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Family relationships and bonds in the digital age: What should be taken into account when considering the tendency towards excessive Internet use among children?

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Abstract

The everyday functioning of contemporary society increasingly depends on modern technologies that support basic needs, workplace cooperation, social interaction, and leisure activities. Among these technologies, the Internet continues to play a prominent role by providing access to information and services and by constantly expanding its functions in response to consumer demand. Consequently, the critical evaluation of online content and the regulation of time spent on activities that do not always contribute to personal development are increasingly necessary. These issues should not be underestimated, particularly among young people, whose activities are closely linked to the Internet and the virtual environment. In this regard, parental approaches and the quality of family relationships may play a key role in preventing children from

spending excessive time on the Internet, social media, and computer networks. The aim of this study was to analyse parent–child relationships and parental bonds as statistically significant predictors of excessive Internet use among children. The research sample consisted of 145 families ($N = 290$ respondents) living in the Banská Bystrica region. The mean age was 43.55 years for parents ($SD = 5.56$) and 12.40 years for children ($SD = 1.52$). Although statistically significant correlations were found between the variables examined, most were weak but non-trivial. Among the types of parent–child relationships, closeness was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.223$; $p = 0.013$); among the types of parental bonds, the approach bond was a statistically significant predictor ($\beta = -0.348$; $p < 0.001$). The results suggest that closer parent–child relationships and emotional understanding tend to reduce excessive Internet use. The tendency to misuse the Internet and its affordances appears to be associated with a set of factors related to the family environment and the rules or principles applied within it.

Keywords

child, parent, family relationships, family ties, excessive Internet use

The growing influence of digital technologies is changing the everyday lives of families and significantly affecting the dynamics of parent–child relationships. In the context of these changes, the concept of digital parenting is increasingly important. According to Fidan and Olur (2023, 15189), digital parenting comprises parenting strategies aimed at supporting and regulating children's digital activities.

In this study, digital parenting strategies are understood as integrating key elements that support the formation and maintenance of family relationships. These elements include trust, effective and open communication, emotional closeness between parent and child, and the absence of alienation. Constructive conflict prevention and resolution are also integral to these strategies. Parental approaches designed in this way may function as important protective mechanisms against technology-related disruption of family dynamics and may help prevent risky behaviour, including excessive Internet use.

This claim is consistent with the findings of Banić and Orehovački (2024, 15–19), who analysed 49 studies from 11 databases in order to identify current trends in digital parenting strategies. Their findings on parental mediation indicate that trust and open parent–child communication, which are closely linked to active mediation, are important in the digital environment.

Following Wangmo and Manivannan (2024, e602–e604), we emphasise that emotional intelligence, including empathy, relationship management, and emotion regulation, is central to effective digital parenting because it supports healthy communication and conflict resolution between parents and children in the digital environment. Together, these elements may form a protective framework against negative phenomena such as excessive Internet use (EIU), broadly understood as potentially harmful or poorly controlled patterns of Internet use (Király et al. 2015, 46–60). Research has shown adverse effects on mental health, including increased cyberbullying and contact with strangers, and on interpersonal relationships (Gámez-Guadix, Borrajo, and Almendros 2016, 103–104). Electronic communication may also increase the risk of several harmful phenomena, including abuse (Valkenburg and Peter 2011, 125).

With respect to family functioning, EIU is closely linked to technoference, understood as the disruption of interpersonal communication caused by the presence of technology (McDaniel and Radesky 2018, 100). Tan et al. (2025, 10–13) state that negative digital well-being in children is associated with certain forms of digital parenting and online behaviour. It may therefore

be inferred that both parents and children spend increasing amounts of time online, often at the expense of direct interaction, which may weaken family ties.

An important protective factor against EIU and its consequences is adequate family communication, especially between parents and children. Communication based on trust and respect contributes to preventing risky behaviour in the digital environment. Research shows that the quality of communication has a more substantial protective effect than the frequency of conversations about online activities alone. Conversely, control strategies, although potentially useful, appear to have only limited effects (Van den Eijnden et al. 2010, 82, 85–87).

A further essential aspect of digital parenting is consistency between rules and parental behaviour, which helps reduce EIU in children (Liu et al. 2012, 1269). In line with social learning theory, children model their behaviour on parental patterns, not only in terms of specific activities but also in their perceptions of technology (Konok, Bunford, and Miklósi 2020, 94, 103; Vaala and Bleakley 2015, 40, 42–43).

