

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'I'm not perfect': Navigating screen time among parents of young children during COVID-19

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Abstract

Background: The use of screen time for young children has been hotly debated among experts. This study explored the utilization of screen time among mothers with young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this study was to understand maternal motivation for utilizing screen time and how mothers have engaged in screen time since the beginning of the pandemic.

Method: This paper uses a sample of $n = 25$ mothers who participated in an in-depth interview about parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team utilized a thematic analysis approach to qualitatively code the transcripts. All analyses were conducted in *Dedoose 8.3*, and all transcripts were coded by three independent researchers to enhance rigour.

Results: Five main themes emerged from the interviews: (1) harbouring screen guilt versus letting it go, (2) managing full-time work and full-time parenting, (3) prioritizing mental sanity, (4) socially distant supports demand screen time and (5) screens can have positive uses, too.

Conclusion: During the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers have resorted to screen time use to cope with increased stress and challenges. However, mothers have also found positive uses for screen time, such as connection with extended family members, peer interaction and educational activities. Findings highlight the need to differentiate screen time use by quality and to update formal screen time guidelines considering changing roles of technology.

KEYWORDS

child care, child development, COVID-19, parental stress, screen time

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of screen time guidelines by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1999, experts have debated the use of screen time for young children. In response, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) updated their screen time guidelines in 2016 to recommend no screen time for children under the age of 2 and to limit usage to less than 1 h per day among children ages 3–5. The guidelines are based in part in research that has found excessive screen

time to negatively child development and well-being (Domingues-Montanari, 2017). Moreover, one study argued that excessive screen time may lessen children's engagement in positive developmental activities such as spending time outdoors, physical activity, imaginative play and face-to-face peer and adult interactions (Duch et al., 2013). Nonetheless, others have critiqued the strict guidelines set by AAP as having an insufficient evidence base and not adequately differentiating types of screen time (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Straker et al., 2018).

Three systematic reviews have analysed the impact of screens on children in the 0–5 age range, noting predominantly negative effects (Downing et al., 2015; Li et al., 2020; Rocha & Nunes, 2020). Greater screen use has been linked to sleep problems, higher BMI, poor executive functioning, poor motor development and aggression in infants, toddlers and preschoolers (Li et al., 2020). However, negative consequences may be somewhat mitigated by factors such as type of screen content (e.g., educational or non-educational content) and whether screen use is accompanied by parent involvement (Rocha & Nunes, 2020). Furthermore, some positive developmental impacts of screen time have been observed in young children, for example, improvements in nonverbal reasoning (Beatty & Egan, 2020) and development of fine motor skills (Bedford et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand and explore the quality of screen time in addition to quantity.

Perhaps the most important factor in screen time usage among young children is their parents, who ultimately serve as gatekeepers for their use of screens. Parental decisions about their children's screen use depend on their attitudes about screen time, their sense of self-efficacy as parents, and how they benefit from children's screen use (Carson & Janssen, 2012). Elias and Sulkin (2019) found that nine common reasons parents used screen time were significantly, positively associated with a child's weekday screen viewing: (1) keeping a child occupied, (2) regulating a child's schedule, (3) calming a child, (4) rewarding a child for desired behaviour, (5) keeping screens on in the background during a child's activities, (6) meal facilitation, (7) bedtime, (8) enrichment and (9) family bonding. Qualitatively, parents have reported similar, varied uses for screen time (Bentley et al., 2016; De Decker et al., 2012).

1.1 | The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for the screen

Emerging research indicates that parenting stress has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baiden et al., 2021; Cameron et al., 2020). Furthermore, experiencing hardships during the pandemic has been linked to poor child and parent mental health (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020), which in turn has been linked to physical health issues among children (Horiuchi et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to understand how parents have coped during the pandemic. However, only a few studies have explored the topic of child screen use during the pandemic to date (Aguilar-Farias et al., 2020; Cartanya-Hueso et al., 2021; Hood et al., 2021; Ozturk Eyimaya & Yalçin Irmak, 2021).

