Parktown area of Johannesburg, South Africa. Permission was granted to the researcher to access participants via the organisation for the purposes of the research. The recruitment process involved distributing posters and leaflets within the organisation, and the NPO administrator also extended verbal invitations to potential participants. This ensured that the research was inclusive of individuals who may have limited literacy skills. The administrator, rather than a social work professional, extended the verbal invitations to reduce the risk of participants feeling pressured or obliged to participate due to their service provider relationship.

The participants of this research were selected with reference to the following inclusion criteria (Bless et al., 2013:177):

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- Caregivers who provide care for children aged between nine and twelve years of age.
- Caregivers had to be residing with the child.
- The caregiver had to be over the age of majority.
- The caregiver had to be able to speak English.
- The caregiver and child had to be residents of South Africa.

The sample comprised of six participants and data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, whereby no added information or themes became apparent, and no new insights came from the data collection phase (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018:34).

3.5.2 Data Collection

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher used interviews as a method of data collection. A semi-structured interview schedule was utilised in this study, allowing the participants to share their own views, opinions, thoughts and ideas without the influence of the researcher's assumptions (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:108). Furthermore, this allowed the researcher to probe or clarify where needed, leading to in-depth exploration (Maree, 2019:110). The interviews were conducted in person and in settings where privacy and confidentiality could be ensured. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate data capture and enable in-depth analysis of the rich insights shared by participants.

The disadvantages of the semi-structured interviews are that it is time-consuming and could incur costs such as transport, and participants might give short or vague answers (Maree, 2019:110). However, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages as the open-ended questions used allowed the researcher to ask questions that assisted in gaining knowledge of the phenomenon on a deeper level (Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey, 2015:494).

3.5.3 Data Analysis

On completion of the interviews, the audio recordings of each interview were transcribed. This allowed for the researcher to make use of thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015:250) to analyse the data. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes found within the

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data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006:250). Data analysis was guided by the steps of (Creswell, 2013:182–188).

Step 1 – Familiarisation: The researcher familiarised herself with the data collected by reading and re-reading transcripts and listening to audio recordings to develop in-depth knowledge and engagement with the data set. Notes of non-verbal communication were analysed to help the researcher find non-verbal meanings (Clarke et al., 2015:230).

Step 2 – Coding: Coding was used as the first step in identifying the patterns in the data. The researcher grouped similar data segments together and assigned a code or label to each data unit. This process formed the basis for identifying and comparing themes found in the data (Clarke et al., 2015:230; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:116).

Step 3 - Searching for themes: The researcher clustered the codes together to create a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data (Clarke et al., 2015:236). The researcher considered how different codes may combine to form one theme using brief descriptions for each code on a separate piece of paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006:19).

Step 4 - Reviewing themes: During this phase, the researcher reviewed the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appeared to form a coherent pattern. The themes that did not have enough data to support them, other themes with data that were too diverse, and some themes that collapsed into each other or needed to be broken down into separate themes were identified. The researcher selected themes that were specific enough to be discrete and broad enough to capture a set of ideas contained in numerous text segments. Data was reduced into a more manageable set of significant themes that succinctly summarised the text. This stage allowed the researcher to have a good idea of the different themes, how they fit together, and the overall story they told about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006:21).

Step 5 - Defining themes: During this stage, the researcher defined and refined themes that were presented for analysis by identifying the essence of what each theme was about. The researcher went back to collated data extracts for each theme and organised them into coherent and internally consistent accounts with narratives. The researcher wrote up a detailed analysis for each individual theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006:22; Clarke et al., 2015:240).

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Step 6 - Producing the report: A report was produced and involved the final analysis of the data. The researcher was cognisant of presenting the themes to best represent the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006:23; Nowell et al., 2017:10)

3.5.4 Data Quality

Establishing trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research to ensure the reliability and validity of data analysis, findings, and recommendations that accurately represent the experiences of the participants (Bless et al., 2013:236; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:143). To achieve this, the researcher addressed key aspects of trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017:3).

3.5.4.1 Credibility

Credibility is the confidence that can be placed in the truth of research findings. Credibility was established to ensure that the qualitative research results were believable from the perspective of the participant in the research. To enhance credibility, the researcher developed an early familiarity with participants and the organisations, ensuring a well-defined purposive sampling and detailed data collection method. Moreover, peer debriefing sessions between the supervisor and the researcher were ensured.

3.5.4.2 Transferability

Kumar (2011:185) defines transferability as the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings. The researcher achieved transferability by ensuring a thick description of the research, providing a full account of the context, participants, and research design and analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:144).

3.5.4.3 Dependability

Dependability is concerned with whether the findings will be the same if conducted twice (Babbie, 2001:278). The researcher ensured the consistency and reliability of the research findings and the degree to which research procedures were documented. A detailed audit trail, accounting for the methods of data collection and analysis and all decisions relating to the research, was reflected upon and detailed in a journal (Babbie, 2001:278; Kumar, 2011:185; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:145).

3.5.4.4 Confirmability

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Confirmability is the degree to which the results can be confirmed or corroborated by others. To ensure credibility, the researcher looked at the degree of neutrality and the extent to which the findings of a study were shaped by the participant and not by the research bias, motivation, or interest. The researcher reduced biases by admitting their predispositions (Kumar, 2011:185; Nieuwenhuis, 2019:145)

3.5.5 Pilot Study

To improve the quality of the data and correct any shortfalls in the research process and instruments, a pilot study was conducted. This aimed to determine whether the data collection instrument was appropriate and would yield the necessary data to answer the research question (Bless et al., 2013:394). Therefore, the researcher interviewed one participant as part of the pilot study. No concerns arose after the pilot study, and the interview schedule was not refined or amended, and the instrument's effectiveness remained unchanged when using it with the study sample (Hilton et al., 2019:10). The data gathered in the pilot study yielded relevant rich data, which contributed to understanding the research question and it was included as part of the data analysis and research findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher requested permission to conduct and proceed with this research project from the identified organisation and the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

Ethical clearance for this research project was secured, as detailed in Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance, ensuring that all aspects of the study adhere to the necessary ethical standards and guidelines. Furthermore, to ensure the protection of the participants in the proposed study, the following ethical considerations were adhered to.

- **No Harm or Deception:** No harm, physically or mentally, was inflicted on participants in any way; participants were fully informed of the purposes, questions, processes, and results of the study (Babbie, 2017:62; Hilton et al., 2019:73). The above ensured that the participants knew what to anticipate before their participation. The researcher took all necessary measures to ensure that participants were not harmed in any way during this study. This included using appropriate language to avoid emotional harm and maintaining the confidentiality of research data. The researcher followed relevant research

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guidelines and adhered to the South African Council for Social Service Code of Ethics to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. The participants may have been affected by the content shared within the interview with the researcher as the data is emotional, sensitive, and personalised. Then the researcher ensured that this aspect of harm was provided for. The researcher had a designated counsellor, Gabriela Völkel, at (JPCCC) appointed through a formal agreement letter, available for follow-up counselling to ensure psychosocial support was obtained for the participants. While one participant became emotional during the interview, it is noteworthy that none of the participants required follow-up counselling services.

- **Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent:** Participation was always voluntary, and no one was forced to participate in the research (De Vos et al., 2021:116). The researcher informed all participants that participation in this study was their choice, and they could decide to withdraw their participation at any time (Maree, 2019:48). The researcher provided the participants with a letter of informed consent, which explained the focus area of the study, research goals and objectives, the role and responsibility of the participant, ethical considerations, and what the researcher planned to do with the study. Thus, ensuring the participants made an informed decision to participate in the research study (Maree, 2019:48). Furthermore, the participants were informed that the research data would be stored for ten years according to the University of Pretoria policy and POPI Act. If participants agreed to voluntary participation in the study, they were required to sign off on the letter of informed consent.
- **Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Anonymity was maintained and interviews were not associated with specific participants (Maree, 2019:48). The participants' names were not mentioned during the interviews, which were audio recorded. The researcher alone transcribed the interviews. The participants were informed that information would be treated as confidential and used for research purposes only. The safekeeping of data is important (Maree, 2019:49); therefore, the researcher ensured that the data collected would be stored securely.

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3.7 Reflexivity and Positionality

According to Holmes (2020:2), positionality refers to an individual's values and beliefs that are shaped by various factors, including political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, and status. To ensure that these factors did not interfere with the data-gathering process, the researcher identified and acknowledged their influences. This process of acknowledging and addressing individual influences is referred to as reflexivity, as defined by Corlett and Mavin (2017:378). Before entering the participants' realities and settings, the researcher identified and addressed any personal influences that could potentially impact the research study.

In acknowledging the researcher's positionality, it is important to recognise the various facets that shape her perspective. As a white, middle-class female conducting research in the context of South Africa, a country with a complex socio-cultural history, the researcher is acutely aware of the potential impact of her demographic on the research process. Being a social worker with an interest in and background knowledge of play therapy adds another layer to her identity, influencing both her understanding of the subject matter and her approach to interactions with participants. It is crucial to note that many participants were familiar with her role as a social worker, introducing a dynamic where responses may have been influenced by a perceived expectation of socially desirable answers. The researcher's commitment to transparency and reflexivity has been integral in navigating these potential biases, ensuring that the study remains mindful of the inherent complexities introduced by her positionality.

3.8. Limitations of the Study

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the exploration solely relied on caregivers' perspectives, omitting the valuable insights that teachers might offer regarding social interactions and screen-time in the educational setting. While one participant was a grade 1 teacher, her contributions were centred on personal experiences with her own children rather than a professional viewpoint.

Secondly, the study's sample size was limited to six participants, while there was some diversity in age, gender and ethnicity the study only offered a snapshot of caregiver experiences in a specific organisation. This narrow representation raises concerns about the generalisability of the findings to a broader population of caregivers and intermediate-phase children. Additionally, the participants predominantly belonged to

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a socio-economic bracket ranging from lower to middle-upper class, potentially excluding the experiences of caregivers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The recruitment process, focused on a specific organisation in Johannesburg, may have inadvertently created a sample bias, limiting the diversity of socio-economic perspectives.

Furthermore, the study's geographical restriction to Johannesburg might not capture the diverse experiences prevalent in other cities or provinces of South Africa. The unique challenges faced by rural or lower socio-economic groups might differ significantly, contributing to an incomplete understanding of the broader landscape.

Additionally, the study did not explore the perspectives of the intermediate-phase children themselves, offering an incomplete picture of their experiences with screen-time and social interactions. Future research should consider including the voices of both teachers and children, expanding the participant pool to ensure a more comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Finally, a language barrier, as the researcher primarily communicates in English. This became particularly pronounced when participants occasionally used Afrikaans or other native languages during interviews. Transcribing these sections posed a challenge, and while efforts were made to accurately capture the essence of the conversations, language differences may have introduced nuances or limitations in fully understanding and interpreting participants' expressions.

3.9 Conclusion

Chapter 3 provided a comprehensive explanation of the methodological design used. This was justified together with the research design, data collection and data analysis and interpretation. Additionally, measures employed to minimise risks to participants were also discussed.

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Chapter 4: Research Findings and Interpretation

4.1. Introduction

When conducting research, the findings are important in that they showcase the end result of the study. Examining the literature, it is clear that there has been an increased use of screen-time by children in recent years. This has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which changed how children make use of digital media platforms (Clair, 2023). The study was done in the geographical area of Johannesburg with participants who are caregivers to children in the intermediate-phase between nine and twelve years of age.

