



School counsellors' responses to preschool children's problematic technology use: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Problematic technology use in early childhood is commonly examined through parent reports and pediatric perspectives, while the role of school counselors remains underexplored. This qualitative study investigated school counselors' perceptions and reported practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Kayseri, Turkey. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with eight counselors working in preschools and kindergartens. Interviews included open-ended questions and a vignette-based scenario, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. Four interpretive themes were identified: technology use as a developmentally sensitive and family-mediated concern; recognizing problematic use through social, behavioral, and attentional indicators; replacing screen routines with social alternatives and family limit-setting; and awareness-oriented counseling practice and the limits of current support. Counselors viewed problematic technology use as linked to family routines and visible in preschool settings through social participation, behavior, attention, and emotional regulation. Findings from this small local sample suggest that preschool counseling practice may benefit from more systematic assessment, targeted psychoeducation, and referral pathways.

Keywords: problematic technology use, educational technology, school counselors, early childhood education, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become embedded in young children's everyday lives through televisions, smartphones, tablets, digital games, online videos, and mobile applications. For preschool children, these technologies may offer opportunities for communication, entertainment, and learning when they are used intentionally, developmentally appropriately, and with adult guidance. However, concerns have also increased regarding early, excessive, unsupervised, and poorly regulated technology use during a developmental period in which children need rich opportunities for play, movement, social interaction, language exchange, sleep, and responsive relationships. International guidance therefore does not treat technology as harmful in itself, but emphasizes the importance of age-appropriate content, adult co-use, clear limits, and balance with non-screen activities (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

Recent research has moved beyond a narrow focus on screen time toward a broader understanding of screen-use contexts. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Mallawaarachchi et al. (2024) showed that children's developmental outcomes are associated not only with the amount of screen exposure, but also with contextual factors such as content, co-use, background television, caregiver screen use during child routines, and age-inappropriate material. This shift is important because it suggests that problematic technology use in early childhood should not be defined only by duration. The present study therefore adopts a functional and contextual understanding of problematic technology use.

The concept of problematic technology use overlaps with related terms such as problematic media use, problematic screen exposure, excessive screen time, and screen media addiction. Domoff et al. (2019) developed the problematic media use measure to assess addiction-like patterns of screen media use among children, including preoccupation, withdrawal, tolerance, loss of interest in other activities, difficulty controlling use, and psychosocial consequences. Domoff et al. (2020) further proposed the interactional theory of childhood problematic media use, which explains problematic media use as the result of interactions among child characteristics, parent practices, family context, and media design. This perspective is especially relevant to preschool children because young children do not independently regulate their technology use; their access, routines, boundaries, and interpretations are largely shaped by adults.

Turkey provides an important context for examining problematic technology use in early childhood. Studies conducted with preschool children in Turkey indicate that problematic screen exposure is associated with multiple factors, including daily screen time, early onset of screen exposure, lack of parental limits, screen use during meals or before bedtime, limited co-viewing, and exposure to low-quality content (Yalçın et al., 2021). Other studies have reported associations between excessive screen time and emotional lability, conduct problems, peer relationship difficulties, and lower psychosocial well-being among Turkish preschool children (Ofly et al., 2021; Tezol et al., 2022). These findings suggest that technology-related concerns may become visible not only in the home, but also in preschool settings through children's play, peer relationships, attention, emotional regulation, and classroom behavior.

School counselors are positioned at an important point in this process. In Turkey, school counseling and psychological counseling services are expected to support students' social-emotional, academic, and developmental needs through developmental, preventive, collaborative, and responsive practices (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020). In preschool settings, counselors may encounter technology-related concerns through parent complaints, teacher observations, classroom behavior, peer interaction difficulties, or children's emotional reactions when limits are imposed. They may also support parents, guide teachers, conduct awareness activities, and refer children or families for further support when needed.

Despite this important role, the literature has focused mainly on parents, pediatric samples, children's screen habits, and teacher perspectives. Much less is known about how school counselors perceive problematic technology use among preschool children, what behavioral patterns they associate with it, and what counseling or guidance practices they use in response. This gap is important because school counselors may be among the first professionals to identify early signs of concern, support families with limit setting, consult with teachers, and design preventive school-based activities. Therefore, understanding counselors' perceptions and practices can contribute to a more ecological and practice-based understanding of problematic technology used in early childhood.

The present qualitative study addresses this gap by examining school counselors' perceptions and practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Turkey. The study explores how counselors understand children's technology use, what behavioral patterns they associate with problematic use, how they approach such cases, and what counseling and guidance practices they report using in preschool contexts.

The study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1:** How do school counselors perceive technology use and problematic technology use among preschool children?
- RQ2:** What behavioral patterns do school counselors associate with problematic technology use among preschool children?

RQ3: How do school counselors approach cases of problematic technology use among preschool children?

RQ4: What counseling and guidance practices do school counselors report using to prevent or address problematic technology use in preschool settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Problematic Technology Use in Early Childhood

Early childhood is a period of rapid development in language, self-regulation, executive functioning, social interaction, emotional understanding, and play. During this period, children learn through embodied, relational, and active experiences. They need opportunities to communicate with adults, interact with peers, move their bodies, explore materials, engage in pretend play, and regulate emotions with adult support. For this reason, concerns about digital technology use in early childhood are not limited to screen exposure itself. The central issue is whether screen-based activities displace developmentally important experiences or become embedded in routines in ways that interfere with children's functioning.

International recommendations reflect this developmental concern. The AAP (2016) recommends that screen use for children aged 2 to 5 should be limited to high-quality content and supported through adult co-viewing. The WHO (2019) similarly emphasizes that young children's daily routines should include sufficient physical activity, sleep, and reduced sedentary screen time. National Association for the Education of Young Children, and Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at Saint Vincent College (2012) also argue that technology can support learning and development only when it is used intentionally, appropriately, and in ways that strengthen relationships, creativity, interaction, and learning. Together, these perspectives suggest that the quality and context of technology use are as important as duration.

In this study, problematic technology use refers to preschool children's screen-based digital device use that is excessive, poorly regulated, developmentally inappropriate, or associated with impairment in social, emotional, behavioral, attentional, family, or school functioning. This definition is broader than screen time. For example, a child may spend time with screens without showing problematic use when content is age-appropriate, time-limited, co-viewed, and balanced with play and social interaction. Conversely, technology use may become problematic when the child becomes distressed when devices are removed, uses screens mainly to manage negative emotions, loses interest in non-screen activities, resists family limits, or experiences social and behavioral difficulties related to technology use.