In addition to the emerging literature on heightened parenting stress, both qualitative (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Rubilar Donoso et al., 2020) and quantitative (Collins et al., 2020) studies have shown that COVID-19 has a disproportionate impact on women with regard to work hours, work–life balance, childcare responsibilities and increased mental burden at home. Cheng et al. (2021) found that working parents, especially working mothers, experienced greater deterioration in mental health during the pandemic. Loss of childcare due to pandemic-related restrictions may contribute significantly to

Key messages

- Mothers have had to 'give in' to the screen and increase screen time usage for young children during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- As more parents navigate disruptions in childcare and work, there may be positive benefits of screen time such as connecting with peers or participating in remote activities.
- Thus, as more activities and socialization occur online, it may be necessary to revisit screen time guidelines.

worsening mental and behavioural health among parents and children (Patrick et al., 2020). Without appropriate care, parents—especially mothers—have had to find ways to adapt in order to care for their families while balancing other responsibilities such as work and other domestic chores.

1.2 | Aim

This study explores how mothers with very young children (age 5 and under) in the United States have navigated screen time use since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | METHODS

Data in this study come from a mixed methods project that examined family stress and resilience among parents of children ages five and under during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore family experiences during COVID-19, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with parents of at least one child under age 6. Parents were recruited from a random selection of licensed childcare centres in one South-eastern state; given challenges in recruitment during the pandemic (many childcare centres were closed), recruitment was extended to social media. The research team posted flyers about the study on multiple online mothers' and fathers' groups. Between June and August 2020, 72 in-depth interviews were conducted with parents via Zoom. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to explore parents' experiences with stress and resilience during the pandemic. Participants were asked 13 open-ended questions to gauge information about their family and experiences since the beginning of the pandemic. The questions that had the most responses related to screen time were as follows: (1) How has your daily life changed in response to COVID-19? (2) How has COVID-19 impacted your family? (3) What, if anything, has added stress to your family since the first restrictions related to COVID-19? and (4) Could you tell me about anything that has helped ease some of the added stress? Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min in length. All study procedures and the informed consent form were reviewed and approved at the first author's university.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

Name	Age	Gender	# of children	Child ages	Race/ethnicity	Employment status	Household income
Audrey	35–44	Female	2	5, <1	NH White	Full-time	\$60 000–\$79 999
Bianca	45+	Female	4	4–14	NH White	Part-time	\$80 000+
Nancy	45+	Female	2	1, 3	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Jane	35–44	Female	1	1	NH White	Full-time	\$40 000–\$59 999
Janelle	45+	Female	2	4, 8	NH White	Self-employed	\$40 000–\$59 999
Deirdre	45+	Female	4	<1–9	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Isidora	35–44	Female	1	<1	NH White	Stay at home parent	\$60 000–\$79 999
Laura	45+	Female	4	4–13	NH White	Part-time	\$40 000–\$59 999
Corey	45+	Female	1	3	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Carrie	45+	Female	1	1	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Juanita	35–44	Female	1	2	Multiracial	Stay at home parent	\$80 000+
Terry	35–44	Female	3	2–8	Hispanic	Full-time	\$60 000–\$79 999
Brooke	45+	Female	2	4,7	NH White	Part-time	\$80 000+
Alex	45+	Female	1	1	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Precious	45+	Female	1	1	Hispanic	Part-time	\$80 000+
Dawn	35–44	Female	2	2,4	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Jessica	35–44	Female	4	2–11	Hispanic	Full-time	\$40 000–\$59 999
Perla	UNK	Female	2	1, 2	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Sara	35–44	Female	2	1, 4	NH White	Stay at home parent	\$40 000–\$59 999
Sierra	35–44	Female	1	2	NH White	Part-time/stay at home parent	\$80 000+
Angelah	45+	Female	2	1, 7	NH White	Part-time	\$80 000+
Tina	45+	Female	3	<1–6	NH White	Full-time	\$80 000+
Cat	45+	Female	3	2–6	NH White	Stay at home parent	\$20 000–\$39 999
Gina	35–44	Female	3	3–11	NH White	Stay at home parent	\$20 000–\$39 999
Geri	35–44	Female	2	3, 1	NH White	Part-time/stay at home parent	\$40 000–\$59 999

Note: To maintain confidentiality, an age range is presented for all mothers who had three or more children.

2.1 | Sample

Of the 72 parents who completed in-depth interviews, $n = 71$ were female and identified as the mother of the child. In the initial coding, several interviewees ($n = 25$) mentioned decision-making around screen time as a stressor or reliever of stress during the pandemic. As such, the subsample for this paper consisted of $n = 25$ participants who explicitly mentioned screen time, television/TV, video games or tablets/iPads in their interview. Participant demographic information is included in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain participant anonymity.

