

THE ROLE OF PARENTAL COMMUNICATION IN SHAPING CHILDREN'S CHARACTER IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has brought both opportunities and challenges for parents in shaping their children's character. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of parental communication strategies in shaping children's digital behavior and character development amid increasing online risks and influences. The study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore parents' lived experiences in communicating with their children to foster positive character development in the digital era. Purposive sampling was employed to select six parents (three mothers and three fathers) with children aged 10-15 years who actively use digital devices. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, and a thematic analysis was used to identify key communication strategies, challenges, and parental roles in shaping digital behavior. The results showed that parents adopted various effective communication practices, specifically maintaining open dialogue through regular family discussions, implementing collaborative rule-setting, engaging in active mentoring through shared digital activities, and modeling appropriate technology use behavior. The main challenges included gaps in technological knowledge and limited quality time. Parents played roles as digital educators, supervisors, and role models. Effective communication had a positive impact on children's awareness of online risks and responsible use of technology. However, consistent implementation of rules and peer influence remain challenges. The study highlights the importance of adaptive and supportive communication practices while also addressing technological knowledge gaps and peer influences.

Keywords: Digital character; Digital parenting; Digital resilience; Media literacy; Parental communication.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has significantly transformed various aspects of human life, especially in communication patterns and social interactions. This rapid development in information and communication technology has posed new challenges for parents in their efforts to raise and educate their children. On the one hand, the digital era provides unprecedented opportunities for accessing information and enhancing learning; on the other hand, it also brings substantial risks and negative impacts, such as exposure to inappropriate content, decreased physical activity, and a rise in cyberbullying incidents (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). As a result, the role of parental communication becomes increasingly critical in shaping children's character and preparing them to navigate the complexities of the digital world.

Character, which encompasses moral values, ethics, and behaviors, is a fundamental aspect of individual development and identity formation. However, in the context of the digital era, this process is further complicated by the pervasive influence of digital technology, which can disrupt traditional character-building mechanisms (Baumrind, 2019). The formation of a child's character is a gradual process shaped by multiple factors, with parents playing a pivotal role as primary figures in their child's life. The easy accessibility to digital media and its influence on children's attitudes, thought processes, and behaviors have further intensified these challenges.

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Article History
Received: 30-8-2023 Accepted: 31-12-2024

Character development in the digital era encompasses more than just behavioral patterns in technology use—it involves the cultivation of core virtues, ethical principles, and moral reasoning that guide a child's decisions and actions both online and offline. While digital behavior is an essential observable manifestation of character, this study focuses on the broader development of moral character traits such as responsibility, empathy, integrity, and self-discipline in the context of digital technology use. These foundational character elements influence how children navigate online spaces, make ethical decisions about content sharing, treat others in digital interactions, and manage their relationship with technology.

The relationship between character and digital behavior is particularly significant as children's online activities increasingly reflect and shape their moral development. For instance, children's responses to cyberbullying situations, handling digital privacy, managing screen time, and engaging with online communities all stem from and contribute to their character formation. Therefore, this study examines not just children's observable digital behaviors but also how parental communication influences the development of underlying character traits that guide these behaviors, includes exploring how parents communicate values, ethical principles, and moral reasoning skills that help children develop into responsible digital citizens with strong moral character.

In the context of this study, children's character refers explicitly to the development of six core dimensions of children's character development in the digital age: moral reasoning, digital empathy, self-regulation, digital responsibility, critical thinking, and cyber resilience. These dimensions shape how children navigate technology, guiding ethical decisions, emotional responses, impulse control, responsible online behavior, critical evaluation of digital content, and recovery from negative experiences. Particularly significant during ages 10-15, when children form their digital identities, these traits are reflected in their responses to cyberbullying, screen time management, online gaming behavior, misinformation, and challenges in the digital environment. Nurturing these dimensions during this formative period is essential for fostering healthy digital interactions.

