

# Enabling Children to Develop Effective Communication Skills in an Increasingly Digital World

Mr. Manav Seth

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the impact of an increasingly digital-first world on children's communication developmental needs. Experts already suggest that increased screen time can lead to mental health and emotional issues in children, with communication development often included in the discourse. By reviewing the elements of effective communication, we can identify how excessive use of technology can hinder children's communication development. These insights can also allow parents and teachers to formulate personalised and creative learning strategies that allow children to develop strong communication skills.

**Keywords:** communication, communication skills development in children, communicating in a digital world, effective communication in children

## INTRODUCTION

Introducing children to the digital world comes with both opportunities and challenges, particularly concerning communication. In today's interconnected society, where screens are ubiquitous and online platforms are integral to daily life, the ability to navigate digital communication effectively is essential for young people. This introduction explores the importance of enabling children to develop communication skills in the digital realm, highlighting both the benefits and potential pitfalls they may encounter along the way.

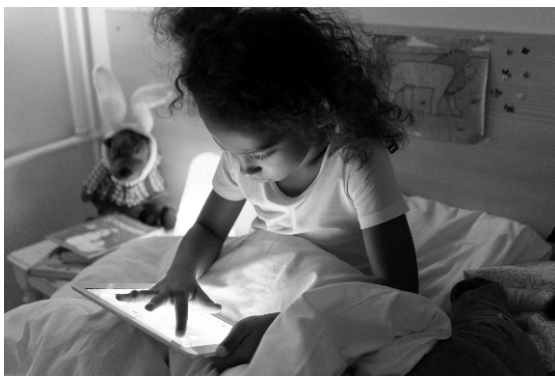
In the digital age, communication extends far beyond face-to-face interactions. Children are exposed to a plethora of digital platforms, from social media and messaging apps to online gaming communities. While these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for connection and learning, they also present unique communication challenges. From deciphering emojis and navigating virtual identities to understanding the nuances of online etiquette, the digital landscape requires a distinct set of communication skills.

Our very first act in this world is to communicate. A change in our environment and biological processes at birth elicits a cry, and for many months thereafter, crying is the only way we communicate with others. As we grow, we learn how to communicate with nuance, eventually expanding the verbal and nonverbal form to include visual and written communication.

Like our fingerprint, our communication has a distinct style and constitutes an essential component of our personality. It also evolves with time, depending on our experiences and exposure. Communication mediums and formats have also evolved for society at large, and people have embraced new ways of communication for several millennia.

Today, in an increasingly digital-first world, where digital interactions are quickly replacing physical ones, it's important to help children develop strong communication skills. To equip children with the necessary skills to thrive in a world where generative AI tools can write assignments, emails, and essays, we must be mindful of how children interact with technology and direct their curiosity, energy, and learning in meaningful ways.

Through this article, the author would like to discuss how parents and educators can strengthen the development of communication skills in children in an increasingly digital-first world. Besides examining the different aspects of communication, the article will also explore how the use of information technology can pose unique challenges for children and, finally, suggest some practical ways to minimise the impact of these issues. For this article, children are all individuals under the age of 18 exposed to technology for learning and entertainment purposes.



**Photo by cottonbro studio:**

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/a-young-girl-using-her-tablet-6684176/>

Excessive use of technology can hinder the development of communication skills in children.

### **Understanding communication beyond language skills**

Before we dive deeper into understanding the impact of technology on emotional and communication skills, it's essential to review the different facets of communication itself. There's a tendency in people, specifically Indian parents, to equate strong communication with fluency in specific languages. However, this is one aspect of communication, strong communication skills are largely language-independent. Furthermore, communication skills are not limited to verbal or written skills, as elements like body language and articulation are integral for effective communication. Indeed, a leading job search platform includes

the following skills as a part of the overall communication matrix (Northup, 2023):

- **Active listening:** This is the ability to stay attentive during communication to understand what the speaker is conveying, gauge the speaker's body language, ask the right questions, and focus on the conversation without distractions.
- **Empathy:** This includes identifying and sharing the emotional subtext of conversations and responding accordingly. While this also requires a high emotional quotient, the expression depends on communication skills.
- **Non-verbal cues:** Elements such as hand gestures, eye contact, voice tone and modulation, posture, facial expressions, and spatiality constitute non-verbal cues that can significantly impact the quality and effectiveness of communication.
- **Confidence:** Being confident while communicating allows the speaker to command attention and make their presence felt. Confidence is also key to negotiation, persuasion, and conflict resolution while communicating.

This shows that effective communication depends on a myriad of factors, and mastering them can allow individuals to excel in interpersonal interactions, such as sharing feedback, providing instruction, working in a team, and, crucially, forming personal and professional relationships.