Domoff et al. (2019) conceptualized problematic media use among children through symptoms adapted from Internet gaming disorder criteria, including preoccupation, withdrawal, tolerance, loss of control, and psychosocial problems. However, Domoff et al. (2020) also emphasized that problematic media use in childhood should not be understood as an individual child problem alone. Instead, it develops within an interactional system involving the child, parents, family routines, media access, content design, and broader environmental conditions. This theoretical position is highly relevant for preschool children because technology use at this age is usually organized, permitted, modeled, or limited by adults.

Screen-Use Contexts and Developmental Concerns

A growing body of research shows that screen-use context matters. Mallawaarachchi et al. (2024) found that program viewing and background television were negatively associated with cognitive outcomes, while program viewing, age-inappropriate content, and caregiver screen use during child routines were negatively associated with psychosocial outcomes. Co-use, however, was positively associated with cognitive outcomes. These findings support a more nuanced interpretation: technology use is not uniformly harmful or beneficial; its implications depend on what children use, how they use it, with whom they use it, and what other activities it replaces.

This distinction is important for school counselors. Counselors do not usually have direct access to exact screen-time data at home. Instead, they often encounter problematic technology use through functional indicators. These may include children's difficulty initiating play, limited peer interaction, attention-related difficulties, emotional reactions when limits are imposed, aggressive responses, withdrawal from non-screen

activities, or parent reports of conflict around phones, tablets, television, or digital games. Therefore, counselors' perceptions of problematic technology use are likely to be shaped by school-based observations and family reports rather than by screen-time duration alone.

The current study adopts this functional and contextual understanding of problematic technology use. It examines how school counselors interpret preschool children's technology-related difficulties in relation to developmental functioning, family routines, parental limit setting, and school-based behavior.

Evidence From Turkey

Several studies from Turkey provide an important foundation for the present research. Yalçın et al. (2021) developed the seven-in-seven screen exposure questionnaire to evaluate problematic screen exposure among preschool children. The tool includes seven dimensions: daily screen time, age of onset, co-viewing with parents, limit setting, screen use during meals, screen use before bedtime, and exposure to low-quality content. Their study found that problematic screen exposure among Turkish preschool children was associated with several family and routine-related factors. This is important because it shows that problematic screen exposure should be monitored through multiple characteristics rather than screen time alone.

Other Turkish studies have examined associations between screen time and children's social-emotional functioning. Oflu et al. (2021) reported that excessive screen time was associated with emotional lability among preschool children. Tezol et al. (2022) found that excessive screen time was associated with lower psychosocial well-being, including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and peer relationship problems. Çaylan et al. (2021) also examined the relationship between parenting styles and excessive screen use among preschool children, further highlighting the role of family practices in children's screen exposure. These findings are directly relevant to school counseling because emotional lability, conduct problems, and peer difficulties are concerns that may become visible in preschool classrooms and may lead teachers or parents to seek support from school counselors.

Research from Turkey also suggests that family counseling and parent guidance can reduce problematic screen-related routines. Bahadur et al. (2021) examined family counseling for young children with high screen exposure and reported reductions in screen time and improvements in co-viewing and parent-child play time after counseling. Although this work was conducted in a pediatric context, it is relevant for preschool counseling because school counselors also work with parents to support routines, boundaries, play, and healthier family interaction patterns.

Overall, the Turkish literature shows that problematic technology use among preschool children is connected to screen duration, early onset, parental mediation, routines, emotional regulation, and social functioning. However, much of this literature relies on parent reports, pediatric settings, or quantitative designs. Less attention has been given to the perspectives of school-based professionals who observe children in preschool environments and work directly with families and teachers.

Comparative Overview of Relevant Research

To clarify the position of the present study within the existing literature, [Table 1](#) summarizes selected studies that have examined early childhood screen use, problematic media use, educational technology in preschool settings, and school-based responses to technology-related concerns. The comparison shows that previous research has mainly relied on parent reports, pediatric samples, quantitative designs, or teacher perspectives, while preschool school counselors remain underrepresented.

Family Mediation, Limit Setting, and Parent-Child Routines

Family mediation is central to young children's technology use. Preschool children usually do not make independent decisions about when, how, or why they use digital devices. Parents provide access, model technology use, choose content, set limits, allow screen use during routines, and decide whether screens are used for learning, entertainment, distraction, or emotional calming. For this reason, problematic technology use in early childhood should be understood as a family-mediated issue.

The AAP (2016) cautions against using media as the main strategy for calming children, because this may reduce opportunities for children to develop internal emotion-regulation skills. This concern is consistent with

Table 1. Comparative overview of related studies and the present study

Study	Focus and context	Method/technique	Main findings and relevance to the present study
Kara and Cagiltay (2017)	Preschool teachers' thoughts about technology use in early educational settings	Semi-structured interviews with 18 in-service preschool teachers; content analysis	Showed that preschool teachers discussed both benefits and limitations of technology in early education. The present study extends this professional perspective by focusing on school counselors rather than teachers.
Domoff et al. (2019, 2020)	Problematic media use among children and the interactional theory of childhood problematic media use	Scale development and theoretical model building	Defined problematic media use through addiction-like and psychosocial patterns and emphasized child, parent, family, and media-design interactions. The present study uses this broader ecological understanding in a preschool counseling context.
Yalçın et al. (2021)	Problematic screen exposure among preschool children in Turkey	Cross-sectional parent-report questionnaire study	Identified screen-time, onset, co-viewing, limit-setting, mealtime/bedtime screen use, and content quality as important dimensions. The present study examines how such concerns become visible to counselors in school settings.
Bahadur et al. (2021)	Family counseling for preschool children with high screen exposure in Turkey	Pre-post family counseling study in a pediatric context	Reported reductions in screen exposure and improvements in co-viewing and parent-child play. The present study complements this by examining reported school-counseling practices rather than pediatric family counseling outcomes.
Joung et al. (2023)	Counselors' experiences with children and adolescents with problematic smartphone use	Focus group interviews with field experts	Highlighted intervention needs for problematic smartphone use, mainly among older children and adolescents. The present study narrows the focus to preschool children and school counseling practice.
Mallawaarachchi et al. (2024)	Early childhood screen-use contexts and developmental outcomes	Systematic review and meta-analysis	Showed that content, co-use, background television, caregiver screen use, and age-inappropriate material matter beyond duration. The present study adopts this contextual perspective in interpreting counselors' accounts.
Ots et al. (2026)	School-based interventions for problematic digital technology use	Systematic review	Showed growing interest in school-based responses, mostly for older students. The present study contributes a preschool-focused, qualitative view of school-counselor responses.
Present study	Preschool school counselors' perceptions and reported practices in Kayseri, Turkey	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with eight counselors; vignette-supported inductive thematic analysis	Adds a school-counseling perspective by showing how counselors identify technology-related concerns and respond through parent guidance, teacher collaboration, awareness activities, and limited assessment-oriented practices.