Parental communication remains central to the character formation process. Through effective communication, parents can impart values, norms, and ethical guidelines that serve as the foundation for positive character development (Kerr et al., 2022). However, in the digital age, communication patterns between parents and children have shifted dramatically. With the increasing prevalence of gadgets and social media, traditional face-to-face interactions are often disrupted. Therefore, an adaptive communication strategy is necessary to ensure the messages regarding character formation are effectively conveyed. For example, the fragmented nature of digital interactions has resulted in weakened parent-child bonds, leading to decreased opportunities for parents to model appropriate behavior (Chen et al., 2021).

Another study by Rodríguez-de-Dios et al. (2023) revealed that active parental mediation in children's use of digital technology can improve children's digital literacy and critical awareness of online content. Meanwhile, Livingstone et al. (2020), in their longitudinal study, found that good parent-child communication quality can mitigate the negative impacts of excessive digital media use on children's social-emotional development. The digital era also brings new challenges in terms of supervising and protecting children from negative content in cyberspace. Parents are required to have an adequate understanding of digital technology in order to guide children in using digital media wisely and safely (Mascheroni et al., 2022). In addition, parents also need to develop effective communication skills to build trust and openness with children so that they can detect and address potential problems that arise from the use of digital technology.

The role of parents extends beyond communication, as they are also role models for technology use. Children tend to mimic their parents' behavior, including how they engage with gadgets and social media. Therefore, parents must balance both online and offline activities by setting appropriate boundaries and modeling healthy technology habits (Bjelland et al., 2021).

In the Indonesian context, research on the role of parental communication in the formation of children's character in the digital era is still limited. However, several studies have shown parental concerns about the negative impacts of digital technology on child development, as well as the importance of the role of parents in guiding the responsible use of technology (Rahmat et al., 2022). Those studies show awareness of the importance of the role of parental communication in shaping children's character amidst the flow of digitalization.

Given the complexity of the challenges faced by parents in shaping children's character in the digital era, further research is needed to explore effective communication strategies in this context. This study aims to analyze the role of parental communication in shaping children's character in the digital era, with a focus on identifying effective communication practices, challenges faced, and strategies to improve the quality of parent-child communication in the context of using digital technology. Through a deeper understanding of the role of parental communication in shaping children's character in the digital era, it is hoped that this study can provide theoretical and practical contributions in efforts to prepare a young generation with strong character and ability to face the challenges of the digital world. The results of this study are also expected to be the basis for the development of educational programs and interventions aimed at improving parental communication skills in the context of the digital era.

METHOD

Study design

This study was conducted from June to September 2023, employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of parents in communicating with their children regarding character formation in the digital era. Phenomenology was chosen because of its capacity to capture the essence of participants' experiences and provide in-depth insight into the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim was to understand how parents navigate the challenges of communication in the digital era and their roles in shaping their children's character.

Participants and Study Area

The study involved six parents (three mothers and three fathers) who had children aged 10-15 years, selected using purposive sampling. This sample size was determined based on data saturation, where no new significant themes emerged during data collection, ensuring sufficient depth and richness in the data (Patton, 2020). The study was conducted in urban and suburban areas of Jakarta, Indonesia, allowing for diverse perspectives within a shared cultural context.

The study focuses on children aged 10-15, a critical developmental stage marked by significant cognitive, social, and emotional changes, increased autonomy in technology use, and initial independent interactions with social media and online communities. Parents of children using digital devices for at least 2 hours daily for education and recreation were selected, with children engaging in educational apps, social media, and online gaming for an average of 1-2 hours each. This age and usage intensity provided a valuable context to explore parent-child communication and character development in the digital era.

