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Navigating Digital Risks in Early Childhood Education: Parental Strategies in Mediating Media and Gadget Exposure

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore how parents of children aged 2 to 6 mediate digital risks, including exposure to violent media and unsafe online content through gadgets. **Method:** Using a qualitative descriptive design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 93 parents across 41 cities in Indonesia to capture a wide range of sociocultural and digital contexts. **Results:** Thematic analysis revealed various parental strategies such as constant supervision, content restriction, open communication, and, in rare cases, complete avoidance of digital technologies. These findings underscore parental concerns and highlight the tension between short-term protective actions and fostering long-term digital resilience in children. **Novelty:** This study contributes to early childhood education by emphasizing the role of parenting practices as central to the development of digital literacy and child protection, and by proposing the need for culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate interventions that support safe digital engagement during early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has reshaped the landscape of early childhood, where screen-based devices and online content now constitute a significant part of children's daily routines. Globally, concerns have intensified regarding the potential risks of unregulated exposure to digital media, especially violent or inappropriate content that may affect young children's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development (Enson, 2018; Rega et al., 2023).

Media violence, defined as depictions of intentional harm portrayed in entertainment content, has been linked to increased aggression, fear, and desensitisation in children (Tanwar, 2016). In addition, the emergence of cyber violence, including exposure to harmful or disturbing content via internet-connected devices, introduces new risks that go beyond passive viewing such as algorithmic exposure, cyberbullying, or accidental access to violent content on social platforms and video-sharing apps (Pashang et al., 2019; Ybarra et al., 2011).

Young children aged zero to six are particularly vulnerable due to their limited cognitive and emotional regulation capacities, which impairs their ability to critically assess content or manage distressing experiences (Milojevich et al., 2020). This makes parental mediation a pivotal protective mechanism that not only restricts access but also fosters the child's capacity to interpret and respond to digital content (Clark, 2011; Hwang et al., 2017; Livingstone et al., 2017).

The literature on parental mediation identifies three principal strategies: restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-viewing. Restrictive mediation involves limiting access or time, active mediation involves discussing and explaining media content, and co-viewing refers to engaging in media jointly without explanation (Chen et al., 2023; Collier et al., 2016). These models, however, have largely emerged from



Western-centric studies that often presume individualistic parenting styles, high levels of media literacy, and stable access to digital infrastructure (Lansford et al., 2021; Livingstone et al., 2017).

In Indonesia, digital access has accelerated dramatically. More than 73 percent of the population is now online, including in rural and lower-income areas (Onitsuka et al., 2018). As a result, children from increasingly diverse backgrounds are exposed to digital devices from early infancy (Paoletti et al., 2024). Despite the rapid digital adoption, the national discourse and empirical research on parental strategies in navigating media violence remain extremely limited. Moreover, existing interventions focus primarily on promoting digital literacy at the school level or among adolescents, with minimal attention to parents of very young children, who are arguably the most critical gatekeepers during early developmental stages (Hall & Bierman, 2015).

Critically, prior studies on parental mediation in Indonesia suffer from several key limitations. They often rely on quantitative surveys or secondary data that measure general attitudes toward digital risks without unpacking how parents interpret, adapt, or struggle with mediation in real-life contexts. They also under-theorise the role of sociocultural structures such as communal caregiving, religious beliefs, or intergenerational authority which profoundly shape parenting practices in Indonesia and may diverge significantly from Western models of digital supervision (Aisyah et al., 2018; Desmita et al., 2022). Finally, they overlook the dynamic evolution of parental strategies across different stages of childhood, failing to recognise how mediation must adapt as children gain autonomy, interact with peers, and develop literacy.

In short, there is a critical empirical and conceptual gap regarding the lived experiences of Indonesian parents as they manage digital and media violence risks in early childhood. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how Indonesian parents perceive and mediate their young children's exposure to media violence, cyber violence, and harmful gadget content. It examines what protective strategies are employed and how these are embedded within specific sociocultural and digital contexts. The study also investigates how these strategies evolve in response to children's developmental stages, family resources, and perceived risk.