the interactional model proposed by Domoff et al. (2020), which suggests that children's problematic media use may be maintained through family stress, inconsistent boundaries, child temperament, and parental reliance on screens to manage behavior. Recent evidence also supports this view by showing that parental distress and media-related coping may interact with child emotional reactivity and screen time in relation to behavioral problems (Jusiené et al., 2025).

For school counselors, family mediation is a practical issue. Counselors may need to help parents understand the importance of consistent limits, alternative activities, quality parent-child interaction, and gradual reduction of excessive screen use. However, they also need to avoid blaming parents. Many families use screens because of work demands, household responsibilities, fatigue, limited support, or difficulty managing children's behavior. Therefore, counseling and guidance practices should be supportive, realistic, and family-centered rather than simply instructing parents to reduce screen time.

Recognizing Problematic Use Through Social, Behavioral, and Attentional Indicators

Problematic technology use in preschool children may appear through several behavioral patterns. These include difficulty disengaging from screens, crying or anger when devices are removed, excessive desire for screen-based activities, reduced interest in play, limited peer interaction, attention-related difficulties, sleep-

related problems, and exposure to unsuitable content. Such patterns are important because they are often the concerns that bring children to the attention of teachers, parents, and school counselors.

The literature supports the relevance of these behavioral indicators, although causal interpretations should be made carefully. Studies conducted in Turkey have reported associations between excessive screen time and emotional lability, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, and lower psychosocial well-being among preschool children (Ofly et al., 2021; Tezol et al., 2022). Similarly, international evidence suggests that screen-use context, including age-inappropriate content and caregiver screen use during routines, is associated with psychosocial outcomes (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2024). These studies do not mean that technology use alone causes children's difficulties. Rather, they indicate that problematic technology use may be part of a wider developmental and family context that requires careful assessment.

This distinction is important for the present study. School counselors' observations should not be treated as clinical diagnoses. Instead, they represent practice-based interpretations of children's functioning in preschool contexts. Counselors may observe social withdrawal, weak play skills, attention difficulties, or aggressive reactions, but these behaviors may also be related to other developmental, emotional, family, or environmental factors. Therefore, school counselors' role is best understood as preventive, consultative, supportive, and referral-oriented.

School Counseling and Guidance Practices

School counselors play a potentially important role in preventing and addressing problematic technology use among preschool children. In Turkey, counseling and psychological counseling services are described as developmental and preventive services that support students' social-emotional, academic, and developmental needs across educational levels, including preschool (MoNE, 2020). These services are expected to be planned according to students' developmental needs, school conditions, family contexts, and environmental characteristics.

In relation to problematic technology use, school counselors may support children by strengthening social skills, peer interaction, play, emotional awareness, and self-regulation. They may support parents through psychoeducation on screen routines, limit setting, co-viewing, alternative play activities, and parent-child communication. They may also support teachers through consultation, classroom guidance activities, and strategies that increase non-digital play and social participation. In more serious cases, counselors may need to conduct further assessment, collaborate with families, and refer children to specialized services.

Although school-based interventions for problematic digital technology use are increasingly discussed, much of this literature focuses on older children and adolescents rather than preschool children (Ots et al., 2026). Similarly, qualitative research on counselors' experiences has mainly examined problematic smartphone use among children and adolescents, not preschool children specifically (Joung et al., 2023). This means that the role of school counselors in preschool children's problematic technology use remains underexplored.

This gap is important because preschool counselors work at the intersection of children, families, teachers, and school systems. They may be among the first professionals to observe technology-related concerns in children's social and emotional functioning. They may also be responsible for translating general recommendations about healthy technology use into practical, culturally appropriate, and family-sensitive guidance.

Rationale for the Present Study

The reviewed literature suggests that problematic technology use among preschool children is a multidimensional issue. It involves not only screen duration, but also content, co-use, parental mediation, family routines, emotional regulation, social interaction, and school-based functioning. Studies from Turkey provide evidence that problematic screen exposure and excessive screen time are associated with several developmental and psychosocial concerns among preschool children (Ofly et al., 2021; Tezol et al., 2022; Yalçın et al., 2021). However, little is known about how school counselors perceive and respond to these concerns in preschool settings.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring school counselors' perceptions and practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Turkey. By focusing on a small group of preschool counselors in Kayseri, the study offers preliminary, practice-based insight into how technology-related concerns are recognized, interpreted, and addressed within preschool counseling and guidance services. The findings may inform future research and practice related to prevention, parent education, teacher collaboration, assessment, early intervention, and referral in school settings.

Research Framework and Research Plan

The research framework integrated two complementary perspectives: the interactional view of childhood problematic media use and the context-based approach to early childhood screen use. The framework was organized around four connected parts. First, preschool children's screen-based digital device use was understood as family-mediated because access, routines, content, limits, and co-use are largely shaped by adults. Second, problematic use was expected to become visible in preschool settings through children's play, peer interaction, attention, emotional regulation, and classroom participation. Third, school counselors were positioned as school-based professionals who interpret these concerns through parent reports, teacher observations, and their own professional judgments. Fourth, counselors' responses were examined in relation to prevention, parent guidance, teacher collaboration, assessment, referral, and the possible gap between awareness-oriented practice and more systematic support.

