

From Face-to-Face to Digital: How Technology Reconfigures Parent-Child Communication

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Abstract

Digital technology has become an integral part of everyday family life, reshaping how parents and children maintain contact, exchange information, and participate in family interaction. Although previous research has extensively examined children's screen use, online risks, and parental mediation, less attention has been given to how digital technology itself reconfigures the communicative relationship between parents and children. This study examines how digital technology influences parent-child communication patterns, the opportunities and challenges it creates, and parents' and children's perceptions of communication quality. A qualitative descriptive design was employed to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of parents and children within the same families. Data were collected through separate semi-structured interviews with parents and children and analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that digital technology has transformed parent-child communication into a hybrid pattern in which digitally mediated and face-to-face interaction coexist. Digital communication increases accessibility, facilitates rapid information exchange, supports everyday coordination, and enables family members to remain connected across physical distance. At the same time, device-related distraction, divided attention, interruptions, and predominantly functional exchanges can limit sustained interpersonal interaction. The findings further indicate that communication quality is shaped not simply by the frequency of technology use but by responsiveness, attention, emotional connection, reciprocity, and the fit between the communication medium and the communicative purpose. Parents and children may also interpret the same technology-mediated practices differently, particularly in relation to monitoring, availability, and device-related boundaries. The study argues that digital technology does not inherently strengthen or weaken parent-child communication; rather, it reconfigures the conditions under which family communication takes place. Digital and face-to-face communication consequently function as complementary but distinct modes of contemporary family interaction.

Keywords: communication; parent; children; digital; screentime

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1. Introduction

Although existing scholarship has increasingly recognized that digital technology can produce both benefits and difficulties for family life, much of this literature has approached the issue through children's media use, parental mediation, technofence, or developmental outcomes. Sartori et al. (2022), for example, demonstrated that interactive technologies can support parental availability, warmth, guidance, and trust, whereas Janssen et al. (2025) showed that parent-adolescent online communication frequently serves practical purposes such as everyday coordination. Other recent studies have drawn attention to the disruptive side of technology use. McDaniel et al. (2025) documented children's experiences of parental device use as an interruption to interaction, while Gahler (2025) linked perceived parental technofence to evaluations of the parent-child relationship. In Indonesia, Purboningsih et al. (2025) demonstrated that parents employ a combination of restrictive and enabling strategies when mediating adolescents' social-media use.

Taken together, these studies establish that digital technology has become an important component of contemporary family life. However, the existing literature tends to examine particular dimensions of this phenomenon separately. Studies of parental mediation primarily focus on how parents regulate children's technology use, studies of technofence emphasize interruption and associated outcomes, and studies of online communication frequently quantify the frequency or duration of digital contact. Consequently, less attention has been given to the broader communicative transformation that occurs

when digitally mediated and face-to-face interaction become integrated within everyday parent–child relationships.

This gap is particularly important because increased accessibility does not necessarily indicate improved communication. A parent may communicate with a child more frequently through a smartphone while simultaneously having less sustained face-to-face interaction. Conversely, digital technology may create opportunities for emotional connection, parental involvement, and communication across physical distance. The same device may therefore function as a channel of connection in one situation and a source of interruption in another. Understanding this duality requires attention not only to how much technology families use but also to how technology changes the forms, purposes, attentional conditions, and perceived quality of parent–child communication.

The present study addresses this gap by placing communication itself at the center of analysis. Rather than treating digital technology primarily as a risk factor or a tool requiring parental control, the study examines how parents and children experience communication through and around digital devices in their everyday family lives. By incorporating both parental and children's perspectives, the study also recognizes that the meaning of technology-mediated communication may differ between members of the same family. The study consequently focuses on three interconnected dimensions: changes in communication patterns, the opportunities and challenges created by digital technology, and its perceived influence on the quality of parent–child interaction.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine how digital technology shapes communication between parents and children in everyday family interaction. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and descriptions of communication practices rather than on measuring the frequency or statistical effects of technology use. The study specifically explored three dimensions of parent–child communication: changes in communication patterns, opportunities and challenges associated with digital technology, and perceptions of the quality of family interaction.

The study adopted a relational perspective by including both parents and children rather than examining either group separately. This approach enabled the researchers to identify areas of convergence and divergence between parents' and children's experiences of technology-mediated communication.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The participants consisted of parent–child pairs from the same households. The children were aged 10–15 years and regularly used digital devices such as smartphones or other internet-connected devices in their everyday lives. Parents and children were included as a pair to provide perspectives from both sides of the family relationship.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) the parent and child lived in the same household; (2) the child was between 10 and 15 years old; (3) both parent and child regularly used digital technology; and (4) both participants were able to describe their experiences of family communication involving digital technology. The study involved 10 parents and 10 children.

The setting was selected because the participating families routinely incorporated digital devices into communication and daily activities. The study did not treat technology use itself as the primary unit of analysis; instead, attention was given to how technology became incorporated into interactions between parents and children.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with parents and children. Interviews were conducted separately so that participants could describe their experiences and perceptions without being influenced by the responses of the other family member. This procedure was particularly important for identifying differences between parents' and children's perceptions of digital communication.

The interview questions addressed participants' everyday communication practices, including how they communicated when using digital devices, the purposes for which digital communication was used, changes in face-to-face interaction, situations in which technology facilitated communication, situations in which technology interrupted communication, and participants' perceptions of the quality of their family interaction.