To explore these issues, this research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach using semi-structured interviews with 93 parents across 41 urban and rural locations in Indonesia. By situating findings within a culturally grounded context, the study aims to offer theoretically informed and practically relevant insights for designing localised and age-sensitive digital parenting interventions. By centering on parents of very young children, this study not only addresses a critical gap but also lays the groundwork for future culturally informed interventions and research that support families in managing digital risks during early childhood.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore parental strategies in protecting children from violence in caregiving, media, and digital content. The descriptive qualitative approach allows for the in-depth examination of naturalistic parental practices without imposing theoretical frameworks in advance, thereby capturing participants' lived experiences as they occur in everyday settings (Creswell,



2013). This design is particularly appropriate for research questions focused on describing behaviours, perceptions, and strategies in context.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility in exploring emerging topics while ensuring consistency in core themes related to digital risks and parental mediation. This method enabled researchers to probe further into parents' experiences, interpretations, and motivations while maintaining a common thematic structure across interviews.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had relevant experience and insights. The inclusion criteria required participants to be parents or primary caregivers of at least one child under the age of six, reflecting the developmental stage when children are highly impressionable and dependent on adult mediation. A total of 93 parents participated in the study. These individuals were drawn from 41 cities across Indonesia, encompassing both urban centres such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar, and rural regions including Agam and Gianyar. This geographic diversity enabled a broad understanding of parental practices across socioeconomic and infrastructural contexts. Recruitment was conducted through early childhood education networks and local family outreach organisations. Participants varied in occupation, income level, and educational background, providing a heterogeneous data set that reflects Indonesia's demographic diversity.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online using video conferencing tools. This modality was selected to allow participation across multiple regions without geographic constraints. All participants provided informed consent for participation and audio recording and were assured of anonymity and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

The interview guide included open-ended questions focused on three key domains: violence prevention in caregiving, media exposure, and digital device use. Follow-up questions were used to explore the rationale behind specific parenting decisions, perceptions of digital risks, and challenges in supervision. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity to participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data following Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase model. This process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Both inductive and deductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were derived from existing literature on parental mediation, while inductive codes emerged from the data itself during iterative reading.

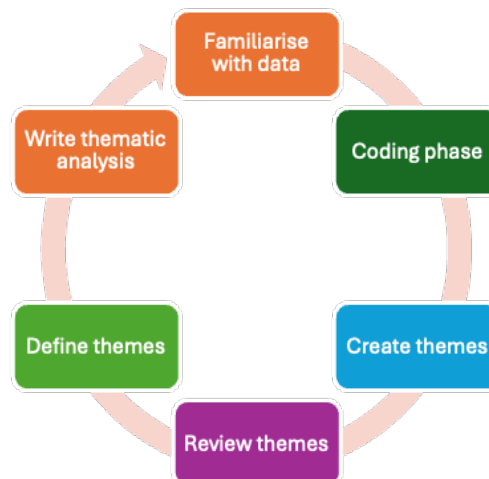


Figure 1. Braun and Clarke six-phase model of thematic analysis

All transcripts were manually coded and managed using NVivo software to facilitate systematic organisation and thematic development. Themes were developed with attention to both semantic and latent meanings, ensuring that both explicit practices and underlying parental beliefs were captured. Subthemes were created when distinct patterns emerged within broader categories such as supervision, restriction, and communication.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigour of the study, strategies were implemented to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative coding, and member checks conducted with a subset of participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the participants' contexts and backgrounds, allowing readers to assess relevance to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions, analytic memos, and reflexive notes that documented the researchers' assumptions and adjustments throughout the analysis process. This comprehensive methodological approach allowed for a rich, contextually embedded understanding of how Indonesian parents manage the complexities of digital risk in early childhood, while ensuring analytic transparency and trustworthiness of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Theme 1: Child Protection from Violence in the Home

Analysis of parents' narratives revealed multiple approaches to preventing violence against young children within the home environment. While responses varied, five major sub-themes emerged: general protective measures, open communication, constant supervision, responsive vigilance, and developmental timing. The numerical references presented (e.g., number of participants citing a strategy) are descriptive and intended to convey the prevalence of themes within this qualitative sample; they do not imply statistical generalizability.