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) parents living with their children; (2) children actively using digital devices; (3) parents willing to share their personal experiences. To provide context, the participants came from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and geographic locations within the Jakarta metropolitan area. This variation ensured a broader understanding of parental communication in different settings. The table below provides a brief overview of the participants' demographic details:

Table 1. Demography of Participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Occupation	Socioeconomic Status	Geographic Location
P1	Male	42	Bachelor degree	Engineer	Middle	Urban
P2	Female	38	Secondary education	Housewife	Lower-Middle	Suburban
P3	Male	45	Master degree	Lecturer	Upper-Middle	Urban
P4	Female	40	Diploma	Small Business Owner	Middle	Suburban
P5	Male	39	Bachelor degree	IT Specialist	Middle	Urban
P6	Female	37	Secondary education	Salesperson	Lower-Middle	Suburban

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60-90 minutes with each participant. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video calls, depending on participant preferences. An interview guide was developed based on a literature review. It included questions about communication strategies, the challenges parents faced, and their perceptions of their roles in shaping their children's character in the digital era. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process involved the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the data: The researcher thoroughly reviewed all transcripts to gain an understanding of the data.
2. Generating initial codes: Key patterns and phrases were identified in the transcripts, and initial codes were generated. This coding process was both inductive and deductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also aligning with the study's theoretical framework.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were organized into broader themes that represented the central ideas and experiences expressed by participants.
4. Reviewing and refining themes: The themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the data. This step involved refining or merging overlapping themes.
5. Defining and naming themes: The final themes were defined and named to reflect the essence of the participants' experiences.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Member checking was conducted by sharing the findings with participants to verify the accuracy of the data interpretation. Peer debriefing was also used, where a colleague familiar with qualitative research reviewed the findings to provide an external perspective. In addition, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document biases, thoughts, and decisions throughout the

research process, ensuring transparency and reflexivity. Thick descriptions of the participants' experiences were provided to offer a rich, detailed context that enhances the transferability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards to protect participants' rights. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of their confidentiality, and their names were anonymized in the transcripts. Voluntary participation was emphasized, and participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

RESULTS

Data analysis from in-depth interviews with six parents resulted in four main themes that reflect their experiences in communicating with children regarding character formation in the digital era. These themes are (1) Parental Communication Strategies, (2) Communication Challenges in the Digital Era, (3) The Role of Parents in Digital Character Formation, and (4) The Impact of Communication on Children's Digital Behavior.

Parent Communication Strategy

Participants in this study described a variety of communication strategies they used to discuss digital technology use and character-building with their children. These strategies can be categorized into four main approaches, as shown in Table 2. The communication strategies identified in this study align with the concept of parental mediation. Open dialogue and joint rule-setting involve active mediation, where parents provide discussion and guidance. Parents employed various communication approaches, as illustrated by their experiences:

"We maintain an open environment at home. When my children want to discuss their online experiences, whether good or concerning, I listen without immediate judgment. This has helped them feel comfortable sharing things with me." (P3, a mother)

Active mentoring reflects co-use, and behavioral modeling highlights the importance of positive parental examples. These strategies demonstrate that parents use a multifaceted approach in communicating about digital technologies, enhancing their ability to shape children's positive digital behavior effectively

Table 2. Parental Communication Strategies.

Communication Strategy	Description	Participant Response
Open Dialogue	Encourage two-way discussions about digital experiences	"We always try to listen to our child's experiences online without being judgmental." (P3)
Joint Rule Setting	Involve children in creating rules for technology use	"We sit down together and create a mutually agreed 'family digital contract'" (P1)
Active Mentoring	Be directly involved in children's digital activities	"I often play online games with my child to understand his world." (P5)
Behavior Modeling	Model healthy technology use	"We set a 'gadget-free time' for the whole family every night." (P4)

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

Communication Challenges in the Digital Age

Although parents have various communication strategies, they also face some significant challenges in communicating with their children about technology use and character-building in the digital age. Table 3 summarizes the main challenges identified by participants. The challenges identified in this study highlight the complexity of parent-child communication in the digital age. The technological knowledge gap experienced by most participants reflects the divide between digital immigrants and digital natives, emphasizing the need for parents to enhance their digital literacy continually. The technological knowledge gap emerged as a significant challenge, as one parent described:

"The biggest challenge is keeping up with new apps and platforms. Just when I think I understand one social media platform, my children are already using something new. It makes it difficult to provide proper guidance when I'm constantly playing catch-up." (P5, a father)

Additionally, the limited quality time shared by participants demonstrates how technology can interfere with parent-child interactions, underscoring the importance of balancing digital engagement with meaningful family connections.

