

# PART 1: RELATIONSHIPS



**Young children in digital contexts interact, engage, access and learn how to use digital technologies in relationships with other people, including the adults (e.g. family members, parents, kinship members, educators) and peers (e.g. friends, siblings, extended family members) in their lives. These relationships facilitate and influence children’s engagement with digital technologies.**

## 1.1 Children, adults and digital technologies

Positive child–adult relationships are well-recognised as essential to children’s healthy development and learning. Research shows that it is through the formation of relationships and attachment with caregivers that children develop cultural competence, a sense of identity, language skills, and knowledge about the world around them (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). In building relationships with young children, adults play a key role in modelling skills and sharing cultural knowledge about social behaviours (Rolfe, 2004)—including those behaviours that involve the use of digital technologies.

Digital technologies can be used to support positive child–adult relationships. For example, adults and children can share positive experiences by co-viewing digital media, co-playing digital games and/or discussing digital media content together (Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011). Infants and toddlers often enjoy looking at digital photographs and videos of themselves, family members and peers. These images and videos can be re-visited by educators and children to promote opportunities for collaborative language development. When educators and other adults model appropriate engagement with technologies, such as co-viewing and co-playing, this helps young children understand that digital technologies can be used to facilitate communication within person-to-person relationships (Danby et al., 2013).

Young children can also use digital technologies for purposeful communication in their relationships with adults, by sending and receiving digital photos, co-sharing social media with adults, or creating text messages and emails. Many children maintain relationships with geographically distant family members or other important people in their lives using video-chat. Research shows that using digital technologies for video communication can be socially beneficial for young children (Roseberry, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2014).

While children can benefit from co-using digital technologies with adults, it is important that when engaging with young children, adults model person-to-person relationships that do not always involve using digital technologies, and moderate their own use of digital technologies. Research has noted situations when adult family members can be distracted by digital technology while with their children (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). When adults are preoccupied with digital activities they might not notice young children’s social cues or requests for attention. These cues and requests are a fundamental part of relationship-building between children and adults. For example, in early childhood education and care settings, educators might be trying to use digital documentation platforms during routines with infants and toddlers, such as recording nappy changes or feed-times. If adults are preoccupied with their own digital technology use, this may reduce the quality of the child–adult interaction.

Adults can model self-regulated digital technology use during sustained social interactions with children. During sustained interactions, adults and children listen to, respond and pay attention to each other (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007). For example, when going on a walk with young children, adults can capitalise on the opportunity to have conversations with children that build language and social skills—without checking their digital devices. Modelling self-regulated digital technology use helps children learn that people can make active decisions about how, where and when they engage with digital technologies.

It is appropriate for children and adults to focus on person-to-person interactions that do not always involve digital technologies.

## 1.2 Children, peers and digital technologies

Child-to-child relationships involve social interactions with same-age peers, older children, siblings and other young kinship members. These relationships help children develop social and emotional capacities such as interpreting the perspectives of other people, paying joint attention to a task or topic, self-regulating behaviour and/or improving impulse control (Hay, 2005).

Digital technologies can be used within child-to-child relationships in ways that create opportunities for social and emotional development. Research shows that many young children enjoy using digital technologies with others (Arnott, 2016). Children are interested in sharing how they have learned to use digital technologies, and will often actively teach each other the functions of different technologies. During these interactions, children benefit from listening to others and appreciating that other people may have a different point of view.

In educational settings, educators can create opportunities for children to use digital technologies collaboratively for shared purposes. This could involve creating content, developing ideas and documenting learning. For example, two or more children might use a digital microscope to examine natural materials found in the outdoor environment, then share these observations with their peers on a large display screen. Drawing other children into the experience creates opportunities for discussion. In this example, children use digital technologies to pay joint attention to a shared learning episode.

Children benefit from the active involvement of adults when co-using digital technologies with peers. In the same way that they must learn to share and collaborate during non-digital activities, children may require support with turn-taking, listening and contributing to the achievement of a common goal. When playing a digital game or taking turns on a touchscreen

device, young children may be tempted to touch, swipe or click screens when it's not yet 'their turn'. While co-viewing digital games and content with peers creates opportunities for discussion, children may benefit from adult support to understand when it is socially appropriate to have a turn at controlling the device (Ljung-Djärf, 2008). Turn-taking and appropriate behaviours are important pro-social skills that children will use when collaborating with others in digital contexts.

