Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching
ISSN 2785-5104
Anno 6 n. 4 (2026)

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

Educational Relationships within the Family and Digital Behaviour

Grazia Romanazzi [1], Anna Dipace [1]

[1] Università Telematica Pegaso; grazia.romanazzi@unipegaso.it; anna.dipace@unipegaso.it

Abstract: Digital technologies offer opportunities for learning and social participation, while problematic patterns of use raise concerns about children's and adolescents' wellbeing. This theoretical contribution examines educational relationships within the family and parenting practices, with the aim of identifying pedagogical orientations for responsible digital participation and prevention. It adopts a critical and argumentative reading of published research and Italian survey findings, bringing them into dialogue with digital wisdom, vulnerability, interdependence, and the ethics of care. The literature discussed identifies associations between problematic behaviours, difficulties in family communication, emotional distress, and sleep problems; these associations do not establish that parenting practices cause addiction. The article's contribution is to interpret parental mediation as a relationship of care that combines guidance, attention to young people's expressed needs, and the development of autonomy. The discussion proposes dialogue, age-appropriate boundaries, shared engagement with digital experiences, adult modelling, and social and emotional learning as complementary educational orientations. The conclusion calls for cooperation among families, schools, healthcare services, and policymakers, alongside professional assessment when difficulties persist. These proposals constitute a pedagogical synthesis rather than an empirically validated intervention, and their implementation requires evaluation of wellbeing, functioning, and young people's participation.

Keywords: Problematic digital media use; Parental mediation; Family educational relationships; Ethics of care; Adolescence.

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1. Introduction: Digital Behaviour among Young People and the Educational Challenge of Digital Wisdom

Generation Z (Zoomers), defined here as those born between 1997 and 2012, is often described through the concept of "digital natives" introduced by Prensky. This expression refers to growing up with digital technologies; it should not imply that all members of a generation possess the same skills or needs.

Prensky's contrast between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" presents technology as a familiar language for younger generations and as something to which older generations have had to adapt. However, familiarity with devices does not in itself establish critical digital competence or responsible use. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) challenge the assumption that young people form a uniformly

proficient digital generation. The educational question therefore concerns how such competence develops through experience, guidance, and reflection.

Moreover, Marc Prensky (2012/2013) highlights the potential of technology to augment and enhance human thinking, particularly in the management and resolution of everyday problems. His concepts of "brain gain" and "mental evolution" offer an interpretation of this potential rather than evidence of uniform cognitive enhancement across a generation. Access to these opportunities remains unequal, making the geopolitical and socio-cultural dimensions of the digital divide relevant to educational reflection.

To address the dysfunctional and uncritical use of technological and digital tools, Prensky proposes seeking out, practising and teaching "digital wisdom", defined by Prensky himself as "the ability to identify solutions to complex human problems that are emotionally satisfying, contextually appropriate, creative and practical" (Prensky, 2012/2013, p. 19).

This article develops a theoretical argument through a critical reading of selected literature and secondary survey findings, rather than reporting an original empirical investigation or a systematic review. Its contribution lies in connecting parental mediation with vulnerability, interdependence, and the ethics of care: digital guidance is interpreted as an educational relationship that supports autonomy while attending to young people's needs. The argument moves from empirical context and developmental concerns to family relationships, then derives orientations for coordinated educational support. These orientations express the article's pedagogical interpretation of the evidence, not a tested prevention model.

2. Empirical Context and Focus: Behavioural Addictions among Young People

Between October and December 2025, a nationally representative sample of Italian students aged 11-17 participated in the survey "Behavioural Addictions in Generation Z 2.0", conducted by the National Centre for Addictions and Doping at the Istituto Superiore di Sanità in collaboration with the Department for Policies against Drugs and Other Addictions of the Prime Minister's Office (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2026). Although "Generation Z" forms part of the official survey title, the sample includes students born after 2012 and therefore extends beyond the generational boundaries adopted here. The survey estimated that approximately 15,900 students aged 11-13 (1%) and 48,600 students aged 14-17 (2.1%) exhibited problematic social media use. Additionally, approximately 340,000 Italian students were estimated to have at-risk or problematic gambling behaviour.

The discussion therefore focuses on the risk of children and adolescents developing addictive behaviours[1].

[1] At the time of writing, the full technical report detailing the methodology and findings of the 2025–2026 survey does not yet appear to have been published on the ISS website.

3. Theoretical Framework: Behavioural Addictions, Developmental Vulnerability and Interdependence

The World Health Organization's recognition of gaming disorder provides a clinical reference for distinguishing problematic behaviour from ordinary digital participation (World Health Organization, 2020). Psychological models also consider interactions among personal characteristics, emotions, cognition, and behavioural control in the development of specific Internet-use disorders (Brand et al., 2016). These perspectives support attention to individual functioning and context rather than treating digital use alone as evidence of addiction.