The interviews also explored how parents and children responded to technology-related situations in everyday family life. Questions concerning attention, responsiveness, emotional connection, accessibility, and reciprocal interaction were included to obtain participants' perspectives on communication quality.

With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts constituted the primary data for analysis. Field notes were also used to record relevant contextual observations made during the data collection process.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed thematically. The analysis followed an iterative process involving data familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme identification, theme review, and interpretation.

First, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts to become familiar with the participants' accounts and identify statements related to digital technology and parent–child communication. Second, meaningful segments of data were assigned initial codes. These codes represented participants' descriptions of communication practices, such as digital coordination, accessibility, brief exchanges, emotional connection, distraction, divided attention, parental involvement, and technology-related negotiation.

Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories. The categories were subsequently examined to identify recurring patterns across the parent and child accounts. The resulting themes were organized according to the three research questions. For RQ1, the analysis focused on changes in communication patterns. For RQ2, the analysis identified opportunities and challenges created by digital technology. For RQ3, the analysis examined participants' perceptions of communication quality and family interaction.

The analysis also compared parents' and children's accounts to identify similarities and differences in their interpretations of the same communication practices. Rather than assuming that parents and children experienced technology in identical ways, the analysis treated differences between their perspectives as meaningful findings.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Several procedures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking was used to clarify participants' intended meanings and reduce the possibility of misinterpreting their accounts. Data triangulation was supported by comparing accounts from parents and children within the same family and examining patterns across participants. The researchers also engaged in peer discussion during the interpretation of emerging themes to challenge individual interpretations and strengthen analytical consistency.

The researchers maintained reflexive awareness throughout the research process by considering how their assumptions about digital technology and family communication might influence data interpretation. The analytical process therefore emphasized participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined judgment that technology was either beneficial or harmful.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Because the study involved children, ethical considerations were given particular attention. Participation was voluntary, and appropriate consent and assent procedures were followed before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the interview.

Participant identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms or participant codes in the transcripts and reporting of findings. Interview data were treated confidentially and were used solely for research purposes. Particular care was taken when discussing potentially sensitive experiences involving family communication, parental device use, disagreement, or perceived lack of attention.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of interviews with 10 parents and 10 children indicates that digital technology has become an ordinary part of parent–child communication. Smartphones and messaging applications were used alongside face-to-face interaction rather than replacing it completely. Across the interviews, participants described digital communication as particularly useful for maintaining contact, exchanging information, coordinating daily activities, expressing concern, and communicating when parents and children were physically separated. At the same time, participants also identified several challenges, particularly distraction, divided attention, disagreement over device use, and the tendency for some digital exchanges to become brief and highly functional.

The findings are presented according to the three research questions. The first section discusses how digital technology has changed parent–child communication patterns. The second examines the opportunities and challenges created by technology. The third focuses on participants' perceptions of communication quality. Throughout the analysis, the perspectives of parents and children are considered together because the interviews show that the same technological practice can be interpreted differently by the two groups.

3.1 The Influence of Digital Technology on Parent–Child Communication Patterns

The findings show that digital technology has reshaped everyday parent–child communication without replacing face-to-face interaction. Participants described smartphones and messaging applications as additional channels for contacting one another, exchanging information, coordinating activities, and staying in touch when physically apart. Rather than a shift from face-to-face to digital communication, the two modes operated alongside each other, each serving somewhat different purposes.

One parent explained how digital contact continued even when the child was away from home.

"Kalau anak sedang tidak di rumah, biasanya saya hubungi lewat WhatsApp. Saya tanya sudah sampai atau belum, sedang di mana, atau nanti pulang jam berapa." [When my child is not at home, I usually contact them through WhatsApp. I ask whether they have arrived, where they are, or what time they will come home.] (PA3, personal communication, translated by author)

A child gave a similar account.

"Kalau saya sedang di luar, biasanya saya kasih tahu Mama lewat WhatsApp. Kadang tidak panjang, cuma bilang saya di mana dan nanti pulangnyanya jam berapa." [When I am outside, I usually tell my mother through WhatsApp. Sometimes it is not a long message; I just tell her where I am and what time I will come home.] (CH4, personal communication, translated by author)

These accounts show that technology has expanded when and how family members reach each other. Communication is no longer confined by physical proximity, since parents and children can contact one another across locations and at different times of day. None of the participants described digital communication as a full substitute for direct interaction; instead, they used it to bridge moments when direct interaction was not possible.

This pattern was especially clear in everyday coordination. Participants often mentioned using messaging apps to ask about school activities, whereabouts, transportation, meal times, and plans for returning home. One parent explained as follows.

"Biasanya yang paling sering itu soal kegiatan sehari-hari. Anak sudah pulang sekolah atau belum, nanti dijemput siapa, pulanginya jam berapa. Kalau saya belum di rumah, biasanya lewat chat." [Most of the communication is usually about daily activities. Whether the child has come home from school, who is picking them up, or what time they will come home. If I am not at home, we usually communicate through chat.] (PA6, personal communication, translated by author)

A child described the same practice from the other side.