This research delves into the experiences of caregivers, exploring how screen-time influences the social interactions of intermediate-phase children. Therefore, themes and sub-themes (see Table 2) were developed from the caregiver responses. The themes include focusing on both positive and negative aspects of screen-time, its impact on social dynamics, and the strategies parents employ to manage screen-time while fostering social engagement. This chapter will begin with exploring the biographical details of the participants and will then move on to discussing the themes and sub-themes which were generated from the data analysis process. Furthermore, the themes and sub-themes will be supported by verbatim quotes from the interviews and relevant literature.

4.2. Demographic Profile of Research Participants

Six caregivers were interviewed about their experiences of how their child's social interaction has been influenced by the use of screen-time. The table below provides the demographic profile of the research participants. As confidentiality was promised to the participants, their names are not included, and codes will replace the names.

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Participation Code	Gender	Language	Ethnicity	Age of child	Relationship to child	Type of family	Participant Code
Pilot	M	English	White	11	Father	Single Parent living with extended family	PC1
Participant A	F	Isizulu	Black	10	Mother	Divorced living with another partner	PC2
Participant B	F	English	White	11	Mother	Nuclear family living together	PC3
Participant C	F	Afrikaans	White	9 & 10	Mother	Nuclear family living together	PC4
Participant D	F	English	Black	11	Mother	Nuclear family with father and son out of the house during the week	PC5
Participant E	F	English	White	10	Adoptive Mother	Nuclear family with adopted children	PC6

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Of the six participants interviewed, five were females and one was male. All the females recognised themselves as the mother of the children. This reflects the gendered nature of care in South Africa, where the majority of caregivers are women even if they are not the biological mothers (Hatch & Posel, 2018:267). The research participants' ages ranged between thirty-two and fifty, with the average age being forty-one. Four of the participants identified their families as nuclear families, whilst one was a single parent living with extended family and another was divorced and living with a new partner. Lastly, the average age of the participants' children was 10 years of age indicating that they are in the intermediate-phase.

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4.3. Themes and Subthemes

While processing the data derived from the six participants' transcripts five main themes emerged. These include family characteristics in terms of how the caregiver views their family and certain traits that their intermediate phase child possesses. The next theme explored screen-time in terms of caregivers understanding of it, the limits they set for their child and the positive impact and challenges experienced related to screen-time. Additionally, strategies that caregivers use to monitor screen-time and behaviour as well as some support strategies that are used. Furthermore, the theme of social interactions and other activities the children engage in or that are encouraged by the caregiver. Finally, COVID-19 experiences will be explored in terms of caregiver and child's experience of online school and the positive and challenging experiences of current schooling since COVID-19. Each of these themes and subthemes will be looked at, supported by participants' verbatim quotes and relevant literature. Below is a table that outlines the themes and sub-themes which will be discussed in detail:

Main Themes	Subthemes
1. Screen-time Use	• Conceptualising screen-time • Screen-time limits • Challenges with screen-time • Positive experiences with screen-time
2. Strategies used by caregivers to monitor screen-time and behaviour	• Support strategies
3. Social Interactions	• Other activities children engage in or that are encouraged by the caregiver
4. COVID-19 Experiences	• Online school experiences • Challenges with school since COVID-19 • Positive school experiences

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

4.4. Family Background Context

The participants were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds which reflects the variety of family compositions and economic statuses in South Africa. This section allows for a more contextual understanding of this study. Children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to screens, although the quality and quantity of access may vary (Huang et al., 2021:4521; September, Rich & Roman, 2016:1060-1065). Of the families interviewed, distinct family structures emerged. According to

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recent statistics from Statistics South Africa thirty-eight per cent of children live in single-parent households with a significant portion residing with extended family members for support (Statssa, 2021). This can be seen by P1 "*So, I am divorced for five years now. I have a nine-year-old daughter. now I stay with my dad. (My child) and myself at my old family home" [PC1]*.

There was a nuclear family where the husband and eldest child lived away from home during the week due to work and boarding school and the caregiver tries to co-parent with another family. This reflects the modern fluidity of family dynamics and support networks. *"my daughter like we, my son is a boarder started this year, and my husband works out of town. so it's mainly my daughter and I are at home during the week. We've become friends with the family, so they spend quite a bit of time together as well. And kind of co-parent at the moment" [PC5].*

Other families stuck to the traditional nuclear families but exhibited unique trajectories. Such as, one family who have relocated around the country quite frequently in recent years. Which is emphasised by Statssa (2021) where approximately eighteen percent of households have moved in the past five years, indicating a common trend of mobility among families in the country. *"We moved to Port Elizabeth. We lived there for about two years. We moved back to Cape Town for 11 months. And then we moved to Joburg so pretty stock standard normal. I would say" [PC4].*

Furthermore, the study demonstrates how divorced caregivers navigate post-separation family dynamics in terms of new relationships. Co-parenting and maintaining positive relationships with ex partners were highlighted as a key feature in providing stability for the child involved. *"I have one child, who's 10 years a girl, from my previous marriage. We have an amazing relationship with the father. Co-parent, so well. She has an amazing relationship with her father. the three of us don't do anything together the three of us, but they do stuff together. And I do stuff with (my child). And I mean, I'm seeing somebody else think I could say, like, traditionally, I can say we are married, because he paid lobola, so obviously we do things with him" [PC2].*

Additionally, families with adopted children contributes to the narrative as we gain deep insights into the challenges that adoption brings. According to Mokomane and Rochat (2012:5) there were over 3000 adoptions in 2011 emphasising the growing prevalence of adoption as a means of family formation. "*it's myself, my husband, I'm 50 He is 54.*

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And we have two sons who are 10 and eight, (Child 1) and (Child 2). We live in the Sandton area. they're both adopted" [PC6].

Beyond structural differences each family displayed unique traits and values such as describing themselves as "foodies" and prioritising family time and communal meals "*We are South African I think 90% of the time we braai a lot. We are foodies, we like going to restaurants as well" [PC4].* Others emphasised the resilience and adaptability of their children reflecting on their personalities and strengths. These different personality perspectives such as introspective, outgoing and assertive add depth to our understanding of family dynamics and their impact on screen time practices.

4.5. Screen-time Use

4.5.1. Conceptualising Screen-time

Screen-time refers to the time spent watching TV, cell phone, computer and any other use of electronic screens for both educational and non-educational purposes (Dunckley, 2015:19; Anuradha, 2019:105; Kaye et al., 2020:3661; Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Dunckley (2015:19) indicates that screen-time includes time spent on texting, video chatting, browsing the internet, gaming, emailing, engaging in social media, using apps, shopping online, writing and word processing, reading from a device and even scrolling through pictures on a phone. All caregivers that were interviewed concurred and had a fairly similar way of defining screen-time and broadly defined it as any time on a device with a screen.

"Screen-time is any time that your kid is watching a tablet or a phone or a TV or games, anything where the attention is focused on the screen" [PC1].

"Screen-time for me is being on the phone whether you're playing games, watching YouTube, whether it's educational or not … or entertaining" [PC2].

"Screen-time is anything phone, tablet TV they are all screen-time. So, whether you are working on your computer, you are playing a game on your phone. You're watching TV, that's all screen-time" [PC5].

Caregivers provided their opinions and perceptions of screen-time highlighting the multifaceted nature of the digital world and the various effects across age groups and internal conflicts caregivers face in navigating its role in their children's life. With some saying it's a useful disciplinary tool, others saying screen-time is different for adults, and some viewing screen-time as taboo for children.

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"so, screen-time, as much as it's bad and taboo, that it's destroying our children and all these things, like, it's a good way to enforce discipline" [PC1].

"Also, when you get older, like dad, he's in front of the computer all day. And that's not... well, I suppose it is by choice. But that's your work. You can't you got to kind of put the divide between work and pleasure" [PC3].

This dichotomy aligns with the previous research of Dunckley (2015:19) and Huang et al. (2021:4521) who identify two types of screen-time interactions which are passive and active screen-time use. While some caregivers noted the differences in screen-time having both positive and negative effects, they did not necessarily describe it as active and passive. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding by acknowledging its dual nature in both positive and negative ways and emphasises the importance of moderation and purpose when it comes to screen-time.

"I think they're both positives and negatives. I think if you look at it, there are times when there's a lot that she learns, right. And there's a lot of positive stuff from being on the screen. She watches all these strange things, and she tries them out. So that's fine. But the negative part is that couch potatoes, we've got couch potatoes, they do nothing, she'd rather sit and be on her phone, or whatever it is, rather than doing things outside. So, I wish that there was a nice healthy balance, you know" [PC5].

"I think it's a dual approach, right? So, I think it can just like anything it can do good and bad, like a gun can be used to protect someone, you know, like a cop could have a gun and protect you… not in South Africa. But yes, they could. And then also gun can kill someone and be used by a murderer. So, I think it's got dual purposes" [PC1].

Additionally, caregivers discussed the integration of screen-time into various components of their children's lives including leisure activities, social interactions and educational pursuits. This view aligns with literature highlighting the pervasive nature of screen-time in modern society (Livingstone & Smith, 2014:50). However, this understanding helps conceptualise screen-time not only as a standalone activity but as something intricately woven into various aspects of children's lives.

"She loves dancing. So, she does a lot of music and dancing. Yeah. So, because she doesn't have a phone and I also don't have TikTok on my phone, but they upload them on YouTube, the YouTube and dance routines" [PC2].

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The use of screen-time amongst intermediate-phase children also varied as children use it depending on the restrictions on content that the caregiver provides This then provides an understanding of the types of screen-time that intermediate-phase children engage in, showing the variety of platforms and content they interact with. For example, the mention of specific platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Netflix, Showmax, and various online games (Minecraft, Among Us, Roblox) offers a clear picture of the digital landscape these children navigate.

"YouTube, Netflix, Prime. But they mostly watch YouTube. There are certain people that I allow them to watch. He's eight years old and he can pretty much identify every car. So, which is awesome" [PC4].

"Yes, games online? What do they call that game? ROBLOX!" [PC2].

"They play Among Us. I don't know how it works. I don't know they try and find out who's the who's the imposter" [PC4].

The caregivers' considerations about content restrictions, such as not allowing TikTok and subscribing to ad-free YouTube due to safety concerns, highlight the awareness and active involvement of parents in regulating their children's screen-time experiences. Their efforts to navigate these challenges highlight the importance of parental involvement and digital literacy in managing children's screen-time use (Mendoza, Kim & McLeod, 2020:55).

"We've all seen social media. We've all heard the warnings and be read to things that are there are things that they not allowed; I will not allow them to have their own TikTok. It's not allowed on any of our phones" [PC4].

"So, the main thing on TV they watch, they tend to follow series on Netflix or Showmax. We don't watch DSTV. And I don't really, I'm a bit nervous. With YouTube, I actually bought a subscription to YouTube just so that ads don't show because I find you know, if you're not careful with YouTube, it just starts showing you all sorts of adverts that aren't necessarily appropriate for your kids…. So, you're always with Netflix and Showmax because they literally just watch the series, and it stops" [PC6].

The next subtheme will look at caregiver restrictions on screen-time in more detail.