Children's relationships with other children at home and in their communities also influence how and why they use digital technologies. Research shows that younger children often learn digital technology skills, such as how to turn computers on and off, navigate games or access digital content from older siblings (Chaudron et al., 2015). Young children are often given 'hand-me-down' digital technologies such as out-dated mobile phones from their parents, other family members, siblings or older peers (Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2008) to be used in play.

Younger children can also be exposed to social media and texting through the digital technology use of siblings and older family members. When young children see other people using social media and texting, they may incorporate this into their own play scenarios. When children incorporate social media and texting into their role-play, educators can use this as an opportunity to help children learn about how digital technologies are used by people to communicate and share information. Building children's knowledge about how to participate in digital contexts through role-play helps children understand the safe and appropriate use of digital technologies with other people.

## 1.3 Educator and family partnerships

Strong partnerships between educators and families are important for young children's wellbeing and developmental outcomes. Research shows that collaboration between educators and families improves young children's social and emotional outcomes

(Huang & Mason, 2008; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Velsson & Waniganayake, 2009; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker & Aupperlee, 2009). Children benefit from observing their educators and families respectfully sharing information about their learning and their lives at home. Educators and families both benefit from feeling that they are listened to and respected (KidsMatter Early Childhood, 2018). Educators are accustomed to working in partnership with families in many areas of children's lives, from sleep and toileting, through to behaviour and social skills. Now that young children are growing up in digital contexts, it's also important for educators and families to work in partnership regarding the use of digital technologies with, by and for young children. Families may also view educators as trusted sources of information and advice about digital technologies and young children (Donohue, 2016).

All families have different perspectives on digital technologies. These perspectives may reflect the values parents and caregivers place on the role of digital technologies in their own lives, and those of their children. Family perspectives shape young children's access to, and experiences with, digital technologies at home and in the community (Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake, 2012). Some families may view digital technologies as useful tools for accessing and enjoying digital content and information. Other families might appreciate digital technologies as a way of staying in touch with distant family members. Being aware of differing family perspectives helps educators consider the range of experiences young children have with technologies in their digital contexts.

An important area of partnership between educators and families is regular communication about children's learning, development and daily routines when participating in educational settings (Parnell & Bartlett, 2012). For many years, educators have documented and assessed young children's learning and development. This has taken the form of observational records, running records, notes and Learning Stories (Carr & Lee 2012). When digital cameras were first released, digital photography was considered an engaging means of sharing

children's learning with parents (Boardman, 2007). As digital innovations in networked technologies and social media have evolved, educators now frequently document children's learning using digital photographs, comments and videos. This documentation is easily shared with parents and family members via social media or dedicated documentation platforms, which provide a flexible way for educators to communicate with families. Many families appreciate being able to see real-time updates of their children's learning and activities on their personal mobile devices (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). However, when using digital documentation platforms, educators should consider the security of their digital data and the privacy of children and families (Lindgren, 2012). Educators and families can cooperate in the use of digital documentation so that all parties understand how digital data about children is being used, stored and shared.

A final area of partnership concerns how educators and families model digital technology use in front of children. For example, when children enter and leave early childhood education and care settings, adults may be involved in their own digital technology use (ECA, 2018). Educators and families may consider developing policies, procedures and/or expectations about digital technology use during these periods. For example, services might decide that educators will not use digital technologies when children are entering and leaving a service so they can devote their full attention to welcoming and farewelling children. Services might share these expectations with families and encourage them to also avoid using digital devices at these times. Other services may consider these periods as opportunities for co-viewing children's digital documentation with families. This can create extended conversations between educators, children and their families about a child's learning and daily activities. It also provides an example of respectful shared digital technology use between adults, which young children can regularly observe. Educators and families can work in partnership to make decisions about how and why digital technologies are used by adults during these situations.

**Principle: Young children's relationships with adults and peers matter in digital contexts**

**Practice advice:**

1. Use digital technologies in early childhood education and care settings to promote social interactions between children, peers and adults.
2. Support children in turn-taking and learning to share when using digital technologies in collaboration with others.
3. Foster children's peer-to-peer interactions as opportunities for co-learning about and with digital technologies.
4. Model self-regulated digital technology use with children and families that recognises the importance of sustained social interactions between children and adults.
5. Create shared understandings between families, educators and services about digital technology use, by adults, in front of children.