Table 3. Communication Challenges in the Digital Age

Challenges	Description	Frequency (n=6)
Technological Knowledge Gap	Parents feel left behind in understanding the latest technology	5
Limited Quality Time	Difficulty finding time for in-depth communication due to busy schedules	6
Children's Resistance	Children show reluctance to discuss their online activities	4
Rapidly Changing Digital Trends	Difficulty keeping up with new platforms and applications	5
Peer Influence	Peer pressure influencing children's technology use	3

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

The Role of Parents in Digital Character Formation

Participants described the various roles they considered necessary in shaping their children's digital character. These roles reflect the multidimensional responsibilities of parents in the digital age, as shown in Table 4. The roles identified by participants align with the concept of digital parenting. The roles of digital educators and supervisors highlight the importance of active and restrictive mediation in guiding children's digital behavior. The facilitator role emphasizes creating a supportive digital environment, while the emotional companion role focuses on building children's digital resilience. Parents described their evolving role in the digital age:

"Being a parent today means wearing multiple hats. I'm not just a mother - I'm a digital mentor, teaching them how to navigate online spaces safely while modeling responsible technology use myself. Sometimes, I learn alongside them, which actually helps build our relationship." (P4, a mother)

Additionally, the role of the digital role model underscores the importance of consistency between parental actions and words, which is essential for character development.

Table 4. Roles of Parents in the Formation of Digital Character

Role	Description	Participant Response
Digital Educator	Teaching digital skills and ethics	"I feel responsible for teaching my child how to interact respectfully and safely online." (P2)
Supervisor	Monitoring children's online activities	"We have a system in place where we regularly check our child's browsing history and the apps they use." (P6)
Facilitator	Providing access and opportunities for positive technology use	"We invest in educational devices and apps to support our child's digital learning." (P1)
Emotional Companion	Providing emotional support in dealing with online challenges	"I always try to be there for my child when they experience cyberbullying or disturbing content." (P3)
Digital Role Model	Modeling healthy and ethical technology use	"I am aware that my children observe how I use my smartphone." (P5)

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

Impact of Communication on Children's Digital Behavior

Participants reported a variety of impacts they observed from their communication efforts on their children's digital behavior. Table 5 summarizes the positive impacts identified, along with the frequency with which they appeared in the interviews. The positive impacts reported by participants highlight the effectiveness of parental communication in fostering healthy digital behaviors in children:

"After months of consistent communication about digital responsibility, I noticed my son starting to self-regulate his screen time. He now comes to me with questions about online content and makes more thoughtful decisions about what he shares on social media." (P1, father).

Increased awareness of online risks and responsible technology use demonstrate the development of digital citizenship. Improved critical thinking skills align with the principles of digital literacy. At the same time, open communication about online experiences reflects a strong foundation of trust between parents and children, which is essential for effective digital parenting. Additionally, the growth of digital empathy signifies the positive character

Table 5. Positive Impacts of Communication on Children's Digital Behavior.

Positive impact	Description	Frequency (n=6)
Increased Online Risk Awareness	Children are more aware of potential dangers in cyberspace	5
More Responsible Use of Technology	Children show independence in managing their time online	4
Increased Critical Thinking Skills	Children are better able to evaluate online information	3
Open Communication about Online Experiences	Children share more about their online activities	6
Increased Digital Empathy	Children show concern for the feelings of others online	3

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

development in online contexts, which is a crucial aspect of character building in the digital age.