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4.5.2. Screen-time Limits

From speaking to the participants, it is clear that there were different types of limits set, the first being time limits and the other content limits. Literature also emphasises the importance of setting limits on screen-time, both in terms of duration and content, and suggests that caregivers should be aware of the negative effects of excessive screen-time (Sigman, 2012:938; Cohen, 2018:278; Hu et al., 2020:183; Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Munsamy et al., 2022:3). All of the caregivers indicated that time limits changed depending on whether it was during the week or the weekend. Some thought there was less during the week. Some caregivers reported stricter limits during the week, with use being prioritised for educational purposes only, whereas weekends often showed more relaxed restrictions allowing for more leisurely screen-time use.

"if they do have screen-time in the week, it will only be like 30 minutes. And on weekends, we still you know, if we have a busy weekend, we'll still try and say, look, you can watch one or two episodes, or maybe on one of like a Saturday or Sunday, they can watch a movie" [PC6].

"During the week, it's only for schoolwork. she's having this no screen-time during the week. Except for maybe if we watch like, an episode, favourite program, just one, you know, like after everything, just after homework and everything, and everything. But basically, it's just for schoolwork during the week, during the weekend, depending on what she has done during the week. And she gets two hours for herself a day" [PC5].

Comparatively other participants felt that there was more screen-time during the week as compared with weekends due to time-constraints and used weekends for more outdoor or interactive activities. This highlights the dynamic nature of screen-time management and family routines.

" if she's alone, generally, the screens involved. Her screen-time is less in the weekend compared to the week because we have more time for her then. So, in the weekend we go karting we're in the garden, we are doing all great things. In the week, the period from when she gets home, and she's done her homework to the point that I knock off work, or someone's got time for her. That's generally screen-time" [PC1].

Content limits were also evident and set by caregivers, while some adopted a more relaxed approach, allowing their children to choose within certain boundaries, others imposed stricter restrictions based on their values and concerns. Participant 1 nicely

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sums up two shared opinions that you need to have a balance between independence and parental guidance when it comes to screen-time.

"So, it's not that I restrict it. I just Limit it. I Limit it. So, she's watching YouTube, and she's watching rubbish, then sometimes I'll go, Listen, you don't want to change the channel, you don't want to watch anything that's got some type of nutrition to it. if I can put it that way. So, we're done, turning off. We finished. So, I kind of leave it in her choice to decide what she wants to watch, but then guide her based on her decision" [PC1].

"There are two (Star Wars episodes) that I have banned, because I just think they're a bit too dark, and they've got stuff in it that these guys aren't actually ready for. But we're not saying no to Star Wars doing Star Wars, because it's awesome. But with our kind of, yeah, within our what we find acceptable as a family" [PC3].

Moreover, some caregivers implemented proactive measures such as age restrictions and certain content filtering on digital platforms. For example, PC2 and PC4 take a pro-active approach in restricting certain words and limiting the chat function both in WhatsApp and You Tube comments section.

"I went on her YouTube channel, and I restricted some things. So, some words when you type them in certain words, okay, anything with sexual content, even if it's just kissing or anything with sexual content. I've blocked it on Google and on YouTube with Netflix as well, she has her own account. It's all kids, kids' kids' stuff. Kids things. Yeah. It's called Kids Netflix" [PC2]

"YouTube, they can do but they're not allowed to comment. I don't want them to put something out there. That will be at this age that will be there for the rest of their lives. So don't want him to do that. They don't have any social media accounts. WhatsApp, they both have got WhatsApp, but they've literally only got family members names on there and each of them got a friend as they can talk to you for if they need something for school or whatever" [PC4].

However, maintaining these boundaries posed a challenge for some caregivers as their children sometimes circumvented restrictions or negotiated for extra screen-time. This highlights the ongoing negotiation and renegotiation that goes into screen-time

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rules and family dynamics which emphasises the need for constant re-enforcement as well as open communication. This is accurately portrayed by PC5 and PC6.

"They're allowed to watch one or two episodes, and then it's done. And they've got to turn the TV off themselves and doesn't always work. Sometimes they sneak in an extra episode. So sometimes he's tried to negotiate with me and say, Mom, can I just I'm so tired, like, can I just watch my TV first and then do my homework and my chores" [PC6].

"So basically, we work on a half-hour basis. So, she's got two hours, I've taken the two hours away because she hasn't listened. Then she knows how to get back those two hours. She will know how to get them back, and how to get extra. But if I think that they need extra she can get extra if she wants, but nothing more than one hour" [PC5].

4.5.3. Challenges with Screen-time

While exploring the challenges of screen-time, different categories of challenges were discovered that highlight the various impacts on individuals. These include concerns about content exposure, issues of addiction, social interaction challenges and physical health concerns including sleep and academic impacts. Some caregivers expressed concerns about their child being exposed to harmful content such as pornography, violence or inappropriate language, which can have lasting impacts on their development (Dunckley, 2015:17; Sigman, 2012:935). Literature notes that the potential risks of excessive screen-time are that the disrupted balance of neurotransmitters can lead to moodiness, anxiety and attention difficulties (Dunckley, 2015:17; Ho et al., 2014).

"She was watching things like sexual things in grade two!? And how I found this, because I'm… all the accounts …. ya all the accounts on the devices are linked to my Gmail account. So, when I was at work, and I was typing something on Google, it pulled up something about girls kissing…. I think it traumatized me. Because I'm just like, what are you doing? Like you're in grade 2. And it also just made me realise we gave her cell phone way too early" [PC2].

"I think like for me is the biggest thing you know, once you see something you can't unsee it and the average age apparently now of exposure to pornography is seven. So that is a bit of a scary statistic says like you have to teach your kids not if this

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happens then when it happens. Give them tools now to figure out what they can do in the moment" [PC6].

Furthermore, caregivers faced content challenges as even supposedly child-friendly programs may contain elements that they found unsuitable. For example, participant 2 says:

".... even though they can say a show is like kid friendly. But maybe there's like, words that we don't use at home, you know, maybe that are being used there. They're not nice words. I think my challenge is just like controlling what she watches" [PC2].

This emphasises the need for active parenting in the guidance and supervision of children's screen-time activities to mitigate potential harmful effects (Dunckley 2015:17). In line with this more than half of the caregivers interviewed expressed concerns about their experiences with YouTube and TikTok. They worried about addiction to and shifts in their child's attitude after watching content on these platforms PC4 and PC5 accurately describe this.

"what I hate about YouTube is the shorts because I feel like it is such a lot of information that comes in and then it's like, what 15 seconds a video and then the next one comes this I don't think there's time for your brain to process so much information" [PC4].

"she watches, like, the Norrisnuts, for example, or whatever, little people they follow on YouTube. I've actually noticed she's got a cheek; you know, she starts talking and behaving like them and I'm like, Yo, dude, I can't do this. You do not talk to me like this. You're Norrisnuts gonna speak to the parents like this, but we're not in Australia" [PC5].

This reflects the wider debate on the impact of digital technology on children's mental health and well-being (Domingues-Montanari, 2017:333; Hudimova, 2021:4).

Moreover, excessive screen-time was associated with various other physical health concerns including sleep disturbances, increased risk of obesity, mental health issues including anxiety, depression, aggression and cognitive problems (Sigman, 2012:935; Domingues-Montanari, 2017:333–334; Gurvich et al., 2020:545; Lodha & De Sousa, 2020:133; Hudimova, 2021:3–5). Almost all caregivers that were interviewed had challenges with attention and focus both those with children that were diagnosed with ADHD and caregivers whose children were not. This resonates with literature

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suggesting a link between screen-time and attention difficulties in children (Ho et al., 2014), but also highlights the need for tailored strategies for ADHD and other children with similar special needs.

"So, we had to buy our 10-year-old a Google Chromebook. It was prescribed which is made it quite challenging because it's not like it's his computer. And we've had to be quite strict because he's got to do homework on there. I think it's quite a challenge, especially when you have ADHD not to get distracted by that. If you're on a computer and you know that there's a game that you can go to or there's another YouTube video that you can click on to actually say no, I'm only going to watch what I've been asked to watch is quite challenging" [PC6].

"I find that if she if she is behind the screen, she is kind of like a zombie. So, she has no focus of what's going on. So, you can't combine screen-time with any interaction or schoolwork, or anything related. It's one or the other" [PC1].

Similarly, as depicted in the literature above caregivers were also concerned about how screen-time might affect their child's outdoor play, mental health, and sleep.

"I was scared for my child. I was stuck thinking what was going on in her head" [PC2].

"This one playdate (Child 1) was being shown. I don't, know if it was a game or a video, but this video that was way too scary for him. I don't even know what the age restriction on the thing was. But yeah, then you can see what the impact was at home is he then had trouble sleeping for the next two nights. And we had to kind of talk him through it and check on him. So, he felt safe to go to sleep again, and all that kind of thing" [PC3].

Online bullying also emerged as a significant challenge with caregivers expressing concerns about their children's social engagement in the online gaming sector. Bullying is defined as intentionally harmful aggressive behaviours directed at individuals with weaker physical or psychological strength (Yang et al., 2021:9). Online bullying allows the perpetrator to remain relatively anonymous and harmful content to spread faster (Mantey et al., 2023:2). For example PC2 shares:

"I think another bad experience we had with her was last year when she was playing this Roblox thing. I think there's a lot of bullying there happening. Because they play with other kids online. And she kept playing, and she said, the kids are pushing her

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down when she was trying to run or whatever. So, I'm like then don't play it if it makes you cry. Then don't play the game, you know? Because these are people online" [PC2].

This underscores again the importance of fostering digital literacy skills and promoting safe online behaviours.

Caregivers are also struggling with how screen-time is shaping family dynamics and relationships, causing negotiations and conflict. This dynamic also affects monitoring and boundaries already in place as discussed above with screen-time limits. Arnett and Maynard (2017:329) explain this shift in family dynamics as coregulation, which is explained as the caregiver-child relationship in which children are able to engage in independent, self-directed behaviour while their caregiver provides broad guidelines.

"we get big drama about, like, even with the games, if the timer goes off in the middle of a game, then they still get I still get the mom, I'm not finished. I know. If I go, now my character is going to die. And then what, I'm like, I don't care" [PC6].

"I beg them I plead. I suggest different things. We will like I said, we will try and be outside with him and I'd say I'd rather let's go get the uno you know, or, you know, let's try this" [PC4].

Furthermore, caregivers grappled with their own screen-time habits, highlighting the pervasive nature of digital technology in everyday life and the need to model healthy behaviours.

"We haven't really got it right it but setting boundaries for ourselves as adults that are modelling to our kids, the right time and place for screens and phones. The problem is, everything is on our phone at the moment from a recipe to a, you know, let me check before my appointment tomorrow, my diary, everything's on that screen. So at one point, we thought about putting our phones and entrance hall and saying if you're going to be on our phones, and we need to be in the entrance hall, but we can't be wandering around the kitchen dining room where it just means we're not present, you know, because we're constantly being distracted by the ping of some message that's come up or whatever" [PC6].

"I must say (Child 1) does frequently go. Mommy, haven't you spent enough time looking at your phone? Now? You've had more than your hour of screen-time? Yes, he is correct" [PC3].

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Finding a balance between embracing technology and setting limits is crucial to promoting positive family dynamics and healthy screen-time. Caregivers acknowledged this unique challenge of balancing the pervasive nature of screens and the fact that they have become a regular part of everyday life.