2.2 | Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research team reviewed transcriptions for accuracy and rigour, and a research assistant de-identified data such as names, cities and companies where participants worked. We used a two-stage thematic coding approach to identify and group themes that emerged in each

transcript. In the first stage, the research team conducted line-by-line coding of the transcripts that mentioned screen time, television, TV, video games or tablets/iPads. In the first stage, each line was coded to extract the main theme. In the second stage, codes from the first stage were grouped utilizing a constant comparison approach to identify similar underlying themes or ideas (Guest et al., 2012). The team met monthly to discuss emerging codes and themes and resolve any discrepancies in coding. In addition, the research team vetted the final themes with an expert in qualitative methodology.

3 | RESULTS

The qualitative analysis revealed five themes related to parents' use of screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) harbouring screen guilt versus letting it go, (2) managing full-time work and full-time parenting, (3) prioritizing mental sanity, (4) socially distant supports demand screen time and (5) screens can have positive uses, too. These themes are described below and illustrated by corresponding excerpts from the parent interviews.

3.1 | Theme 1: Harboring screen guilt versus letting it go

The first theme encompassed the guilt mothers felt from relaxing their restrictions on screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the mothers said that their typical allowance of screen time had changed during the pandemic, almost always increasing. At least two mothers specifically acknowledged grappling with expert recommendations for young children and screen time. Alex, a mother of one child (age 1), explained that she moved away from following these recommendations as a result of the pandemic:

So, we were practicing no screen time for our daughter, following guidelines that say no screen time ages zero to two. And when this [the pandemic] started, we have been letting her watch a *Sesame Street* or a *Daniel Tiger* each day, which she loves.

In contrast, Carrie, a mother of one child (age 17 months), indicated that her daughter did not use screens during the pandemic, explaining,

And she does not get screen time, that's the other thing ... I know that's not true of every parent. I do know it's the AAP's [American Academy of Pediatrics] recommendation; I also know not everybody has—I will say—has the luxury to follow that.

In parallel, mothers discussed screen time allowance in terms of what it might say about them as a parent. These remarks highlighted mothers' feelings of wanting to be a 'good mom' and not wanting to be viewed as 'that parent'. Although the source of this internal pressure was not always specified, the guilt that would result from allowing extended screen time was evident. For example, Audrey, a mother of two children (ages 5 and 2 months), noted that engaging in specific non-screen activities eased her guilt about screen time:

[H]aving that activity made me a better mom and it also like took the pressure off of me because when I went to bed at night and I was like, 'Oh my God, what did I do with my child today? Like, did he watch 17 hours of the *Wild Kratts* creatures—you know, nature documentaries? ... [A]nd instead I could be like, Actually, we went outside and we played bubbles'.

Dawn, a mother of two children (ages 4 and 2), expressed her disapproval of extended screen time even more bluntly, saying, 'I don't want to be the parent that always turns on the TV for our kids'.

Sierra, a mother of one child (age 2), noted that the societal pressure she already felt as a mother was accentuated during the pandemic.

I think it [the pandemic] has amplified all of the struggles of being a parent to a younger child in this century where, you know, you are supposed to do more than just keep them alive. I'm supposed to make sure she eats the right things and, you know, does not watch TV and reads books and gets fresh air. Like, we have all these expectations that I feel like our – my parents' generation did not really stress, you know? ... It's a much more intensive type of parenting I feel, at least among the people I know.

Sierra's comment highlights the fact that, for most parents, the sense of guilt associated with allowing screen time likely existed prior to COVID-19.

While most study participants expressed misgivings about added screen time, some seemed more accepting of the need to relax their screen time restrictions given the circumstances. These mothers seemed better able to let go of the guilt associated with extra screen time, acknowledging that they—and the circumstances—were not perfect. For example, Terry, a mother of three children (ages 8, 5 and 2), explained that she had come to accept that her children would have extended screen time some days so that she could work:

The stress of thinking, 'Am I doing enough with my kids? You know?' Yes, they have been on their iPad all day. Maybe we should, you know, read some books today, but it's like, I have a full day of work and [I'm] just trying to balance everything. It's not—every day is not picture-perfect here. I mean, there's some days that are good days, and then some days where it's like, okay, well, that's how this day is going to be. And I think I've had to just accept that.

Bianca, a mother of four children (aged 14 through 4), was also comfortable with extended screen time. She commented, 'So, I'm not perfect. They're on [the] tablet literally all day. This is fine. This is what makes them feel good. So that's what we're doing'.