"Kalau ada perubahan jadwal, saya biasanya langsung kasih tahu Mama. Misalnya pulanginya lebih lama atau ada kegiatan di sekolah. Jadi Mama tidak perlu menunggu tanpa tahu." [If there is a change in my schedule, I usually tell my mother immediately. For example, if I am coming home later or there is an activity at school. That way, she does not have to wait without knowing.] (CH5, personal communication, translated by author)

Digital communication, then, functioned less as a space for extended conversation and more as a quick way to exchange information. This is consistent with Janssen et al. (2025), whose 100-day diary study of 479 adolescents recorded parent–adolescent online communication on 43% of observed days, averaging about 20 minutes daily and consisting largely of micro-coordination such as whereabouts and everyday arrangements. The present interviews add an experiential layer to that pattern, showing that participants turned to digital communication precisely because it was immediate, convenient, and suited to information needing a quick response.

At the same time, availability should not be equated with depth. Participants distinguished short digital exchanges from conversations requiring greater attention or emotional engagement. One parent put it this way.

"Kalau cuma mau tanya sudah makan atau belum, sudah sampai atau belum, chat sudah cukup. Tetapi kalau ada masalah yang penting, saya lebih suka bicara langsung supaya bisa dijelaskan dengan baik." [If I only want to ask whether the child has eaten or arrived, a chat is enough. But if there is an important problem, I prefer to talk directly so that it can be explained properly.] (PA5, personal communication, translated by author)

A child expressed a similar preference.

"Kalau cuma kasih kabar, chat tidak masalah. Tapi kalau mau cerita masalah atau sesuatu yang serius, saya lebih nyaman ngomong langsung. Kalau lewat chat kadang susah menjelaskan." [If I am just giving an update, chatting is fine. But if I want to talk about a problem or something serious, I feel more comfortable talking directly. Sometimes it is difficult to explain through chat.] (CH6, personal communication, translated by author)

This distinction extends the quantitative evidence in Janssen et al. (2025), who found that while online communication was a regular part of parent–adolescent interaction, a substantial share of adolescents engaged in it infrequently and briefly. Brevity, the present findings suggest, is not a weakness of digital communication but a reflection of the practical purposes it serves. What matters is the distinction between communication availability and communication depth.

A further pattern concerned divided attention during face-to-face interaction. Several participants described smartphones intruding on conversations or family activities, where technology

no longer connected parent and child but competed with the interaction itself. A child described the experience directly.

"Kadang saya sedang cerita sama Mama, tetapi Mama masih pegang HP. Memang Mama kadang masih mendengarkan, tetapi saya merasa perhatiannya terbagi. Jadi kadang saya berhenti cerita." [Sometimes I am telling my mother a story while she is still using her phone. My mother sometimes still listens, but I feel that her attention is divided. So sometimes I stop telling my story.] (CH7, personal communication, translated by author)

A parent acknowledged the same situation from the opposite side.

"Kadang memang saya pegang HP ketika anak sedang bicara. Bukan karena tidak mau mendengarkan, tetapi kadang ada pesan atau pekerjaan yang harus diselesaikan. Anak mungkin melihatnya sebagai saya tidak memperhatikan." [Sometimes I do use my phone when my child is talking. It is not because I do not want to listen, but sometimes there is a message or work that needs to be dealt with. My child may see it as me not paying attention.] (PA8, personal communication, translated by author)

This shifts the analytical focus from technology as a channel of communication to technology as a potential interruption of it. Gahler (2025), studying parental technofence in families with younger children, similarly found that greater perceived technology interference during parent-child time was linked to less favorable evaluations of the relationship. Although the participants and outcomes differ from those in the present study, both point to the importance of interpersonal attention when technology is present.

The children's perspective matters here. McDaniel et al. (2025) found that children noticed when parents' device use interfered with interaction and described efforts to regain their parents' attention. The present interviews offer a similar, communication-centered view. When a child experiences a parent as physically present but mentally occupied with a device, the issue is not simply how much screen time is involved, but whether the child feels the parent is genuinely available and attentive.

Parents and children also sometimes read the same digital practice differently. Parents often described checking messages or asking about a child's whereabouts as an expression of care and responsibility.

"Kalau saya sering tanya anak lewat chat, sebenarnya karena saya khawatir. Saya ingin tahu dia sudah sampai atau belum. Bukan mau mengganggu, tetapi sebagai orang tua memang perlu tahu keadaan anak." [If I often ask my child questions through chat, it is actually because I am concerned. I want to know whether the child has arrived or not. I am not trying to disturb the child, but as a parent I need to know how the child is doing.] (PA1, personal communication, translated by author)

Children did not always experience this checking the same way.

"Saya tahu Mama bertanya karena khawatir. Tetapi kalau terlalu sering ditanya, kadang saya merasa seperti tidak dipercaya. Apalagi kalau baru saja bilang saya di mana, kemudian ditanya lagi." [I know that my mother asks because she is worried. But when she asks too often, sometimes I feel as if she does not trust me. Especially when I have just told her where I am and then she asks again.] (CH2, personal communication, translated by author)

This contrast shows parents and children as active participants in negotiating digital communication, not passive users of it. Parents may read repeated checking as care, while children may read it as monitoring; conversely, children may value digital communication for its convenience while parents worry about excessive device use. This aligns with Janssen et al. (2025), who found that adolescents were not merely recipients of parents' online communication but also initiated contact themselves, to monitor, support, and stay connected with their parents.

The Indonesian context adds another layer. Purboningsih et al. (2025), drawing on interviews and focus group discussions with Indonesian parents and adolescents, identified a mix of restrictive and

enabling parental mediation strategies, including monitoring, supervision, co-use, interpretative mediation, modelling, and norm implementation. Their findings show that technology-related family practices in Indonesia involve negotiation rather than restriction alone. The present study builds on this by focusing on how the communication relationship itself is reorganized once technology becomes embedded in everyday family life.

