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

Though the use of interactive media has been well-studied among young children and adolescents, very little research has been conducted on the effects of digital media on children ages 6-12 years old. Caregivers and teachers need research-based guidelines to understand how to support learning and cognitive development in middle childhood.

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

- Two-thirds of interviewed parents played games with their children and found them beneficial.
- Children ages eight to eighteen played games for an average of one hour and twenty minutes a day.
- 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

- Federal agencies could fund technology, app, and game development aimed at fostering students' academic skills, together with research on effects on child development.
- 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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