3.2 | Theme 2: Managing full-time work and full-time parenting

A second theme that emerged was that participants were facing unprecedented challenges as they were forced to work remotely while also caring for their children. For most of the mothers, their usual childcare plan changed because of COVID-19. Some children could not attend school or daycare as a result of shutdowns; some mothers chose not to utilize older family members for childcare to mitigate their risk of exposure to the virus. As working mothers navigated these circumstances, extra screen time became a mechanism to manage full-time work and parenting. Corey, a mother of one child (age 3), described why she chose to allow more screen time:

We were each trying to, um, trying to manage full-time work and full-time parenting, um, and keeping kids on track and trying to be conscientious of screen time, which for us, we gave in on some of that and just focused on being kind to each other, keeping everyone feeling happy and cared for and [...] loved.

Perla, a mother of two children (ages 2 and 15 months), also mentioned the need to use screen time so she could work:

So not having childcare—that changed everything ... And so work had to get crunched into less hours. There's been a lot more screen time, definitely. Whereas before that time we only used television as a – really a treat maybe once a week, now it's a daily thing in our home.

Brooke, a mother of two children (ages 7 and 4), described using screen time to address a similar problem—trying to care for her younger child while also helping her older child with virtual schooling:

She wanted to play. So it was hard because [...] like, obviously I wasn't neglecting her, but I had to home-school my first grader and work with her. My husband was working. And so, I would have her, you know, play by herself for a lot of the day. That was hard. Probably more screen time than we like, but what are you supposed to do right now?

Although many two-parent households arranged a shift-work style schedule to cover childcare, many mothers reported having more flexible work or employers than their partners. As such, many participants were pressed into relaxing their usual standards for parenting, work, or both in order to meet the demands of multiple full-time 'jobs'.

3.3 | Theme 3: Prioritizing mental sanity

The third theme centred on parents' need to maintain their mental well-being during the pandemic. Juggling many responsibilities for an extended period of time, and with limited support, mothers needed a break. Screen time offered one way to take a break when other options were sparse. Juanita, a mother of one child (age 2), described how her exhaustion led her to relax screen time restrictions: 'Day in and day out, we're resorting to things like screens because we are burnt out. We're burnt out. We don't want to come up with new ideas for things all the time. She doesn't want them anyway'.

The need for a break was also mentioned by Geri, a mother of two children (ages 3 and 1), who lamented,

I try to give the girls a little bit more freedom when it comes to screen time and stuff like that. I'm just kinda like, yeah, we'll put *Disney Plus* on the TV [...] during

the day, which we did not used to. But now it's like, I kind of have to for myself.

This theme emerged among mothers with and without full-time employment. Participants reported that screen time afforded them a much-needed opportunity to engage in self-care or have some quiet time—and for some, time to simply make a phone call or make dinner. Some mothers felt unable to engage in self-care at all because they worked after their children went to sleep. Even those with supportive partners who were also working from home still seemed to feel the primary weight of keeping the home and family functioning during the pandemic.

3.4 | Theme 4: Socially distant supports demand screen time

The fourth theme observed was that many community resources available to entertain, educate, or occupy children from home during the pandemic required some form of screen time. These resources included activities such as virtual story hours, zoo visits, yoga, art classes, and even opportunities for peer or family socialization. The reality of stay-at-home orders and social-distancing forced parents to either allow more screen time to utilize these resources or—in the cases of education and entertainment—to expend extra effort to come up with off-screen activities. Precious, a mother of one child (age 22 months), noted how many community activities involved screen time:

My big thing with the resources that are available, because I think the [city] museum, the [art museum], the libraries, the city, like I think between all of them, there's been a lot of resources. It's just, they are all on TV. They're all apps, they are all screen time. And I think if [my daughter] was older, that would work.

Janelle, a mother of two children (ages 8 and 4), expressed the same sentiment, explaining, '... I don't want to do a lot of screen time as a family. But that's where most of the resources are'.

The specific ages of the children parented by the mothers in the study amplified the struggle with screen time for two reasons. On the one hand, parents were concerned about the potential negative effects of screen time given their children's young ages; on the other hand, they were concerned that screen time was not effective at keeping such young children occupied. Two participants illustrated the limitations of screens for young children's developmental needs. Cat, a mother of three children (ages 6, 4 and 2), explained that screen time did not necessarily engage her son's attention:

Yeah, my two-year-old, he's like, 'Oh yeah, look, there's Grammy on the—' cause I'll, I'll cast my video up to the TV and he's like, 'Oh yeah, there's Grammy, "Hi, Grammy,"' and then he's off. But if – if she was here in-person, he'd be crawling on her and hugging on

her and talking to her. And it's just - it's different. It's a lot different.