A majority of participants (66 out of 93) described general protective measures without assigning them to a formal strategy. These responses reflected intuitive, context-driven practices emphasising parental presence and attentiveness. For example, one parent stated, *"We have to be vigilant and responsive in handling violence, but also remain calm"* (Parent 3, Bekasi), capturing a balanced and situational approach to risk mitigation.

Open communication was reported by 15 parents as a proactive tool in preventing violence. These parents emphasised the importance of discussing potential dangers and fostering trust. A respondent from Jakarta shared, *"I always talk to my child, explaining the things that can be dangerous and how to avoid them"* (Parent 7), indicating an early attempt to build children's awareness and self-protective behaviour through conversation.

Nine parents highlighted constant supervision as their primary strategy. This was often articulated as a form of continuous presence, such as in the response, *"My child is always under supervision"* (Parent 2, Tangerang). This suggests a strong reliance on physical monitoring, particularly among parents with limited external caregiving support.

A small group of participants emphasised the need for rapid responsiveness. One parent noted, *"Parents must be quick to respond to violence and any threats to their children"* (Parent 9, Agam), suggesting a readiness to intervene rather than reliance on pre-emptive strategies.

Interestingly, a few parents deferred protective action, citing the child's young age as justification. As one participant explained, *"I haven't done anything yet because my child is still too young to understand violence"* (P5, Tangerang). This indicates that some parents view the development of risk awareness as premature during early childhood, potentially delaying intervention.

Only one parent explicitly mentioned intentional education for self-protection, stating, *"I teach my child how to recognise dangerous situations and how to stay away from them"* (P4, Agam). This reflects a minority perspective focused on proactive risk education. These findings highlight a broad spectrum of parental beliefs and practices, ranging from immediate supervision to emergent communication and delayed intervention based on developmental readiness.

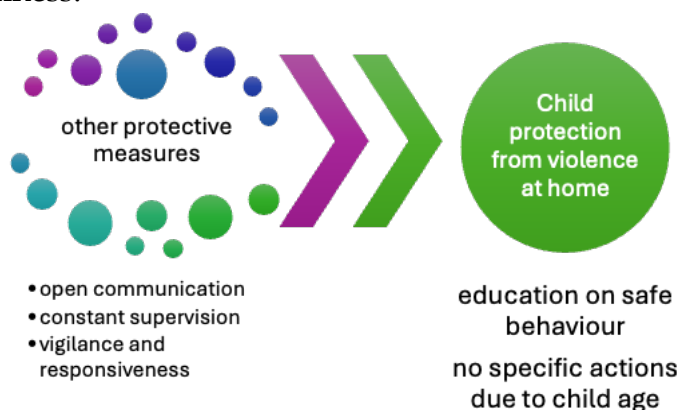


Figure 2. Visualisation of Theme 1

Theme 2: Protection from Media Violence

Parental strategies to prevent children's exposure to media violence coalesced around four main categories: general protective awareness, supervision, content restriction, and non-intervention. Thirty-nine parents described generalised caution,



often invoking attentiveness without providing clear behavioural strategies. As expressed by a parent from Bogor, *"I think we need to be cautious and mindful of the type of media our children are exposed to"* (Parent 12), these responses emphasise concern without structured enforcement.

Twenty-five parents reported active supervision practices, which included either being physically present during screen time or deliberately selecting appropriate content. One participant stated, *"I always supervise when my child is watching TV or using gadgets to ensure they are not exposed to violent content"* (Parent 15, Makassar). Others focused on content curation, as illustrated by a parent from Yogyakarta: *"We only allow our child to watch educational cartoons, and we avoid showing any adult content"* (Parent 28). These responses reflect a shift toward content-focused management, beyond just temporal control.