Preventing digital risks requires systematic and targeted parental effort. Many parents, however, encounter obstacles associated with insufficient media literacy or limited experience (Bielčíková and Gužíková 2023, 323). Jeffery (2024, 472–473) also identifies differences in how parents and children perceive the digital environment, which often leads to conflict. Such conflicts mainly concern time spent online, exposure to “inappropriate” content, children’s media-influenced behaviour, and sibling rivalry.

The introduction of new technologies can significantly affect family cohesion. This claim is consistent with Maihasni et al. (2025, 796), who state that new technologies, particularly social media, may affect family cohesion by changing communication patterns and interpersonal relationships within the family. This impact is particularly evident in reduced empathy and care, increased mistrust, and strengthened privacy boundaries between family members, all of which may weaken family ties. Despite these negative effects, families respond by introducing responsible management of social media use, raising awareness of digital risks, and strengthening interpersonal communication in order to maintain social cohesion and minimise the adverse effects of the digital environment on family dynamics.

Mesch (2006, 119–121) observed that increased Internet use is associated with less time spent with family and more frequent conflict. The perceived disruption of family boundaries caused by technology can reduce the overall sense of family belonging. More recent research by Erstad et al. (2024, 164–165),

based on multidisciplinary literature, suggests, however, that relational identity is transformed rather than simply disrupted by the emergence of new platform practices and the reconfiguration of existing ones. This finding points to the need to redefine family boundaries in digital contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on digital parenting and excessive Internet use, further analysis is required to clarify how specific aspects of family relationships and parental bonds function as protective or risk factors in children's online behaviour.

The main research problem of this study is to determine which dimensions of parent–child relationships and parental bonds significantly predict excessive Internet use among children. The aim of this study is to analyse parent–child relationships and parental bonds in relation to excessive Internet use among children.

To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives were formulated:

- to examine the relationship between types of parent–child relationships and excessive Internet use;
- to examine the relationship between parental bonds and excessive Internet use;
- to identify statistically significant predictors of excessive Internet use among children.

On this basis, the research questions were formulated and are presented in the Methods section.

1. Methods

This study used a quantitative research design based on a questionnaire survey. It examined parent–child relationships from the parents' perspective, parental bonds from the children's perspective, and their association with excessive Internet use among children. To achieve this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: Which dimension of the parent–child relationship is a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children?
- RQ2: Which parental bond is a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children?

2. Research tools

The questionnaire was divided into two separate sections, one for parents and one for children, each containing validated psychometric instruments and demographic items. The scales were translated using the forward–backward translation method. Scale reliability was verified by calculating Cronbach's alpha. The instruments had previously been validated in the studies cited below.

Section for parents:

- Child–Parent Relationship Scale–Short Form (CPRS-SF) — a 15-item scale assessing the parent–child relationship through two subscales: closeness (7 items) and conflict (8 items). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = definitely does not apply, 2 = rather no, 3 = not sure, 4 = rather yes, and 5 = definitely applies (Driscoll and Pianta 2011). Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.802$ for conflict and $\alpha = 0.744$ for closeness, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Section for children:

- Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS) — a 14-item instrument measuring excessive Internet use (EIU). In the original version, item scores range from 0 to 4; in the modified version used here, they range from 1 to 5 and are measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = very often (Meerkerk et al. 2009, 2–3). For children, the scale achieved $\alpha = 0.922$, indicating excellent internal consistency.
- The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) — a 25-item questionnaire assessing adolescents' relationships with parents across three dimensions: trust, communication, and alienation. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = never or almost never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = almost always or always (Armsden and Greenberg 1987, 430, 451–453). Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.832$ for trust, $\alpha = 0.869$ for communication, and $\alpha = 0.719$ for alienation, indicating acceptable reliability. The alienation scale was reverse-coded and interpreted as approach/attachment.

2.1. Research sample and data collection

The research sample consisted of 145 families (145 children and 145 parents). The mean age of the parents was 43.55 years ($SD = 5.56$), and the mean age of the children was 12.40 years ($SD = 1.52$). A convenience sample was drawn from the Banská Bystrica region. Data were collected electronically between May and December 2024 with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. Informed consent was obtained, as minors participated in the study.

