



Young Children and YouTube: A global phenomenon

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Young Children and YouTube:

A global phenomenon

In the 1960s and 1970s, the most popular device for media viewing was television.

The 1980s were dominated by the Video Home System (VHS) technology, which allowed users to watch pre-recorded material in their homes and make their own recordings of television shows. In the 1990s,

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portable camcorders made original video production accessible, and DVDs (Digital Versatile Discs) became the standard by the 2000s. By 2005, with the proliferation of the World Wide Web, the

concept of video was transformed with the launch of the YouTube platform.

YouTube's Popularity With Young Children

A recent report surveyed 3,154 families and showed that 80% of children age 0-7 use YouTube, and 59% use YouTube Kids. While most young children are likely using their parents' accounts, 11% have their own YouTube accounts and 16% have registered with the YouTube Kids app. On average, children spend 1.39 hours each weekday and 1.47 hours each weekend day viewing YouTube videos, which are approximately 4 to 9 minutes in length. The topics most likely to be viewed by children include: play, toys, nursery rhymes, television interests, funny videos, and animal videos.¹

Children age 3 years and older are increasingly using YouTube to view a range



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of videos, such as humorous cartoons. The YouTube Kids app has had over 10 million downloads worldwide. The DisneyCollector YouTube channel has had over 11 billion views and over 11 million subscribers.

YouTube is easily accessible by children and has low barriers for participation with a simple and intuitive interface design. The multimodal features (e.g., audio, text, special effects, animated characters) capture children's attention. It can be accessed through any digital device (e.g., tablet, phone, laptop) connected to the internet and the simple home page layout allows for fast access to content by searching key terms.

What Are Children Watching on YouTube?

A popular genre of video on YouTube are “unboxing” videos (e.g., DisneyCollector channel) that show a product being opened (e.g., Kinder surprise egg). This perhaps can be as exciting as opening their own presents. The “unboxing” videos have evolved into reviews of products for children, such as FunToyzCollector. These reviews of toys from a range of commercial companies (e.g., Pixar, Nickelodeon, Claymation) have gained widespread attention and popularity among young children.

Popular culture videos that feature children's favorite characters (e.g., Peppa Pig, Dora the Explorer, Disney Princesses, and Minions) also dominate YouTube content. Also popular are rhyme genre videos for young children. The Cocomelon Nursery Rhymes channel has 45 million subscribers and their “Wheels on the Bus” video has had 65 million views. The Chu Chu TV Nursery Rhymes and Kids Songs Channel has over 20 million subscribers and their Baba Black Sheep video has gained over 480 million views.

How Are Children Interacting With YouTube?

Researchers studied how 55 children in India (age 6 to 24 months) interacted with song and dance videos on YouTube and how the children's behavior changed over time.² The researchers visited the children's homes every

This type of peer-peer modeling and sharing of information appeals to young children, as they can engage with the presenter and learn new skills and information.

six months to observe them watching YouTube for 10 minutes. At six months of age, the children would imitate dance movements when they heard the music; at 18 to 24 months old, they began pressing the buttons on the tablet screen more often. From 12 to 24 months old, the children began to identify characters (e.g., cartoon or fairy-tale characters) they saw on the screen. By 2 years old, the children were reported to enjoy viewing advertisements of familiar food products (e.g., baby food, biscuits).

In a preschool classroom observation,³ a YouTube video about a family's weekend road trip was used as a positive activity that supported teacher-child conversations

and fostered shared understandings. The researchers stressed the importance of providing opportunities for children to talk about the videos. Teachers' use of gestures and embodied actions further supported children's understanding of the content. Shared viewing of the video and questioning strategies helped children deepen their understandings, share in others' experiences, and make interpretations. With such supports, YouTube videos can be a positive learning tool in the preschool classroom.

Some video presenters are children themselves. Young viewers identify with the children they see on the screen. This type of peer-peer modeling and sharing of information appeals to young children, as they can engage with the presenter and learn new skills and information.

What Are Potential Benefits of YouTube?