Generally, the term "addiction" refers to an appetitive behaviour – that is, one capable of generating a sensation of pleasure and gratification – which is compulsive or excessive in nature. Usually, there is a loss of control over the addictive behaviour, to the extent that it compromises other areas of life such as social relationships, education, work, family life. Such behaviours are often accompanied by feelings of guilt. However, the addicted individual is unable to stop the compulsion to engage in these pathological behaviours, as ceasing them causes a feeling of unease and deprivation (Valentini & Biondi, 2016).

From a clinical and neurobiological perspective, substance addictions and behavioural addictions exhibit largely overlapping "symptoms"; they differ, however, in terms of the object of the addiction, which in the case of behavioural addictions is not a substance but an activity.

In 2013, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) classified gambling disorder within the category of Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders. Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD), by contrast, was included in Section III as a condition requiring further research before recognition as a formal diagnosis. Its proposed criteria concern Internet gaming specifically and do not encompass general Internet use or social media use. Accordingly, Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) was not recognised as an official diagnosis in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Research has identified characteristics associated with problematic Internet use and gaming. Such associations indicate areas requiring attention; they should not be treated as certain predictions of future addictive behaviours.

Personal and intrapsychic indicators include poor impulse control, mood dysregulation, poor social skills, and comorbidity with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression or social anxiety (Munno et al., 2017; Paulus et al., 2018).

The physical and psychological changes that occur between the ages of 10-11 and 14-15, during pre-adolescence, should not be underestimated (Riverso, 1993). Pre-adolescence is a developmental phase distinct from both childhood and adolescence. It is characterised by uncertainty and instability, a rapid pace of change, the search for personal identity, the development of critical thinking, the pursuit of greater autonomy, and the formulation of a personal life plan (Williams & Currie, 2000). These are profound and sudden changes that take place over the course of just a few years and can destabilise both pre-adolescents and the adults in their lives, who no longer recognise them as children but do not yet regard them as adolescents. In other words, the existential "transitoriness" of pre-adolescence can constitute a state of vulnerability that exposes individuals to the risk of losing their sense of their true self or confusing it with an ideal self (Rogers, 1961/2019) – one that is imaginary, fictitious, artificial or virtual.

Social and cultural factors are also relevant. A hyper-connected society characterised by hyper-production and hyper-consumption blurs the boundary between the real and the virtual. Moreover, the physical spaces of everyday life are no longer the sole venues for socialisation, learning and, even more fundamentally, the processes of identity formation and development. Currently, all these functions can also be carried out online, thus raising the long-standing issue of the formation – even at an early age – of a digital identity that often differs from one's real identity, offers an alternative to it, or even substitutes for it.

Adolescence warrants particular attention because developmental changes in reward processing, motivation, and cognitive control may contribute to vulnerability to substance use and other addictive behaviours (Hammond et al., 2014). This developmental perspective does not justify assuming that every adolescent is at greater risk than every adult, or that the same mechanisms account for all forms of problematic digital use.

The transitional phases from childhood to pre-adolescence, from pre-adolescence to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood are periods in which developing individuals are particularly fragile, as they are subject to the vulnerability of change and the unpredictability of what may lie ahead. These are stages of life in which the individual drive towards autonomy and self-determination emerges; yet, in reality, interpersonal dependence becomes apparent – a fundamentally human condition that is constitutive of irreducible individual fragility and collective vulnerability. It is against this backdrop that the risk of developing pathological behaviours arises within the context of the supposed social recognition guaranteed by the media. Therefore, the first step to be taken towards an education on and about fragility and vulnerability is the recognition of these as resources for discovering or reinterpreting the dynamics of mutual dependence or, better still, of interdependence with others. It is within relationships that the project of one's own "self" is realised; in responding to the needs of others, each person's "self" is actualised for the wellbeing of all (MacIntyre, 1999/2001).

Recognising interdependence as a dimension of human development shifts prevention towards the quality of educational relationships. Vulnerability should not be interpreted as an inevitable pathway to addiction, but as a condition whose outcomes depend on the interaction between personal resources and environmental opportunities. The I-PACE model conceptualises problematic Internet use through interactions among individual predispositions, emotional and cognitive responses, coping strategies, and executive control (Brand et al., 2016). This framework offers a basis for pedagogical reflection on the needs that digital activities may fulfil, including emotional relief, recognition, and belonging. Such reflection should distinguish participation from persistent patterns that undermine everyday functioning. The World Health Organization (2020) identifies impaired control, prioritisation of gaming, and continuation despite harmful consequences as central features of gaming disorder, together with significant functional impairment. These criteria caution against equating frequent use with addiction. Educational attention can focus on changes in relationships, school engagement, and daily routines while preserving opportunities for dialogue. Self-determination theory further highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs supporting motivation and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). From a pedagogical standpoint, this suggests creating contexts in which young people can express difficulties, experience

achievable challenges, and participate in decisions affecting them. Adults can support emotional awareness, critical interpretation of online recognition, and the development of interests across digital and physical settings. Prevention thus becomes an educational responsibility: helping young people acknowledge dependence on others while developing agency, reflective judgement, and the capacity to seek support when difficulties exceed their resources.

