

INVITED REVIEW OPEN ACCESS

Editorial: Child Protection in the Digital Age

Wing Hong Chui¹  | Yuhong Zhu²  | Qiqi Chen¹ ¹Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong | ²School of Sociology & Population Studies, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China**Correspondence:** Wing Hong Chui (wing-hong.chui@polyu.edu.hk)**Received:** 12 March 2024 | **Accepted:** 14 April 2024

1 | Introduction

The digital age has erased traditional jurisdictional lines, making it clear that a collaborative effort from technology platforms, governments, guardians and children themselves is necessary to create a digital ecosystem that is safe for children. In an era when digital landscapes are ever-expanding and evolving, our children are becoming citizens of limitless virtual boundaries. As we stand at the crossroads of innovation, privacy, connectivity and exploitation, this special issue endeavours to dissect the multifaceted challenges that children face online. In this digital era, protecting children and promoting their well-being has become a challenge for governments, communities and practitioners. This special issue, 'Child Protection in the Digital Age', is more than a collection of scholarly articles; it is a clarion call to action, a detailed map charting the complexities of a terrain fraught with both promise and peril for the youngest members of our society. It aims to capture the broad lessons emerging from the research so that cross-country scholars can expand upon knowledge exchange and capacity building. Our contributors, comprising a diverse mix of researchers, practitioners and educators around the world, offer valuable insights into the current state of child protection in the digital realm. The contributions herein address a spectrum of topics, including cyberbullying, online predators, data privacy and digital footprints. They provide evidence-based strategies for safeguarding children, promoting digital literacy and cultivating a safe online environment where children can thrive. Additionally, implications for policy development are discussed, emphasizing the need for all stakeholders involved to play their part in realizing the benefits that the digital age has to offer.

2 | Balancing Technology Use and Family Communication for Child Well-Being

Two recent studies shed light on the complex dynamics between children's technology use and their overall life satisfaction, as well as the subtleties of parent-child communication in the context of pervasive Internet access. Topić, Brkljačić, and Brajša-Žganec (2023) delve into how digital technology use and preoccupation with devices might predict life satisfaction in children; their study 'Digital technology use and preoccupation with digital technology as predictors of life satisfaction in children' underscores a paradox that has long puzzled educators and parents alike. It demonstrates that although technology use can provide educational resources and social connections vital for child development, an overemphasis on digital engagement can detract from life satisfaction. This delicate balance suggests that not all screen time is created equal: The content, context and communication potential of digital activities are critical factors in determining their impact. Switching gears to the familial aspect, Nguyen et al. (2024) take us into the homes of Vietnamese urban families in their study 'Internet impacts on parent-child communication in Vietnamese urban families'. This research explores the impacts of the Internet on parent-child interactions, revealing that although the Internet offers new avenues for communication and shared digital experiences, it also presents potential barriers to face-to-face interactions, possibly eroding traditional family bonds. Both studies implicitly call for a proactive approach to digital literacy, where children are taught to navigate the online world with discernment, balancing their digital lives with offline activities that promote well-being.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2024 The Authors. *Child & Family Social Work* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Upon synthesizing insights from these pivotal studies, it becomes evident that there is a pressing need to nurture digital well-being for the next generation. This involves guiding children to recognize when technology use may be encroaching on their sense of happiness and satisfaction with life. Moreover, as Vietnamese urban families illustrate, the adaptation to a 'new normal' where the Internet is interwoven into the fabric of daily life requires cultural sensitivity and a willingness to evolve. Maintaining open lines of communication about technology's place in the family, and embracing its positive aspects while mitigating its downsides, is key.

