Media & Technology

A summary of the scientific literature on the impact of media and technology, including digital games and artificial intelligence (AI), on child development.



How This Impacts Children's Development

Description

Digital and screen-based media, including social media and artificial intelligence, are increasingly present in the lives of children, adolescents, and their caregivers. Child development science offers parents, educators, and policymakers tools to understand how exposure to different types of media at different developmental stages affects the well-being of children.

Read the brief: Helping Young People Thrive In Real Life and Online: Evidence-Based Investments States Can Make Now (2026)

Read the brief:The Child Development Perspective on Artificial Intelligence: Emerging Policy Considerations for AI's Impact on Children's Wellbeing, 2026.

Read the brief: understanding and addressing the effect of digital games on cognitive development in middle childhood. 2019

Talking Points from the SRCD Briefs

- While digital spaces are a source of opportunities for learning and community, especially for young people who don't feel a strong sense of belonging with the people around them, excessive reliance on technology may displace the in-person relationships and experiences that are foundational to healthy development.
- Educationally oriented games may enhance executive functions, mental rotation skills, basic math understanding, and problem-solving abilities.
- Research suggests generative AI can lower critical thinking, reasoning, and engagement when overused.
- Companion-style chatbots may encourage emotional reliance and expose youth to unsafe or inappropriate guidance.
- AI tools, such as tutors, may enhance learning when they complement human interaction.

Policy Considerations in the Briefs

- Investing in positive youth development programs strengthens healthy development. Access to community spaces and out-of-school-time activities that foster meaningful relationships with peers and caring adults promotes belonging, resilience, and positive youth development while providing

healthy alternatives to excessive digital media use.

- Federal agencies could develop research-based guidance or regulation for app stores on what constitutes an educational app.
- Policymakers should prioritize integrating AI literacy into early education, ensuring that children, parents, and educators understand how AI works, its limitations, and its effects on trust, relationships, and decision-making.
- AI systems designed for children should remain task-focused rather than fostering open-ended, human-like relationships, and should redirect youth to trusted adults when social or emotional needs arise.
- Policymakers should promote safer, privacy-protective AI environments for youth, such as monitored school-based platforms, while also investing in research to better understand AI's long-term developmental impacts.

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