4. Discussion: Parenting Styles, Family Relationships and the Prevention of Problematic Digital Use

From a pedagogical perspective, the national survey mentioned earlier invites reflection on children's and adolescents' digital experiences, particularly on the online availability of information, consumer products, media content and educational materials, and on the ease and immediacy with which these resources can be accessed. Even socialisation, exploration and understanding of the world, the formation of identity and young people's emotional lives are mediated by digital media to a considerable extent. In the ISTISAN report, the expression "Face-down generation" is used to describe young people's tendency to remain hunched over digital devices (Mortali et al., 2023, p. 2).

From this perspective, digital wisdom should be understood as an educational achievement requiring support, rather than as an automatic consequence of growing up with technology. Familiarity with devices does not necessarily entail the ability to evaluate information, understand how media operate, or make responsible choices. Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) challenge the assumption that young people possess digital competencies simply because of their generational membership. Their analysis reinforces the need for teaching that develops critical judgement alongside practical skills. Concerns about digital behaviour require careful interpretation. Odgers and Jensen (2020) show that associations between digital technology use and adolescent mental health are often small, inconsistent, and based on correlational evidence. Pedagogical reflection should therefore consider individual vulnerabilities, the quality of online experiences, and the social contexts in which media use occurs, without treating connectivity itself as evidence of pathology. Within this framework, family and school have complementary responsibilities: they can help young people recognise their needs, interpret mediated experiences, and integrate digital participation into a pattern of life. The Council on Communications and Media (2016) recommends developmentally appropriate family media plans, open communication, shared media activities, and protection of sleep, physical activity, and interpersonal relationships. These recommendations suggest an educational approach combining guidance with the gradual development of autonomy. Adults should create opportunities to discuss online encounters, assess the reliability of content, and reflect on the consequences of sharing personal information. Thus, prevention can be conceived as a relational process through which young people acquire the capacity to use technology purposefully while preserving their wellbeing, agency, and responsibility towards others.

The first instance of otherness experienced by young people comes from the adults in their lives, usually their parents.

Parents' attitudes and parenting practices can contribute to the context in which children and adolescents use digital media. Their role should be considered

alongside young people's characteristics and the opportunities and risks of their digital environments, rather than treated as a sole determinant of functional or problematic use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2017).

As with other developmental challenges, the use of digital technology requires adult guidance and support.

First and foremost, it is essential to understand the digital world in which adolescents are immersed, including their vocabulary, modes of interaction, the pace of change they experience, the speed at which they search for and retrieve information, and the learning resources and technologies they use.

It is the so-called "media moms" and "digital dads" (Uhls, 2015), through their own attitudes and behaviours towards technology, who serve as role models for their children and thus influence how they use it.

Naab's (2018) qualitative study of parental media trusteeship offers a perspective on parents' decisions concerning the timing, forms, and autonomy of children's media use. It draws on interviews with 29 parents of very young children; its interpretive types should therefore not be generalised directly to all families or to adolescent parenting.

"Cyber-wall hermits" are generally well-informed about the media and the potential risks associated with media use; for this reason, they adopt a restrictive and controlling approach towards their children. "Re-activists", on the other hand, are generally supportive of media use and seek to harness its potential to promote positive development; these parents sometimes overlook the risks associated with media and subsequently become aware of their responsibility to guide and regulate their children's media use. Finally, the category of "Naive optimists" comprises those parents who are completely unaware of the potential risks that media pose to their children's development.

These different approaches suggest a need for educational support that helps parents reflect on media guidance and adapt it to their children's development. From a pedagogical perspective, the issue is how to strengthen parental confidence, knowledge, and communication while recognising that family guidance alone cannot account for, or prevent, all problematic digital behaviours.

The ISTISAN Report 23/25 (Mortali et al., 2023) examines behavioural risks in the school population and their relationships with parental competencies. It reports links between risk indicators, difficulties communicating with parents, and poorer sleep. These findings warrant attention to family relationships and wellbeing, but they do not establish that communication difficulties cause the behaviours investigated or that all such behaviours inevitably produce sleep disturbances.

