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**Digital Parenting in Adolescence:
A Socio-Ecological Analysis of Parental Practices and
Interpretations**

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

PhD Thesis

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1. Research background and justification for the selection of the topic

1.1. Justification for the selection of the topic and theoretical background

Over the past decades, the rapid spread of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped everyday life, including the most intimate sphere of social interaction: the family. Digital technologies offer new opportunities for learning, entertainment, and connection, yet they also introduce new uncertainties. Parents are increasingly expected to guide their children in digital environments they did not grow up with, where norms and risks are often unclear (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). As a result, children's technology use has become a visible and socially evaluated aspect of contemporary parenting, in which parents make decisions about their own family life and also reflect on whether they are acting as responsible parents.

These developments occur in a broader social context characterized by rising expectations of parenting. In many Western societies, good parenting is increasingly understood as an intensive, future-oriented activity that requires constant attention, emotional involvement, and informed decision-making (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2023). These expectations are particularly evident in relation to digital technologies, which place additional responsibility on parents to guide children in rapidly changing environments (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

Within this culture of intensive parenting, technology occupies an ambivalent place. It appears at once as a resource to be cultivated, an

investment in children's development and future prospects (Lareau, 2002; Doepke et al., 2019), and as a risk to be anticipated and contained, in keeping with the risk-consciousness of late-modern parenting (Beck, 1992; Lee et al., 2023). Much of the everyday work this involves is anticipatory and organizational, and it is distributed unequally, falling most often on mothers (Daming, 2019; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Dean et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on parental mediation and digital media use, digital parenting is still often treated as a set of individual strategies rather than as a socially embedded process shaped by family dynamics, institutional expectations, and broader cultural narratives. This dissertation argues that digital parenting in adolescence is best understood within a socio-ecological framework, and it uses Belsky's (1984) socio-ecological process model of parenting as its main theoretical framework. In Belsky's model, parenting is influenced by three interrelated subsystems: the parent, the child, and contextual sources of stress and support surrounding the family. This perspective allows examination of digital parenting as a multidetermined process shaped simultaneously by individual resources, relational dynamics, and structural conditions. Although Belsky's framework has been used in research on parental mediation and ICT use (Dedkova & Smahel, 2020; Walker & Rudi, 2014), its explicit application to digital parenting in adolescence remains relatively rare, despite its clear relevance.

The dissertation also builds on a conceptual shift in recent literature from a narrower notion of parental mediation to a broader concept of digital parenting. Earlier research, rooted mainly in television studies, focused on

identifying specific parental strategies such as restrictive rules, active discussion, or co-viewing. In contemporary digital environments, however, technologies are deeply embedded in everyday family life and shape communication patterns, routines, authority relations, and expectations about responsible parenting. The concept of digital parenting therefore refers not only to regulation but also to the wider organizational, relational, and normative dimensions of parenting in digitally mediated societies (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018; Nichols & Selim, 2022).

The empirical focus is on families with adolescent children. Adolescence is a particularly relevant life stage for studying digital parenting, as it is characterized by increasing autonomy, stronger peer relationships, and greater involvement in digital environments. During this period, parental authority is renegotiated, and conflicts related to privacy, independence, and responsibility become more frequent, while adolescents' online activities may be less visible to parents yet more socially significant (Erickson et al., 2016).

1.2. Research questions and hypotheses

The main aim of the dissertation is to show that digital parenting in adolescence should be understood as a socio-ecological, socially embedded phenomenon rather than a set of individual parental strategies. Using Belsky's (1984) model, it examines how parent-related, child-related, and contextual factors together shape everyday parenting practices around digital technology. Beyond applying this framework, the dissertation makes two contributions: it identifies three cross-cutting

tensions that organize digital parenting, and it reconceptualizes digital parenting as an ongoing, unequally shared form of invisible care work.

The study concentrates on three specific practices: monitoring adolescents' technology use, parent-child co-use of digital devices, and parent-child discussions about technology use. The quantitative component tests whether concrete, operationalized indicators of the parent, child, and contextual subsystems exert statistically demonstrable effects on the likelihood of these practices. The qualitative component explores more openly how parents interpret and negotiate digital parenting in everyday life, uncovers additional elements within each subsystem, and illuminates the mechanisms underlying the statistical associations.