### **Factors impacting the development of children's communication skills**

With the complexity of communication in context, let us now consider the factors that determine the development of these skills. Researchers agree that a combination of nature and nurture is responsible for forming communication and language abilities (Johnston, 2010). Internal factors such as genetics, are outside of our control, so we will focus more on the external factors and classify them into the following cohorts:

## Learning and domestic environments

The school and family environments of children are significantly influential factors in determining communication development. The type of interactions children observe, the respect their expression is accorded, and the overall patterns they notice can be the foundation of how children learn to communicate.

## Quality of social interactions

Besides observation, the quality of social interactions with classmates, teachers, siblings, parents and extended family allows children to expand their vocabulary, learn logic and reasoning, understand non-verbal cues and form sentence structure through positive reinforcement. While environments have a largely passive influence, interactions impact communication development actively.

## Social and emotional development

Overall social and emotional development allows children to understand emotions, express opinions, empathise with others, vocalise needs and formulate relevant responses. This, in turn, is contingent on several other elements, such as the quality of education, upbringing style, culture and societal structures.

## Exposure to media

Finally, the media consumed by children, including books, movies, television and the internet, plays a key role in the formation of unique communication styles. With increasing exposure to digital media, this particular factor is of paramount interest, more so due to the dual nature of impact it can have on children.

As we will observe in the next section, almost all these factors are influenced by technology in some manner. It is then incumbent on parents and educators to understand precisely how technology impacts children's social, interpersonal and emotional development.

## Conflicts between communication development and overuse of technology in children

Communication skills are a combination of several different abilities, and their development is dependent on multiple interconnected factors. Let us examine how the overuse of technology can potentially interact with these factors, resulting in poor communication development.

Before proceeding, the author wishes to clarify that technology aids learning in children in many notable ways. In addition to conducting remote classes, the use of technology can gamify learning, visualise complex topics, make classrooms interactive, integrate storytelling and increase access to information. However, children often use electronic devices beyond school and homework. One survey by Vivo estimates that children spend an average of just over six hours on the phone (*Parents Spend More Time With Their Phones Than Kids: Survey, 2023*).

It then becomes important to analyse the challenges associated with overuse and unregulated access to digital electronic devices, such as laptops, mobile phones and tablets. Since we are interested in understanding communication development, we will refrain from dissecting the physical impact of excessive technology, such as reduced physical activity or sleep quality (Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, 2022).

## Overstimulation and shrinking attention span

Many games, apps and platforms on the internet are designed to stimulate the brain and offer instant gratification continually (Rosenstein, 2019). Prolonged exposure to such media can manifest as attention and concentration challenges, besides impacting the ability to learn and retain information (Elsayed, 2021). As stated before, communication requires mindfulness and attention as it involves an interplay of articulation, expression, body language, vocabulary and grammar. Thus, distracted

children may increasingly struggle to communicate and engage effectively.



Photo by Ron Lach : <https://www.pexels.com/photo/boy-looking-on-mobile-phone-in-front-9783837/>

Unregulated screen time can result in a host of social, emotional and communication issues in children.

### **Impact on social development**

Increased screen time often comes at the cost of reduced in-person interpersonal interactions. The Vivo survey found that parents felt responsible for their children's mobile addiction and emphasised the need to prioritise quality time. Limiting in-person social interactions can increase social isolation or trouble maintaining friendships (Elsayed, 2021). Children who do not have adequate confidence may be anxious or underconfident in navigating real-world conversations and scenarios.

### **Impact on mental and emotional health**

The internet is an unforgiving space, and children are potentially more vulnerable to cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content and privacy leaks. Social media algorithms can expose children to content they may not fully understand, resulting in unrealistic

standard settings and unwarranted social comparisons. Children may experience anxiety, depression and low self-esteem due to excessive screen time (Jacobson, 2024). Interestingly, the impact of technology is also increasingly gendered, as girls are more likely to experience issues related to body image and self-esteem, whereas boys are likely to experience overuse of video games and pornography (Goldberg, 2024).

Most parents and educators are familiar with some of the issues mentioned above. The most visible and immediate impact of excessive screen time is on children's physical health and personality. However, the author would implore parents and teachers to pay attention to how exposure to digital media impacts a child's communication pattern, language development and ability to express and emote. It's also important to monitor the type of relationship that children are forming with technology and whether they are increasingly turning to games or social media to escape the challenges they face in the real world. There's a reason why The American Psychological Association (APA) recommends limiting the use of technology for different age groups of children and that's because they are easily susceptible to technology overuse (APA, 2019).

