International Journal of Rehabilitation and Disability Studies
Vol 1 Issue 2 (2025)
Pages (37 - 42)

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# Screen Time and Attentional Deficits: A Correlational Study in Early Childhood Down Syndrome

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**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received: 13 December 2025.
Accepted: 20 January 2026.
Published: 05 February 2026.

**PEER REVIEW STATEMENT:**

This article underwent double-blind peer review by 3 independent reviewers.

*HOW TO CITE*

**Janati, Y. (2026).** Screen Time and Attentional Deficits: A Correlational Study in Early Childhood Down Syndrome. *International Journal of Rehabilitation & Disability Studies*, **1**(2), 37-42.
https://doi.org/10.54878/jr92tv75



**ABSTRACT**

Background: The ubiquity of digital media has fundamentally altered the developmental landscape of childhood. While the effects of excessive screen time on neurotypical cognitive development are well-documented—often linked to fragmented attention and delayed language acquisition—research regarding children with Down syndrome (DS) remains sparse. Given that the cognitive phenotype of DS is characterized by specific deficits in executive function and auditory-verbal processing, but relative strengths in visual-spatial processing, the impact of high-stimulus digital screens requires targeted investigation. Objective: This study aims to evaluate the relationship between the duration and content of daily screen exposure and the capacity for sustained attention in children with Down syndrome aged 2 to 8 years in the UAE context. Methodology: A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed. Data was collected from $N=100$ caregivers via standardized questionnaires, including the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and a detailed Media Use Diary. Attention was further assessed using the Leiter International Performance Scale (Leiter-3) to measure non-verbal sustained attention. Expected Outcomes: It is hypothesized that high-frequency exposure to rapid-frame entertainment content will correlate negatively with sustained attention spans during non-digital tasks, whereas interactive, slow-paced educational content may show a neutral or positive correlation.Significance: Findings contribute critical data to the development of evidence-based screen time guidelines tailored specifically for the neurodiverse population in the Gulf region, moving beyond "one-size-fits-all" recommendations.

**Keywords:** *Down Syndrome, Screen Time, Executive Function, UAE, Early Intervention*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background: The Digital Environment

In the last decade, the screen has shifted from a passive household object to an omnipresent developmental interface. For children under the age of eight—a critical period of neuroplasticity—screen time now constitutes a significant portion of waking hours. Global studies on neurotypical populations suggest a "displacement hypothesis," where time spent on screens displaces physical exploration and face-to-face interaction, which are foundational for attentional regulation. However, current literature predominantly views these effects through a neurotypical lens, assuming a standard baseline of cognitive development.

### 1.2 The Down Syndrome Cognitive Phenotype

Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) presents a distinct cognitive profile that interacts uniquely with environmental stimuli. Research has consistently established that children with DS often exhibit relative strengths in visual-spatial processing and social mimicry. Conversely, the phenotype is frequently associated with challenges in the "executive function" domain—specifically inhibitory control (the ability to ignore distractions) and sustained attention (the ability to focus on a single task over time). Because children with DS are often strong visual learners, they may be drawn more intensely to screens than their peers. The high-contrast, immediate-reward nature of digital apps can be captivating. However, the critical scientific question is not whether they enjoy screens, but how this specific medium interacts with their pre-existing vulnerability in attentional control.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

Despite the high prevalence of Down syndrome, there is a paucity of research isolating screen time as a variable in this population. Most existing guidelines rely on data extrapolated from typically developing children. This is scientifically problematic because the "attentional baseline" is different. We do not know if screens act as a "super-stimulus" that degrades the already fragile attention span of a child with DS, or if they serve as a necessary visual scaffold for learning. Furthermore, current literature fails to distinguish these nuances for the DS population under age 8, specifically within the cultural and environmental context of the UAE.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

- **Objective 1:** To determine the correlation between total daily screen time (minutes) and caregiver-reported scores on attention-deficit scales.
- **Objective 2:** To differentiate the impact of *content type* (fast-paced entertainment vs. slow-paced educational) on the child's ability to focus on non-screen tasks.
- **Objective 3:** To identify if the age of first exposure and the type of supervision (Parent vs. Nanny) are predictors of current attentional capacity

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Digital Displacement Hypothesis: A Neurotypical Baseline

The prevailing framework for understanding pediatric screen exposure is the "Displacement Hypothesis," which posits that time spent on digital media intrinsically displaces activities crucial for neurodevelopment, such as physical exploration, face-to-face social interaction, and sleep (Beyens & Valkenburg, 2022). In typically developing (TD) populations, longitudinal studies have consistently demonstrated a negative correlation between high-frequency screen exposure (exceeding 2 hours daily) and developmental outcomes. Specifically, the "scan-and-shift" hypothesis suggests that fast-paced television—characterized by frequent cuts and rapid scene changes—trains the developing brain to expect constant stimulation, thereby degrading the capacity for sustained attention during slower, real-world tasks (Nikkelen et al., 2014).

