

SCREEN TIME, HABIT FORMATION, AND SELF-REGULATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: A LITERATURE-BASED EDUCATIONAL ANALYSIS THROUGH PLATO

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of smartphones, tablets, and video games in childhood has intensified concern over their effects on children's behavior, emotional regulation, attention, and social development. For primary school children, this issue extends beyond health because digital habits also shape learning readiness, self-control, classroom participation, and family routines that support schooling. This study examines how Plato's account of moral formation in *The Republic* can help interpret contemporary research on children's gadget and video game use. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, the study analyzes Plato's educational thought together with peer-reviewed studies and policy documents on screen time, parenting, self-regulation, sleep, attention, and child development. The analysis draws on purposively selected literature and thematic synthesis. Five major patterns were identified: screen environments can function as habit-forming settings; excessive use is associated with socioemotional and behavioral difficulties; screen use may displace sleep and sustained attention; self-regulation in childhood depends heavily on adult mediation; and balanced guidance is more educationally productive than either permissiveness or punitive prohibition. The study offers an education-centered framework for understanding digital media use in primary school contexts and argues that the central issue lies not in technology itself, but in the quality of guidance, routine, and moral formation surrounding its use.

Keywords: screen time, primary school children, self-regulation, parental mediation, Plato

ABSTRAK

Penggunaan smartphone, tablet, dan video game pada anak semakin meluas dan menimbulkan kekhawatiran terhadap dampaknya pada perilaku, pengaturan emosi, perhatian, dan perkembangan sosial. Bagi anak sekolah dasar, persoalan ini tidak hanya berkaitan dengan kesehatan, tetapi juga dengan pendidikan, karena kebiasaan digital ikut memengaruhi kesiapan belajar, kontrol diri, partisipasi di kelas, dan rutinitas keluarga yang mendukung kegiatan sekolah. Penelitian ini membahas bagaimana gagasan Plato tentang pembentukan moral dalam *The Republic* dapat digunakan untuk memahami penelitian kontemporer tentang penggunaan gawai dan video game pada anak. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi literatur, penelitian ini menelaah pemikiran pendidikan Plato bersama

artikel ilmiah *peer-reviewed* dan dokumen kebijakan mengenai screen time, pengasuhan, regulasi diri, tidur, perhatian, dan perkembangan anak. Analisis dilakukan melalui pemilihan literatur secara purposif dan sintesis tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan lima pola utama, yaitu lingkungan berbasis layar dapat membentuk kebiasaan; penggunaan yang berlebihan berkaitan dengan masalah sosioemosional dan perilaku; penggunaan layar dapat mengganggu waktu tidur dan perhatian yang berkelanjutan; regulasi diri pada anak sangat dipengaruhi oleh pendampingan orang dewasa; dan pendampingan yang seimbang lebih bermanfaat secara pendidikan dibandingkan sikap yang terlalu membebaskan ataupun pelarangan yang terlalu keras. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka yang berfokus pada pendidikan untuk memahami penggunaan media digital pada anak sekolah dasar dan menegaskan bahwa persoalan utamanya bukan terletak pada teknologinya, melainkan pada kualitas pendampingan, rutinitas, dan pembentukan moral yang menyertai penggunaannya.

Kata Kunci: waktu layar, anak sekolah dasar, regulasi diri, pendampingan orang tua, Plato

A. Introduction

Digital devices are now deeply embedded in children's everyday lives. Tablets, smartphones, streaming platforms, and video games increasingly occupy time once associated with unstructured play, face-to-face interaction, print reading, and routine family activities. For children in the primary school years, this shift has important educational consequences. Screen habits can shape sleep, emotional regulation, persistence, classroom attention, and the time available for reading, physical activity, and social learning. The issue therefore extends beyond entertainment or household convenience. It concerns the

conditions under which children develop habits and dispositions that are central to learning and character formation.