However, it is important to note that participants also reported several challenges that they still face in influencing their children's digital behaviors. Table 6 summarizes these challenges. These challenges suggest that while parental communication has a positive impact, there are still complexities in shaping children's digital behavior. The consistency of rule implementation, which was a challenge for the majority of participants (5 out of 6)

Table 6. Challenges in Influencing Children's Digital Behavior

Challenge	Description	Frequency (n=6)
Consistency of Rule Implementation	Difficulty consistently enforcing technology rules	5
Strong Peer Influence	Peer pressure to use certain apps or platforms	4
Technology Addiction	Difficulty reducing children's screen time	3
Conflicts over privacy	Tension between parental supervision and children's desire for privacy	4
Differences in Risk Perception	Differences in parent-child views about online dangers	3

Source: Data processed by author, 2024

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide in-depth insight into the complexity of parental communication in shaping children's character in the digital era. The findings regarding the communication strategies used by parents are consistent with previous research that highlights the critical role of active mediation in children's digital media use. Valkenburg et al. (2023) emphasized that active mediation, involving open dialogue and joint rule-setting, proves to be significantly more effective in promoting positive digital behavior than purely restrictive approaches. This study reaffirms that when parents engage in meaningful discussions and collaboratively establish digital guidelines with their children, they create an environment that encourages trust, understanding, and mutual respect. Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) also underscore the importance of open communication as a cornerstone for "parenting for a digital future," suggesting that such communication not only guides children's behavior but also empowers them to navigate the complexities of the digital world independently. By fostering open dialogue, parents are better equipped to address their children's concerns, build resilience against online risks, and instill a sense of responsibility in their digital interactions.

The communication challenges identified in this study, particularly the technological knowledge gap between parents and children, highlight the significant barriers to effective digital parenting. This gap aligns with Prensky's (2019) concept of "digital immigrants" versus "digital natives," where parents often struggle to keep pace with their children's rapidly evolving technological expertise. This disparity creates challenges in guiding children's digital behavior, as parents may lack the skills or knowledge to fully understand the platforms and applications their children use. Mascheroni et al. (2020) emphasize that closing this gap requires continuous efforts by parents to improve their digital literacy, enabling them to engage in more informed and effective conversations with their children. Moreover, the issue of limited quality time, reported by all participants, reflects the concept of "technoference," which describes how technology often disrupts meaningful parent-child interactions. When parents themselves are preoccupied with their devices, opportunities for communication and connection diminish, further complicating the dynamics of digital parenting. Addressing these challenges requires parents to prioritize not

only their digital habits but also strategies that foster deeper engagement and connection with their children, ensuring a balance between digital guidance and emotional support.

The roles of parents in shaping children's digital character, as identified in this study, expand on the framework of "digital parenting" and demonstrate the multifaceted nature of this responsibility. Parents' roles as digital educators and supervisors highlight the importance of active and restrictive mediation, where clear rules and consistent guidance help children understand the boundaries of responsible technology use. Mascheroni et al. (2020) suggest that these roles are essential in equipping children with the knowledge and skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively. Beyond this, the role of the facilitator reflects the need to create a supportive digital environment, encouraging children to explore and learn while developing critical thinking and self-regulation. This finding aligns with Livingstone and Stoilova's (2021) study on the importance of fostering "digital resilience" in children, enabling them to cope with challenges such as cyberbullying or harmful online content.

Furthermore, the role of emotional companions emphasizes the significance of providing emotional support and building trust, which is critical for helping children develop confidence in their digital interactions. The role of digital role models, as highlighted by Lickona and Davidson (2021), underscores the necessity of consistency between parental words and actions. By demonstrating positive digital habits, parents reinforce the values and behaviors they wish to instill in their children, creating a foundation for character-building and ethical decision-making in the digital age.