"I suppose it's that thing of, you've got to be strict enough, but not too strict then at the same time, they're almost under exposed. And then when they do go to friends and suddenly, oooh, look at this and your kids are like, oh my goodness, what's going on? Is that? Yeah, so it's trying to almost get the balance right" [PC3].

"So, for me, I would never restrict her completely from all of that stuff, because it will just leave her behind and leave her, you know, excluded socially, as well as like developing her mind to the future" [PC1].

Generally addressing the challenges associated with screen-time requires a holistic approach that involves active parent involvement that promotes digital literacy and fosters open communication within families.

4.5.4. Positive Experiences with Screen-time

Louw and Louw (2019:247), and Munsamy et al. (2022:2) note that technology can provide some benefit to young children. These may include exposure to new ideas and skills through TV programmes. Playing computer and video games may develop computer literacy skills in children. Caregivers recognise its role as an educational tool, contributing to fast learning and skill development. This sentiment is depicted nicely by two participants namely PC1 and PC5. PC1 recognises the educational value of the game Minecraft which facilitates creative exploration and problem-solving, and PC5 who illustrates how her child learned practical cleaning hacks from online sources. This demonstrates the capacity of screen-time to impart useful knowledge and skills beyond the usual traditional learning methods.

"I appreciate that sometimes, she gets to learn quite a few things about two or three weeks ago she was going around cleaning the house because she had seen some cleaning hack, wow. Baking soda, vinegar, and sunlight liquid. And you clean everything, she was going around cleaning everything" [PC5].

"I also think that Minecraft is very educational she built a whole house, and farms and is very good at learning dimensions and other useful facts from the game" [PC1].

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Secure attachment is an important part of this age group's development, while attachment styles mainly form in infancy, there are still things parents can do at this stage to foster attachment (Lamb & Lewis, 2011:265). Things such as spending quality time together, engaging in their interests, listening to them, and showing genuine care. Caregivers of this study expressed how shared screen-time has the capacity for positive bonding experiences, fostering connections and shared moments between them and their child. For example, PC2 highlights how watching funny videos together strengthens their relationship, while PC4 shows the importance of a family movie night as their bonding ritual. These experiences shape how the role of screen-time can be used to facilitate quality time and shared experiences among family members.

"Our communication, our relationship, everything's still. Actually, she loves it when I watch something with her. When she and when she sees something funny, she'll call me Mom, watch this. Look at this. This is so funny" [PC2].

"Most Friday nights we will put the mattress in front of the TV and watch the movie every Friday night. As a family. Yeah, we try, one of them might go to the room, we try at least" [PC4].

Another positive aspect is that caregivers use screen-time strategically to manage their busy schedules and redirect children's attention to keep them engaged during times when direct supervision may be a challenge. For instance, while occupied with household chores or work, caregivers may permit their children to watch videos or play games on electronic devices (Huang et al., 2021:4521). PC5 testified to this saying it's a useful tool when she's busy and she needs to get things done. This highlights the adaptive use of technology as a tool for maintaining productivity and managing daily routines within the family.

"Sometimes when I am really busy, or I just need to get on with stuff. It's a nice way to keep them entertained soon. But then, obviously, once, not all the time" [PC5].

In conclusion, the positive experiences with screen-time align with the literature, illustrating the potential benefits of promoting learning, bonding and practical childcare management.

4.6. Strategies Used by Caregivers to Monitor Screen-time and Behaviour.

When managing screen-time use, caregivers employ different methods to control how much and when their children use devices. This includes setting timers, keeping an

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eye on usage, and even limiting access to devices to ensure responsible screen-time. Caregivers prioritise outdoor play and other physical activities in an effort to maintain a balance between outdoor activities and screen-time. For example, some caregivers mentioned that her child and friends will often play outside. This aligns with Louw and Louw (2019:247) who suggest that outdoor play is crucial for a child's development.

"(My child) and her friends still play outside, together. So luckily, if she has friends over generally, they're playing outside. Sometimes they'll be playing inside, watching TV together or playing games together, but generally outside. So yeah, if she has friends over generally, it's a messy house and lots of art stuff and toys and all of those good things" [PC1].

Additionally, caregivers focus on controlling what content their children access and where they use screens. This involves choosing child-friendly content, encouraging balance, creating routines, and establishing safe spaces for online activities to promote a positive screen experience. This is particularly true for platforms such as Youtube, for example, one caregiver shares how strict she is with monitoring Youtube and ensuring her children are always watching appropriate content that is free from clickbait. Literature concurs that caregivers play an important role in guiding their child's online experience (Wells, 2008). *"We did load kids tube on to a device at one point, but you know, they know how to get onto YouTube on the TV. A lot of other kids, I think get a bit more free rein with YouTube. I'm quite strict with YouTube. I'm like, I need to look at it. I need to see what you're watching. And make sure there's no clickbait, you know" [PC6].*

It is evident that caregivers use technological tools such as parental controls and monitoring software to manage their child's screen-time effectively. while some caregivers use it to restrict access and track usage others emphasize the importance of teaching responsibility and building trust. which reflects the ongoing debate around apps that control screen-time and content use and the balance that is needed between monitoring and fostering independence (Huang et al., 2021:4521).

"The one thing I can recommend, and also that I do is Apple family. So, I have the ability to see what (My child) does, how long she does it, prove which apps she can use on her tablets, I still find via PlayStation I can manage her as well. So, there's a

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lot of software that allows you to not kind of spy on your kids, but manage their content, right?" [PC1].

"I haven't used any resources in terms of like, that kind of software with limits and everything, I guess, maybe because I've always been with them. I don't want to do that. Because I want to teach them the responsibility. Because if I'm monitoring, then it means that they're not learning the responsibilities. I teach them. I mean, like, even with screen-time, but if there's something a programming TV, that is not age appropriate for her, she actually walks out and says, no, I can't watch this, what's something that I can watch? You know, so it's like, kind of just teaching them that there's a time and a place for everything. And this is not your time. And this is not the place" [PC5].

Caregivers also seem to find it easier to have some general household rules around screen-time. This encourages open communication and mutual understanding (Huang et al., 2021:4521). Some caregivers described how they set clear expectations and boundaries around screen-time use.

"But I think with the right kind of routine, like, they just automatically switch off after they watch two episodes because they know that that's the rule. And when they start playing Xbox, they come and ask me to put my timer on my phone. And I literally time them. Because of the Xbox, they lose sense of time, they can't tell how long it's been. So, I literally put it on my phone. And then I have my timer on for half an hour. And when it's time, I go tell them it's time then they switch off and they come" [PC3].

Wells (2008) emphasises that listening to children and valuing their contributions to conversations can help children develop their communication skills and build confidence in their ability to express themselves. He suggests that caregivers engage in meaningful conversations with children, providing opportunities for children to share their thoughts and ideas. From what the participants shared it suggests that most caregivers do guide their children in some way when it comes to screen-time, some seem to encourage open conversations and trust-building, fostering an environment where honest discussions about online experiences can take place and ultimately shaping a secure and communicative approach to screen-time.

"So, I don't believe I should ever spy on (My Child). And I always tell her, I trust her. Yeah, I give her my trust. And you know, she must either show that it was well given

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or not. at the end of the day, you got to kind of teach your kid what's right and what's wrong" [PC1].

"And it forced me to have a conversation with her at that time and just explain everything And I just had I just said, I told her that. No, she wasn't supposed to watch whatever she was watching" [PC2].

This study shows that caregivers also incorporate values and rewards into their screen-time management by encouraging educational content and using rewards and consequences to reinforce positive behaviour. This emphasises the difference that positive parenting styles make on managing screen-time as discussed in the literature review (Munsamy et al., 2022:3).

"I base everything that I teach her is based on Christianity and what we believe in and what God says" [PC2]. I encourage her to watch more educational programs and Church things like Bible stories" [PC2].

"We do try and reward them when they've finished doing their homework, feeding the dog showering like you know doing whatever chores they need to do on their own then they can get as a reward if there's still time an episode during the week" [PC6].

As children get older, caregivers acknowledge that their strategies may need to change to adapt to the needs and challenges that may arise. Caregivers had specific concerns about high school and the new risks that are associated with screen-time such as cyberbullying. Ranjit et al. (2022:459) agree that screen-time needs to be continuously monitored as technology develops and children get older.

"Once they get their own devices, we would definitely have to look at different things to put into place" [PC3].

"I think we'll probably look at, you know, getting equipped through some of these organizations that do, like 'last clicked items' you know, that sort of helps you put things in place to sort of equip your kids as they grow into the teenage phase" [PC6].

Overall, caregivers seem to employ a combination of proactive measures such as technological tools and value-based approaches to guide children to a more responsible approach to screen-time. The next section will focus on specific support

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strategies caregivers use to guide their own knowledge and experience of safe screen-time use for their children.

4.6.1. Support Strategies

Conversations with other caregivers sometimes serve as a valuable resource for sharing insights and perspectives on screen-time. These discussions often involve comparing the opinions and experiences of other caregivers as a support strategy to see other family approaches and develop their own conclusions as to what constitutes successful screen-time management. For instance, a few caregivers discussed the differences in rules she had noticed among some of her child's friends.

"So, I haven't but I have said to parents us mums we do talk. Like for instance, one (Child 1)'s one friends not allowed to have WhatsApp. Because in the past, there have been some nasty chats and whatever (Her child is allowed WhatsApp). *Another friend of hers is allowed to have TikTok* (Her child is not allowed TikTok). *and I said to the mom, when she does come over, I would appreciate that if we don't go down that avenue" [PC4].*

Similarly, some parents expressed their frustration over societal norms around screen-time use recognising that screens are a part of normal everyday life even though it is often frowned upon publicly.

"We have (had discussions with other parents) *and most time we get mocked for allowing her too much screen-time or allowing her to see things that she shouldn't see or play games that are not in her age group. So, we have engaged with other parents, I have noticed that most parents will claim their kids are never on the screen. And if you go out for lunch with them, or whatever the kid just sits glued to the screen. So, I find it's almost like, everyone's got an opinion that it's terrible. And they don't do it. But everyone does it. Every parent that has a kid. And if they don't have a free hand, or they don't have time, they will pass their phone or tablet. So, no one can tell me that holier than thou" [PC1].*

In addition to peer discussions, some caregivers choose to engage with teachers to address concerns and navigate school-related screen-time policies. According to Wells (2008), effective communication between caregivers and teachers is also critical to create a shared understanding of children's needs and abilities. Opinions varied in

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this study in terms of seeking support from their child's teachers. Some viewed it as unnecessary while others shared their concerns with the teacher.

"I have had a couple of chats with the teachers around the screens that they prescribed, I did feel like I said to them, you know, I as a parent would never have given my child their own device at this age. And I'm having to work out what to do with the fact that my youngest grade two carries an iPad around a school bag. And my grade four carries a Google Chromebook in his bag that he can pull out anytime and use it, you know, obviously, when I'm not around, but I just feel like I've been thrown into a situation where not by choice. But at the same time, you know, chatting to the teachers, I guess, it is one of those things that you just embrace and just make the best of the situation. But I have spoken to them, for example, you know, they not allowing the kids to load games" [PC6].

"I really don't think it's got nothing to do with a teacher unless it's an issue and it's been taken to school. Which it's not happened in my house. No. So I haven't" [PC4].

Furthermore, some caregivers chose to seek external support systems such as religious groups or other professionals for guidance on managing screen-time and promoting self-regulation in their children.