Video technology can be used to support learning and be an engaging springboard for classroom activities. Videos can stimulate a range of emotions, such as anger, empathy, sadness, love, and excitement. They can inspire children's play, creativity, and curiosity; help children research and prepare for school projects about a range of exciting and interesting topics (e.g., Vikings, dinosaurs); and offer tutorials for science activities (e.g., making slime, building a volcano).

As they view YouTube videos, children also may begin developing critical media skills about how to make informed choices. In telephone interviews, 110 children were asked questions about their YouTube viewing (e.g., “What kinds of videos do you watch on YouTube? Have you learned anything on YouTube; if so, what was it? Is there anything you don’t like about YouTube?”). Findings indicated that by 14 years of age, children were careful to avoid pop-up advertisements and clickbait. They quickly clicked away from inappropriate content and pressed the dislike button. The children also showed an understanding of commercialization issues and expressed their viewpoints on YouTube celebrities. Overall, these older children demonstrated thoughtfulness and responsibility in their YouTube use.

However, this may not be the case for all children or for younger children, who may need greater adult guidance and support when using YouTube. For younger children, scaffolding by parents, teachers, or caregivers may support development of digital literacy skills as they help children interact with the YouTube interface to select and view videos (e.g., type in search terms in Google or YouTube, tap the YouTube icon application, scroll up and down, skip advertisements, enlarge and reduce the image, fast-forward to a favorite

section of the video, pause the video, and repeat the video).

What Are Concerns About Children’s YouTube Use?

Concerns have been raised about the impact of YouTube viewing on early childhood learning and development, including risks of exposure to commercial advertisements and “disturbing” videos.⁴ YouTube’s algorithms for circulating videos may expose children to distressing content. Popular children’s characters (e.g., Spiderman, Mickey Mouse, Frozen movie characters) may be combined with depictions of violence and inappropriate connotations and posted online with innocent-seeming thumbnail snapshots that do not provide an accurate indication of the content. Strategies are needed to reduce the risks of predatory content and advertisements.

Some commercial content may be deceptively integrated into children’s content, such as in the “unboxing” videos of candy and toys.⁵ Also, pop-up advertisements appear prior to watching many videos that children must view for a period of time before they can choose to skip them. Children do learn to click off the ads or jump to another video to avoid watching an advertisement. A survey of 100 parents reported that 75% were concerned that their children would be exposed to inappropriate content.⁶ Parents should be cautious and critical when selecting YouTube content for their children to view, and greater research into the ethical guidelines for children’s engagement with social media is needed.

To work toward alleviating such risks, YouTube policies recently have been introduced to comply with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) Children’s Privacy Protection Act.⁷ YouTube video creators must set their content as “Made for Kids” or “Not Made for Kids.” If a video is categorized as “Made for Kids,” certain YouTube features are removed, such as the comment functionality, and advertising limitations are enforced. Despite such tighter regulations, further work is needed



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to ensure that YouTube content categorized as “Made for Kids” is designed and created at a high-quality standard that supports early learning.

What Are the Implications of Children Using YouTube?

It is clear that children are using YouTube daily for a wide range of purposes (e.g., researching, creating, curating, sharing, showcasing). The online platform has the potential to benefit early learning by increasing children’s knowledge of the world, supporting their creativity and sharing of ideas, and building up their confidence, voice, and agency. Teachers can use YouTube videos to inspire and motivate young children in their play, creativity, and innovation. For example, children can watch a YouTube video on how to use a recipe to make a cake, then make their own cake with assistance from an adult.

However, despite the potential affordances of new digital technologies, software, and

online platforms, most children are still reported as being consumers rather than producers and creators of digital content. Finding effective ways to support children in becoming competent, creative, and critical consumers and producers (e.g., prosumers) of digital technologies is of key importance in the 21st century.

Selecting Quality YouTube Videos

Key factors that should be considered when selecting YouTube videos for kids are age-appropriateness, content quality, video design features, and potential for the video to support learning outcomes.

- **Age-appropriateness:** The video is suitable for the child’s gender, age, and needs; it appeals to their personal interests; the subject matter is appropriate for children; and the behavior of actors on the screen is positive.