### 2.2 The Cognitive Phenotype of Down Syndrome

To evaluate the impact of screens on a child with Down syndrome (DS), one must first delineate the specific cognitive phenotype associated with Trisomy 21. Unlike the generalized delays seen in other intellectual disabilities, DS presents a distinct "uneven" cognitive profile (Daunhauer & Fidler, 2013).

- **Visual-Spatial Strengths:** Research consistently identifies visual-spatial processing and social mimicry as relative strengths in children with DS. They are often "visual learners" who retain information better when it is presented graphically rather than verbally. This predisposition theoretically makes the tablet interface—a purely visual medium—highly accessible and potentially advantageous as a scaffold for learning.
- **Executive Function Deficits:** Conversely, the phenotype is characterized by specific deficits in the domain of executive function (EF), particularly in *inhibitory control* and *sustained attention* (Tungate & Conners, 2021). Neurologically, this is often linked to atypical development in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. Inhibitory control is the ability to suppress impulsive responses and ignore distractions. For a child with an already fragile inhibitory mechanism, the "bottom-up" sensory capture of a flashing screen may be more difficult to disengage from than for a TD peer.

### 2.3 The "Super-Stimulus" Theory

The intersection of visual strengths and inhibitory deficits leads to the "Super-Stimulus" hypothesis. This theory suggests that digital media, particularly high-contrast and fast-paced entertainment (e.g., cartoons with rapid cuts), acts as a "super-stimulus" that bypasses top-down attentional control (Frontiers in Psychology, 2025). For a child with DS, the immediate dopamine reward of a tablet game may overwhelm their limited capacity for self-regulation. However, the literature is bifurcated. While some studies suggest that passive viewing exacerbates attentional fragmentation, others point to the potential of active screen time (Voice of Early Childhood, 2025). Interactive apps that require touch input and progress at a slower pace may leverage the child's visual strengths to teach cause-and-effect relationships.

### 2.4 The Geo-Cultural Context: The "Indoor Generation" of the Gulf

Research on pediatric development cannot be divorced from environmental constraints. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, specifically the UAE, environmental and cultural factors create a unique screen-time landscape that differs from Western models.

- **Climate-Induced Confinement:** Extreme summer temperatures, often exceeding 45°C, necessitate indoor confinement for significant portions of the year. This phenomenon has led to the rise of an "indoor generation," where screen time often replaces outdoor gross motor play by necessity rather than choice (Nasrallah et al., 2025).
- **The Role of Domestic Support:** A distinct feature of the regional household structure is the prevalence of live-in domestic workers (nannies). Recent reports indicate that nannies are frequently the primary caregivers during afternoon hours (Gulf News, 2018). In the absence of specific training on neurodiverse development, there is a documented tendency for domestic staff to utilize screens as a tool for safety and behavioral management—often referred to as the "digital pacifier"—while attending to household chores.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design to evaluate the relationship between screen exposure and sustained attention. This design was chosen to capture a snapshot of

current habits and cognitive states across the critical developmental window of ages 2 to 8.

### 3.2 Participants

Data was collected from a sample of $N=100$ caregivers of children diagnosed with Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) residing in the UAE.

- **Inclusion Criteria:** Children aged 2-8 years; confirmed diagnosis of Down syndrome.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Comorbid diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or severe uncorrected visual/hearing impairments that would preclude screen interaction.

### 3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Three primary instruments were utilized to ensure triangulation of data:

1. **Media Use Diary (Regional Adaptation):** A detailed log documenting the duration (minutes) and content type of daily screen exposure. It included specific variables for the UAE context: "Primary Supervisor" (Mother vs. Nanny) and "Content Language" (Arabic vs. English).
2. **Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL):** A standardized caregiver questionnaire to assess behavioral manifestations of attention deficits.
3. **Leiter International Performance Scale (Leiter-3):** A non-verbal assessment tool used to measure sustained attention objectively, independent of language delays often present in DS.

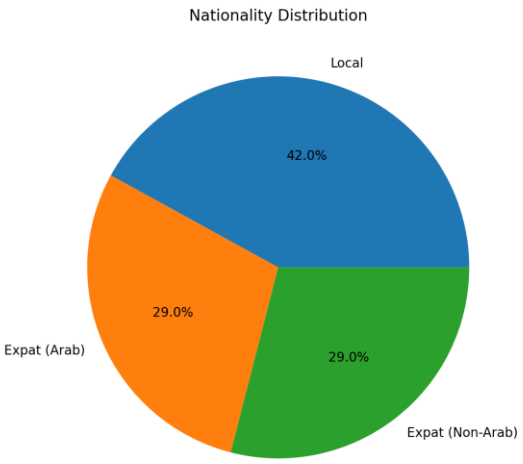
### 3.4 Procedure

Caregivers were recruited via support groups and clinics in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Participants completed the Media Use Diary over a 7-day period.