"I mean, only with the incident that happened in Grade Two that I like I chatted, I did have a chat with my bible group because I'm just like, Guys, please pray for me. I'm not coping you know. But it was just that" [PC2].

"We were talking about self-regulation. And I was asking the psychiatrist who gives us the scripts, how you know, if your child is dysregulated, but it's in that sort of low zone, as opposed to the hyper zone, the hypo zone, how do you get them energised? Because it's kind of seems kind of obvious when you co-regulate with a hyper child that you try to calm them down. But how do you to be someone up, you know, and he just said, well, the worst thing you can do is put them in front of a screen, which was very interesting" [PC6].

Thus, caregivers make use of a combination of peer insights, educational resources and external support networks to further develop effective strategies for managing screen-time.

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4.7. Social Interactions

Social interaction in middle childhood refers to the methods children use to engage with peers and adults in their lives and how they navigate social relationships and social norms (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). Caregivers are instrumental in facilitating and nurturing these interactions both in the physical and digital world. Family-centred activities are vital for strengthening bonds between caregivers, extended family members and their children (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). Whether it is family movie nights with homemade burgers, outdoor activities such as games, music and marshmallow roasts or engaging in communal family activities such as playing board games or cooking together. Some caregivers share their social experiences.

"We always have burgers on Friday night. We have a movie night on one of the nights. Normally a Saturday, which we will sit and choose a movie that we're all allowed to watch. And we will sit together. And I think it's yeah, it's quite a thing, because we don't watch a lot of TV during the week" [PC3].

"We spend a lot of time outside listening to music and chilling and playing Uno, or board games or cards. That's kind of what we do. Most Friday nights we will put the mattress in front of the TV and watch the movie every Friday night"[PC4].

"We make fires and braai marshmallows, we do arts. Do some art stuff we play in the garden, play with the dogs, play with the birds, play PlayStation together" [PC1].

Social interaction in middle childhood refers to the methods children use to engage with peers and adults in their lives and how they navigate social relationships and social norms (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). Peer interactions amongst intermediate-phase children are also vital to their development and social well-being (Arnett & Maynard, 2013:325) Caregivers witnessed the development of these friendships among their children pointing out the dynamics and nuances of these relationships. Some noticed how children navigated new friendships at school and broadened their social circles through play dates and extramural activities.

"She only started at the school last year. So, these other.... her friends that have been there since grade one, they were talking about things that happened in grade one and grade two, with this girl, how she's a liar and all of that. And she was with those girls, you know, so she got in trouble (with peers) *because of that as well" [PC2].*

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"We are hoping that his friendship circle will broaden a bit in the months ahead, because I think he has been quite reliant on this one friend in his class. But like last week, there was another little friend invited them both together to his house for a playdate, so we thought okay, great. The circles growing" [PC6].

As for peer dynamics, caregivers have noticed some interesting interactions.

"Uh they girls, the one day she'll be like .... Oh, they were being horrible. She's had, there's a girl that was actually... it was bullying to be honest, was bullying her. And she's a new girl, the kid is new to the school. But we spoke with her, and she dealt with it. So now she's okay. She's actually okay with the other girl as well.. I mean, they big kids they in grade fives, they're gonna have good days and bad days. Days where everything is hunky dory then days when it's just fights and yeah, there's always drama" [PC5]

Navigating the landscape of social activities, relationships, and communication, both online and in the physical world this study shows the multifaceted ways in which caregivers encourage children to interact, connect, and communicate. In terms of the physical world literature agrees that parents play an important role in children's friendships and social development. Their study (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009:295), discusses the roles of parents in establishing friendships for young children. Parents who provided support and opportunities for socialisation, as well as fostered inclusive and supportive environments, positively affected children's friendships and social skills. Caregivers share their experiences with this.

"She's got a little group of friends. And I think one of the moms started a book club with her group of friends. So, they do book club... so, they are forced to read the books. And I think those little girls in book club are more or less her friends at school" [PC5].

"he has a very good friend, I mean, they are very close. So as long as his buddy is there, like he'll, you know, if, (friend) is playing cricket, (Child 1) will be playing cricket with him, he doesn't really mind going so much because his mate is there. So, friends, for him plays a huge part in activities" [PC6].

The potential that online platforms bring for social engagement. Caregivers noted various advantages including the use of online platforms for fostering social

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engagement. Caregivers viewed online gaming as opportunities for social cues, and building connections across the globe.

“She uses games as social cues. So, if she meets someone, and she's like, hey, do you play fortnight and they play fortnight, you know what I mean? It's a way to relate to other kids as well” [PC1].

”if you look at it from a positive point of view, it is very awesome. If you can make a friend your age in the UK, and you know, have chats with them. That's pretty cool. I think that's awesome. We can have friends all over the world. And as soon as you're 19 and you want to start traveling the world, you've got friends in multiple places. So that can be very awesome and very positive” [PC4].

To sum up, while caregivers see the positives to online interactions, they also acknowledge the need for a balance, thereby fostering healthy social development in their children. The next section will look at the role caregivers play in encouraging a diverse range of activities for their children.

4.7.1. Other Activities Child Engages in or Encouraged by Caregiver.

Children engaging in active play and participating in games, dance routines, and sports such as soccer not only aids the development of coordination and muscle strength but also promotes healthy habits from a young age. These promote physical, social and cognitive development (Louw & Louw, 2019:254). Some caregivers prioritised outdoor adventures as a way to disconnect from the online world and engage in physical activities. They encouraged their children to interact and play outside especially when frustrations with online gaming arose.

“It's you know kind of like get off your devices get outside, I’m done bring those devices here. Put them here. Go and talk or something...” [PC5].

“I have also found as well is that particularly with the Xbox side of things is that they get very frustrated if something isn't working out in their game. And then we have to switch off, take a step back, run outside, and we'll try again tomorrow. Because I can find that both my boys have their times of getting very frustrated, and it's not working. And then things get thrown around and stomping. And then I'm like, sorry, guys, it's not worth it. We don't... we can't have behaviour like that” [PC3].

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In addition to outdoor activities, other caregivers tried to promote extra-curricular activities as much as possible. These ranged from sports such as rugby and netball to cultural pursuits like drama and dance.

"...during rugby season? We watch my son play... Ja, no, like for half the year it's all of us every Saturday like we leave the house at eight in the morning. Come back at five and before that school is rugby so that's what our lives during the weekends, we do that The intermediate-phase child*…. she's one of those. She does? She does drama. She does. Dance. That's all the cultural stuff. Sports. She's doesn't really enjoy that" [PC5].*

"This term (Child 1) has done cricket, and Art Club and tennis. And then cubs on a Friday that's not with the school, but it's an extramural so busy" [PC3].

"So, she does netball. And then there's this. It's called Winning Edge. It's not academics or sports. It's basically more you know a character building or personality. So, it helps them with like confidence being responsible, taking accountability, or to study on your own, own up to your mistakes" [PC2].

While these caregivers commit to the above activities enhancing their physical development and character building, caregivers also noted some challenges such as financial constraints and children's reluctance to participate.

"Extramurals, not as yet. so, our plan is to get her into it, but I think she's trying to avoid it. We don't know why" [PC1].

"We still looking for a place for (Child 2) he really wants to do karate or boxing something like that? Yeah. Financially just not viable right now. Right now, no, it's about a grand a month so it's extra murals are quite expensive It must just wait" [PC4].

These challenges may have also inspired parents to look at other alternatives. An example is how Indoor activities were encouraged and sometimes took place with friends. Caregivers encouraged activities that foster creativity and social interaction such as Playmobil, board games and art.

"You know, for my oldest, my 10-year-old, his way of self-regulating is going and playing playmobil" [PC6].

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"Whenever the electricity is off, for instance then she'll go grab a book, and she'll start colouring . When she has friends *…they now still at the age where they like dressing up and they like doing their makeup thing and they literally play everything that we own. So that is all of the board games and all of the card games and all of the dresses up" [PC4].*

It is evident from the above that caregivers play an integral role in facilitating a diverse range of activities for their children. Other challenges parents faced over recent years is that of lockdowns which prompted a shift in screen-time habits. The study will now explore the impact of COVID-19 on intermediate-phase children's screen-time use.

4.8. COVID-19 Experiences

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to families around the world, reshaping their daily routines and social interactions and has therefore had a significant impact on the way families and children interact with technology (Kanekar & Sharma, 2020:336). Caregivers shared their unique perspectives on how the pandemic shaped their households.

"Well, during COVID-19 It was very different. It seems like so long ago It was very different because we were all cooped up inside and there was... we were all using the devices and stuff for work, for communication with friends and for everything. So, to be honest I think we probably just got on each other's nerves because we were all in the same place" [PC5].

"Financially it was rough we had we had to move out of one house and into a more affordable place. You have to look where to go you are 3 months behind on all your bills. This is stressful and the constant you can't get that now. It is stressful, Can I have sweet no we can't afford it, can I have a cold drink no we can't afford it. Oh, your school shoes are broken, we have to wait till the end of the month then we can go buy new shoes And I think they picked up on that. (Child 1)'s now older and she gets it she's like, Okay, well, you know, I'm not even going to ask She is afraid that we will say no, So she did not even ask the question" [PC4].

"I suppose they were exposed to that even you know, doing family zoom calls, interacting with a family over a screen. I remember even having a birthday party over the screen. My youngest Yeah, we tried to do like a fun game sort of thing with some young guy who did sports coaching, got online and then gave all the kids different

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tasks to do and then everybody had to have the camera on and do the competition. I suppose they were introduced to it a lot earlier on than what we would have planned" [PC6].

As families transitioned to online schooling, caregivers noticed an increase in screen-time driven by the necessity of virtual classrooms. This finding aligns with a survey conducted during the early stages of the pandemic that indicated an over fifty per cent increase in internet use globally (Beech, 2020:1). This point also relates to Bergmann et al. (2022:2721) where the pandemic limited outdoor play and encouraged indoor activities, thereby increasing children's reliance on screens for entertainment.

"They used more screens obviously, and they watch TV more. Because there was no going outside. There was no playing outside. There was literally nothing else to do. So yes, there was more screen-time" [PC2].

"So, during COVID-19, she became very antisocial. Because obviously, she couldn't really see anyone, so a lot of screen-time a lot of Minecraft a lot of time by herself, because I'd be working. So, she kind of just had to get on with it" [PC1].

However, alongside the practical challenges of online school, caregivers and their children experienced anxiety and stress around family health, finances and concerns about their future. This resonates with the literature discussed which highlights the psychological impact of the pandemic on individuals and families especially anxiety and emotional distress (Bergmann et al., 2022: 2721).

"Fear set in immediately there was an immediate fear of fear of becoming ill fear of losing your parents fear of not knowing that was hard for them. (Child 1) especially the worst she was anxious as hell she was terrible, I had to take her to the doctor and I was like what the hell am I gonna do good she had to go on. She got panic attacks like severe panic attacks. The pressure therapy nature drops, in the last 2 weeks she has had those spells again she is coming to me and saying Mama what has happened" [PC4].

"Perhaps they didn't have as much opportunity to bond with friends and family by I think maybe it's made us all a little bit like it's shrunk our world a little bit. So maybe all networks are a little bit smaller, which is not a bad thing. Because I think our lives in Joburg are very busy. And you know, even now after COVID-19 You just realise how

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busy things have got again, and how frantic we all are taking our kids to this and that and the next thing" [PC6].