3 | Addressing Cyberbullying in the Digital Era: Insights From Diverse Cultural Contexts

The scourge of bullying remains a persistent challenge in schools across the globe, manifesting in both the physical and digital realms. Four compelling studies from different cultural contexts—rural China, urban Hong Kong, Turkey and Spain—provide a multifaceted perspective on the nature of cyberbullying, its correlates and the coping strategies employed by young people while also offering targeted insights into how we might address this multifaceted problem. The first study (Liu and Li, 2023) takes us into the heart of rural China, where the dynamics of parental attachment, peer relationships, school connectedness and Internet usage shape bullying behaviours among adolescents. With over 2200 students surveyed, the alarmingly high rates of bullying and victimization underscore the urgent need for comprehensive prevention systems that emphasize family–school collaboration and the wise guidance of Internet use. The findings emphasize the necessity for targeted interventions that enhance healthy relationships and digital literacy in less urbanized areas. Moving to Hong Kong, a study (Chen et al. 2023) involving over 5500 children adds another layer to our understanding by examining the overlap of online and offline violence, including sibling violence, school bullying and exposure to family violence. The study highlights the interconnected nature of different types of victimization, emphasizing the need for interventions that address not only specific instances of bullying but also the broader ecosystem of violence that children may be exposed to. The finding that higher parental education levels and frequent family residential mobility are associated with an increased risk of victimization underscores the importance of adopting a nuanced approach to prevention that considers these less intuitive factors. In Spain, research (Escortell et al. 2023) focusing on primary education students offers a unique perspective by creating profiles of cyberbullying involvement based on self-concept and academic goals. This study enables a more personalized approach to intervention. Significantly, the study emphasizes the importance of bolstering children's self-concepts and fostering their learning aspirations as protective factors against cyberbullying. Finally, the fourth study (Hendekci, Albayrak, and Şimşek, 2023) examines the heightened risks of cyber victimization in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies adopted by adolescents. With the pandemic driving unprecedented levels of screen time, this research provides crucial insights into how young people navigate online adversity, emphasizing the importance of resilience and the role of parents, educators and peers in supporting effective coping mechanisms.

The collective findings of these studies highlight that bullying is not simply a series of isolated incidents but a complex phenomenon influenced by various interconnected factors, including family dynamics, school environment, self-perception and societal changes (Chui and Wong 2017). Effective interventions need to adopt a multifaceted approach that is culturally sensitive and responsive to the specific needs of different student profiles. Moreover, the researches call for a proactive stance in creating positive school climates, fostering strong family–school partnerships and providing guidance on responsible Internet use (Livingstone and Bulger 2014). It also underscores the significance of considering the broader context of a child's life, including negative family dynamics and the potential for residential mobility, which may contribute to a sense of instability and vulnerability (Zhu, Chan, and Chen 2018). As we translate these findings into action, it becomes evident that our approach to bullying prevention must consider the interconnected nature of the problem itself. We need to work collaboratively across disciplines, cultural boundaries and educational systems to develop strategies that are evidence based and empathetic to the lived experiences of students.

4 | Protecting Children in the Digital Age: Navigating the Online Landscape

In the digital age, the Internet offers unparalleled access to knowledge and connection. However, it also exposes young users to various risks, such as online sexual solicitation and substance-related marketing. Two recent studies shed light on these perils by respectively examining the complex dynamics of disclosure and the influence of adolescent digital privacy attitudes, which are moderated by parenting behaviours. The first study (Gemara, Mishna, and Katz, 2023), delves into the distressing realm of child online sexual solicitation. Drawing from forensic interviews with Israeli children, the study underscores the significant role peers play in the disclosure process. It also reveals the obstacles children face in discussing these incidents with their parents. The research uncovers a stark reality: children prefer to confide in their peers rather than their parents when encountering online dangers. This preference is shaped by factors related to sexuality, technology, and anticipated responses from those to whom they disclose such information. The implications of these findings are profound, underscoring the urgent need for effective communication channels between children and trusted adults. Furthermore, educational programs that address the complexities of online sexual behaviours are imperative. The second study (Corcoran et al., 2023) shifts focus on the impact of adolescent exposure to substance-related marketing and its potential to induce substance use. This research illuminates how screen time acts as a gateway to such exposure and is intertwined with young people's perceptions of digital privacy. Notably, the study identifies 'TECH parenting' as a potent moderating factor. This approach encompasses open communication with children, educating them, engaging in shared media use and setting household rules. Adopting this approach not only enhances adolescents' understanding of privacy concerns but also lowers the likelihood of exposure to online substance-related marketing.