The positive impacts of parental communication on children's digital behavior, as observed in this study, highlight its effectiveness in fostering healthy digital habits and character development. Participants reported that open communication led to increased awareness of online risks, enabling children to navigate the digital environment more responsibly. This result aligns with the concept of "digital citizenship" discussed by Jones and Mitchell (2021), where responsible digital behavior and ethical decision-making are key components of character development. Additionally, improved critical thinking skills reported by participants reflect the importance of digital literacy, as emphasized by Livingstone et al. (2019). Critical thinking enables children to evaluate online content, identify misinformation, and make informed decisions about their digital engagement. Moreover, the trust built through open discussions fosters a stronger parent-child relationship, allowing children to feel supported and guided in their online experiences. Wartella et al. (2020) also found that warm and responsive communication enhances children's ability to share their digital experiences openly, contributing to a more positive and collaborative digital parenting dynamic. The development of digital empathy, another positive outcome, underscores the role of parental communication in character building. As Twenge and Campbell (2022) note, cultivating empathy in online interactions is essential for fostering kindness, respect, and understanding in the digital age.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings reveal ongoing challenges in influencing children's digital behavior. Issues such as consistent rule enforcement and the strong influence of peers highlight the complexity of digital character formation, which involves multiple factors beyond parental control. The strong influence of peers suggests the importance of considering the child's social context in parental communication strategies (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). The consistency of rule implementation, which was a challenge for the majority of participants (5 out of 6), reflects the difficulty in implementing "family media agreements", as discussed by Coyne et al. (2023). Coyne et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of "family media agreements," where children are actively engaged in creating digital usage rules. Such involvement ensures greater adherence to the rules and fosters a sense of responsibility and ownership among children. Additionally, challenges related to technology addiction and privacy conflicts illustrate the tension between promoting children's autonomy and maintaining parental supervision. This tension aligns with the concept of "autonomy-supportive parenting," as discussed by Joussemet et al. (2023), which advocates for a balanced approach that allows children to exercise independence while ensuring

their safety and well-being. Addressing these challenges requires parents to adopt adaptive strategies that consider both the evolving digital landscape and the unique needs of their children.

Overall, the results of this study reinforce the understanding that parental communication plays a crucial role in shaping children's character in the digital age. However, its effectiveness is influenced by various factors, including the strategies employed, the parent-child relationship, and the broader sociocultural context. These findings advocate for a holistic approach to digital parenting that combines open communication, autonomy support, active role modelling and shared learning between parents and children. Recent research, such as Wartella et al. (2020) and Waters et al. (2021), emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts to address the multifaceted challenges of digital parenting. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, parents must remain proactive in adapting their strategies to ensure their children develop the skills, resilience, and character needed to thrive in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified several effective communication practices that parents employ in shaping children's character within the context of the digital era. The most successful practices included (1) maintaining open dialogue through regular family discussions about digital experiences, (2) implementing collaborative rule-setting where children actively participate in creating technology guidelines, (3) engaging in active mentoring through shared digital activities, and (4) modeling appropriate technology use behavior. These evidence-based practices were found to contribute positively to children's responsible digital behavior and character development.

One of the unique contributions of this study is its focus on the dynamic nature of digital parenting, offering new insights into how parents can navigate the challenges posed by rapidly evolving technology. Unlike previous studies, this research provides a detailed exploration of how parents adapt their communication strategies to address the specific pressures of the digital environment. By emphasizing the importance of parental involvement in setting technology rules and fostering open communication, this study fills a gap in the literature regarding effective parental mediation strategies.

In practical terms, holistic communication refers to an approach where parents integrate multiple aspects of their relationship with their children—such as trust, guidance, and emotional support—into their digital interactions. Adaptive communication involves the ability to adjust these strategies as new technologies emerge or as children grow older. Both approaches are critical in ensuring that communication remains relevant and effective as the digital landscape continues to evolve.

Concrete recommendations include the development of digital literacy training programs tailored specifically for parents needed to address the challenges identified in this study. These programs should focus on equipping parents with practical skills for navigating digital platforms, understanding online risks, and engaging in meaningful conversations with their children about technology use. Additionally, family-based workshops or community support groups could be implemented to help parents share strategies and learn from each other's experiences.

Lastly, further research is needed to examine the long-term effectiveness of family-based interventions in improving both parent-child communication and children's digital behavior. Future studies could explore how these strategies work across different cultural or socioeconomic contexts, broadening the understanding of digital parenting in diverse environments.

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