Recent scholarship suggests that debates over children's screen use cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between optimism and panic. Some studies indicate that digital media can support learning, creativity, and social connection when the content is age-appropriate and use is moderated. Other studies link heavy or poorly regulated screen use to weaker self-regulation, emotional difficulties, sleep disruption, attentional problems, and lower academic performance (Eirich et al., 2022; Madigan et al., 2019; Stiglic &

Viner, 2019). Recent policy guidance also emphasizes that many digital environments are designed to maximize engagement rather than child well-being, which makes adult mediation increasingly important (Council On Communications and Media et al., 2016).

Within primary education, this issue has particular urgency. During middle childhood, children are expected to sustain attention, follow routines, manage impulses, cooperate with others, and gradually assume responsibility for their own conduct. Yet these capacities are still developing. Self-regulation does not arise automatically, nor can it be inferred simply from children's apparent technological competence. Recent evidence suggests that childhood self-regulation is associated not only with academic and social adjustment in the early years, but also with several longer-term life outcomes across the lifespan (Evans et al., 2025; Geng et al., 2023). For this reason, questions about gadget use should be understood not merely as lifestyle choices, but as part of a broader educational concern with habit formation.

A useful lens for examining this issue can be found in Plato's philosophy of education. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that children's character is shaped through repeated exposure to environments, stories, rhythms, and practices that influence desire before reason is mature enough to govern it independently (Jonas & Nakazawa, 2022; Plato, 2013). Although his argument does not address digital media directly, it offers a valuable framework for understanding why repeated engagement with highly stimulating, reward-oriented media may matter educationally. Plato's concern is ultimately about moral ecology: what surrounds a child, and what a child repeatedly does, gradually becomes part of that child's character.

This perspective remains relevant because contemporary digital environments are not neutral tools. They are structured experiences that provide rapid feedback, variable rewards, immersive stimulation, and repeated cues for continued engagement. In this respect, they resemble the kind of formative environment Plato believed adults should supervise carefully. At the same time, an exclusively prohibitive

reading of Plato would be inadequate for contemporary family and school settings. Developmental and educational research suggests that children benefit most not from panic or blanket suppression, but from balanced mediation, explicit routines, adult modeling, and warm but consistent limits (Banić & Orehovački, 2024; Jin & Chen, 2024; Nagata et al., 2025).

Despite the growing literature on screen time, an important gap remains. Much of the research focuses on physical health, psychological symptoms, or media effects in relative isolation. Other studies examine parenting strategies or developmental risks without offering a strong philosophical account of why repetition, imitation, and supervision are educationally significant for character formation. By contrast, classical discussions of moral education are rarely brought into systematic dialogue with current questions of digital parenting and primary education. As a result, scholarship often lacks an integrated framework that connects contemporary evidence on screen use with broader educational concerns

about habit, self-discipline, and guided freedom.

Against this background, this article brings Plato's educational philosophy into dialogue with contemporary literature on children's digital media use. It asks how Plato's account of early moral formation can clarify what is educationally at stake in children's gadget and video game use during the primary school years. More specifically, the article examines how current literature describes the behavioral, emotional, attentional, and self-regulatory implications of children's screen use, considers the extent to which these patterns resonate with Plato's theory of guided formation, and draws implications for parents, teachers, and schools seeking to cultivate healthy digital habits without resorting to either simplistic bans or permissive neglect.

This study contributes to primary education by offering an interdisciplinary framework that connects classical moral philosophy, developmental psychology, and digital media research. It also reframes screen-time management as a matter of educational guidance rather than mere restriction. The central argument advanced here is that the issue lies not

in the presence of technology itself, but in whether adults structure children's digital use in ways that support rather than undermine attention, self-control, sleep, social learning, and character development.

B. Research Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative literature-based review to examine how contemporary research on children's screen use can be interpreted through Platonic educational thought. The study did not seek to estimate prevalence or test causal effects in a new sample. Instead, it synthesized philosophical, empirical, and policy literature to clarify the educational significance of screen time, habit formation, and self-regulation in primary school children.