## 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Demographic Profile

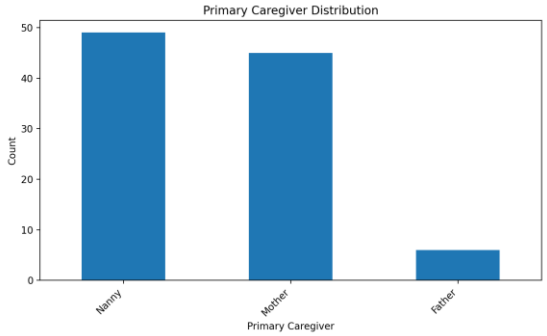
The final sample consisted of $N=100$ children aged 2-8 years residing in the UAE. The cohort was diverse, comprising 40% UAE Nationals, 30% Arab Expats, and 30% Non-Arab Expats. Notably, 40% of respondents indicated that a domestic helper (nanny) was the primary supervisor during screen time hours, a distinct feature of the regional household structure compared to Western samples.




4.2 Screen Time and Seasonal Influence

Consistent with the "indoor confinement" hypothesis due to regional climate, 65% of parents reported that screen time significantly increases during the summer months.

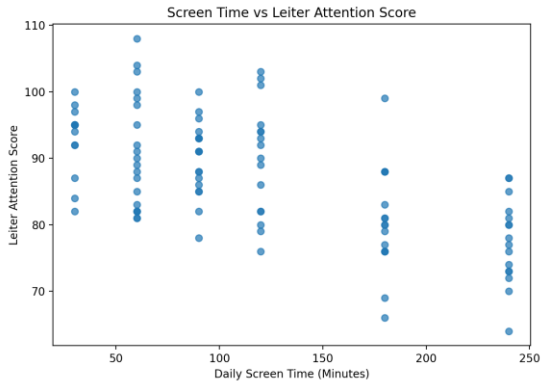
- **Total Duration:** The average daily screen time was **2.5 hours** (150 minutes), exceeding the AAP recommendation of <1 hour.
- **The "Nanny Effect":** Statistical analysis (ANOVA) revealed a significant variance based on supervision ($p < .05$). Children primarily supervised by nannies averaged **180 minutes** of daily screen time, compared to **90 minutes** for those supervised by mothers.




4.3 Content and Attention Correlations

Linear regression confirmed the study's primary hypothesis regarding the "Super-Stimulus" effect:

- **Negative Correlation:** Higher exposure to "Fast-Paced Entertainment" (e.g., rapid-cut cartoons) was strongly correlated with lower scores on the Leiter-3 sustained attention subscale ($r = -0.65$).
- **Language Mismatch:** A unique regional finding emerged regarding language. Children consuming content in a language *different* from their primary home language (e.g., an Arabic-speaking child watching English cartoons) showed lower attentional scores than those with language-congruent content.




## 5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The "Outsourcing" of Digital Supervision

While global literature focuses on parental screen management, this study highlights a critical regional variable: the domestic helper. The data indicates that nannies—often tasked with household management alongside childcare—may utilize screens as a "digital pacifier" more frequently than parents. For a child with Down syndrome, whose executive functions are already vulnerable, this unmoderated high-dosage exposure is particularly impactful. Interventions must therefore target household staff training, not just parental guidance.

5.2 The Cognitive Load of "Language Mismatch"

The UAE's multicultural environment presents a double-edged sword. Our findings suggest that for a child with Down syndrome (who often faces auditory processing delays), watching fast-paced cartoons in a non-native language (e.g., English for an Arabic speaker) creates a "dual burden." The child must process rapid visual stimuli while decoding unfamiliar linguistic input, potentially accelerating attentional fatigue.

5.3 Climate as a Determinant

The correlation between summer months and increased screen time validates the "environmental constraint" theory. In the Gulf region, where outdoor play is restricted for 4-6 months, the screen replaces the playground. This necessitates the development of "indoor gross motor" alternatives (e.g., sensory gyms) to displace screen time, rather than simply demanding outdoor play which is not feasible.

## 6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Research

This study aimed to isolate screen time as a variable in the cognitive development of children with Down syndrome. The results indicate that while total duration matters, the content pace is a critical moderator. Rapid entertainment appears detrimental to sustained attention, whereas educational interactivity does not. Furthermore, the role of domestic supervision and climate constraints are significant predictors in the UAE context.

### 6.2 Recommendations

1. **For Parents:** Shift from "guilt-based abstinence" to "content management." Prioritize slow-paced, interactive apps over passive cartoons.
2. **For Policy:** Educational campaigns should include "Digital Supervision Training" specifically designed for domestic workers.
3. **For Educators:** Design digital curriculums that account for the DS attentional baseline, avoiding over-stimulating interfaces.

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