Based on this framework, the research plan followed five stages. First, the RQs were developed to examine counselors' perceptions, observed behavioral patterns, case responses, and counseling practices. Second, school counselors working with preschool-aged children in Kayseri were recruited through snowball sampling. Third, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with a common interview guide and a realistic vignette to stimulate practice-based responses. Fourth, interview transcripts were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis with independent coding, inter-coder agreement calculation, and consensus meetings. Fifth, the findings were interpreted in relation to the framework by examining how family-mediated technology routines become school-visible concerns and how counselors respond within preschool counseling services.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using inductive thematic analysis to explore school counselors' perceptions and practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Kayseri, Turkey. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it offers a flexible and systematic approach for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The study aimed to understand how school counselors interpret children's technology-related difficulties, what behavioral indicators they associate with problematic use, and how they describe their counseling and guidance practices in preschool settings. Rather than testing predetermined variables, the study sought to generate an exploratory and practice-based understanding of participants' professional experiences.

The analytic process was primarily inductive, while remaining guided by the RQs. This means that codes and themes were developed from participants' accounts, but the analysis focused specifically on perceptions, behavioral indicators, responses to the vignette, and reported counseling practices.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were school counselors/psychological counselors working in preschools and kindergartens in Kayseri, Turkey. The inclusion criteria were:

- (a) currently working as a school counselor/psychological counselor in a preschool or kindergarten setting,
- (b) having professional experience with preschool-aged children, and
- (c) volunteering to participate in the study.

A snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Initially, school counselors who met the inclusion criteria were contacted by the researchers. After the first interviews, participants were asked to suggest other counselors who had relevant experience and might be willing to participate. This strategy was

Table 2. Demographic and professional characteristics of participants

Participant code	Gender	Age	Years of professional experience	Number of students in the preschool	Experience in preschool counseling
P1	Female	25	3	50	3
P2	Female	30	3	250	3
P3	Female	35	12	300	10
P4	Male	26	3	185	1
P5	Male	28	3	100	3
P6	Female	29	5	400	5
P7	Male	43	19	200	14
P8	Female	32	6	40	4

considered suitable because the study focused on a specific professional group working in preschool counseling and guidance services.

A total of 8 school counselors participated in the study. This number was considered adequate for the exploratory aim of the research because the participants formed a specific professional group, all had direct experience in preschool counseling, and the interviews focused on a clearly bounded topic supported by a vignette. During analysis, participants' accounts showed repeated patterns across the main RQs, suggesting sufficient data adequacy for identifying preliminary themes. The sample was not intended to represent all school counselors in Turkey; rather, it was used to generate practice-based insight into counselors' perceptions and reported practices in one local context. Participants' demographic and professional characteristics are presented in [Table 2](#).

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interview form included a short case scenario/vignette describing a preschool child experiencing difficulties related to technology use. The vignette was:

"A parent of one of your students visits the school and asks to meet with you. The parent says that the child watches television and plays with a tablet every day and asks for your advice. What would you advise this parent?"

Participants were asked how they would interpret the case and what steps they would take as school counselors. The vignette was used to elicit practice-based responses and to understand how counselors would approach a realistic school counseling situation.

Semi-structured interviews were used because they allowed the researchers to ask common guiding questions while also giving participants the opportunity to explain their experiences, examples, and professional judgments in detail. The interview protocol included questions about school counselors' views on preschool children's technology use, their perceptions of problematic technology use, the behavioral patterns they observe among children, and the counseling and guidance practices they use with children, parents, and teachers.

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. After data collection, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. All interviews were conducted in Turkish. For the English-language manuscript, selected participant quotations were translated from Turkish into English and checked for meaning by the research team. The interview guide is provided in [Appendix A](#).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. During this stage, the researchers noted initial ideas related to school counselors' perceptions, observed child behaviors, intervention approaches, and counseling practices.

Next, two researchers independently coded the interview transcripts. Coding was conducted inductively, meaning that codes were developed from participants' own descriptions rather than from a predetermined coding framework. After independent coding, inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa. The resulting value was $\kappa = .88$, indicating a high level of agreement between coders (Cohen, 1960; Landis & Koch, 1977).

After the agreement calculation, the researchers compared their codes, discussed similarities and differences, and refined code definitions. Through this consensus-based process, overlapping codes were merged, unclear codes were revised, and a final codebook was developed. The finalized codes were then organized into broader interpretive themes. Four main themes were identified: technology use as a developmentally sensitive and family-mediated concern; recognizing problematic use through social, behavioral, and attentional indicators; replacing screen routines with social alternatives and family limit-setting; and awareness-oriented counseling practice and the limits of current support. These themes reflected both the RQs and the patterns that emerged from the data.

Code frequencies were calculated after the final codebook was completed. A code was counted once for each participant when that participant's response included the relevant meaning, even if the same idea was mentioned more than once in the interview. Therefore, the frequency values show how many participants referred to each code, not how many times a word or topic appeared in the transcripts. These frequencies were used descriptively to help readers see which patterns were broadly shared across participants and which were mentioned by fewer counselors. They should not be interpreted statistically, and they do not indicate the importance of a theme by themselves. The interpretation of the findings remained grounded in the meaning, context, and depth of participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to support the trustworthiness of the study. First, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to protect the accuracy of participants' accounts. The transcripts were checked against the audio recordings by the research team. The verbatim transcripts were not returned to participants for member checking; this decision is acknowledged in the limitations section. Second, the use of direct quotations in the findings helped preserve participants' voices and allowed readers to evaluate the connection between the data and the researchers' interpretations. Third, two researchers independently coded the data, calculated inter-coder agreement, and then compared their codes through discussion. This consensus-based coding process supported the credibility and dependability of the analysis.