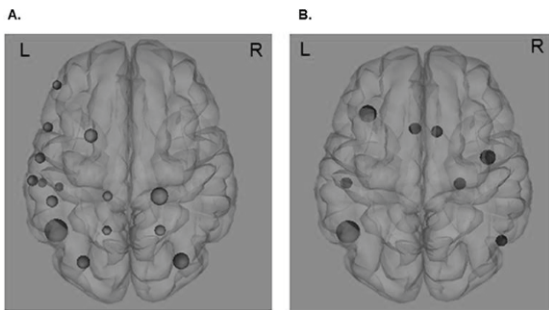
### **Mitigating the negative impact of technology on communication development: Practical ways to get started**

The scope of this article limits itself to discussing different approaches that can help parents and educators creatively enhance children's communication skills. Common regulatory and prohibitory actions such as parental locks, limiting screen time and supervision of content are essential to set boundaries, but we are more concerned with enabling children to communicate better despite the existence of such technologies:

#### **Read together**

If the schedule permits, find time to read books together. If there is already a bedtime reading routine, stick to it diligently and review if

reducing screen time for longer reading sessions is possible. Besides the obvious benefit of spending quality time together, evidence supports the claim that reading to children up to a certain age can result in better language and literacy skills (LaMotte, 2020). This is in contrast to children who spend an average of two hours a day playing on screens, who reported underdevelopment and disorganisation of white matter in the same brain areas. Consider the difference in brain activity measured during reading (left) and screen time (right) in another study in the image below (Hoyos et al., 2018).



**Source:** Frontier for Young Minds  
<https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2018.00066>

### Assign them fun projects

If limiting screen time is proving tricky, be more creative in influencing a child's activity when they are online. Incentivise them to work on stories, comics, videos or other projects that require them to actively apply their learning instead of being a passive consumer of content. Ask them to prepare presentations, reports or simple doodles on topics they are interested in, encouraging them to explore their unique visual language, storytelling skills and expression. Children can present their projects on the weekend, with meaningful rewards given for their efforts.

### Ask open-ended questions

Give children the space to form and express their opinions by probing the 'why' and the 'how'. For example, if they say they like a particular fruit, ask them why they like it. Some scaffolding

may be necessary initially, like prompting inquiries about preferences for colour, shape, fragrance or taste. Similarly, allow them to find logic in their statements and encourage them to enquire. Be patient as they collect their thoughts and help them choose the right words. Use this opportunity to make their vocabulary richer. For instance, if they repeatedly use certain adjectives ('I like this movie' or 'This food is very good') to describe their opinion, teach them more appropriate words ('I enjoy watching this movie' or 'This food is delicious').

### Give your games a creative spin

Add elements of vocabulary, grammar, storytelling, role-playing and visual expression to the games. Depending on the child's age, create a game that requires clear articulation for just about any activity. For example, young children can be taken along for grocery shopping and asked to describe the things added to the cart without naming them. If they prefer working on more tactile games, get board games that include following visual and written instructions. As always, use positive reinforcements and rewards when they show improvement.

### Inculcate a journaling habit

This declining habit has benefits beyond clarifying expressions and thoughts. Journaling facilitates the discovery of one's unique voice and style while also providing an avenue for introspection. Start a journal with the children and make regular entries. If committing to long entries is tough, get any Q&A journal that poses one question every day and answer it with them. Note that journaling need not necessarily be text-based, as encouraging the children to sketch, paint, or even record audio notes and videos is also an option.

### Become a confidant

Children will interact with technology, and their usage will likely increase as they grow older. To ensure that children can develop a healthy relationship with technology, fostering a confidant role and establishing a space where

questions can be freely brought forward is advisable. Children will inadvertently encounter age-inappropriate content on the internet, and they should seek guidance from a trusted adult rather than turning to online strangers or peers who may be equally uninformed. Similarly, engaging in technology activities with children, such as watching videos or playing games together, and subsequently discussing them in depth, can be beneficial. For instance, after watching a humorous skit or cartoon together, pose open-ended questions about what they enjoyed and discuss different perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

Digital technology is the bedrock of modern society, and we are moving toward an increasingly hyper-digital world. With generative AI tools already performing many tasks, a generation of children will grow up with technologies that can communicate effortlessly and instantly on their behalf. As parents, educators and society at large, the extra effort should be made to help the next generation acquire skills that allow them to connect with their world. Communication is at the forefront of these abilities, allowing people to exchange ideas, express creativity and lead others.

Children must be equipped with strong communication skills not only to ensure their personal development but also to give them the arsenal that enables them to succeed professionally in a tech-driven world that values strong critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership and decision-making skills.

Technology can reap valuable dividends for child development, provided it is used in moderation and targeted for specific use cases. While the negative impact of technology on children is undeniable, the solution is not to shun it but to regulate it and support our children in controlling their actions, thoughts and ideas. By day's end, it's essential to recognise the internet as a tool for sharing information, emphasising to children its function as such rather than portraying it as a separate realm detached from reality. Empowering children to take charge of their online presence starts with equipping them with the necessary tools, support, and language to articulate themselves effectively. This approach safeguards against our fundamental mode of communication, which commences from birth, from being overshadowed by online personas and digital avatars.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Manav Seth is a communications specialist and copywriter with over 12 years of experience. He specialises in content strategy, SEO and content creation. Manav enjoys writing and simplifying complex subjects for a diverse audience. He is also a certified communications coach. He can be reached at [manav.seth29@gmail.com](mailto:manav.seth29@gmail.com).*