This shrinking of social networks and reliance on immediate family members for support reflect the broader societal trends observed by Hollingsworth and Buysse's (2009:296). However, it also shows the resilience displayed by families in adapting to these challenges and emphasises the importance of social support and family bonds in times of adversity.

The educational landscape globally and in South Africa underwent a complete shift to online, leaving both children and educators to navigate uncharted waters (Desai & Burton, 2022:113). While some children struggled with the adjustment, others found innovative ways to thrive in virtual environments. This reflects the adaptive nature of children and their ability to navigate change albeit with various degrees of success (Arnett & Myanard, 2013:325).

"She had to learn to use the devices like on the go and on her own without anybody helping her and even you know, like for the classrooms to be in time for classrooms and classes and everything. And she did that. And I think that's the only thing that she's carried on. After that she's very, on top of things" [PC5].

"Okay, so I think that the thing here is that these guys are already doing work through their tablets at the schools even before. Yes. So, like when they get to grade three, or grade four is on their tablets, so that all the books get downloaded onto the tablets. I think the only thing that changed that they now are still using as well. Is Google Classroom, I think, yeah. So, they started using Google Classroom, and even after that the teachers have kept Google Classroom open" [PC5].

Additionally, missed milestones and disruptions to traditional schooling underscored the profound impact the pandemic had on intermediate-phase children's educational journeys and long-term academic achievement and social development (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). One participant shared her experience of a missed once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Yeah, so in 2020 she was still in grade one. And that's like your first school experience. And they were in lockdown. So, I can say she missed out on that. I think maybe that would have helped us so much with like, her character and I don't know.

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But the fact that they had to like starting your, your first grade you have to do online is like, you know, and it's something that could never she could never get back. Yeah. Like she missed out a lot like it's her first year in school. And that's how it started" [PC2].

This shows how the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for families reshaping their daily routines, social interactions and educational practices as well as online schooling bringing increased screen-time and practical adjustments. The next section will further explore the online experiences these families had to endure.

4.8.1. Online School Experience

The transition to online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic presented families with a multitude of challenges that unveiled the less favourable aspects of this type of learning. These ranged from technical challenges to workload management and the blurred lines between teacher and parent duties. For some caregivers, online schooling was viewed as a suboptimal alternative, especially for younger children highlighting how technical challenges and lack of engagement hindered learning.

"The one thing was bandwidth. So, she's on a call, I'm on a call. We are chowing each other's bandwidth. And I was in a meeting. So, I'm online, she's online, hers is clipping. Mine's clipping. So, bandwidth was a bit of an issue when we were doing it dovetail" [PC1].

"Another experience I could say was online teaching. So, the one time they had to make playdough with conditioner and something. Yeah, and it was just a mess. While I was in meetings, I was cleaning up a mess. So yeah, it was the online stuff didn't work really for that age Yeah, it was just a lot of kids that had never experienced teams meeting or a Zoom meeting, ours was on Zoom. So, they didn't really know what kind of what was going on. And then when they saw their buddies, it was just talking about life not really anything focused on school" [PC1].

This is inline with literature which acknowledges the overwhelming nature of online learning for younger children, citing challenges developmental challenges with attention span and adaptability to online learning platforms (Snyder et al., 2021:337).

Technical challenges emerged as a common theme among caregivers as above another caregiver described their experience where bandwidth limitations disrupted

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online sessions, underscoring the importance of reliable internet connection for remote learning. (UNESCO, 2023) Similarly, device shortages posed a challenge especially when there were multiple family members requiring usage simultaneously. These internet and device shortage issues are common in the South African context.

"Okay, so, it did get a little manic. I think just because device wise, we didn't have enough devices, you know, because I had to be on my computer. We had (My Husband's) computer, but with two children it wasn't always accessible for yeah for all of us to be on at the same time so that did cause a few problems. That being said, though, they did enjoy the fact of oooh, I can go onto the computer and get into my little lesson and watch it, so it was kind of like a novelty being able to use the computer so much". [PC3].

Caregivers also grappled with the dual roles of parent and educator, with varying degrees of success. This participant shares her frustration with patience and difficulty facilitating effective learning experiences for her child. This aligns with research that highlights the challenges faced by parents in assuming teaching responsibilities, particularly in subjects outside of their expertise (Cohen, 2018:278).

"Obviously, I wouldn't teach her like a professional teacher. Also, I'm very impatient. You know, so I don't think that was fun for her. It wasn't fun for me either. So, I think maybe that also, that's where she missed so much. And that's why we're trying to catch up now, with extra lessons and her tutor and all of that. Because that was foundation phase. I'm not a foundation phase teacher. So, I think my daughter, missed out a lot there. Because I had to do most of the teaching" [PC2].

Additionally, caregivers of children with ADHD faced unique struggles with online learning in that they had to manage attention and behaviour during sessions, necessitating additional support and accommodations. .

"Specifically, for the 10-year-old, right? Now, I think he found it challenging having his mom try and teach him as well. But we, we actually, it gave me also first-hand experience, because that's when we started giving him Ritalin for ADHD. And I literally could observe the difference in a home environment. And, you know, I mean, it literally was from chalk to cheese. And we used to sort of be fighting up until two o'clock in the afternoon, like, when are you going to do the work, you need to just knuckle down and finish this and you know, it used to be sort of exhausting and saying, like, I really don't

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want to be doing your classwork at four o'clock in the afternoon. It's too long we can get it finished in the early part of the day. And I remember it was a Friday morning, and I gave him a tablet. And he went and did his work. And he finished at 11 o'clock. And he came to me and said, Mom, I think I'd like to do the extra work for the week. So, I nearly fell over. Yeah, I remember asking the doctor is it like a Smartie effect. Because but you know, just Yeah, it was it was really great for me to just observe that" [PC6].

"So, we scheduled breaks like normal school time, just because of (Child 1) and his ADHD. The sitting obviously, sitting for too long was a problem that you then sitting for too long in front of the screen, you could definitely see the difference. So, we had to manage it. And when I saw him getting antsy, we had to take a break and go run outside, go do something outside and then come back and carry on" [PC3].

The impact of loadshedding, a common occurrence in South Africa involving frequent power cuts, further exacerbated the challenges of online learning. This participant shares her frustration about the power outages that disrupted her daughter's ability to complete online homework and access digital resources.

"But the one thing I didn't like about it and even now I still struggle with it is that simply because everything is online, right? I mean, my daughter could be doing anything to be honest. Right? and also with the power cuts and all the stuff that's happening now. You struggle to finish your homework and everything unless you've got like backup devices which we don't, and I just don't like the fact that they just on a computer for me. I think I mean even the schoolbooks they're given are online and I actually rather she reads from book. You get a light and read during the Loadshedding, something can do but I know she will say to me one of the book we're given is on the tablet, and I can't access my tablet because I need Wi Fi, I'm sorry, I didn't do my homework because there's no Wi Fi. My child doesn't particularly Like school so any excuse" [PC5].

This experience underscores the broader issues of infrastructure limitations, where unreliable electricity supply hampers access to online education (Masango & Raisaka, 2020:102). Research also indicates that loadshedding during online learning exacerbates inequalities, especially for students from low-income backgrounds who may lack access to backup sources and alternative study methods (Masango & Raisaka, 2020:102).

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Perception of teachers' versus parents' roles during online learning also emerged as a point of contention with caregivers feeling overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them to facilitate learning at home. Literature notes that in a South African context, not all caregivers are able to meet with their children's teachers regularly, thus impacting the support needed for creating opportunities to practice skills in the home setting (Verschueren, 2015:86). These caregivers share their experiences.

"It's almost like, the teachers expected the parents not to be working. Yeah. So, like, the teachers are saying in the thing, okay, go find your parents and go ask them for a blue pen and then you're in a meeting and your kids' kind of trying to find a blue pen. So yeah, that didn't work out great. It was more nuisance than anything because they gave us stuff to do. But then the stuff that they had to do to get on the call, most kids didn't really remember what they had to do. So it was that there was a disconnect there, you know? So, then nothing would happen. And there was no follow-through the next day. Like did you do this? Or did you not do this? So, it was it was so unorganised chaos" [PC1].

"It's very hard to, to get somebody to explain things again, when you're not in a classroom. And if you don't understand it, it's very difficult to I mean, the teachers would try and then after they would have like, sessions within let's say, if you're struggling with that session with afterwards, but it's very difficult to, to be in a classroom like that. And I think that they didn't enjoy it" [PC5].

This highlights the need for clear communication and support strategies between schools and families during periods of remote learning (Verschueren, 2015:86).

Therefore, it is evident that the shift to online learning during the pandemic brought forth a host of challenges for families ranging from technical difficulties, loadshedding and blurred lines between parents and teachers.

4.8.2. Transition of School Post COVID-19 Lockdown

While the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, some educational challenges still linger. From transitional and adjustment changes to academic and learning challenges and the continued use of screens in education, these are some of the experiences of caregivers.

Transitioning between schools and types of schools can have profound effects on an intermediate-phase child's social interaction in terms of adjusting to a new

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environment and adapting to different social norms which can influence how a child fits in and how they navigate friendship dynamics (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). These interactions may take place in a variety of contexts including school, home, and extramural activities (Louw & Louw, 2019:274). These participants share their experiences of transitions during COVID-19 between schools and the ensuing effects on their children's social and academic well-being.

"For my son's been really hard because I never wanted my kids to go to boarding school. But he's so sporty. So, into rugby, it's like we were basically waking up at 4:30 in the morning to make it to rugby at five and it is just me at home with both of them. I had to wake up at four o'clock (in the morning) and we would only get home at six (in the evening) it was such a long day, and I was tired and stressed out. So, he went to boarding school. So, it was very.... that was hard, because it's starting to let go because you know, he's probably gonna move on to varsity or college and he's never been out the house. So just.... I was very emotional" [PC5].

"(Child 2) is in grade three (Child 1) in grade four. And grade four for (Child 1) has been hard because it's not obviously big school and its exams, proper exams and a huge situation. it's different for my family because like I said they've gone from English schools and Afrikaans school and the transition has been hard. So, it's been rough. But they aren't doing bad. They are still like doing in the 80%. So, they are still performing academically. But emotionally I would say that it is a bit hard for them" [PC4].

Most caregivers had concerns about academic and learning challenges and catching up with what was lost during COVID-19. Highlighting the need for interventions to foster academic improvement.

"I would have liked for her to be held back a year actually because her birthday is very late in the year already. And then our COVID-19 on top of that, and the half classes, I think she still to this I day can benefit from being kept back a year" [PC4].

"When the kids went back to school, the school that she went to it was so bad, I don't think the teachers really tried to, to catch up, or backtrack to see, you know, did the parents really do their job, they just continued and took it from there and just continued, you know? So, it was a challenge. that's why we're trying to catch up now, with extra lessons and her tutor and all of that. Because that was the foundation phase" [PC2].

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Even as schools reopen, technology continues to be integrated into teaching and learning, prolonging children's exposure to screens (Wiederhold, 2021:481-482). PC6 highlighted concerns about unsupervised internet usage and potential disengagement from school tasks while PC5 lamented the overwhelming reliance on digital platforms. These experiences underscore the ongoing challenges faced by families as they navigate the evolving landscape of education in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"He and his buddy can go on to work on the laptops when the teacher gives him some work to do. And he says, Mom, we watched, your workout video on YouTube. Because he knows, he knows the workout channel that I use in it, and he looked it up. Really like I wonder if the school knows that the kids are not doing the work that they were just given to do. You know, they say they have checks and balances in place on the internet. You know, but I mean, I you know, I don't know who checks that" [PC6].