The analysis is structured around three subsystem-specific research questions:

RQ1: How do parent-related factors shape digital parenting practices?

RQ2: How do child-related factors shape digital parenting practices?

RQ3: How do contextual factors shape digital parenting practices?

The following hypotheses were tested in the quantitative phase.

Parent-related factors (RQ1):

H1.a. Mothers are more likely than fathers to monitor children's technology use, while fathers are more likely than mothers to engage in digital co-play with their children.

H1.b. With increasing parental age, the likelihood of parental monitoring, parent-child co-play, and parent-child discussions about technology use decreases.

H1.c. Parents' educational attainment is positively associated with the likelihood of parental monitoring and parent–child discussions about technology use.

H1.d. Subjective parental quality is positively associated with the likelihood of parental monitoring, parent–child co-play, and parent–child discussions about technology use.

Child-related factors (RQ2):

H2.a. As children grow older, the likelihood of parental monitoring, parent–child co-play, and parent–child discussions about technology use decreases.

H2.b. Parents are less likely to monitor boys' technology use and more likely to engage in digital co-play with them than with girls.

H2.c. Children's end-of-year grade point average is positively associated with the likelihood of parental monitoring.

Contextual factors (RQ3):

H3.a. The likelihood of parental monitoring, parent–child co-play, and parent–child discussions about technology use is lower in families with multiple children than in families with only one child.

H3.b. Parents with white-collar or entrepreneurial occupations are more likely to monitor their children's technology use and to discuss appropriate technology use with them than parents with blue-collar occupations.

H3.c. A higher level of support in the contextual subsystem — better work–life balance and lower perceived overload — is associated with a higher likelihood of parental monitoring, parent–child co-play, and parent–child discussions about technology use.

2. The methods used

2.1. Research design and data

The dissertation uses a multi-method research design that deliberately combines quantitative secondary analysis with two qualitative components, each contributing distinct analytical value. The three components were produced at different points in time (the survey in 2017, the individual interviews in 2019, and the focus groups in 2025–2026); they are combined not as comparable waves of a single study but as functionally distinct sources, each addressing a different dimension of the research problem. The temporal differences between them are treated as a matter of interpretive context.

The quantitative component is based on the database of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund project “Race against time” (NKFIH K120089). Ipsos collected the data using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) in autumn 2017, with a sample representative by region, settlement type, and the child’s age group, and a 40% quota for fathers. A total of 1,000 parent–child pairs (aged 12–16) participated; the present study analyses only parental answers. These data should be read in their historical context: in autumn 2017 smartphone ownership among the youngest children was still far from universal, short-form video platforms such as TikTok had not yet achieved mass adoption, the COVID-19 shift to home-based schooling was three years away, and widely accessible generative AI did not yet exist (NMHH, 2025).

The first qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews with 29 parent–child dyads, conducted face-to-face in 2019 as part of the same

project, following a rapid analysis of the survey results. The present analysis draws exclusively on the interviews with parents (22 mothers and 7 fathers; mean age 46), most of whom lived in Budapest or its metropolitan area, with white-collar workers overrepresented. The second qualitative component consists of four focus group discussions conducted in December 2025 and January 2026 with 23 parents of 12–16-year-olds (17 mothers, 6 fathers), recruited through parent-focused Facebook groups in and around Budapest, with deliberate diversity in family forms and school types (state, church-run, and private).

2.2. Analytical strategy

The quantitative analysis fitted three binary logistic regression models – one for each practice (monitoring, co-play, discussion) – and reported average marginal effects (AME), computed in R. The dependent and several explanatory variables were dichotomized to ensure sufficient cell sizes; multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors, and model fit using pseudo- R^2 statistics. The explanatory variables were entered in three steps corresponding to Belsky's parental, child, and contextual subsystems. The models identify statistical associations rather than causal relationships; in this respect, the quantitative analysis is exploratory, testing whether indicators associated with the three subsystems are related to digital parenting practices.