In a research report mapping selected forms of risky behaviour among children and youth, Holdoš et al. (2023, 135–136) found statistically significant regional differences in excessive Internet use among young people. Respondents from central Slovakia, which includes the Banská Bystrica region, ranked third, behind respondents from western Slovakia and Bratislava. The report also found that communication with family is one of the most common online activities among children. Janková's research report (2022, 6, 15) showed that children and adolescents in the Banská Bystrica region have broad access to digital technologies, creating conditions for frequent and diverse online activities. A more detailed description of the research sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	n	%
Parents' gender		
Mother	130	89.66
Father	15	10.34
Family type in terms of structure		
Complete or reconstituted	124	85.52
Incomplete	21	14.48
Number of children aged 10–15		
1	104	71.72
2 and more	41	28.28
Place of residence		
Town	77	53.10
Village	68	46.90
Age of parents (categories)		

Demographic characteristics of the research sample	n	%
≤ 42	54	37.24
≥ 43	91	62.76
Children's gender		
Girl	73	50.34
Boy	72	49.66
Age of children (categories)		
Pre-puberty (10–12)	78	53.79
Puberty (13–15)	67	46.21

2.2. Data analysis

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.1.0. Inductive statistical procedures included Pearson's correlation coefficient and multiple linear regression. Scale scores were calculated as item means. Because the data consisted of matched parent–child responses within families, the regression results were interpreted in light of the potential non-independence of observations within families. The normality of variable distributions was evaluated by assessing skewness and kurtosis and by inspecting histograms. Information on the assumptions for regression analysis is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Assumptions for the use of multiple linear regression

Assumptions	Model 1	Model 2
Normality of the distribution of standardised residuals (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, $p > 0.05$)	assumption met	assumption met
VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) < 5	assumption met	assumption met
No influential cases (Cook's distance < 1)	assumption met	assumption met
No multivariate outliers (Mahalanobis distance < 15)	assumption met	one potential outlier identified (value 18.94)

Table 2 shows that the assumptions for the appropriate use of multiple linear regression with the enter method were met for the data obtained from respondents. Homoscedasticity was assessed visually using a scatterplot of standardised residuals against predicted values. No systematic pattern or substantial change in residual spread was observed, indicating that this assumption was satisfied.

2.3. Results

Table 3. Correlations between types of parent–child relationships, parental bonds, and excessive Internet use among children

Variables		Conflictual relationship	Closeness relationship	Trust bond	Communication bond	Approach bond	Excessive Internet use
Conflictual relationship	Pearson's correlation coefficient	1	−0.403	−0.406	−0.304	−0.413	0.181
	p-value		0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.030*
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Closeness relationship	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.403	1	0.427	0.509	0.354	−0.260
	p-value	0.000***		0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.002**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Trust bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.406	0.427	1	0.761	0.590	−0.268
	p-value	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***	0.000***	0.001**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Communication bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.304	0.509	0.761	1	0.597	−0.264
	p-value	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***	0.001**
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Approach bond	Pearson's correlation coefficient	−0.413	0.354	0.590	0.597	1	−0.388
	p-value	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***		0.000***
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145
Excessive Internet use	Pearson's correlation coefficient	0.181	−0.260	−0.268	−0.264	−0.388	1
	p-value	0.030*	0.002**	0.001**	0.001**	0.000***	
	N	145	145	145	145	145	145

Table 3 shows a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between conflictual relationships and closeness as aspects of the parent–child relationship ($r = -0.403$; $p < 0.001$). It also shows statistically significant, stronger correlations between trust and communication, trust and approach, and communication and approach as aspects of parental bonds ($r > 0.5$; $p < 0.001$). All variables were statistically significantly correlated with excessive Internet use among children, although the strength of these correlations varied. The weakest correlation was between conflictual relationships and excessive Internet use; weaker negative correlations were observed between closeness and excessive Internet use, communication and excessive Internet use, and trust and excessive Internet use; the strongest correlation was between approach and excessive Internet use.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression models between parent–child relationships, parental bonds, and excessive Internet use among children

Model description		Excessive Internet use	B	Beta	t	p-value
R	0.273	Predictors				
R ²	0.074	Conflictual relationship	0.109	0.091	1.027	0.306
F (ANOVA)	5.699	Closeness relationship	-0.372	-0.223	-2.530	0.013*
p-value	0.004**					
Model description		Excessive Internet use	B	Beta	t	p-value
R	0.391	Predictors				
R ²	0.153	Trust bond	-0.072	-0.047	-0.377	0.707
F (ANOVA)	8.497	Communication bond	-0.025	-0.021	-0.169	0.866
p-value	0.000***	Approach bond	-0.388	-0.348	-3.478	0.000***