In addition, the researchers documented the coding process, code revisions, theme development, and consensus decisions during analysis. This helped create an analytic trail and supported the transparency of the research process. Transferability was supported by providing information about the study context, participant group, sampling strategy, and data collection procedures. Because the study was conducted with school counselors working in preschools and kindergartens in Kayseri, Turkey, the findings should be interpreted within this specific context.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team brought expertise in early childhood education, psychological counseling, and educational technology. Because the topic of children's technology use can easily be interpreted through a risk-focused lens, the researchers discussed their own assumptions during coding and theme development. During consensus meetings, the team considered both risk-oriented and more balanced accounts, including participants' statements that technology should not be completely banned when it is purposeful, limited, and adult-guided. This reflexive discussion helped reduce overgeneralization and supported a more cautious interpretation of counselors' accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Erciyes University Social and Humanities Ethics Committee, 2020-176. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Table 3. Descriptive code frequencies by theme

Theme	Codes	f
Technology use as a developmentally sensitive and family-mediated concern	Negative effects on developmental domains	8
	Limited use	6
	Risk of problematic technology use	4
	Family-based factors	3
	Use for beneficial purposes	2
Recognizing problematic use through social, behavioral, and attentional indicators	Weakening of social skills	7
	Problem behaviors	7
	Attention-related difficulties	6
	Excessive use	3
	Exposure to inappropriate content	2
Replacing screen routines with social alternatives and family limit-setting	Supporting children's social skills	8
	Supporting parents' limit-setting skills	6
	Informing parents	5
Awareness-oriented counseling practice and limits of current support	Collaborating with teachers	2
	Informing parents	8
	Informing teachers	6
	Informing children	6
	Home visits	1
	Assessment and evaluation activities	1

Note. Frequencies (f) indicate the number of participants whose responses included each code at least once; Each code was counted once per participant, even when the participant referred to the same idea several times; Codes were not mutually exclusive; therefore, frequencies should be interpreted as descriptive indicators of breadth and emphasis across participants rather than statistical comparisons or measures of theme importance; Low-frequency codes, such as home visits and assessment and evaluation activities (f = 1), reflect isolated reported practices and should not be overemphasized

To protect confidentiality, participants' names and identifying information were removed from the transcripts. Participant codes such as P1, P2, and P3 were used in the reporting of findings. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of interviews with school counselors regarding problematic technology use among preschool children. The analysis yielded four interpretive themes: technology use as a developmentally sensitive and family-mediated concern; recognizing problematic use through social, behavioral, and attentional indicators; replacing screen routines with social alternatives and family limit-setting; and awareness-oriented counseling practice and the limits of current support. **Table 3** provides a descriptive overview of the themes and codes.

Technology Use as a Developmentally Sensitive and Family-Mediated Concern

The first theme concerned school counselors' perceptions of technology use among preschool children. Most participants expressed concern about children's technology use during the preschool years. Their concerns mainly focused on the possible negative effects of excessive or uncontrolled screen exposure on children's developmental domains, including attention, language, social interaction, play, and self-regulation.

Participants frequently stated that technology use should be limited during early childhood. They did not necessarily reject technology completely, but they emphasized that young children should not be exposed to digital devices for long periods or without adult supervision. One counselor explained this concern as follows:

"For me, children at this age should not be left with a phone or tablet for a long time. When it is not controlled, we see problems in attention, language and play, and sometimes in how they communicate with others. Technology can be in their lives, but an adult should guide it and set limits." (P3)

This quotation reflects a common view among participants: technology was not seen as inherently harmful, but its use during early childhood was considered risky when it was excessive, unsupervised, or developmentally inappropriate. Several counselors described early childhood as a sensitive period in which

children need interaction, movement, play, and communication rather than long periods of passive screen exposure.

Some participants also referred to problematic technology use as an emerging risk among preschool children. They reported that some children had personal access to smartphones or tablets, used the Internet independently, downloaded games, or spent extended periods on digital devices. One participant described this situation in relation to parent consultations:

“Some parents say the child has an old phone at home and uses it like his or her own phone. The child downloads games, watches videos and spends a long time on it. When this continues during the day and even at night, I see it as a serious risk.” (P5)

Family-based factors were also emphasized. Participants commonly stated that children’s technology use was closely connected to parental routines, family stress, work demands, and difficulties in setting limits. Several counselors noted that digital devices were often used to keep children quiet, calm them, or occupy them while parents completed household responsibilities. One counselor explained:

“In many homes, the phone is used to keep the child occupied. Parents say, ‘I am tired after work’ or ‘I need the child to stay quiet while I cook.’ So I do not see it only as the child’s problem. It is also part of the family’s daily routine.” (P1)

Although the dominant view was cautious or risk-oriented, not all participants perceived technology use as harmful in itself. A small number of counselors stated that technology could be beneficial when used purposefully, appropriately, and under adult guidance. One participant expressed this more balanced view:

“I would not say technology must be completely banned. We are living in a digital age. It can be useful if the child uses it in the right way, with limits and with an adult nearby. The real issue is how it is used, how long it is used, and why it is used.” (P7)

Overall, this theme shows that school counselors generally perceived preschool children’s technology use through a developmental risk lens. However, their views were not fully anti-technology. Rather, participants emphasized the importance of age-appropriate, limited, supervised, and purposeful use. They also understood problematic technology use as closely connected to family routines and parental mediation.

Behavioral Patterns Associated With Problematic Technology Use

The second theme focused on the behavioral patterns that school counselors associated with problematic technology use among preschool children. Participants most frequently referred to weakened social skills, problem behaviors, attention-related difficulties, excessive use, and exposure to inappropriate content.

The weakening of social skills was one of the most commonly reported patterns. Counselors observed that some children had difficulty initiating play, sustaining play, developing peer relationships, and engaging creatively with others. One counselor described this observation in relation to children’s play behaviors:

“In preschool, children are expected to play, make up games and join their friends. But some children struggle even to start a game or keep playing with others. They may stay by themselves or wait for an adult to tell them what to do. When we speak with the family, we sometimes hear that the child spends a lot of time with screens at home.” (P2)

This finding suggests that counselors often recognized problematic technology use through children’s social participation and play behaviors. However, participants did not always present technology as the sole cause. Some stated that weak play skills or limited peer interaction should be evaluated together with the child’s broader developmental and family context.

Problem behaviors were another important pattern. Participants reported that some children cried, became angry, or showed aggressive reactions when phones, tablets, or cartoons were removed. These reactions were interpreted as signs that children had difficulty tolerating limits around technology use. One counselor explained:

"Families usually come to us when they feel they cannot set limits anymore. They say, 'When we take the phone, the child cries, shouts or gets very angry.' For me, that reaction when the device is taken away is as important as the number of hours." (P4)

In this sense, problematic technology use was not described only in terms of duration. Participants also focused on children's emotional and behavioral responses when access to digital devices was restricted. This shows that counselors interpreted problematic use through its functional effects on children's self-regulation and family interactions.