Search Strategy and Source Selection

The literature search was conducted between August and September 2025 using Google Scholar, ERIC, and journal portals accessible through the school's online library. Search strings combined terms such as "Plato education," "Platonic moral education," "children and screen time," "video games and child

behavior," "self-regulation and screen use," "parental mediation digital media," "sleep and screen time," and "primary school children digital habits."

To maintain relevance to current educational and developmental debates, empirical and policy sources were limited mainly to publications from 2016 to 2025. Because the article uses Plato as an interpretive lens, recent secondary scholarship on Platonic moral education was also included.

A final set of 17 sources was retained for analysis. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, policy statements, and recent philosophical or educational scholarship relevant to Platonic moral formation.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) sources focused on children or primary-school-aged populations; (2) studies or policy documents addressing screen time, gaming, digital media use, self-regulation, attention, sleep, socioemotional development, parental mediation, or educational implications; and (3) recent scholarly works directly relevant to Plato's account of moral

education, habituation, or guided character formation.

Exclusion criteria included: (1) studies focused mainly on adults, adolescents, or higher education populations without clear relevance to primary school children; (2) publications lacking clear educational or developmental relevance; (3) opinion pieces without identifiable scholarly grounding; and (4) sources whose full texts were unavailable.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Each included source was read in full and summarized in an analytic matrix covering author, year, type of source, population or context, major findings, and relevance to the study's conceptual framework. The data were analyzed using thematic synthesis in three stages. First, the sources were openly coded according to recurring issues such as attention, emotional regulation, impulsivity, sleep, habit formation, parental mediation, and educational implications. Second, related codes were grouped into broader themes. Third, these themes were interpreted through Platonic concepts of habituation, supervision, and moral formation.

This process generated five central themes: screen environments

as habit-forming contexts; associations with socioemotional and behavioral difficulties; displacement of sleep and sustained attention; adult mediation as a developmental necessity; and balanced guidance over punitive or permissive control.

Rigor and Limitations

To strengthen analytic rigor, the study prioritized converging evidence across systematic reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, and major policy statements. Screening criteria were specified in advance to reduce selective inclusion. Nevertheless, the study remains limited by its literature-based design, the heterogeneity of the included sources, and the interpretive nature of philosophical analysis.

C. Results dan Discussion

Results

1. Screen Environments as Habit-Forming Contexts

Across both philosophical and empirical literature, a recurring pattern was the formative effect of repeated exposure. In Plato's account, early habits matter because children absorb patterns of desire and conduct before they are fully capable of critical reflection. Contemporary literature

similarly characterizes digital environments as recurring and highly engaging settings that shape routines and preferences over time. Policy guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that digital ecosystems are often designed to prolong engagement, while recent reviews describe children's interactions with screen-based media as deeply embedded in everyday developmental experience (Council On Communications and Media et al., 2016; Swider-Cios et al., 2023).

2. Associations With Socioemotional and Behavioral Difficulties

A second pattern concerned children's socioemotional and behavioral functioning. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that greater screen time is associated with both externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, although the observed effects are generally small rather than severe (Eirich et al., 2022). Other recent syntheses report similarly small but significant negative associations between screen exposure and social-emotional development, with stronger concern surrounding problem behaviors and more intensive forms of use (Jia et al.,

2025). Earlier research has likewise linked higher screen time to lower psychological well-being and reduced curiosity and self-control (Twenge et al., 2018).