The parental subsystem was represented by gender, age, education, and subjective parental quality (a ten-item self-evaluation index); the child subsystem by the child's age, gender, and end-of-year grade point average; and the contextual subsystem by the number of minor children in the

household, occupational position (blue-collar versus white-collar or entrepreneur), subjective work–life balance, and perceived overload. A fourth model additionally controlled for parents’ and children’s estimated screen time.

The qualitative material (the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions) was analyzed thematically within the same socio-ecological framework, using NVivo software to organize and code the transcripts. Coding proceeded in a combined deductive–inductive manner: an initial coding frame was derived from Belsky’s three subsystems (parental, child-related, and contextual factors), while additional codes were developed inductively from the data to capture themes that emerged from parents’ own accounts. Codes were then grouped into the broader thematic categories corresponding to each subsystem, allowing a systematic comparison of how the same factors surfaced across the two types of material. The interviews illuminate how subsystem factors are embedded in parents’ individual narratives and justificatory frameworks, whereas the focus groups reveal how parents collectively negotiate, contest, and prioritize these factors in interaction with one another. Read together, the qualitative findings provide evidence for how the subsystems interact in everyday family life – an interaction that the additive quantitative models did not test directly.

3. Scientific results of the dissertation

3.1. Findings by Belsky's subsystems

According to the survey, 46.7% of parents report closely monitoring the child's technology use, 56.8% of families report parent-child co-play on a digital device at least occasionally, and 62.6% of parents discuss appropriate technology use with their child occasionally or regularly. Across the three subsystems, the quantitative models establish that theoretically motivated indicators are associated with the three practices, while the qualitative findings show how these associations operate and are interpreted in everyday life.

The hypotheses received mixed support, consistent with Belsky's proposition that all three subsystems matter but with varying strength and configuration. Among the clearest patterns, the likelihood of the practices decreases with both parental and child age (supporting H1.b and H2.a for monitoring and co-play), a higher grade point average is associated with more monitoring (H2.c), better work-life balance raises the likelihood of all three practices (H3.c), and white-collar or entrepreneurial occupation is associated with more monitoring (H3.b). Other expectations were only partly borne out: subjective parental quality increased monitoring but reduced co-play (H1.d), education predicted discussions (H1.c), family size lowered only co-play (H3.a), and parental and child gender showed no significant direct effect in the models (H1.a, H2.b), even though the qualitative material revealed gendered patterns of risk perception and of the invisible work of digital parenting.

Parent-related factors:

- Higher subjective parental quality increases the likelihood of monitoring but is negatively associated with parent–child co-play; it shows no significant relationship with technology-related discussions.
- The likelihood of monitoring and co-play decreases with parental age; parental education is a significant predictor of discussions, with vocationally and higher-educated parents more likely than those with only primary education to talk with their children about appropriate technology use.
- Parental gender did not directly predict the practices in the models; however, the qualitative findings highlight an unequal distribution of digital parenting work. Mothers more often expressed doubt, uncertainty, and continuous reflection and described their partners as more relaxed, suggesting that the emotional and mental load is experienced more strongly by mothers even when responsibilities are formally shared.
- Most parents entered the digital world as adults and lack clear role models; monitoring and co-use often require digital competence, whereas initiating conversations depends more on parents' willingness to remain informed.

Child-related factors:

- Even within the narrow 12–16 age range, the likelihood of applying the practices decreases with age. The qualitative findings refine this: parents base decisions less on chronological age than on perceived maturity, self-control, risk-awareness, and capacity for dialogue, and on a growing intention to respect adolescents' privacy.
- Children with higher end-of-year grades are significantly more likely to be monitored. Parents use school performance as a reference point for whether stricter practices are needed, though interviews suggest stricter regulation does not necessarily improve outcomes.

- Child gender did not significantly affect the practices in the models, but gendered perceptions of risk emerged qualitatively: parents associate different dangers with boys and girls and draw on these perceptions when justifying supervision, restriction, or discussion.