The discussion of parenting can be organised around three aspects: positive and supportive interaction (Positive Parenting), supervision of children's activities (Poor Monitoring when insufficient), and consistency in guidance and boundaries (Ineffective Discipline when lacking). These aspects are useful for reflection on educational practices; they should not be read as mutually exclusive categories of parents. The pedagogical concern is to combine a welcoming family environment with dialogue and coherent expectations that help children develop self-regulation and respect for others.

These considerations suggest that parental mediation should be understood as a relational practice, responsive to children's developmental needs and experiences. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) distinguish different forms of mediation, including

shared use, restrictions, and monitoring, showing why parental involvement cannot be reduced to a single strategy. Livingstone et al. (2017) identify enabling and restrictive approaches: enabling mediation supports online opportunities but may also accompany greater exposure to risk, whereas restriction can limit both risks and opportunities. The pedagogical challenge is therefore to combine protection with participation, adapting guidance to children's competencies and circumstances. Shared exploration of digital environments can create occasions to discuss privacy, evaluate content, and interpret encounters. Rules acquire educational meaning when their purposes are explained and revisited through dialogue, allowing young people to practise responsibility within clear boundaries. Attention must also extend to adults' own digital habits. In families with young children, McDaniel and Radesky (2018) found associations between technology-related interruptions of parent-child interactions and child behaviour problems. These findings do not establish causation or directly describe adolescence, but invite reflection on adults' availability and the consistency between their expectations and conduct. From this perspective, parental education should support awareness as well as technical knowledge, helping caregivers recognise how their practices shape family communication. Collaboration with schools can offer spaces for discussing difficulties, sharing strategies, and strengthening confidence without blaming parents. Digital guidance thus becomes an expression of educational care: a commitment to listening, negotiating expectations, and supporting autonomy while maintaining the relationships through which children learn to seek help.

5. Conclusion: Towards an Educational Community Grounded in the Ethics of Care

In view of these serious challenges, a cultural shift involving society as an educational community is urgently needed. This community comprises different yet equally important components, roles, functions and tasks. The family and school, as primary educational institutions, should promote awareness of dysfunctional behaviour and support its prevention. Health and social-care services are responsible for monitoring needs and providing appropriate care. Policymakers, informed by scientific evidence, must commit to primary prevention programmes and community support.

From a pedagogical perspective, there is a need to examine children's and adolescents' digital behaviour and the needs, motivations, and circumstances associated with problematic patterns of use. Such reflection can inform educational support without assuming that intensive use necessarily develops into pathology.

The role of parents must not be overlooked, as parents require support, training and the development of specific skills.

There is an urgent need for educational practices guided by an ethics of care and grounded in everyday mutual attention, mutual support, dialogic exchange and concrete responses to each individual's specific psycho-symbolic and socio-relational characteristics (Noddings, 1998).

Translating this orientation into practice requires educational environments in which care is experienced through listening and responsive action. Noddings (2012) emphasises that caring relations involve dialogue, critical thinking, and responses to learners' expressed needs. Applied to digital behaviour, this perspective invites educators to explore what young people seek online and how these experiences

relate to belonging, recognition, and emotional distress. Prevention should cultivate resources for living and relating, alongside awareness of digital risks. Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that school-based social and emotional learning programmes improved students' skills, behaviour, and academic performance.

Although these findings do not establish effectiveness against digital addiction, they support the educational value of developing emotional awareness, interpersonal competence, and responsible decision-making. Evidence on the prevention of problematic Internet use remains heterogeneous. Throuvala and colleagues (2019) reported mixed outcomes for school-based prevention and recommended evaluation methods, skill enhancement, and attention to protective factors rather than relying on reduced Internet time as the principal outcome. As a pedagogical inference, this suggests designing initiatives that integrate digital literacy with relational support and assess changes in functioning and wellbeing. In practical terms, this synthesis proposes regular conversations about online experiences, negotiated boundaries appropriate to age and development, shared exploration of digital content, and adult modelling of attentive media use (Council on Communications and Media, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2017).

These practices should support increasing autonomy while protecting opportunities for sleep, learning, and relationships. Within an educational community, cooperation can translate into exchanges between families and schools, parental learning opportunities, and pathways to specialist services when difficulties persist. Such arrangements should respect professional roles while maintaining continuity of support. As this article provides a theoretical synthesis, the effectiveness of these combined proposals remains to be investigated in specific educational contexts. Young people's accounts should inform both programme design and evaluation, ensuring that interventions respond to young people's experiences. The pedagogical aim is to sustain agency within relationships of care, enabling children and adolescents to recognise distress, seek assistance, and participate in digital life with judgement and responsibility.

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