Jessica, a mother of four (aged 11 through 2), focused on the other issue—screen time not providing the type of interaction that benefits child development. She reported,

I think, you know, being stuck at home and, um, just doing digital visits to the museums or watching videos of the animals at the zoo, you know, our kids aren't being exposed to those experiences that help their brain grow when they are so little.

3.5 | Theme 5: Screens can have positive uses, too

The final theme was that screens could have positive uses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously mentioned, technology provided links to community resources, helped maintain parents' mental well-being and facilitated real-time visits with friends and family. Some of these things may have been impossible without screens, especially while schools and businesses were closed and households were social distancing. A few families even incorporated screen time into their daily or weekly routines. For example, Nancy, a mother of two (ages 3 and 14 months), described having daily screen time chats with friends and family members:

During mealtimes, we always call at least one or two family members or friends. Um, and luckily most of our friends have similar aged kids. So I can talk to the adults while the kids are also talking or showing their toys. And, um, we try to balance it all out so that everyone's getting their social interaction through a video multiple times a day.

Tina, a mother of three children (ages 6, 4 and 1), included online story times and play dates in their family weekly schedule:

They actually did, um, we actually did do child's, like, story hours. We did that a lot. Um, so there's places that did that, but with my son's preschool, we actually did twice a week. We had [Zoom] preschool play dates.

Participants also found ways to utilize screen time for atypical benefits, such as physical activity. Bianca, a mother of four children (aged 14 through 4), got her child moving by playing 'YouTube funny dance videos'. Another mother of two children (ages 7 and 15 months) said her son took a live, Zoom-based 'virtual Taekwondo' class that later shifted to meeting outdoors in a park (Angelah). Others used screens for family time and to cultivate skill development and learning. Sara, a mother of two children (ages 4 and 19 months), described the benefits of playing video games as a family:

We bought a Nintendo Switch, so we are playing video games as family. My four-year-old is loving all the classic Nintendo games with daddy ... But you know, his visual hand-eye kind of coordination has gone up a little bit. His reasoning skills have gone up a little bit ... [I]f one of the adults is doing the Ring Fit, the kids will try and exercise beside us. I've got a couple cute pictures with that. Yeah, cause a, a four-year-old trying to do push-ups is amusing. Then the 19-month-old just kind of like flopping on the ground.

Gina, a mother of three children (ages 11, 5 and 3), explained that her son's teachers helped make screen time useful for learning:

[The teachers] had sheets and they sent YouTube videos and they had a lot of interactive things and they would post videos of themselves. Um, they just did—for being thrown to the wolves, I would say, they did a terrific job implementing a virtual classroom in [a] remote learning setting for my son to be able to continue to learn.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study explored mothers' utilization of screen time for their young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some prior research has focused on the impact of screen utilization on developmental outcomes for young children, few studies have explored parents' views on screen time. As the COVID-19 pandemic thrust parents into stressful circumstances due to disruptions in childcare, many parents had to balance work and family responsibilities. Stress was particularly prevalent for mothers who took on the bulk of additional childcare duties (Collins et al., 2020), many while teleworking from home. From the qualitative analysis, five themes emerged: (1) harbouring screen guilt versus letting it go, (2) managing full-time work and full-time parenting, (3) prioritizing mental sanity, (4) socially distant supports demand screen time and (5) screens can have positive uses, too.

While much has been written about the ills of screen time in young children, evidence is still growing about parental feelings of guilt or internal conflict as a result of their children's screen time use. Findings from our study align with one prior study which found that Canadian parents of children with autism spectrum disorder expressed guilt at increased screen time among their school age children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cardy et al., 2021). The results also align with Egan and colleagues' study (2021) in which parents of young children in Ireland reported feeling remorseful about the extent of screen time use needed to occupy their children during periods of working from home. The data in our study furthered existing conversations of mothers' identity being reflected in their screen time allowance. A more common sentiment in the literature supported by our data is that mothers prefer their children to not engage in screen

time, especially in large quantities, but also find that it is sometimes necessary or helpful (Bentley et al., 2016). The reasons for mothers' use of screen time during the COVID-19 pandemic were consistent with the literature which describes its multiple uses for purposes such as occupying, calming, or rewarding a child (Elias & Sulkin, 2019). Moreover, the observed need for increased screen allowance makes sense in light of emerging literature that suggests the pandemic has increased screen time use among toddlers and preschoolers (Aguilar-Farias et al., 2020) and that the well-being of working mothers trying to *do it all* has suffered (Shockley et al., 2021).