Taken together, the data suggest that digital technology has reorganized, rather than simply increased or decreased, parent–child communication. It has changed where communication happens, when it happens, how quickly it happens, and what kinds of messages get exchanged. Digital communication works well for accessibility, immediate contact, and everyday coordination, while face-to-face communication remains essential when interaction calls for sustained attention and emotional engagement.

The central finding for RQ1 is that contemporary parent–child communication is best understood as a hybrid pattern. Digital and face-to-face communication do not compete or simply replace one another; they coexist within family routines, each offering different possibilities and constraints. The contribution of this study lies in showing this transformation from both parents' and children's perspectives, and in demonstrating that the deeper change is not increased technology use itself, but the reconfiguration of the communicative conditions of family interaction.

3.2 Opportunities and Challenges Created by Digital Technology for Parent–Child Communication

The second research question examined what digital technology makes possible and what difficulties it introduces into parent–child communication. Across the interviews, the data revealed a clear duality. Participants identified digital technology as a practical resource for maintaining contact, exchanging information, providing emotional support, and participating in children's digital experiences. At the same time, they described distraction, divided attention, disagreements over device use, and communication that sometimes became increasingly brief and functional.

3.2.1. Greater Accessibility and Everyday Connection

The most immediate opportunity identified in the interviews was accessibility. Parents and children could contact one another without being physically present, which was particularly useful when they were separated by school, work, travel, or other daily activities. One parent explained.

"Sekarang lebih mudah menghubungi anak. Kalau dulu anak pergi, kita menunggu dia pulang. Sekarang tinggal telepon atau chat, kita sudah bisa tahu dia di mana dan bagaimana keadaannya." [It is easier to contact my child now. In the past, when the child went somewhere, we had to wait until the child came home. Now we can simply call or send a message and know where the child is and how things are.] (PA1, personal communication, translated by author)

A child stated something similar.

"Kalau saya pergi sendiri, saya tetap bisa kasih kabar. Biasanya kalau sudah sampai saya chat Mama. Jadi Mama tidak terlalu khawatir karena sudah tahu saya sampai." [When I go somewhere by myself, I can still give my mother an update. Usually, when I arrive, I message her. So my mother does not worry too much because she knows I have arrived.] (CH3, personal communication, translated by author)

These accounts show that technology lowers the practical barriers associated with physical distance. Sartori et al. (2022) similarly found that interactive technologies supported parental availability and communication among parents and early adolescents. The present findings extend this observation, showing that accessibility is embedded in ordinary family routines rather than limited to exceptional circumstances.

Janssen et al. (2025) offer a useful quantitative comparison. Their diary data showed that online parent–adolescent communication occurred on 43% of observed days and was dominated by everyday micro-coordination. The present participants described similar uses, suggesting that the value of digital communication often lies in supporting small but recurrent acts of family coordination.

3.2.2. Emotional Support Beyond Physical Proximity

Technology also created opportunities for emotional connection. Participants described using messages or calls to check on one another, express concern, share experiences, and offer reassurance when face-to-face interaction was not possible. One parent explained.

"Kalau anak sedang ada masalah, kadang dia lebih dulu chat daripada cerita langsung. Dari chat itu saya bisa tanya apa yang terjadi. Jadi walaupun dia tidak langsung bicara di depan saya, tetap ada jalan untuk berkomunikasi." [When my child has a problem, sometimes the child messages me first rather than talking directly. Through the chat I can ask what happened. So even if the child does not talk to me directly at first, there is still a way to communicate.] (PA7, personal communication, translated by author)

A child described a similar experience.

"Kalau saya sedang sedih atau ada masalah, kadang saya chat Mama dulu. Lebih mudah memulai dari chat. Setelah itu kalau sudah nyaman baru saya cerita langsung." [When I am sad or have a problem, sometimes I message my mother first. It is easier to start with a chat. After that, when I feel comfortable, I tell her directly.] (CH6, personal communication, translated by author)

This finding adds an affective dimension to the micro-coordination described above. Digital communication is not limited to practical instructions; it can also carry expressions of care and emotional support. Sartori et al. (2022) reported similar associations between interactive technology and warmth, trust, and parental availability. The present data suggest, however, that digital emotional communication does not necessarily match the experience of face-to-face interaction. Participants distinguished a quick supportive message from an extended conversation, so technology expands opportunities for emotional contact without automatically supplying the depth associated with sustained interpersonal engagement.

3.2.3. Communication About Technology

Another opportunity concerns communication about technology itself. Parents described using digital activities as occasions to discuss online content, appropriate use, boundaries, and digital responsibility with their children. One parent said as follows.

"Saya juga sering bicara dengan anak tentang apa yang dia lihat di HP. Kalau ada sesuatu yang menurut saya kurang baik, saya tidak langsung melarang saja, tetapi saya tanyakan dulu dan saya jelaskan kenapa harus hati-hati." [I also often talk to my child about what the child sees on the phone. If there is something I think is not good, I do not simply prohibit it; I ask first and explain why the child needs to be careful.] (PA4, personal communication, translated by author)

A child described this interaction as follows.