Only five parents mentioned strict restriction, involving rules that limit screen time or prohibit specific content. A parent from Padang explained, *"I limit screen time and ensure my child doesn't have access to inappropriate shows or games"* (Parent 37). Such practices indicate a more directive approach, though less common than supervision. Six parents indicated no specific action regarding media violence. These responses generally referenced the child's developmental stage as a rationale for inaction. One parent noted, *"I haven't restricted media access yet because my child is still very young"* (Parent 41, Medan), revealing an assumption that early childhood offers some natural insulation from media harm due to limited comprehension. Overall, while many parents expressed awareness of media violence, their practical responses ranged from active engagement to passive tolerance, influenced by their interpretations of developmental timing and perceived severity.

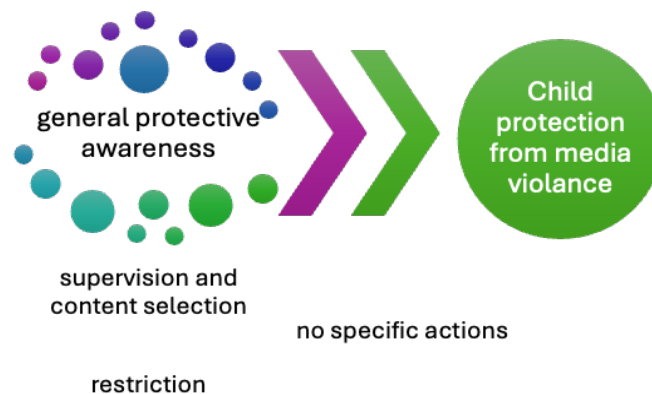


Figure 3. Visualisation of Theme 2

Theme 3: Protection from Cyber Violence through Gadgets

When discussing protection from cyber violence, defined as harmful or inappropriate content accessed via internet-connected gadgets, parents articulated three primary strategies: general protective behaviour, supervision, and restriction.

Forty-six parents described a general attentiveness to digital content, often without elaborating specific techniques. As one parent noted, *"I believe we should be cautious and mindful about how much and what type of content our children are exposed to on gadgets"* (Parent 17, Bekasi). These accounts reflect concern and monitoring, though not always translated into consistent practices.



Twenty-four parents reported supervising gadget use directly. This typically involved observing or co-using devices with their children. One parent from Jakarta said, *"I always supervise my child when they are using a gadget, to make sure they don't see anything harmful"* (Parent 11, Jakarta), underscoring real-time control as a preferred preventive measure.

Twenty-two participants described restrictive strategies such as time limits or app restrictions. A parent from Tangerang shared, *"We limit gadget use to one hour a day and make sure that it doesn't include any violent content"* (Parent 7), highlighting structured efforts to moderate both exposure duration and quality.

One parent explicitly avoided gadget use altogether, explaining, *"We don't allow our child to use gadgets at all, to prevent any exposure to harmful content"* (Parent 3, Surabaya). Although this approach offers high immediate control, it also suggests an avoidance strategy that may be difficult to sustain as children grow older.

Taken together, parents' responses reflect a continuum of mediation, from permissive co-use to firm restriction and total avoidance. These strategies appear shaped not only by perceived digital threats but also by parents' digital literacy, household routines, and child developmental considerations.

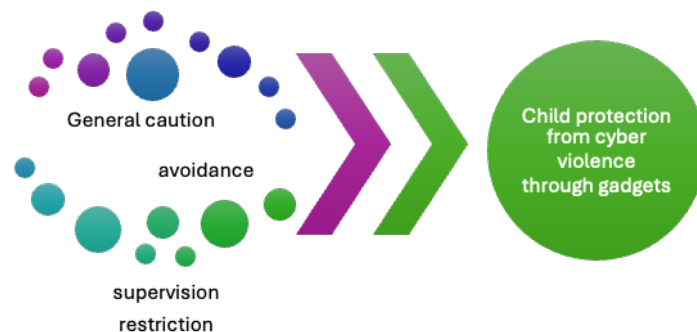


Figure 4. Visualisation of Theme 3

To synthesise these findings, Table 1 presents a thematic matrix summarising key parental strategies across all three domains, accompanied by representative quotes that illustrate the nuance and diversity of responses. This table highlights not only the range of mediation approaches but also the underlying reasoning and context-specific adaptations that inform each strategy.