3. Displacement of Sleep, Attention, and School-Related Readiness

A third pattern involved displacement effects. Several sources indicate that heavy or poorly timed screen use may interfere with sleep, attention, and school-related readiness. Reviews and policy statements consistently warn that screens may displace activities known to support healthy development, including sleep, physical movement, face-to-face interaction, and reading (Council On Communications and Media et al., 2016; Stiglic & Viner, 2019; World Health Organization, 2019). Reviews focused on attention further suggest that frequent exposure to rapidly changing audiovisual content may be associated with difficulties in sustained attention, particularly among younger children (Jourden et al., 2023). Cohort evidence has also linked higher early screen exposure to lower performance in elementary reading and mathematics (Madigan et al., 2019).

4. Adult Mediation as a Developmental Necessity

A fourth pattern was the developmental incompleteness of self-regulation in childhood. Recent evidence highlights the educational importance of early self-regulation, showing that it is associated with children's academic and social adjustment, while developmental and parenting studies indicate that these capacities do not emerge independently and still require adult support and mediation (Geng et al., 2023; Giovanelli et al., 2025; Nagata et al., 2025). Media-specific research further shows that parental monitoring and limit-setting are generally associated with lower problematic screen use, whereas adult modeling of high screen use, mealtime screens, bedtime screens, and screen-based rewards are associated with more problematic outcomes (Nagata et al., 2025). This pattern is consistent with systematic reviews of parental mediation, which identify adult guidance as central to the way children engage with digital media (Banić & Orehovački, 2024; Giovanelli et al., 2025).

5. Balanced Guidance Over Permissiveness or Punitive Control

The final pattern concerned the quality of guidance surrounding children's digital use. The literature does not support either a blanket ban on all digital use or a permissive laissez-faire approach. Instead, the most consistent recommendations favor structured, developmentally appropriate, and relational forms of mediation. Recent research suggests that children benefit more from structured, developmentally appropriate, and relational forms of guidance than from either permissiveness or punitive control. In digital contexts, monitoring, routines, content selection, and adult modeling appear more constructive than panic, inconsistency, or the use of screens as tools of reward and punishment (Banić & Orehovački, 2024; Jin & Chen, 2024; Nagata et al., 2025). These recurring patterns are synthesized and presented in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Representative evidence	Relevance to the study
Habit formation through repeated exposure	Plato (2013); Council On Communications and Media et al. (2016)	Digital environments are not neutral; repeated use shapes

Theme	Representative evidence	Relevance to the study
Socioemotional and behavioral associations	Twenge and Campbell (2018); Eirich et al. (2022); Jia et al. (2025)	routines and preferences Excessive screen use is associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties
Sleep, attention, and academic displacement	Stiglic and Viner (2019); Jourden et al. (2023); Madigan et al. (2019); World Health Organization (2019)	Screen use may interfere with school-related readiness and developmental balance
Adult mediation as a developmental necessity	Geng et al. (2023); Giovanelli et al. (2025); Nagata et al. (2025)	Children require guidance because self-regulation is still developing
Balanced structure rather than punitive control	Banić and Orehovački (2024); Jin and Chen (2024); Nagata et al. (2025)	Effective media guidance combines limits, modeling, and explanation

Discussion

This study examined how Plato’s educational philosophy can help clarify contemporary concerns about children’s gadget and video game use in primary school contexts. The central finding is that Plato’s theory of moral formation remains highly relevant, not because it offers ready-made rules for modern technology, but because it helps explain the educational logic

behind many current concerns. Repeated environments shape desire, repeated practices become habits, and habits in turn influence attention, self-control, and social conduct. This perspective helps bring together a body of literature that often appears dispersed across psychology, media studies, pediatrics, and education.

The first major implication is conceptual. Public discussions often treat screen time primarily as a scheduling issue, a behavior-management issue, or a health concern. The present analysis suggests that it should also be understood as a matter of educational formation. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that the young are shaped not only by direct instruction but also by what they repeatedly encounter and enjoy. This insight is highly relevant to digital media because contemporary platforms and games are often organized around repetition, immediacy, and reward. These features do not automatically produce harm, but they make adult guidance necessary. When children repeatedly turn to fast, immersive, and low-friction stimulation, they may gradually find slower and more effortful activities, such as reading, waiting,

concentrating, or tolerating delayed gratification, harder to sustain.