"Mama kadang tanya saya sedang lihat apa. Kalau ada video atau sesuatu yang menurut Mama tidak cocok, biasanya dibicarakan. Jadi bukan cuma HP-nya diambil." [My mother sometimes asks what I am watching. If there is a video or something that she thinks is inappropriate, we usually talk about it. So she does not simply take the phone away.] (CH8, personal communication, translated by author)

This pattern corresponds with Purboningsih et al. (2025), who identified monitoring, supervision, co-use, interpretative mediation, modelling, and norm implementation among Indonesian families. The present findings extend that work, showing that these practices are not merely forms of parental regulation but communicative activities through which parents and children negotiate expectations and responsibilities.

3.2.4. Distraction and Technoference

The principal challenge identified in the interviews was distraction during interpersonal interaction. Participants described occasions when either parents or children attended to a device while another family member was trying to communicate. One parent acknowledged this directly.

"Kadang ketika sedang bersama keluarga, anak sibuk dengan HP. Saya panggil beberapa kali baru menjawab. Kadang saya juga begitu, sedang anak bicara tetapi saya masih melihat HP. Jadi memang dua-duanya bisa terjadi." [Sometimes when we are together as a family, the child is busy with the phone. I have to call several times before the child responds. Sometimes I do the same thing; the child is talking while I am still looking at my phone. So it can happen on both sides.] (PA8, personal communication, translated by author)

A child described the same problem from the child's side.

"Kalau saya sedang bicara tetapi Mama masih melihat HP, saya kadang merasa tidak didengarkan. Bukan berarti Mama tidak mendengar, tetapi saya merasa perhatiannya tidak penuh." [When I am talking while my mother is still looking at her phone, sometimes I feel that I am not being listened to. It does not mean that my mother cannot hear me, but I feel that her attention is not complete.] (CH7, personal communication, translated by author)

The significance of this finding is that the same technology facilitating communication in one context can obstruct it in another. McDaniel et al. (2025) similarly found that children noticed interference associated with parents' device use and sometimes tried to regain parental attention. Gahler (2025) likewise linked perceived technology interference during parent–child time with evaluations of family relationship quality. The present findings suggest that the central issue is not technology itself but where attention is directed while it is present. A smartphone used to communicate with a child can strengthen connection; the same smartphone used for an unrelated activity while the child is speaking can weaken the interaction.

3.2.5. Conflict and Negotiation Over Device Use

The interviews also revealed negotiation and disagreement surrounding device use. Parents generally described setting expectations about when and how children could use devices, while children did not always interpret these rules the same way. One parent explained.

"Saya biasanya membuat aturan, misalnya kalau sedang makan HP tidak boleh digunakan. Waktu belajar juga HP disimpan dulu. Kalau sudah selesai belajar baru boleh digunakan lagi." [I usually make rules; for example, the phone cannot be used while eating. During study time, the phone is put away first. After studying is finished, it can be used again.] (PA2, personal communication, translated by author)

The child perceived the rule somewhat differently.

"Saya mengerti kenapa Mama membuat aturan, tetapi kadang saya merasa terlalu dibatasi. Apalagi kalau saya sedang ada tugas atau sedang ingin menyelesaikan sesuatu di HP." [I understand why my mother makes the rules, but sometimes I feel too restricted. Especially when I have an assignment or when I am trying to finish something on my phone.] (CH2, personal communication, translated by author)

This parent–child contrast matters analytically because it shows that digital technology can become a topic of family communication in its own right. Purboningsih et al. (2025) found that Indonesian parents employ both restrictive and enabling mediation strategies. The present study extends this finding by showing that negotiation over technology is also part of the broader relational process through which parents and children communicate.

3.2.6. Functional Communication Versus Meaningful Interaction

A further challenge concerns the tendency for digital communication to become brief and functional. Participants described messages used for reminders, instructions, schedules, questions, and other immediate purposes. One parent explained.

"Kalau lewat chat biasanya memang singkat. Paling bertanya sudah makan, di mana, kapan pulang, atau ada keperluan apa. Kalau mau membicarakan sesuatu yang panjang, biasanya lebih enak langsung." [Communication through chat is usually brief. We mostly ask whether the child has eaten, where the child is, when the child will come home, or whether there is something needed. If we want to discuss something at length, it is usually better to talk directly.] (PA10, personal communication, translated by author)

A child expressed a similar view.

"Kalau chat biasanya untuk hal yang cepat saja. Kalau mau cerita banyak, saya lebih suka ngomong langsung karena bisa menjelaskan dengan lebih jelas." [I usually use chat for things that are quick. If I want to tell a longer story, I prefer talking directly because I can explain it more clearly.] (CH1, personal communication, translated by author)

This pattern closely parallels Janssen et al.'s (2025) finding that parent–adolescent online communication was predominantly oriented toward micro-coordination. The present qualitative data add an important interpretive point, that short digital exchanges should not automatically be classified as poor communication. Their usefulness depends on the purpose of the interaction. A short message may work well when a parent needs to know a child's whereabouts, but less so when the topic calls for emotional discussion or mutual reflection.

Taken together, the findings reveal a fundamental opportunity and challenge duality. Digital technology creates accessibility, connection, coordination, and opportunities for parental involvement, while simultaneously creating distraction, divided attention, negotiation, and the possibility of shallow or overly functional interaction. These dimensions can occur within the same family, even within the same day.

This interpretation matters because it avoids a technologically deterministic conclusion. Coyne et al. (2025) cautioned against treating parental technofence as uniformly harmful and emphasized the importance of context and mechanisms. The present findings support this contextual view. Participants did not describe technology as inherently beneficial or harmful; rather, its consequences depended on what it was used for, when it was used, and whether it complemented or competed with family interaction.

