

Social Research Call

Title:
*Understanding Digital Engagement in
Early Childhood: Profiles and
Developmental Outcomes*



Acronym: GrowingDIGITAL

Project leader: Joana Baptista

Host organisation: Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon

Main purpose of the project: Digital technologies can both benefit and challenge young children's development, yet little is known about for whom and under which conditions these effects occur. This project will develop a multidimensional measure of digital engagement in children aged 2–5 years, identify distinct engagement profiles, and examine how environmental sensitivity and family digital ecology shape the associations between these profiles and children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach: GrowingDIGITAL employs a multi-stage mixed-methods design that integrates measure development and psychometric validation, and a nationally representative survey of children aged 2–5 years and their caregivers. Survey data will be complemented by face-to-face assessments of self-regulation in a subsample of children, enabling the integration of caregiver-reported and behavioural measures.

Potential results: The project will deliver a validated measure of digital engagement for children aged 2–5 years, a representative dataset, and evidence on how digital engagement profiles relate to developmental outcomes across diverse child and family contexts. Outputs will include scientific publications, policy recommendations, and practical resources to support evidence-informed practice and policymaking.

Social relevance of the research: GrowingDIGITAL will generate evidence on which digital experiences are most beneficial or detrimental for different children and under which family conditions. This knowledge will support evidence-informed guidance and policy development aimed at promoting children's well-being, rights, and healthy development in digital environments.

Originality/value of the project: GrowingDIGITAL challenges one-size-fits-all approaches to children's digital media use by conceptualising digital engagement as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond screen time to encompass content, purpose, interactivity and social context. By integrating child environmental sensitivity within a family digital ecology framework, the project will provide a more comprehensive understanding of when, how, and for whom digital experiences support or hinder development.