This perspective also helps explain why contemporary evidence more often points to patterns of accumulated risk than to a single catastrophic effect. Meta-analytic work by Eirich et al. (2022) found weak but significant associations between screen time and internalizing or externalizing behavior problems. Such findings matter educationally because childhood development is cumulative. In school settings, even modest reductions in self-regulation, sleep quality, or sustained attention may have meaningful consequences for classroom participation and learning over time. Plato's framework helps interpret these "small but significant" effects not as trivial, but as consistent with the gradual shaping of character through repeated experience.

A second implication concerns the relationship between freedom and guidance. Contemporary discourse sometimes treats digital autonomy as a sign of competence. However, the literature reviewed here shows that self-regulation in childhood is developmental rather than assumed. Recent evidence suggests that self-regulation is a powerful developmental

asset because it is associated with children's early academic and social adjustment and, in some longitudinal work, with several longer-term life outcomes as well (Evans et al., 2025; Geng et al., 2023). Expecting young children to govern highly engaging screen habits without adult structure is therefore developmentally unrealistic. Plato's educational perspective is consistent with this conclusion. For him, the immature soul cannot yet order itself well; it requires wise external order before internal order becomes possible. In contemporary educational terms, routines, co-regulation, and guided limits are not obstacles to autonomy, but conditions that make autonomy possible.

This point is especially important in the primary school years. At this stage, children are learning to delay gratification, follow rules, sustain attention, and manage transitions between tasks. Excessive or poorly regulated screen use may complicate these tasks by normalizing rapid reward cycles and by displacing activities that strengthen attention and executive functioning. Reviews on attention and screen exposure suggest that overstimulating screen environments may challenge the

development of sustained attention, especially in younger children (Jourdn et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence linking higher early screen exposure with lower elementary reading and mathematics outcomes indicates that digital habits may affect educational readiness in ways that extend beyond mood or leisure preference (Madigan et al., 2019).

A third implication concerns parenting style. The literature does not support punitive or fear-based control as the most productive response to children's screen use. A third implication concerns parenting practices. The literature does not support punitive or fear-based control as the most productive response to children's screen use. Instead, recent research suggests that children's self-regulation and emotional adjustment are more likely to be supported by warm, structured, and consistent forms of adult guidance than by either permissiveness or overly harsh control (Jin & Chen, 2024; Nagata et al., 2025). This matters because adult responses to children's screen overuse often swing between indulgence and panic, neither of which provides a stable educational foundation. A Plato-informed and

developmentally updated position instead favors structured guidance, adult consistency, and explanation. In this sense, Plato's emphasis on order is better understood through relational education than through domination.

Contemporary research on media parenting supports this interpretation. Nagata et al. (2025) found that parental monitoring and limit-setting were associated with lower problematic screen use, whereas mealtime screens, bedtime screens, and the use of screens as behavioral rewards or punishments were associated with worse outcomes. This is particularly important because when screens become the currency of discipline, they may become even more psychologically salient. Such practices can unintentionally intensify children's attraction to devices rather than normalize balanced use. From an educational perspective, this suggests that adults should not only reduce unnecessary exposure, but also avoid turning screens into symbols of emotional bargaining.

The discussion also points to the importance of media quality. Not all digital engagement is equivalent. Reviews increasingly show that the

effects of screen use depend on timing, content, social context, and developmental stage, not merely on duration alone (Stiglic & Viner, 2019; Swider-Cios et al., 2023). This is an important qualification because a narrow focus on hours alone can obscure the difference between passive overconsumption, high-arousal gaming, family co-viewing, creative digital production, and educationally purposeful media use. Plato's perspective is again useful here. His deeper concern is not novelty itself, but whether repeated experiences orient the child toward order, moderation, and sound judgment. A contemporary educational interpretation of this view would therefore prioritize high-quality, age-appropriate, bounded, and socially guided digital use rather than universal prohibition.