Attention-related difficulties were also commonly mentioned. Counselors stated that children who were heavily exposed to technology sometimes showed short attention spans, difficulty following classroom rules, and challenges in adapting to classroom expectations. One participant described this pattern as follows:

"Some children cannot stay with an activity for long. They may have difficulty following classroom rules or listening to the teacher even for a short time. Of course, we cannot say this is only because of technology. But if there is heavy screen use at home, I take it as one possible factor." (P6)

This quotation illustrates the cautious way in which some participants interpreted attention-related concerns. They associated these difficulties with problematic technology use but also acknowledged that such behaviors may have multiple explanations.

Some participants described excessive and uncontrolled use as another visible behavioral pattern. They explained that parents often approached them with concerns such as "my child plays too much with the phone," "my child spends too much time on the tablet," or "my child does not leave the television." One counselor stated:

"The first complaint from families is usually, 'He wants the phone all the time,' or 'She watches cartoons for too long.' Sometimes they say the child does not want to leave the television. These complaints usually come when the family feels they have lost control." (P8)

Finally, a small number of counselors raised concerns about children's exposure to inappropriate content. Although this code appeared less frequently, it is important because preschool children may not have the developmental capacity to understand, evaluate, or emotionally process unsuitable digital content. One participant explained:

"Sometimes the problem is not only the time spent with the device. It is also what the child is watching. If there is no adult supervision, preschool children can easily see videos or games that are not suitable for their age." (P5)

Taken together, this theme suggests that school counselors recognize problematic technology use through observable changes in children's social, emotional, behavioral, and attentional functioning. The findings also show that counselors rely on both school-based observations and parent reports when identifying possible concerns. Importantly, participants' accounts point to a functional understanding of problematic technology use: they were concerned not only with screen time itself, but with how technology use appeared to affect children's play, relationships, emotional regulation, and daily routines.

Replacing Screen Routines Through Social Alternatives and Family Limit-Setting

The third theme concerned how school counselors approached cases of problematic technology use. Their responses mainly focused on supporting children's social skills, developing parents' limit-setting skills, informing parents, and collaborating with teachers. These approaches were often described in response to the case scenario presented during the interviews.

The most common approach was to support children's social skills and increase their engagement in non-digital activities. Participants suggested that children should be guided toward hobbies, play, art, music, movement, and other activities based on their interests and developmental needs. One counselor explained:

"First, I would try to learn what the child enjoys apart from technology. Maybe drawing, music, moving around, or another kind of play. If we find something the child really enjoys outside the screen, reducing screen time becomes more possible." (P3)

This view suggests that counselors did not conceptualize intervention as simply removing devices. Instead, they emphasized replacing screen-based routines with meaningful alternatives that support children's social, emotional, and developmental needs.

Another important approach was helping parents develop limit-setting skills. Counselors emphasized that families need guidance on how to set clear, consistent, and gradual limits around technology use. Participants generally stated that sudden or harsh restrictions may increase conflict and resistance. One counselor described a gradual approach:

"I would tell the family not to take the phone away suddenly and expect the child to accept it. Limits need to be gradual and consistent. For example, they can first spend time with the child, do something together, and then reduce screen time step by step." (P1)

This quotation reflects the family-centered nature of counselors' approaches. Participants recognized that preschool children need adult support to regulate technology use and that parents may need practical strategies for setting boundaries without escalating conflict.

Participants also described parent education as an important part of their approach. They stated that parents should be informed about the possible developmental effects of problematic technology use, the importance of the 0-6 age period, and the value of real play and quality parent-child interaction. One participant explained:

"With parents, I would explain why the preschool years are important and how too much technology may affect development. But I would not only warn them. I would also suggest real games, shared time and some screen-free routines at home." (P6)

This finding shows that counselors viewed parents as central actors in both the emergence and prevention of problematic technology use. Parent education was not limited to warning families about risk; it also included guiding them toward healthier routines and interactions.

Collaboration with teachers was mentioned less frequently but remained important. Some counselors stated that they would organize meetings with teachers to discuss technology use and plan activities that support children's social adaptation. One counselor described teacher collaboration as follows:

"I would also speak with the classroom teacher, because the teacher sees the child with friends and during daily routines. Together, we can plan activities that help the child join games, talk with friends and participate more." (P4)

In addition, some participants emphasized the need to evaluate family dynamics when working with children who show technology-related problems. Counselors stated that children's anger, resistance, or emotional reactions around technology may be connected to parenting attitudes, inconsistent boundaries, or broader family interaction patterns. One participant explained:

"If a child reacts with strong anger when the phone or tablet is limited, I would also look at the boundaries at home. Sometimes the issue is not only technology. It is also about how limits are set, whether parents are consistent, and how they respond when the child gets upset." (P2)

Overall, school counselors' approaches were mainly preventive, developmental, and family-centered. They focused less on clinical intervention and more on strengthening children's social alternatives, improving parental limit-setting, informing families, and increasing cooperation between parents and teachers. This indicates that counselors positioned problematic technology use as an issue requiring support across home and school contexts.

Awareness-Oriented Counseling Practice and Limits of Current Support

The fourth theme focused on the counseling and guidance practices that school counselors reported using in relation to problematic technology use. Most practices were informational and awareness-oriented. These practices targeted parents, teachers, and children.

Parent-oriented information activities were the most frequently reported practice. Counselors stated that they organized seminars, shared brochures, discussed conscious technology use, and provided guidance about play, screen time, and digital content. One participant explained:

"Every year, I try to include conscious technology use in my work with parents. We do seminars, share brochures and talk about how screen use affects children. I also remind parents that children need real play and interaction, not only digital games or videos." (P5)

This quotation shows that parent-oriented activities were generally designed as awareness-raising practices. Counselors aimed to help parents understand the risks of excessive or poorly regulated technology use and encourage healthier routines at home.

Teacher-oriented information and consultation activities were also reported. Some counselors stated that they sent teachers suggestions for traditional games and structured play activities. These activities were intended to help children interact more with one another, build peer relationships, and develop leadership and social skills. One counselor described this practice as follows:

"We support teachers by suggesting games and classroom activities. For example, we recommend traditional games or group activities so children interact more with each other. In this way, we try to strengthen social relationships instead of letting children stay passive." (P1)

This finding suggests that counselors tried to create alternatives to screen-based activities by strengthening play-based and social opportunities within the school environment. Teacher consultation was therefore used not only to address technology use directly, but also to support children's social development more broadly.