Contextual factors:

- Parents who perceive a better work–life balance are significantly more likely to monitor, engage in co-play, and discuss technology use. Perceived overload increases the likelihood of monitoring but reduces co-play. Parents in white-collar or entrepreneurial positions are more likely to monitor than those in blue-collar occupations.
- The number of minor children does not affect monitoring or discussion, but co-play is significantly less likely in families with more than one child; sibling dynamics and divided attention further complicate digital parenting.
- Institutional environments matter: school platforms and requirements often make device use unavoidable, while clear school rules can reduce parental uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the introduction of devices at younger ages and normalized digital technology as a perceived necessity.

3.2. The three tensions and the reconceptualization of digital parenting

Read together, the findings do more than list separate determinants: they converge on three recurring tensions that parents work to manage, and in these tensions the three subsystems meet. Each tension marks a point at which the wider context presses on an individual parental decision.

(1) Resource versus risk. Parents treat digital technology as something to be cultivated and something to be contained at once – an investment in the child’s future (Lareau, 2002; Doepke et al., 2019) and a danger to be

anticipated (Beck, 1992; Lee et al., 2023). The moral vocabulary for weighing opportunity against danger comes largely from outside the family – expert advice, school messaging, and public debate – so the contextual subsystem partly scripts individual decisions.

(2) *Control versus trust.* Supervision and respect for the adolescent’s growing autonomy pull in opposite directions. As children mature, parents read them for self-control and judgment and shift from direct control toward trust-based, indirect oversight, illustrating the reciprocity of Belsky’s model: the child’s characteristics actively redirect parental strategies.

(3) *Aspirations versus material and temporal constraints.* Time, energy, and material resources set the real limits of what parents can do. This explains why overload increases monitoring while reducing co-play: under pressure, parents drop the resource-intensive practice (co-play) and retain the low-cost, reassurance-yielding one (monitoring). Much of this work is anticipatory and organizational, and it is distributed unevenly, most often falling on mothers (Daminger, 2019; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Dean et al., 2022).

On the basis of these tensions, the dissertation advances two central contributions.

(1) *Theoretical contribution.* The study adapts Belsky’s (1984) model rather than merely applying it, placing digital parenting at the centre and specifying the reciprocal, cross-level dynamics through which the subsystems act on one another. The three tensions are its central theoretical move: where Belsky’s model names the subsystems, the tensions specify

how they meet in everyday practice. The contribution is thus not a relabelling of Belsky's categories with digital content, but a specification of the dynamics his model leaves open.

(2) *Empirical contribution.* The study reconceptualizes digital parenting as a form of ongoing, and largely invisible, care work rather than a set of observable strategies. Standard mediation typologies capture what parents do (restrict, discuss, co-use) but not the anticipatory attention, coordination, and emotional and moral effort that surround these acts. This locates digital parenting within the sociology of intensive parenting and the mental load of care (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2023; Daminger, 2019), and makes visible its uneven distribution between parents.

Taken together, digital parenting is best understood not as a self-contained “screen problem” to be solved with the right rule or application, but as one terrain of contemporary parenting on which parents continually assess how present, competent, and responsible they are. It is a socio-ecological process, held together by the recurring tensions parents manage and experienced as part of the more complex and morally charged project of contemporary parenting.

3.3. Practical implications

A practical implication follows from these results. Digital parenting should not be addressed primarily as a problem of individual parental competence to be fixed by better-informed parents. Support should help parents manage the three tensions rather than pretend they can be solved, and it should lighten and redistribute the everyday, largely invisible work of digital parenting rather than add another expectation. One test applies to any

intervention: does it reduce the burden and the moral pressure parents already carry, or add to them?

In practice, this points to national and institutional guidance that is current, balanced, and deliberately non-alarmist; to schools as central institutional partners that both structure and can relieve parental decision-making, and that themselves need support; to parent-facing help that offers practical decision tools rather than idealized prescriptions; and to measures designed for the households with the least time, knowledge, and resources, since the invisible work of digital parenting falls unequally, most often on mothers. Supporting digital parenting, in this sense, means supporting the conditions under which parenting happens.

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