The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities for our children, but it also requires us to be vigilant guardians of their

well-being. The risks and harm that many children already face offline can be extended and amplified online, making children who are already vulnerable even more fragile (Keeley and Little 2017). These studies collectively provide a sobering glimpse into how the digital landscape influences youth behaviour and well-being. It is imperative to cultivate an environment where children feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues with adults. This necessitates building trust, understanding the digital milieu in which children operate and equipping them with the necessary tools to safely navigate complex online interactions (Third et al. 2014). Dialogues on these matters should not be reactionary but should form part of a consistent and comprehensive strategy. By doing so, parents can empower their children to make informed decisions and develop a healthy scepticism towards online content. May this special issue serve as a testament to our shared dedication to understanding and improving the digital lives of children. Let it inspire further research, innovative solutions and unwavering vigilance in our pursuit to safeguard our most valuable assets—the children who will one day shape the world with the very tools we are striving to make safer for them.

In closing, we extend our sincerest gratitude to all contributors and reviewers who have made this special issue possible. It is our hope that their work will not only inform but also inspire action and positive change for the betterment of children worldwide. Together, we can chart a path towards a safer and more inclusive digital future for every child.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the special issue.

*Chen, Q., C. Lo, M. Chen, K. L. Chan, and P. Ip. 2023. “Shared and Unique Characteristics of School, Cyber and Family Victimization Among School-Aged Children in Hong Kong.” *Child & Family Social Work* 28: 992–1000.

Chui, W. H., and M. Y. Wong. 2017. “Avoiding Disappointment or Fulfilling Expectation: A Study of Gender, Academic Achievement, and Family Functioning Among Hong Kong Adolescents.” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 26: 48–56.

*Corcoran, E., N. Wydra, N. Tejada, S. Nelapati, and J. Gabrielli. 2023. “A Moderated Mediation Model of the Relationship Between Adolescent Screentime, Online Privacy Cognitions and Exposure to Online Substance Marketing.” *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13105>.

*Escortell, R., B. Delgado, A. Baquero, and M. C. Martínez-Monteagudo. 2023. “Latent Profiles in Cyberbullying and the Relationship With Self-Concept and Achievement Goals in Preadolescence.” *Child & Family Social Work* 28: 1046–1055.

*Gemara, N., F. Mishna, and C. Katz. 2023. “‘If My Parents Find Out, I Will Not See My Phone Anymore’: Who Do Children Choose to Disclose Online Sexual Solicitation to?” *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13069>.

*Hendekci, A., E. Albayrak, and N. Şimşek. 2023. “Cyber Victimization With Increasing Digitization during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Coping Strategies Used by Adolescents.” *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13104>.

Keeley, B., and C. Little. 2017. *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*. New York, NY: UNICEF.

*Liu, T., and T. Li. 2023. “Social Bonds, Internet Usage Time and Bullying Involvement: A Study of Rural Secondary School Students in China.” *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13091>.

Livingstone, S., and M. Bulger. 2014. “A Global Research Agenda for Children's Rights in the Digital Age.” *Journal of Children and Media* 8: 317–335.

*Nguyen, L. T. T., T. K. D. Le, V. C. Tran, D. N. Nguyen, H. K. Nguyen, and D. D. Le. 2024. “Internet Impacts on Parent–Child Communication in Vietnamese Urban Families.” *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13157>.

Third, A., D. Bellerose, U. Dawkins, E. Keltie, and K. Pihl. 2014. “Children's Rights in the Digital Age: A Download From Children Around the World.” http://www.uws.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/753447/Childrens-rights-in-the-digital-age.pdf.

*Topić, M. K., T. Brkljačić, and A. Brajša-Žganec. 2023. “Digital Technology Use and Preoccupation With Digital Technology as Predictors of Life Satisfaction in Children.” *Child & Family Social Work* 28, no. 4: 1131–1138.

Zhu, Y., K. L. Chan, and J. Chen. 2018. “Bullying Victimization Among Chinese Middle School Students: The Role of Family Violence.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 33: 1958–1977.