Table 4 shows that closeness in the parent–child relationship was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.223$; $p = 0.013$), indicating that higher levels of parent–child closeness were associated with lower levels of excessive Internet use. Table 4 also shows that the approach bond was a statistically significant predictor of excessive Internet use among children ($\beta = -0.348$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of approach bond were associated with lower levels of excessive Internet use. The first model

explained 7.4% of the variance in excessive Internet use, whereas the second model explained 15.3%.

3. Discussion

Based on the regression results, closeness in the parent–child relationship appears to influence excessive Internet use among children.

Closeness promotes open communication and mutual respect and may increase children's willingness to share and reflect on their digital experiences, thereby supporting responsible and safe online behaviour (Alias, Nasri, and Awang 2022, 1, 11–12). Research by Kaspersky Lab (2016) showed that up to 35% of parents of teenagers felt isolated from their children because of the Internet. This may be interpreted as a weakening of emotional contact. Dulovics, Niklová, and Zošáková (2023, 12–16, 71–72) further emphasise that the quality of communication and trust, not merely technical measures, is central to reducing children's digital vulnerability.

Although conflict in the parent–child relationship showed a statistically significant positive correlation with EIU ($r = 0.181$; $p = 0.030$), it was not significant in the regression model. This result is consistent with Chen, Li, and Nie (2024, 1, 5), who found that parent–adolescent conflict is associated with problematic Internet use in adolescents indirectly through depression. Similarly, Geng, Xu, and Liu (2023, 1, 8) identified conflict as a mediator of the adverse effects of media behaviour on mental health, especially in older children.

According to Syahril et al. (2024, 1001, 1005–1006), different family orientations towards technology affect the maintenance of family relationships and the setting of boundaries for device use. A conformity-oriented parental approach may either reduce or increase family tension, depending on how technology is regulated within the family. On the basis of Li et al. (2022, 1, 18), it may be inferred that the Internet itself is not necessarily a source of conflict or alienation; rather, it becomes risky when it replaces authentic family communication and emotional connection. Their findings also suggest that meaningful Internet use, such as maintaining contact with loved ones, can strengthen interpersonal bonds, whereas excessive and superficial use may lead to social isolation and weakened family relationships. Based on the regression results, the approach bond appears to influence excessive Internet use among children within the broader construct of parent–child bonds.

This variable refers to perceived emotional availability between the child and his or her parent. The result is consistent with Mikuška et al. (2020, 1294–1295), who state that strong and supportive family and school relationships can help prevent excessive Internet use among adolescents, partly by alleviating emotional problems and influencing how young people perceive their online social interactions. On the basis of Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 425, 437–438), it can be argued that emotional alienation in the family increases the risk that children will retreat into the online environment and weakens the family's protective function.

In such cases, digital technologies may replace personal interaction and reduce mutual understanding, particularly when authentic communication is lacking. The importance of emotional connection is also confirmed by the short-term longitudinal study by Wright and Wachs (2020, 2390, 2398), which shows that parental social support is a strong protective factor against problematic digital media use, including cyberbullying.

Although trust ($r = -0.268$; $p = 0.001$) and communication ($r = -0.264$; $p = 0.001$) were not significant predictors of excessive Internet use (EIU) in the regression model, their negative correlations with EIU were statistically significant. This suggests that, in a larger sample, they might prove to be important factors influencing EIU through the broader family atmosphere. Alias, Nasri, and Awang (2022, 1) confirm that trust shown to children strengthens their autonomy, improves their understanding of parental Internet mediation styles, reduces parental concerns, and increases children's awareness of privacy issues.

Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 425, 443) also point to the paradox of digital communication: although it can weaken the ability to understand emotions, it may also facilitate the sharing of feelings. Their study, therefore, suggests that social media has a dual character: it may function as a means of detachment, but it may also support attachment formation. Research by Kaspersky Lab (2016), conducted in seven countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Russia—with a sample of 3,780 families (one parent and one child in each family), revealed that 12% of parents (who regularly use social media) hide their online activity. This may further undermine trust and transparency in relationships. Procentese, Gatti, and Di Napoli (2019, 1, 6) suggest that parents who perceive social media negatively are more likely to have limited openness in communication.