Table 1. Synthesise of findings

Theme	Strategy	Illustrative Quote
Violence in Home	General Protective Measures	We have to be vigilant and responsive in handling violence but also remain calm. (P3, Bekasi)
Violence in Home	Open Communication	I always talk to my child, explaining the things that can be dangerous and how to avoid them. (P7, Jakarta)
Violence in Home	Constant Supervision	My child is always under supervision. (P2, Tangerang)
Violence in Home	Responsive Vigilance	Parents must be quick to respond to violence and any threats to their children. (P9, Agam)
Violence in Home	No Action (Due to Age)	I haven't done anything yet because my child is still too young to understand violence. (P5, Tangerang)



Theme	Strategy	Illustrative Quote
Violence in Home	Education for Risk	I teach my child how to recognise dangerous situations and how to stay away from them. (P4, Agam)
Media Violence	General Protective Awareness	I think we need to be cautious and mindful of the type of media our children are exposed to. (P12, Bogor)
Media Violence	Supervision & Content Selection	We only allow our child to watch educational cartoons, and we avoid showing any adult content. (P28, Yogyakarta)
Media Violence	Restriction	I limit screen time and ensure my child doesn't have access to inappropriate shows or games. (P37, Padang)
Media Violence	No Action	I haven't restricted media access yet because my child is still very young. (P41, Medan)
Cyber Violence	General Caution	I believe we should be cautious and mindful about how much and what type of content our children are exposed to on gadgets. (P17, Bekasi)
Cyber Violence	Supervision	I always supervise my child when they are using a gadget, to make sure they don't see anything harmful. (P11, Jakarta)
Cyber Violence	Restriction	We limit gadget use to one hour a day and make sure that it doesn't include any violent content. (P7, Tangerang)
Cyber Violence	Avoidance	We do not allow our child to use gadgets at all, to prevent any exposure to harmful content. (P3, Surabaya)

Discussion

This study examined how Indonesian parents navigate the challenges of protecting their young children from exposure to violence in caregiving, media, and digital content. Across these domains, parents employed a range of strategies, including supervision, content restriction, open communication, and, in rare cases, total avoidance of gadgets. While these strategies reflect active concern for children's safety, the findings also reveal significant variation in parental reasoning, contextual constraints, and developmental assumptions that shape mediation practices.

Supervision emerged as the most frequently cited strategy. Parents consistently described it as direct involvement, including being physically present during screen time, observing interactions, or managing routines. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that active monitoring can mitigate children's exposure to inappropriate content (Gentile et al., 2012; Holmgren et al., 2019; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). However, although effective in the short term, supervision may be unsustainable as children grow older and gain more autonomous access to digital devices, particularly in environments where content is increasingly personalised and mobile. Excessive reliance on supervision may also hinder the development of children's self-regulation and critical digital competencies. Padilla-Walker et al. (2021) caution that overprotective parenting can suppress opportunities for independent decision-making. In this study, few parents described strategies that gradually transition from control to guided autonomy,



indicating a potential gap in long-term digital literacy planning. This has direct implications for early childhood education, where fostering autonomy, building resilience, and developing foundational digital literacy are core developmental objectives.

Complementing supervision, some parents relied on restrictive strategies, including screen time limits and content filtering, typically as reactions to specific incidents or concerns. These strategies tended to be more structured and rule-based yet rarely included explanations or negotiation with the child. While such practices are consistent with pediatric guidelines (Hill et al., 2016), restriction in isolation may become authoritarian, particularly when it is not accompanied by efforts to cultivate internal understanding or reasoning. More importantly, restriction without concurrent investment in digital literacy may leave children unprepared for unsupervised environments such as school, public digital spaces, or peer settings. As Livingstone et al. (2017) argue, protection must be balanced with empowerment. From an early childhood education perspective, restrictions should serve as scaffolds for responsible and reflective media use, which requires treating the home as an educational setting where foundational norms and behaviours are actively constructed (Schwendemann et al., 2021).