RQ2, then, shows that the opportunities and challenges of digital technology are not separate categories with fixed boundaries. Accessibility can become interruption, parental involvement can become monitoring, convenience can reduce communicative depth, and digital contact can either complement or compete with face-to-face interaction. The central challenge for families is not whether to use technology, but how to incorporate it into communication without letting technological convenience displace interpersonal attention.

3.3. The Impact of Digital Technology on the Quality of Parent–Child Communication

The third research question focused on participants' perceptions of communication quality. The interviews indicate that technology shapes quality through several interconnected dimensions, namely availability, responsiveness, attention, emotional connection, reciprocity, and communicative depth. Participants did not evaluate technology as uniformly positive or negative; rather, they judged communication quality by whether technology helped or hindered the interaction taking place.

3.3.1. Availability and Responsiveness

Participants frequently associated digital communication with greater availability and responsiveness. Parents and children could send messages or make calls and receive responses even when they were not together. One parent explained.

"Kalau anak membutuhkan saya dan saya sedang tidak bersama dia, sekarang dia bisa langsung telepon atau chat. Kalau saya lihat pesannya, biasanya saya usahakan segera balas." [If my child needs me and I am not with the child, the child can now call or message me directly. When I see the message, I usually try to respond immediately.] (PA3, personal communication, translated by author)

A child stated something similar.

"Kalau saya butuh Mama, saya tinggal chat atau telepon. Jadi tidak harus menunggu Mama pulang atau saya pulang dulu." [If I need my mother, I can just message or call her. So I do not have to wait until my mother comes home or until I get home.] (CH4, personal communication, translated by author)

This finding echoes Sartori et al. (2022), whose participants valued technology for parental availability and communication. The present data add an important qualification, that being reachable is not the same as being attentive. A parent can respond quickly to a message but may still be unable to give sustained attention during an in-person conversation.

3.3.2. Communication Depth and the Choice of Medium

Participants also distinguished communication that was convenient from communication that was meaningful. Digital media were seen as appropriate for brief or practical matters, while face-to-face interaction was often preferred for important, sensitive, or emotionally demanding conversations. One parent explained.

"Kalau masalahnya sederhana, saya tidak masalah anak menyampaikannya lewat chat. Tetapi kalau masalahnya serius, saya lebih suka dia datang dan bicara langsung. Dari situ kita bisa lebih jelas melihat apa yang dia rasakan." [If the issue is simple, I do not mind if my child tells me through chat. But if the issue is serious, I prefer the child to come and talk directly. That way we can see more clearly what the child is feeling.] (PA5, personal communication, translated by author)

A child gave a similar account.

"Kalau mau bilang sesuatu yang biasa, saya lebih cepat chat. Tapi kalau masalahnya penting, saya lebih nyaman bicara langsung karena Mama bisa langsung bertanya dan saya bisa menjelaskan." [If I want to say something ordinary, it is quicker to chat. But if the matter is important, I feel more comfortable talking directly because my mother can ask questions immediately and I can explain.] (CH6, personal communication, translated by author)

This distinction reinforces Janssen et al.'s (2025) observation that parent–adolescent online communication frequently centers on micro-coordination and tends to be brief. The present study adds that participants' evaluation of communication quality depends partly on the fit between medium and purpose. Digital communication can be high in quality when the purpose is rapid coordination, while the same medium may feel inadequate when sustained emotional engagement is required.

3.3.3. Attention and Responsiveness

The strongest threat to perceived communication quality in the interviews was divided attention. Participants described communication as less satisfying when a parent or child used a device while another person was speaking. One child explained this directly.

"Kalau saya sedang cerita terus Mama sibuk dengan HP, saya merasa kurang nyaman. Saya lebih suka kalau Mama berhenti sebentar dan mendengarkan saya dulu. Setelah selesai baru pegang HP lagi." [When I am telling my mother something and she is busy with her phone, I feel uncomfortable. I

prefer it when my mother stops for a moment and listens to me first. After I finish, she can use the phone again.] (CH7, personal communication, translated by author)

This finding closely parallels McDaniel et al. (2025), whose child participants described parental device use as interfering with interaction and reported attempts to regain parental attention. The present findings place this experience within the broader construct of communication quality, suggesting that children evaluate communication not only by whether a parent responds, but by whether the parent is fully attentive during the interaction. A parent acknowledged this distinction.

"Kadang saya merasa sudah mendengarkan anak walaupun sambil memegang HP. Tetapi setelah dipikir, mungkin anak melihatnya sebagai saya tidak fokus. Jadi sekarang kalau anak sedang cerita sesuatu yang penting, saya usahakan HP diletakkan." [Sometimes I feel that I am already listening to my child even while holding my phone. But when I think about it, perhaps the child sees it as me not being focused. So now, when the child is telling me something important, I try to put the phone away.] (PA8, personal communication, translated by author)

Gahler's (2025) findings offer further contextual support. Greater perceived technology interference during parent-child time was associated with less favorable evaluations of the co-parent's relationship with the child. Gahler examined relational evaluations specifically, whereas the present study suggests that perceived communication quality may be one pathway through which technology interference becomes relationally meaningful.

3.3.4. Emotional Connection

The interviews also indicate that technology can support emotional connection, especially when parents and children are physically separated. One parent described simple digital expressions of care.