The strongest correlations were identified between trust and communication ($r = 0.761$; $p < 0.001$), trust and approach ($r = 0.590$; $p < 0.001$), and

communication and approach ($r = 0.597$; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that these aspects form a relatively coherent construct of parental-bond quality. According to Ishak, Yunus, and Iskandar (2010, 1529–1530, 1532–1534), trust is built through emotional availability and mutual respect, and communication is particularly effective when it is reciprocal and collaborative.

Combining the present results with those of Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 443) and Syahril et al. (2024, 1008–1009) suggests that excessive digital media use may reduce the perceived value of personal interactions through technoforce, resulting in weakened trust and closeness. Tahir, Sarwar, and Tahir (2025, 434–435) found that 66% of respondents reported that time spent on social media reduced time spent with family, and 57% reported reduced face-to-face communication as a result of social media use. The present findings, according to which higher closeness and attachment reduce the risk of EIU, therefore complement this picture with quantitative evidence from a different cultural context. This phenomenon is further highlighted by McDaniel and Coyne (2016, 85, 93), who state that digital devices and their interference in conversations, including conversations between partners, have adverse effects on personal life and relationships.

3.1. Limitations and future research

The main limitations of the study were the sample size and the use of a convenience sample, which limits representativeness. The research was also geographically limited, as data were collected in the Banská Bystrica region; consequently, the results cannot be generalised to a broader national context. In addition, multiple linear regression was performed on a single data set. Data collection may also have been affected by unequal access to information technology and differences in respondents' digital literacy.

Another important limitation is the low representation of fathers in the research sample (10.34%). The findings therefore predominantly reflect maternal perspectives on parent–child relationships and digital parenting practices. As a result, their generalisability to both parents is limited. Future research should seek a more balanced representation of fathers in order to capture a more comprehensive view of family dynamics in the digital environment. It should also examine other determinants, such as value orientation, media literacy, and the social context of families.

3.2. Recommendations

Our findings support the premises of the *Concept of Media Education in the Slovak Republic in the Context of Lifelong Learning* (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic 2009, 34–39, 44–45). It is essential to develop parents' media and digital literacy systematically across various educational formats, including online courses, workshops, and webinars. Programmes should focus on strengthening critical thinking, recognising digital risks, safe Internet use, and media education in the family.

A key element of supportive digital parenting is the provision of practical tools that enable parents to participate actively by jointly viewing digital content, discussing it, setting clear rules, and communicating about digital threats. We recommend coordinated cooperation with schools to ensure comprehensive and accessible education for parents.

Such cooperation should include teachers specialising in media education and media literacy, who can inform parents about meaningful digitally supported interactions with their children, as well as digital coordinators, who can demonstrate appropriate ways to use digital platforms to communicate with children about their responsibilities and to share engaging content that supports emotionally meaningful communication. This is also an area in which novice teachers should be more actively involved, including student teachers educated according to newer didactic concepts in which teacher preparation has a stable place in future-oriented classrooms (Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic 2025).

In this context, the development of transversal competencies in student teachers is important. At the same time, family activities that do not involve technology should also be supported because they strengthen traditional forms of communication and social bonds within the family.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that the quality of parent–child relationships, particularly emotional closeness, plays a significant protective role against excessive Internet use among children. Specifically, closeness in the parent–child relationship and emotional availability (approach bond) were identified as statistically significant predictors, suggesting that children who experience stronger

emotional connections with their parents are less likely to engage in problematic Internet use.

Although trust and communication were not identified as statistically significant predictors in the regression models, their significant correlations with excessive Internet use indicate their potential indirect role within the broader family environment. These findings suggest that excessive Internet use should not be understood solely as an individual behavioural issue, but rather as a phenomenon embedded in the relational and emotional dynamics of the family.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening emotional bonds between parents and children and fostering open communication and mutual trust. Interventions aimed at reducing excessive Internet use should therefore extend beyond controlling screen time and should focus on the quality of family relationships. In this context, enhancing parents' media literacy also appears important because it enables them to better understand the digital environment and to guide their children's online behaviour more effectively. Further research would benefit from longitudinal designs that allow for a deeper understanding of causal relationships between family dynamics and children's online behaviour.

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