For primary education, the practical implications are clear. First, schools should treat digital habit formation as part of character and self-regulation education, not solely as an issue for parents or clinicians. Second, parent education programs should move beyond alarmist messages by emphasizing routines, modeling, sleep protection, screen-free mealtimes,

and explicit family plans. Third, teachers should recognize that difficulties involving attention, frustration tolerance, transition resistance, or peer interaction may sometimes be related to broader home media routines. This does not mean pathologizing children, but it does mean taking digital ecology seriously as part of the learning environment.

The study also highlights the importance of adult modeling. Children learn not only from what adults say, but also from what adults repeatedly do. Research on media parenting shows that higher parental screen use is associated with higher child screen use and more problematic engagement (Nagata et al., 2025). This echoes Plato's insight that education is inseparable from the surrounding pattern of life. Families cannot credibly teach moderation if everyday routines normalize constant distraction, mealtime screens, or bedtime device dependence. In this sense, digital habit formation is relational and ecological rather than merely individual.

At the same time, the study does not support deterministic claims. The literature does not justify the

conclusion that all video games or all gadgets necessarily harm children. Some digital experiences may support learning, collaboration, or creativity, especially when adults select content carefully and maintain clear boundaries. The central issue is that children are not yet equipped to manage all forms of digital stimulation independently. The developmental task is therefore one of guided discernment. Adults need to help children learn not only when to stop, but also how to distinguish enriching use from compulsive or overstimulating use.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Because this is a literature-based study, it does not provide direct causal proof beyond the evidence reviewed. The literature itself is methodologically diverse, and effect sizes are not always large. In addition, this study focuses on the educational interpretation of screen use rather than on specific clinical diagnoses. It also uses Plato as an interpretive framework, which necessarily involves conceptual translation across historical periods. Even so, this translation remains justified because Plato's central concern, namely how repeated environments shape the

young before mature reason is fully formed, remains highly relevant to contemporary digital childhoods (Jonas & Nakazawa, 2022).

Future research could extend this framework in several ways. Empirical studies in primary school settings could examine how home media routines relate to classroom attention, emotional regulation, and task persistence. Mixed-method research could investigate how parents and teachers negotiate screen-related behavior in daily practice rather than only through survey categories. Intervention studies could also test whether family media plans, screen-free routines, and parent modeling produce measurable improvements in children's self-regulation and school readiness. Further scholarship might also compare different philosophical traditions of character formation in order to enrich the educational analysis of digital life beyond Plato alone.

E. Conclusion

This study examined children's gadget and video game use by bringing Plato's philosophy of education into dialogue with

contemporary research on screen time, self-regulation, and child development. The analysis suggests that the central issue is not technology itself, but the way repeated digital experiences become embedded in children's habits, expectations, and daily routines. Across the literature, excessive or poorly mediated screen use is associated with socioemotional difficulties, sleep disruption, reduced sustained attention, and challenges in self-regulation, all of which carry clear implications for primary education.

Plato's framework helps explain why these patterns matter educationally. Children are shaped by repeated experiences before they are fully able to govern themselves reliably. For this reason, adult supervision, clear boundaries, and moral guidance remain essential. At the same time, contemporary literature indicates that effective mediation is not grounded in panic or harsh control, but in structure, warmth, consistency, thoughtful content selection, and adult modeling.

This study offers an education-centered interpretation of children's digital media use and argues that primary schools and families should approach screen-time management

as part of character education and habit formation. The study is limited by its literature-based design and by the interpretive nature of philosophical analysis. Future research could test these implications through empirical work in school and family settings. Even so, the literature reviewed here supports a practical conclusion: children do not need a total rejection of technology, but wise guidance that helps situate digital use within routines that protect attention, sleep, relationships, and the gradual development of self-control.

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