Child-oriented information activities were also mentioned. Counselors described using stories, classroom activities, and interactive materials to help children develop awareness of healthy technology use. One counselor explained:

"With children, we use stories, pictures and classroom activities. We do not explain it like we explain it to adults. We try to show them that there should be time for play, friends, sleep and family, not only time for screens." (P7)

Although these child-oriented activities were developmentally adapted, they appeared to focus mainly on awareness rather than individualized counseling or direct intervention. Participants did not provide many examples of structured child counseling or targeted psychoeducational programs for children already experiencing serious difficulties.

Only a small number of participants mentioned home visits and assessment activities. One counselor stated that home visits could help counselors understand family routines more clearly:

"Sometimes talking at school is not enough. A home visit can help us see the child's routine more clearly, how technology is used at home and what kind of support the parents need." (P8)

Another counselor described using a parent survey to understand family technology habits and plan future activities:

"Before planning activities, I prepared a short form for parents about technology use at home. I asked how much time the child spends with screens and how parents use technology. Their answers helped me decide what kind of parent guidance was needed." (P6)

These examples suggest that some counselors attempted to move beyond general awareness activities toward assessment-informed planning. However, such practices were mentioned infrequently. Most reported practices remained at the level of universal information sharing and primary prevention.

Overall, the findings show that school counselors' current practices are concentrated mainly at the level of primary prevention. They provide information, raise awareness, and guide parents, teachers, and children. However, the findings also suggest that more systematic assessment, psychoeducation, counseling, targeted intervention, home-school follow-up, and referral practices may be needed for children who are already at risk or experiencing more serious difficulties related to problematic technology use.

DISCUSSION

This study explored school counselors' perceptions and practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Kayseri, Turkey. The findings showed that counselors generally perceived technology use in early childhood through a risk-oriented but not fully anti-technology lens. They associated problematic technology use with weakened social skills, problem behaviors, attention-related difficulties, excessive use, and exposure to inappropriate content. Their approaches focused mainly on strengthening children's social alternatives, supporting parents' limit-setting skills, informing families, and collaborating with teachers. However, their reported counseling and guidance practices were largely concentrated at the level of information sharing and awareness raising, with fewer examples of systematic assessment, individualized counseling, psychoeducation, or referral practices. This pattern points to a central practice gap between recognizing technology-related concerns and having structured school-based tools to address them.

A key finding was that school counselors viewed technology use in early childhood primarily in relation to developmental risk. Participants expressed concern that excessive or poorly regulated use may affect children's social interaction, attention, language, play, and emotional regulation. This finding is consistent with recent literature showing that the implications of screen use depend not only on duration, but also on the context of use, including content, co-use, background television, caregiver screen use, and age-appropriate guidance (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2024). In this sense, the counselors' views were partly aligned with the current movement in the literature away from a simple "screen time only" perspective toward a broader understanding of screen-use quality and context.

At the same time, the findings suggest that counselors' perceptions were more strongly shaped by the possible negative consequences of technology use than by its developmental or educational potential. This may be understandable because school counselors usually encounter technology use when it has already become a concern for parents, teachers, or children. Unlike early childhood teachers, who may discuss technology as a learning tool, school counselors are more likely to meet families when there are difficulties related to limits, behavior, emotional reactions, or peer relationships. Therefore, their risk-oriented perspective should not necessarily be interpreted as a rejection of technology. Rather, it may reflect the professional context in which technology-related concerns become visible to school counselors.

The findings also highlight the central role of the family in preschool children's technology use. Participants frequently linked problematic technology use to family routines, parental limit-setting difficulties, limited parent-child interaction, and the use of digital devices to keep children occupied or calm. This finding is strongly supported by the interactional theory of childhood problematic media use, which conceptualizes problematic media use as an outcome of interactions among child characteristics, parent practices, family context, and media design (Domoff et al., 2020). From this perspective, problematic technology use should not be understood as an individual child problem alone. Instead, it develops and is maintained through daily routines, reinforcement patterns, parenting practices, emotional regulation demands, and broader family conditions.

This family-centered finding is important for school counseling practice. Counselors in the present study did not only suggest reducing screen time; they emphasized the need to help parents set limits, spend quality time with children, and provide alternative activities. This is consistent with research from Turkey showing that problematic screen exposure among preschool children is associated with multiple family and routine-related factors, including early onset of screen use, lack of parental limits, screen use during meals or before bedtime, limited co-viewing, and low-quality content (Yalçın et al., 2021). It is also consistent with findings that

parenting styles and family practices are related to excessive screen use among preschool children (Çaylan et al., 2021).

Another important finding concerned the behavioral patterns that counselors associated with problematic technology use. Participants most commonly referred to weakened social skills, problem behaviors, and attention-related difficulties. These observations are consistent with Turkish studies reporting associations between excessive screen time and emotional lability, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, and lower psychosocial well-being among preschool children (Ofly et al., 2021; Tezol et al., 2022). However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. The present study does not show that technology use caused these behavioral difficulties. Rather, it shows that school counselors perceive these difficulties as possible indicators of problematic or poorly regulated technology use.

This distinction is important for interpreting the present findings. Preschool children's problem behaviors, attention difficulties, or weak social skills may have multiple developmental, emotional, relational, and environmental explanations. Technology use may be one contributing factor, but it should not be treated as the only cause. Therefore, school counselors' role should include careful assessment of the child's broader developmental and family context. This cautious interpretation helps avoid a simplistic "technology causes problems" argument and instead positions problematic technology use as part of a wider ecological system.

The study also showed that counselors' approaches to problematic technology use were mainly preventive and developmental. They suggested supporting children's social skills, increasing non-digital activities, guiding parents in limit setting, informing families, and collaborating with teachers. These approaches are meaningful because they focus on replacing screen-based routines with developmentally appropriate alternatives rather than simply removing devices. For preschool children, alternatives such as play, art, music, movement, peer interaction, and family activities are essential because they support self-regulation, communication, creativity, and social-emotional development.

However, the findings also reveal a possible gap between awareness-based activities and more structured intervention. Counselors reported many practices such as parent seminars, brochures, classroom awareness activities, and teacher consultation. These are valuable primary prevention practices. Yet only limited examples were reported regarding assessment, individualized intervention, systematic psychoeducation, home-based follow-up, or referral to specialized services. This suggests that current school counseling practices may be more developed at the universal prevention level than at the targeted or intensive support level.