It is possible that the demographic characteristics of the present sample (e.g., predominantly affluent and well-educated) may have impacted guilt and struggles related to children's screen time use during the pandemic. These questions could possibly be explained, in part, by inequities based on socio-economic status and privilege. One mother, Carrie, who spoke of her ability to follow AAP recommendations as a 'luxury', described that she was in 'a very privileged position' to be able to follow guidelines which are 'not easy'. Parents are often busy and overwhelmed and thus may feel guilt over failing to implement health-related recommendations for their children (Faulkner et al., 2016). One study found that mothers reported higher work-interfering-with-family guilt than fathers (Borelli et al., 2017). It is conceivable that families with greater financial resources for childcare or the economic means for one parent to stay at home had been able to better negotiate, or even uphold, rigorous screen time guidelines prior to the pandemic. Thus, it is possible that burdens of COVID-19 forced some mothers, especially those who were all of the sudden working from home without childcare, into an internal conflict they had previously avoided. Indeed, the notion of intensive mothering emerged within a neoliberal framework of individual responsibility and is based on largely middle-class ideals of maternal responsibilities (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Therefore, it is possible that the demographics of the sample, namely mothers who were largely upper middle class and highly educated, influenced their notions and subsequent guilt over not fulfilling the intensive mothering role expected of them.

Prior literature supports the idea that families with lower income levels may allow their children to participate in greater screen time use. Kabali et al. (2015) observed a high prevalence of screen use in children age 4 and under in a sample drawn from patients at a paediatrics clinic in an urban, low-income, minority community. In the study, by age 4, most children had their own device, could work devices independently and engaged in media multitasking. Carson and Janssen (2012) likewise found significant negative correlations between parental income and education level and children's screen time viewing among Canadian parents of young children. In contrast, a more recent study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that more educated parents provided more opportunities for screen time to their children (Aguilar-Farias et al., 2020). However, the authors hypothesized that this finding might be partially explained by more educated caregivers having to work from home during the pandemic and thus needing ways to entertain their children. This aligns

with the findings from our study about increased screen time use among young children of highly educated mothers during the pandemic. Future research should consider whether families with lower incomes have different reasons for screen use.

4.1 | Limitations

As noted above, one of the limitations of this sample is that the majority of interviewees were highly educated, professional women. Future research could examine themes related to screen time use and mothering identity among a more diverse sample. Although the authors utilized theoretical sampling to reach more diverse participants, themes related to screen time came up most prominently in interviews with White, cisgender, married, older high-income mothers. It is likely that this reflects the two main recruitment strategies: from licensed childcare centres (at which often there are two-income households) and from social media groups that targeted mothers in advanced degree professions. Thus, future research could compare attitudes towards screen time among diverse parents. In parallel, only one father participated in an interview. As the concept of intensive mothering has been much more developed in prior literature than intensive fathering, future research could also explore fathers' experiences of navigating screen time and their own parenting identity. Gender differences in parenting roles and expectations, particularly with regard to screen time, could be further explored in future research.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study explored maternal utilization of screen time for children ages 0–5 during the COVID-19 pandemic. While much of the prior literature has focused on risk mitigation and decreasing screen time use, findings from this study highlight the need to support and validate mothers, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Possibly due to intensive mothering and higher expectations on mothers now to nurture, educate and stimulate their young children, mothers reported feeling guilty and judged when resorting to screen time. Not only did screen time provide stress relief and an opportunity for mothers to fulfil other roles such as attending work meetings; screen time also provided families an opportunity to connect with loved ones unable to travel, virtually attend story times, tour zoos, or participate in other educational activities, and even to interact with peers. As technology continues to be a part of our everyday life, especially during the pandemic, it may be necessary to adjust screen time guidelines to better meet the constantly evolving needs of families with young children, and to account for the changing modalities of educational activities, interaction, and formal instruction. As we adapt to a 'new normal', telework and online schooling have become increasingly common and have highlighted positive uses for screen time that may require us to re-evaluate past strict guidelines.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Erin Findley participated in research design, data collection, data analysis and writing of the manuscript. Dr. Catherine LaBrenz participated in research design, data collection, data analysis and writing of the manuscript. Dr. Saltanat Childress participated in data analysis and writing of the manuscript. Gladis Vásquez-Schut participated in data analysis and review of the manuscript. Katrina Bowman participated in data collection and review of the manuscript.

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