In contrast, open communication was reported by a smaller subset of parents. These participants described discussing digital risks, explaining rules, and encouraging their children to express concerns. Such approaches align with active mediation models and are supported by research showing links between open dialogue and children's critical awareness and resilience (Valkenburg & Peter, 2016; Warren, 2003). However, even among these parents, communication was rarely positioned as a primary or independent strategy. Most applied it alongside supervision or restriction, and many expressed difficulties adjusting their communication to suit the cognitive abilities of young children. This underscores a significant developmental challenge. While open communication is vital, its effectiveness hinges on both parental skills and age-appropriate comprehension. In early childhood education, dialogic interactions are foundational to language acquisition, emotional regulation, and emergent critical thinking (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014; García-Carrión & Villardón-Gallego, 2016). Therefore, equipping parents with strategies for developmentally attuned conversations about digital risks is essential to bridge informal learning at home with structured pedagogical goals in institutional settings (Kuznetsova & Azhmukhamedov, 2020; Nichols & Selim, 2022).

A small number of parents reported either avoiding digital technologies altogether or delaying any form of mediation due to the perception that their children were too young to be affected. These perspectives are rooted in two distinct logics: active withdrawal from perceived harm and deferral of responsibility until children reach an assumed threshold of readiness. Both approaches raise concerns. Avoidance, although well-intentioned, may limit children's opportunities to develop foundational digital literacies under guided conditions. Likewise, deferral underestimates the extent to which young children engage with digital media before they can meaningfully interpret or critique what they encounter. Within early childhood education frameworks, the early years are widely recognised as a critical window for introducing digital norms, safety principles, and basic competencies (Aubrey & Dahl, 2014; Edwards et al., 2018), avoidance



and postponement may inadvertently result in missed opportunities for developmentally appropriate engagement and preparedness.

Importantly, most parental decisions in this study were not driven by formal knowledge or professional guidance, but rather shaped by intuition, moral reasoning, and contextual flexibility. This responsiveness reflects an underlying theme of general protective awareness, yet it also introduces risks of inconsistency, particularly in families with low digital literacy or fragmented caregiving structures. Parenting in Indonesia is often embedded within extended family networks and influenced by cultural values such as deference to elders and religious norms. Despite this, few parents reported drawing explicitly on these social resources when mediating children's digital lives. This suggests a gap between cultural caregiving systems and formal early childhood education interventions, which are often modelled on frameworks developed in Western contexts. Bridging this disconnect will require a localised approach that centers culturally relevant practices and acknowledges the social ecology in which parenting takes place.

Taken together, these findings affirm that no single mediation strategy is sufficient across all developmental stages or social settings. Effective digital parenting requires a dynamic balance of supervision, communication, restriction, and gradual autonomy-building. This corresponds with ecological models of media mediation that integrate individual, familial, and institutional layers of influence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2016). More than presenting a taxonomy of strategies, the study underscores the need for culturally grounded and developmentally informed frameworks that recognise the material constraints, social dynamics, and educational responsibilities of parents. In particular, media literacy initiatives in Indonesia must broaden their scope to include not only schools and adolescents but also families with very young children. Early childhood education must be reconceptualised as an ecosystem that includes the home as a central site of foundational digital learning. Recognising parents as co-educators shifts the function of mediation from reactive protection to proactive formation of digital values, competencies, and identities.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study found that while parents of young children employ diverse strategies, such as supervision, restriction, open communication, and avoidance, to manage digital risks related to caregiving, media exposure, and gadget use, these practices are largely intuitive and lack developmental alignment and long-term planning for digital resilience. **Implication:** The findings underscore the importance of recognising parents as primary educators in early digital socialisation and call for the integration of digital parenting within early childhood education frameworks through culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and accessible interventions. This includes embedding structured support in ECE centres, community programs, and faith-based settings, enabling parents to move beyond protective measures toward fostering critical, ethical, and reflective media engagement. **Limitation:** The study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on urban and semi-urban contexts in Indonesia, which may not fully capture the experiences of parents in rural or under-resourced areas. It also does not measure child outcomes directly, focusing instead on parental perceptions and practices. **Future Research:** Further studies should explore the long-term effects of parental mediation strategies on children's digital behavior, examine interventions



tailored to various cultural and socioeconomic contexts, and consider the perspectives of other caregivers and educators in shaping digital literacy during early childhood.

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