The central analytic contribution of this study is therefore the identification of a practice gap in preschool counseling services. Existing literature has focused mainly on parents, pediatric samples, teachers, and children's screen habits. For example, Kara and Cagiltay (2017) showed how preschool teachers think about technology in early educational settings, while Joung et al. (2023) examined counselors' experiences with problematic smartphone use among children and adolescents. The present study adds a preschool school-counseling perspective by showing that counselors recognize technology-related concerns and engage in awareness raising, but may need clearer screening tools, family guidance protocols, targeted psychoeducational resources, and referral pathways to move beyond general information activities.

In the Turkish context, this finding is also relevant to the developmental and preventive orientation of school counseling and psychological counseling services. The MoNE's (2020) counseling framework positions guidance services as school-based, preventive, developmental, and collaborative. The findings of this study suggest that problematic technology use fits naturally within this framework because it requires cooperation among counselors, teachers, parents, and, when necessary, external specialists.

Overall, this exploratory study offers three practice-based contributions. First, it provides preliminary insight into problematic technology use in early childhood from the perspective of school counselors, a group that has received less attention than parents and pediatric professionals. Second, it suggests that counselors in this local sample interpret problematic technology use through observable developmental and behavioral indicators, especially social skills, problem behaviors, attention, and family limit-setting difficulties. Third, it points to a possible practice gap: school counselors mainly reported awareness-based and primary prevention activities, while more systematic assessment and intervention practices appeared less common in their accounts.

Implications for School Counseling Practice

The findings suggest several implications for preschool counseling and guidance services. First, school counselors may benefit from practical screening and observation tools that help them identify possible signs of problematic technology use without reducing the issue to screen time alone. Such tools could include questions about screen routines, content, co-use, mealtime and bedtime use, emotional reactions when limits are set, parent-child interaction, and children's engagement in play and peer relationships.

Second, parent guidance should focus not only on reducing screen time, but also on helping families create realistic and developmentally appropriate routines. Counselors can support parents in setting consistent limits, introducing gradual changes, increasing co-play and shared activities, avoiding screen use as the main calming strategy, and replacing screen-based routines with social, physical, and creative activities.

Third, teacher collaboration is important. Preschool teachers observe children's play, peer relationships, attention, emotional regulation, and classroom participation. Counselors and teachers can work together to identify children who may need support, strengthen non-digital play opportunities, and design classroom guidance activities on healthy technology habits.

Fourth, schools may need a multi-level approach. At the universal level, counselors can provide awareness activities for all parents, teachers, and children. At the targeted level, they can work more closely with families whose children show early signs of difficulty. At the intensive level, counselors can refer children and families to child mental health, developmental pediatrics, or other specialized services when concerns are severe or persistent.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted with eight school counselors working in preschools and kindergartens in Kayseri, Turkey. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this local context and should not be considered representative of all preschool school counselors in Turkey. Future studies should include participants from different Turkish cities, regions, school types, and socio-economic contexts.

Second, the study relied on counselors' self-reported perceptions and practices. Although this provided valuable insight into their professional experiences, self-report data may be influenced by recall limitations and social desirability. The study did not include direct observation of counseling practices, parent interviews, teacher interviews, or child-level data. Future research could use multiple data sources to examine how counselors', parents', and teachers' perspectives compare.

Third, the interviews lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. Because the interviews were focused on a specific topic and supported by a vignette, they were useful for identifying counselors' main perceptions and reported practices. However, longer interviews or focus groups could provide richer detail about counselors' decision-making processes, challenges, institutional constraints, and training needs.

Fourth, the study used snowball sampling, which was suitable for reaching a specific professional group but may have limited participant diversity and increased the possibility that participants came from similar professional networks. Future research could use maximum variation sampling to include counselors with different levels of experience, institutional backgrounds, and training.

Fifth, the verbatim transcripts were not returned to participants for member checking. Although the research team checked transcripts against audio recordings and used direct quotations to support credibility, future studies may strengthen trustworthiness by asking participants to review transcripts or summary interpretations. In addition, low-frequency codes in the findings, such as home visits and assessment activities, should be interpreted as isolated reported practices rather than common patterns across counselors.

Finally, this study did not evaluate the effectiveness of school counseling interventions. Future studies could design and test school-based parent guidance programs, teacher consultation models, or psychoeducational interventions for problematic technology use in preschool children.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examined school counselors' perceptions and practices regarding problematic technology use among preschool children in Kayseri, Turkey. The findings showed that counselors generally perceived preschool children's technology use through a developmental risk lens, particularly when use was excessive, poorly regulated, or associated with family limit-setting difficulties. Counselors associated problematic technology use with weakened social skills, problem behaviors, attention-related difficulties, excessive use, and exposure to inappropriate content.

The study also showed that counselors' responses were mainly family-centered, preventive, and awareness-oriented. They emphasized supporting children's social alternatives, helping parents set limits, informing families and teachers, and encouraging non-digital activities. However, the findings suggest that current practices may remain largely at the level of primary prevention. More systematic assessment, targeted psychoeducation, individualized counseling, family consultation, and referral pathways may be needed for children who show more serious or persistent difficulties.

By focusing on school counselors, this study offers a preliminary school-based perspective on problematic technology use in early childhood. The findings suggest that problematic technology use is not only a home-based or pediatric concern but may also become visible in preschool settings through children's play, peer relationships, emotional regulation, attention, and classroom behavior. Strengthening school counselors' role in this area may support earlier identification, more effective parent guidance, stronger teacher collaboration, and healthier technology routines for preschool children.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening question: Could you briefly describe your role as a school counselor/psychological counselor in your preschool or kindergarten?

1. What are your general views about preschool children's use of digital technologies such as television, tablets, smartphones, digital games, or online videos?
2. In your opinion, when does technology use become problematic for preschool children?
3. What kinds of child behaviors or classroom patterns do you associate with problematic technology use?
4. Vignette: A parent of one of your students visits the school and asks to meet with you. The parent says that the child watches television and plays with a tablet every day and asks for your advice. What would you advise this parent?
5. How would you work with the child, if needed, in such a case?
6. How would you guide or support the parents?
7. How would you collaborate with the classroom teacher?
8. What school-based guidance, prevention, or awareness activities do you use or recommend regarding children's technology use?
9. In which situations would you consider additional assessment, follow-up, or referral to another specialist?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about problematic technology use among preschool children?