"Kalau anak sedang di luar, saya biasanya chat menanyakan sudah makan atau belum, sudah sampai atau belum. Kadang saya juga bilang hati-hati. Memang sederhana, tetapi itu cara saya menunjukkan perhatian." [When my child is outside, I usually send a message asking whether the child has eaten or arrived. Sometimes I also say to be careful. It is simple, but that is how I show my concern.] (PA6, personal communication, translated by author)

A child recognized the emotional meaning behind these messages.

"Mama sering chat tanya sudah makan atau belum, sudah sampai atau belum. Kadang pertanyaannya sederhana, tetapi saya tahu Mama bertanya karena khawatir." [My mother often messages me asking whether I have eaten or arrived. Sometimes the questions are simple, but I know that my mother asks because she is concerned.] (CH3, personal communication, translated by author)

This complements Sartori et al. (2022), whose participants associated interactive technology with warmth and trust. The present participants, however, also distinguished immediate emotional contact from deeper emotional communication. A message can convey concern efficiently, but an uninterrupted conversation offers greater room for elaboration, clarification, and mutual understanding. Digital technology, then, does not determine emotional communication quality by itself; its contribution depends on whether the interaction calls for a brief expression of support or a sustained exchange of feelings and experiences.

3.3.5. Reciprocity and Children's Participation

Communication quality was also tied to reciprocity. Participants described situations in which both parents and children initiated communication, responded to one another, exchanged information, and took part in shared digital activities. One child explained.

"Kadang saya yang chat duluan kalau ada sesuatu yang mau saya ceritakan. Misalnya ada kejadian di sekolah atau saya melihat sesuatu yang menurut saya menarik. Saya kirim ke Mama." [Sometimes I am the one who messages first when there is something I want to tell my mother. For

example, something happened at school or I saw something interesting. I send it to my mother.] (CH5, personal communication, translated by author)

A parent confirmed the child's active role.

"Tidak selalu saya yang menghubungi anak. Kadang anak saya yang chat duluan. Kalau dia sudah mulai cerita, biasanya saya balas dan tanya lebih lanjut supaya komunikasinya tidak berhenti di satu pesan saja." [I am not always the one who contacts my child. Sometimes my child messages me first. When the child starts telling me something, I usually respond and ask further questions so that the communication does not stop with one message.] (PA9, personal communication, translated by author)

This finding matters because it challenges a parent-centered model of digital family communication. Janssen et al. (2025) similarly found that adolescents were active participants in online communication with parents rather than passive recipients of parental messages. The present study reinforces this point by showing that children's agency shapes how communication quality is experienced.

3.3.6. Divergent Parent and Child Perceptions

The paired perspectives further reveal that communication quality is not always evaluated the same way by parents and children. A parent may regard frequent checking in as evidence of care, while a child may experience the same behavior as excessive monitoring. A parent explained.

"Kalau saya sering menanyakan anak sedang di mana atau dengan siapa, itu karena saya ingin memastikan dia aman. Bagi saya itu bentuk perhatian sebagai orang tua." [When I often ask where my child is or who the child is with, it is because I want to make sure the child is safe. For me, that is a form of parental care.] (PA1, personal communication, translated by author)

The child's perception differed somewhat.

"Saya tahu Mama khawatir, tetapi kadang kalau terlalu sering ditanya saya merasa seperti sedang diawasi terus. Saya ingin Mama percaya kalau saya sudah bisa menjaga diri." [I know that my mother is concerned, but sometimes when she asks too often. I feel as if I am constantly being watched. I want my mother to trust that I can take care of myself.] (CH2, personal communication, translated by author)

A similar divergence appeared around parental device use. A parent described multitasking as acceptable under certain circumstances.

"Kalau saya sedang pegang HP tetapi masih bisa mendengarkan anak, menurut saya tidak selalu menjadi masalah. Tetapi saya sadar, mungkin anak merasa saya tidak fokus kalau mata saya masih ke layar." [If I am using my phone but can still listen to my child, I do not think it is always a problem. But I realize that my child may feel that I am not focused if my eyes are still on the screen.] (PA8, personal communication, translated by author)

The child, however, placed greater weight on visible attention.

"Kalau Mama masih mendengarkan saya, sebenarnya tidak terlalu masalah. Tetapi kalau saya bicara dan Mama terus melihat HP, saya merasa lebih baik nanti saja ceritanya." [If my mother is still listening to me, it is not really a problem. But if I am talking and she keeps looking at her phone, I feel that it is better to tell the story later.] (CH7, personal communication, translated by author)

This contrast is one of the important contributions of the present study. It shows why research based on only one participant group can give an incomplete account of family communication. McDaniel et al. (2025) demonstrates the value of children's perspectives on parental device use, while Janssen et al. (2025) shows adolescents as active participants in online parent–child communication. The present study brings these perspectives together within the same family context.

3.3.7. Technology Rules as Communication

Parental rules concerning digital technology also shaped perceived communication quality. Participants described rules on device duration, appropriate situations for use, and restrictions during family activities. One parent explained.

"Kalau sedang makan atau sedang berbicara dengan orang tua, saya minta anak menyimpan HP. Menurut saya, waktu bersama keluarga harus tetap ada tanpa HP." [When we are eating or talking with parents, I ask the child to put the phone away. In my opinion, family time should still include time without phones.] (PA2, personal communication, translated by author)

The child emphasized how the rule was communicated.