"I struggled because everything was on Google Classroom. If you want anything, you have to go to Google Classroom. If you if you want to do anything, everything is on there. So, I think that's the one thing that they've taken out of COVID-19 is that everything now? Like literally everything is on the devices" [PC5].

The pandemic has thus presented a myriad of challenges in the return to traditional schooling methods. From emotional adjustments to cultural and linguistic shifts, caregivers have grappled with various aspects of their child's academic journey. Despite these obstacles, caregivers remain resilient in their efforts to support their child's learning and even share some positive experiences as is seen in the next section.

4.8.3. Positive School Experiences

Positive school experiences emerged amidst the challenges of transitioning to online and traditional face-to-face learning during and after the pandemic. Caregivers shared moments of growth and bonding highlighting the flexibility and individualised attention offered by both learning modalities.

One caregiver said that online school gave her firsthand experience with her child's ADHD challenges. This mirrors the findings in previous studies that emphasise the role of personalised support strategies in addressing the unique needs of special needs children such as those with ADHD (Huang et al., 2021:4521) The smaller class

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sizes and tailored interactions facilitated by online classes were particularly beneficial for children with ADHD, contributing to a positive learning experience (Huang et al., 2021:4521)

“It (online school) gave me a first-hand experience into his challenges, because I realized how frustrating it was. And then, you know, when the teacher eventually comes back and says, look, I think you need to go for an assessment, and you need to do an educational psychologist assessment to see if there are some challenges here, I was a lot more open to it because I could see that he couldn't concentrate, it wasn't like a revelation or something but for (child 1) it was like four of them or three of them at a time with the teacher. And she would go through their work with them and try and give them some individual attention” [PC6].

The period of homeschooling fostered stronger bonds between caregivers and children, as observed by PC3 who described how the bond between her, and her child has grown since COVID-19. The shared experience of navigating remote learning together created opportunities for connection and collaboration, enhancing the family dynamic (Fantuzzo et al., 2013:525).

“(Connection)…. which I think we did form in COVID-19, because I was home with the two boys, and we were homeschooling together and all of that. So, I think that did actually help us” [PC3].

In traditional classroom settings, caregivers witnessed their children’s enthusiasm and enjoyment of school activities, reflecting the literature on the significance of positive school experiences in promoting student engagement and motivation (Skinner et al., 2008:224). PC2’s child displayed an eagerness to impress their teachers and engage with peers, demonstrating a positive attitude towards learning. Similarly, PC6 noted a reduction in stress levels and increased flexibility in daily routines, leading to more relaxed and enjoyable school experiences for her children.

“She’s very happy at school. She loves to impress her teachers. She loves to impress everyone. She Yeah, she’s enjoying her school, and she likes her friends. She doesn’t want to be late for school. That’s one thing about my child. But I always say to her, I wish you had the same passion and enthusiasm, like with wanting to get higher grades than like you do with like, not wanting to be late” [PC2].

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"I think they enjoyed not having to get up in the morning and get into uniform and be sort of shimmied along to get into the car and into school. So, I think it removed some of the stress, but not all of it. Yeah, we didn't have to get them to do all those things before a certain time. And the time was flexible. So maybe that was an enjoyment" [PC6].

Overall positive school experiences encompassed a range of factors including personalised attention, family bonding and enjoyment of learning activities.

4.9. Summary

The main themes discovered in this research have successfully explored and described caregivers' experience of screen-time and how it affects their intermediate-phase child's social interaction. These findings have outlined the main themes of screen-time use which looked at conceptualising screen-time from a caregiver's point of view, setting screen-time limits and exploring the positive and negative experiences of screen-time use. The study revealed diverse caregiver views on screen-time, ranging from seeing it as a learning tool to dealing with ongoing negotiations around its use.

It then went on to look at strategies that parents use to monitor screen-time and behaviour including support strategies they use for themselves, revealing a spectrum from using screens for discipline to seeking support from religious groups and non-teacher professionals. These insights shed light on the complex decision-making of caregivers, highlighting the varied approaches they employ.

Moving on to social interactions and non-screen related activities, the research highlighted the richness of children's experiences beyond screens, including outdoor play, participation in extra-murals, and enjoyment of artistic pursuits. It showcased the multifaceted nature of children's lives, finding fulfilment beyond the digital world. It was interesting to see the different uses of screen-time within these social interactions from uses for communicating with family, to online parties and playdates.

The study also delved into the unique challenges faced by caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift in schooling both online and offline after COVID-19. It was fascinating to see families' resilience in navigating not only the global pandemic but also the specific challenges of loadshedding in South Africa. The adaptability and strength displayed by these families underscore their ability to thrive amidst change.

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Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

In bringing this study to a close, this section will revisit the initial aims and objectives. Through a reflective examination, this conclusion will assess the extent to which these objectives were accomplished, drawing on concrete examples from both the empirical data collected and the insights gathered from existing literature. It will also address the challenges and limitations encountered during the course of this research, offering transparency about the constraints faced. Furthermore, this conclusion will provide practical recommendations concerning screen-time and its impact on social interactions, leveraging the findings to propose actionable insights for Social Workers or other professionals working with children in the intermediate-phase. Finally, the discussion will suggest potential avenues for future research to delve deeper into this dynamic and evolving domain.

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of caregivers on how screen-time affects the social interaction of their intermediate phase children.

The objectives of this study are:

- To explore and describe the positive and negative experiences of caregivers on the use of screen-time by their children in the intermediate-phase.
- To explore and describe how the use of screen-time has affected the social interaction of children in the intermediate-phase.
- To explore and describe measures promoted by caregivers to engage intermediate-phase children, in social interaction with friends and family.

5.2. Achievement of Aim

The primary aim of this study was to explore caregiver experiences of screen-time and its impact on the social interactions of intermediate-phase children. In assessing the achievement of this aim, it is evident that the study successfully focused on caregivers, all of whom were responsible for intermediate-phase learners residing in Johannesburg, South Africa. The key themes identified in the research, namely screen-time and social interactions, directly align with the study's aim. The exploration examined how caregivers navigated screen-time experiences during this

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developmental phase of the child, especially in the unique context of a pandemic. Moreover, it sheds light on the influence of screens on an intermediate-phase child's social interaction, such as engaging in dance-offs and online gaming with peers. Additionally, the study looks at the intricacies of relationships within this age group, and how children are navigating relationships with both caregivers and peers as highlighted in the literature review as a pivotal part of development for these children. The specific challenge of loadshedding in South Africa is also highlighted, emphasising the additional hurdles it posed to online schooling and activities beyond screens.

5.3. Achievement of Objectives

- **To explore and describe the positive and negative experiences of caregivers in the use of screen-time by their children in the intermediate phase.**

The first objective of this study was to thoroughly investigate and describe the positive and negative experiences of caregivers concerning their children's screen-time usage in the intermediate-phase. In the findings of this study, caregivers shared valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of their experiences. Positive aspects highlighted the recognition of potential learning benefits, the strengthening of the caregiver-child bond during homeschooling, and the adaptability facilitated by online schooling. Conversely, negative experiences unveiled challenges linked to online education, increased stress associated with screen-time during lockdown, and concerns about potential distractions affecting their children's focus. This array of findings not only meets the objective but also emphasises the nuanced dynamics surrounding screen-time management in the intermediate-phase, providing a comprehensive view of caregivers' perspectives and challenges 4.5.3 and 4.8.2.

- **To explore and describe how the use of screen-time has affected the social interaction of children in the intermediate phase.**

The second objective aimed to explore and describe how the use of screen-time has impacted the social interactions of children in the intermediate-phase, both online and offline. Throughout this exploration, caregivers provided valuable insights into the ways screens influence their children's social lives. Positive impacts included the use of screens for virtual playdates, online gaming with peers, and creative interactions such as dance-offs. These online platforms allowed for novel forms of social engagement, fostering connections even during periods of physical distancing.

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Moreover, it became evident that traditional face-to-face interactions were fundamental to the social development of children in the intermediate-phase. Caregivers highlighted the importance of outdoor play, face-to-face interactions with friends, and engagement in extracurricular activities beyond the screen. The findings shed light on the complex interplay between screens and both online and offline social interactions, offering a nuanced understanding of how children in the intermediate-phase navigate relationships in the online world while appreciating the significance of traditional, offline social experiences. Thus, the study successfully addresses the second objective by capturing the varied ways screen-time shapes the social dynamics of this age group, acknowledging both its positive and challenging aspects, both online and offline.

- **To explore and describe measures promoted by caregivers to engage intermediate phase children, in social interaction with friends and family.**

The third objective aimed to explain the measures implemented by caregivers to encourage social interaction among intermediate-phase children and their friends and family. The data collected in this study unveils a wide array of strategies employed by caregivers to foster meaningful connections for their children.

Caregivers shared diverse approaches, from organising outdoor activities and playdates to encouraging participation in extracurriculars like sports, arts, and community events. Furthermore, the use of screens was intertwined with these measures, with caregivers using technology for virtual gatherings, coordinating online playdates, and facilitating communication with family members, especially during times of restrictions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is noteworthy that caregivers, with a blend of creativity and intentionality, sought to balance screen-time with other forms of social engagement. The findings illustrate the multiple ways in which caregivers nurtured the social well-being of intermediate-phase children, considering both virtual and face-to-face interactions. Thus, the exploration successfully addresses the third objective by providing a comprehensive understanding of the measures caregivers employ to promote social interaction in this age group, acknowledging the integration of both digital and traditional approaches.

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5.4. Conclusions Drawn from the Study

Certain assumptions and conclusions were revealed through the course of this study. Here follows a brief discussion of these findings. Firstly, a notable finding is the consistent definition of screen-time among parents, aligning closely with established definitions in the literature review. Screen-time refers to the time spent watching TV, cell phone, computer, and any other use of electronic screens for both educational and non-educational purposes (Dunckley, 2015:19) This shared understanding showcases a collective acknowledgement of what constitutes screen-time in the context of this study.

Another observation is that caregivers are already being proactive in setting to ensure screen-time limits in their own unique ways. This demonstrates an understanding among caregivers of the importance of monitoring and regulating their child's digital experiences. The research proves findings from the literature review that there is a need to set certain limits on both screen-time and content and that there is no hard and fast rule that all content is inherently bad but that monitoring and caregiver discretion is needed. (Cohen, 2018:278) and Hu et al. (2020:183) emphasise the importance of setting limits on screen-time, both in terms of duration and content, and suggest that caregivers should be aware of the negative effects of excessive screen-time. While Ashton and Beattie (2017:293) suggest that caregivers should use their judgment on how children use screen-time.

What was interesting, was that while online schooling was a necessity during the pandemic it posed challenges to social interactions and contributed to increased screen-time among children. This, in turn, led to caregivers providing devices to their children at younger ages than they might have otherwise. The study highlights the importance that traditional learning is crucial in the development of social skills and mental well-being, even in the face of interesting dynamics and bullying among peers.

The findings further indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly restricted social interactions among children, resulting in potential long-term consequences such as increased anxiety. The study recognises the broader societal impact on children's socialisation and emphasises the need for interventions to address these issues and promote healthy social development.

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Additionally, while traditionally viewed as negative, the study suggests that caregivers are increasingly recognising screen-time as an integral part of modern life. The research emphasises the importance of educating caregivers on distinguishing between active and passive screen-time. This nuanced understanding can guide caregivers in leveraging technology for educational purposes while mitigating potential negative effects. As defined in the literature review active screen-time refers to screen activities in which the user regularly interfaces with an electronic screen device such as work, education and research (Dunckley, 2015:19). Educational content and interactive applications can be powerful tools for learning during middle childhood, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills in engaging formats (Dunckley, 2015:19). Passive screen-time refers to watching TV or other electronic devices. This is normally associated with inactivity, apathy and laziness (Dunckley, 2015:20). Excessive passive screen-time has been linked to attention deficits, social and behavioural concerns, cognitive difficulties, language delays, sleeping disorders, eating concerns and obesity in children (Huang et al., 2021:4521).

The research commends caregivers for promoting and encouraging alternative activities such as outdoor play, reading, and participation in extramural activities. Balancing screen-time with these offline pursuits is essential for a well-rounded and holistic development, aligning with the broader goal of nurturing children's physical and mental well-being.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the unique needs and experiences of children with special needs, particularly those with ADHD. Their distinct challenges in online use and social interactions emphasise the importance of tailored approaches and support mechanisms for children with diverse learning needs.

Parenting styles are considered to be ways of parenting, the broad approaches that parents employ to raise and nurture their children. These styles are characterised by the combination of parenting behaviours, attitudes, and expectations that shape the parent-child relationship (Louw & Louw, 2019: 207). The study underscores the impact of parenting styles and the level of strictness on children's screen-time exposure and content limitations. Variations in parenting approaches directly contribute to how children engage with devices.

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Interestingly, the research highlights that the developmental stage of the child plays a pivotal role in determining the type of content and platforms they engage with. In the case of children in the intermediate-phase, activities like playing Roblox and Minecraft predominate, distinguishing them from older age groups exposed to social media challenges, including severe cyberbullying, as noted by Ranjit (2022: 459). Who confirms the connection between screen-time and depression in adolescents, they note that various aspects such as reduced time spent on fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, sleep quality due to extended screen-time use, decreased physical or recreational activities which can lead to social isolation, insecure attachment styles, and low self-esteem which can hinder their ability to engage in both online and offline interactions.

A significant perception among caregivers in this study was the sense that they were primarily responsible for their children's education, particularly during the pandemic. While acknowledging the efforts of teachers, parents express a belief that more could have been done on the part of educators. This insight into parental perspectives on the distribution of educational responsibilities sheds light on the challenges faced by families during times of crisis.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into how children in the intermediate-phase handle screen-time, education, and social interactions. The various aspects of these experiences highlight the ongoing need for research, collaboration, and well-informed strategies to support the overall development of this age group in the digital age. These findings deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between parents, children, and digital technology, emphasising the importance of personalized guidance. Recognizing the impact of parenting styles, developmental stages, and the shared responsibility in navigating education, especially during challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, is crucial. This highlights the need for continuous exploration and improvement of approaches to tackle the changing aspects of the digital era.

5.5. Recommendations for Professionals

Professionals helping caregivers of children in navigating screen-time and social interactions can incorporate discussions about screen-time in sessions with children and caregivers. Explore how digital interactions may impact social and emotional well-being and offer guidance on healthy usage. Professionals have the resources to equip

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caregivers with information on digital literacy to empower them in guiding their children's online experiences, offering workshops or information sessions to address common concerns and promote responsible technology use. Professionals need to consider the impact of screen-time on a child's overall well-being when conducting assessments. Explore how screen-time habits may influence social interactions, emotional health, and academic performance. Collaboration with teachers and other professionals creates a holistic support system. By aligning efforts, social workers can contribute to a comprehensive approach to addressing screen-time challenges in educational settings. Professionals need to advocate for the development and implementation of digital well-being policies within schools and communities. These policies can provide guidelines on healthy screen-time practices and promote a supportive environment for children.

5.6. Recommendations for Further Research on the Topic

For future research the following suggestions are considered, firstly that studies should aim for a more diverse and representative sample, encompassing caregivers and children from various socio-economic backgrounds, geographical locations, and cultural contexts. This would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how screen-time and social interactions are influenced by diverse circumstances. Secondly, to obtain a comprehensive view of the subject, future studies should include teachers' perspectives. Exploring how educators perceive the impact of screen-time on social interactions in the intermediate-phase classroom setting would provide valuable insights that complement caregiver viewpoints. As well as the consideration of incorporating the voices of intermediate-phase children themselves for an ever deeper and more holistic understanding.

Furthermore, expanding the geographical scope beyond Johannesburg to include various regions in South Africa would enable researchers to identify regional nuances and challenges. Understanding how factors such as urban-rural disparities impact screen-time and social interactions. Subsequent studies could consider longitudinal research which would help capture the dynamic nature of screen-time and social interactions of caregivers and children over an extended period. This would allow for a more in-depth analysis of changes, patterns, and the long-term effects of screen-time on social interactions.

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Finally, a collaboration between researchers from various disciplines, such as education, psychology, and technology, can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of screen-time and social interactions.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance

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Lefapha la Bomotho

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Since 1919

2 June 2023

Dear Mrs JA Seiler

Project Title:	Caregivers' experiences on the effects of screen-time on social interactions of South African children in the intermediate phase
Researcher:	Mrs JA Seiler
Supervisor(s):	Ms J Chiba
Department:	Social Work and Criminology
Reference number:	22584782 (HUM037/0523)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 4 May 2023. Please note that before research can commence all other approvals must have been received.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

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Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interview schedule
Topic of research: Caregivers experiences on the effect screen-time has on social interactions of South African children in the intermediate phase

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Gender		
Age		
Home language		
Ethnicity		
Who lives in the family/household? (List people in the household and their relationship to the children such as children, mother, father, uncle, aunt, cousin etc; indicate which person is the caregiver)[1]	Relationship	Age
Participant's position in the family (e.g., parent, sibling, extended family member, friend, etc.)		
Age of intermediate phase child		

SECTION B: CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL INTERACTION

1. Please tell me about your family and children.
2. Can you share with me some of the things that you do as a family together (on weekends)?
3. Can you tell me a bit about your child and their friends?
   - How often do they play together?
   - What would they typically play with (outside, computer games, etc.)?
4. Can you share with me your child's experience at school? (What Grade is your child in? What do they enjoy about school? Do they get along well with friends at school? Do they participate in any extramural activities – sport or cultural?)
5. With COVID many things changed for children. Can you share with me some of the changes that you have observed in your child with regards to how they interact with their friends, cousins, family and with you as a caregiver?

SECTION C: CHILDREN'S SCREEN-TIME USE DURING COVID

1. One of the biggest things that changed for children in COVID, was when they had to school from home. Can you share how your child may have experienced this? (What was challenging? What did they enjoy about this? Were they able to keep up with the work?) Please motivate your answer.
2. During this time what changes did you notice with regards to your child's use of screens (How did they make use of screens?).

SECTION D: CHILD SCREEN-TIME EXPOSURE AND USE

1. How would you describe what screen-time is?

[1] Note that all bracketed comments are prompts for the researcher

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2. Please tell me how does your child currently make use of screen-time (for schoolwork, games, YouTube, WhatsApp)?
    - Are there differences in use during the week and weekends? If yes, please explain the differences.
3. What are your feelings about your child making use of screen-time? Do you feel it is positive or negative? Please explain.
4. What observations have you made about your child's use of screen-time? How has it affected their interactions with friends and family (positive or negative – please elaborate)?
5. How do you manage your child's use of screen-time? (How do you set limits on the use of screen-time? What are the household rules about use of screen-time? What are some of the challenges that you experience with your child's use of screen-time?)
6. How do you encourage your child to balance screen-time with other activities (including interacting with friends and family)?

SECTION E: SUPPORT AND STRATEGIES

1. Please share with me if you have had any discussions with other caregivers or with teachers about the use of screen-time and your child's interactions with others? Could you please elaborate on this?
2. Can you share what you consider to be helpful strategies or resources which could assist in developing healthy screen habits and maintain positive social interactions? Have you used any of these strategies with your child? (If yes, please share. If no, would you consider using some of these strategies?

Any other responses or comments that you would like to share about your child and their use of screen-time and interacting with others?

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Thank you for your participation

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Appendix 3: Letter of Informed Consent

2024/02/13

Principal investigator
Our Ref: Jacqueline Seiler
Tel: 0849779258
E-mail: jaseiler2020@hotmail.com

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE OF THE STUDY
Caregivers' experience on the effect Screen-time has on social interactions of South African children in the intermediate phase.

GOAL OF STUDY
To explore and describe the experiences of caregivers on how screen time affects the social interaction of their intermediate-phase children.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE PROCEDURE
The procedure for the research will entail individual interviews with a duration of 45-60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded by the researcher. The interview will be held at or near Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC) or other convenient location to research participant.

RISKS AND EFFECTS OF INTERVIEW
No risks and discomforts/emotional harm are foreseen. Should you experience any emotional discomfort prompted by sharing your experiences of caring for children in middle childhood, you should inform the researcher. The researcher has prepared for psychosocial support from JPCCC with Gabriela Völkel

BENEFITS
As a research participant, you confirm that you understand that this study has no immediate benefit for you. However, the results of the study could contribute to enhancing the knowledge and techniques that social workers can use to help caregivers manage their children's screen-time in a way that promotes positive social interactions.

COMPENSATION
You confirm that you will receive no financial compensation for your participation in the study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
You will not be coerced into participating in the interview. You will participate of your own free will and can withdraw from participating at any given time without reason. Withdrawing will not affect any relations between you and the organisation or the researcher. If you withdraw during the interview, the data gathered will be destroyed or provided to you to keep.

1

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INTERVIEWEE'S RIGHTS

You can withdraw within the interview, when feeling uncomfortable, at any point. You may decline to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering.

All information obtained will be treated confidentially. To protect the identity of the participant, the researcher will use a pseudonym. Neither the data nor the conclusions reported will include any information which may lead to the identification of the participant, unless required by law. JPCCC will also not be identified as the participating organisation in the study.

The documentation will be accessed by the researcher and authorised University of Pretoria research team. The researcher, with assistance from the University of Pretoria, will keep all documentation collected from the interviews in a safekeeping cabinet for 10 years post-study. The electronic documents will be stored in a password protected format at the Department of Social Work and Criminology for a minimum of 10 years. Data might be used in future research studies.

PUBLICATION OF INFORMATION GATHERED FROM INTERVIEWEE

The findings gathered from the study will be published as a research report and articles in scientific journals and conference papers. The terms of confidentiality will be kept to throughout these engagements or publications.

The study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr J Chiba, Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria (jenita.chiba@up.ac.za).

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Department of Social Work & Criminology

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INTERVIEWEE CONSENT

I, _____
(*full name*) have had the researcher explain the Informed Consent form and understand my rights in participating in the study. I voluntarily consent to participate in the study, with the insight into the purpose of the study and what the data gathered will be used for. I will be provided a pseudo name for the study and all information shared will be handled with confidentiality, unless requested otherwise by myself. All information shared will be kept at the University of Pretoria for safekeeping for 10 years. I will be provided with a copy of my signed consent form.

_____ _____
Interviewee's signature **Date**

_____ _____
Researcher's signature **Date**

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