"Kalau Mama menjelaskan alasannya, saya lebih mudah mengikuti. Saya biasanya keberatan kalau HP langsung diambil tanpa dijelaskan kenapa." [If my mother explains the reason, it is easier for me to follow the rule. I usually object when the phone is simply taken away without an explanation.] (CH2, personal communication, translated by author)

The findings suggest that the quality of technology-related communication depends partly on how rules are negotiated. When parents explain their expectations and listen to children's views, technology rules can become opportunities for dialogue; when rules are experienced as unilateral restrictions, they may instead become sources of conflict. This observation complements Purboningsih et al. (2025), who identified both restrictive and enabling forms of parental mediation among Indonesian families and emphasized the importance of local family contexts. The present study extends that discussion by showing that mediation is not merely a behavioral management strategy but a communicative process through which parents and children negotiate expectations, autonomy, responsibility, and trust.

The findings also need to be read alongside broader evidence on parental technofence. Zhang et al. (2025), in a meta-analysis of 53 studies involving 60,555 participants, found a positive association between parental technofence and children's problematic media use. Their outcome differs from the present study's focus on communication quality, so the current findings do not claim that technofence necessarily causes poor parent-child communication. Instead, they show how participants experience and interpret the attentional disruption associated with device use within everyday interaction.

Coyne et al. (2025) similarly emphasized that technology-related effects on family relationships should be interpreted in relation to context and mechanisms rather than assuming that all parental technology use is harmful. The present data support this position. Technology used to contact a child may strengthen accessibility and responsiveness, whereas unrelated device use during a child's attempt to communicate may undermine perceived attention. What matters, then, is not simply the presence of technology but its function and timing within the interaction.

Overall, the findings indicate that communication quality is shaped by the balance between being reachable and being present. Digital technology improves reachability, responsiveness, and continuity of contact, but meaningful communication also requires attention, reciprocity, emotional presence, and sufficient time for interaction.

The findings for RQ3 therefore suggest that digital technology does not by itself determine whether parent-child communication is high or low in quality. Rather, it reconfigures the conditions under which quality communication occurs. Technology can strengthen communication when it complements family interaction, supports accessibility, and facilitates emotional connection, and it can weaken perceived communication quality when it competes for attention, encourages overly functional exchanges, or becomes a source of conflict.

The overall contribution of the study is thus a shift from evaluating technology by how much it is used toward examining how it is integrated into family communication. High-quality parent-child communication in a digital environment is not necessarily communication that avoids technology.

Rather, it is communication in which technology remains subordinate to the relational purpose of the interaction, one where parents and children remain able to reach one another, listen to one another, respond to one another, and maintain meaningful face-to-face engagement when sustained interpersonal connection is needed.

3.3.8. Summary of the Findings Across the Three Research Questions

Across RQ1 through RQ3, the findings reveal a consistent pattern. Digital technology has become an integrated component of contemporary parent–child communication, but its influence is neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative. The technology creates a hybrid communication environment in which digital and face-to-face interaction perform complementary functions.

For RQ1, the principal finding is the emergence of a hybrid communication pattern. Digital communication expands accessibility, enables immediate contact, and supports everyday coordination, while face-to-face communication remains important for extended, sensitive, and emotionally demanding conversations.

For RQ2, the findings demonstrate an opportunity and challenge duality. Technology provides accessibility, emotional connection, coordination, and opportunities for parental involvement, yet the same technological environment can produce distraction, divided attention, conflict over device use, and increasingly functional forms of communication.

For RQ3, communication quality is shaped by the balance between reachability and interpersonal presence. Digital technology strengthens communication when it supports responsiveness, emotional connection, and reciprocity, while communication quality may weaken when device use competes with attention or when digital interaction becomes an inadequate substitute for sustained face-to-face communication.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the central issue is not whether technology should be present in family communication, but how it is used within the communicative relationship. The quality of parent–child communication depends less on the mere presence of smartphones or messaging applications than on whether these technologies complement or compete with attention, reciprocity, emotional engagement, and meaningful interpersonal connection.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that digital technology has reconfigured, rather than replaced, parent–child communication. Drawing on the perspectives of 10 parents and 10 children, the findings indicate that contemporary family communication operates as a hybrid system in which digital and face-to-face interaction coexist. Digital communication mainly supports accessibility, immediacy, everyday coordination, and continuity of contact, while face-to-face interaction remains especially important for emotionally sensitive, complex, and sustained conversations.

The findings also reveal a fundamental opportunity and challenge duality. Digital technology allows parents and children to stay connected across physical distance and creates additional openings for emotional support and parental involvement. At the same time, device use can produce distraction, divided attention, conflict over technology rules, and increasingly functional communication. The effects of technology therefore cannot be read off its mere presence or frequency of use; they depend on how, when, and why it is incorporated into family interaction.

A central contribution of this study is the distinction between being reachable and being present. Digital technology enhances responsiveness and communication availability, yet participants, children in particular, also stressed the importance of attention, reciprocity, emotional presence, and communicative depth. The findings further show that parents and children can interpret the same technological practice quite differently. Parental checking may be understood as care by parents yet felt

as monitoring by children, and parental multitasking may seem acceptable to parents while children experience it as inattentive.

The study thus suggests that high-quality parent–child communication in the digital age does not require eliminating technology, only integrating it without letting it displace interpersonal attention. Technology proves most beneficial when it complements rather than competes with family interaction. This finding shifts the question away from whether technology is good or bad for family communication and toward examining the conditions under which digital technology supports accessibility, reciprocity, emotional connection, and meaningful interaction.

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