- **Content quality:** Video images and content encourage children to perform or engage in creative and positive activities and the video message, content, and dialogue is easy for children to follow and comprehend.
- **Video design features:** Words, pictures, animations, and graphics are engaging and multimodal, congruent with and accompanied by appropriate audio (e.g., narration, sounds, music, or song).
- **Learning outcomes:** The video supports learning in one or more developmental domains—Cognitive (e.g., literacy, language, numeracy), Social-emotional (e.g., resilience, self-esteem), and Physical (e.g., fine and gross motor skills).

Further research is needed on how to design clear and comprehensive evaluation criteria to help teachers and parents identify positive and negative design features of YouTube videos. The quality and suitability of YouTube for supporting child development and learning also needs to be determined. Evidence-based professional development can help teachers better understand how to use YouTube effectively in the classroom and integrate it into the curriculum and existing teaching and learning practices.

Be Mindful When Using YouTube

It is also important to be mindful of the time children spend viewing YouTube videos. Strict screen time guidelines with a “one-size-fits-all” approach should be reconsidered, taking into account the needs of diverse learners and individual family and child circumstances and backgrounds.⁸ Rather than focusing on the length of time a child is spending on their screen, a deeper and more

differentiated analysis should be conducted into what device is being used, what a child is watching on YouTube (e.g., nursery rhymes, unboxing videos, science tutorials), and how what they are viewing is associated with learning.

Parents can interact with videos alongside their children, performing physical gestures and actions that are demonstrated on the screen (e.g., motions to accompany “Wheels on the Bus”). Parents also can share moral themes and lessons, make links to the real world, regulate screen time, actively set parent controls, and create a personal playlist for children’s interests and learning needs.

It is also recommended that adults act as consistent and positive role models and set rules and goals around YouTube screen time through collaborative family discussion, variations of family schedules to strengthen screen time rules that suit individual family needs, and select quality YouTube videos. Such an approach will provide children with a healthy and balanced “digital diet.”



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What Are Some Practical Strategies for Using YouTube?

Ongoing and constructive conversations with children about what they are watching on YouTube can encourage development of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and reflection. This will help children become more mindful when they are using YouTube and develop a self-regulated approach to monitoring the time they spend on YouTube under the guidance of their parent or teacher. Chatting with children about what they are doing on their tablet and screens also has the potential to foster language skills. This conversational approach can be achieved by applying the 5Ws (Who, What, Where, Why, and When).

- **Who:** “Who are you watching the YouTube video with?” It is important for young children to view their screens in a social context (with peers, family members).
- **What:** “What YouTube video are you watching?” Check that the video is appropriate and of reasonable quality.
- **Where:** “Where are you watching the YouTube video?” Being in a room isolated from others is not recommended. Also, encourage children to change body positions when viewing on mobile device (e.g., lying on their stomachs to vary neck positions).
- **Why:** “Why are you watching that video?” Ensure that they are having a purposeful and meaningful experience.
- **When:** “When are you watching YouTube?” A 15- to 20-minute session is a suitable time frame for watching YouTube videos, and watching at bedtime should be avoided.

Active adult-child conversations and co-viewing with YouTube will support children’s learning and participation in meaningful online and offline activities. With this support, children can build their critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving to become producers rather than just consumers of digital content.

Notes:

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² Yadav, S., Chakraborty, P., Mittal, P., & Arora, U. (2018). Children aged 6–24 months like to watch YouTube videos but could not learn

anything from them. *Acta Paediatrica: Nurturing the Child*, 107, 1461-1466.

³ Davidson, C., Given, L. M., Danby, S., & Thorpe, K. (2014). Talk about a YouTube video in preschool: The mutual production of shared understanding for learning with digital technology. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 76-83.

⁴ Papadamou, K., Papasavva, A., Zannettou, S., Blackburn, J., Kourtellis, N., Leontiadis, I., Stringhini, G., & Sirivianos, M. (2019). *Disturbed YouTube for kids: Characterizing and detecting inappropriate videos targeting young children*. Computer Science: Social and Information Networks.

⁵ Burroughs, B. (2017). *YouTube Kids: The app economy and mobile parenting*. Social Media + Society.

⁶ Jindal, R., & Kanozia, R. (2019). Do YouTube based children channels impact parenting? An exploratory study. *Journal for All Subjects*, 8.

⁷ Google Privacy Policy YouTube Terms of Service: *Upcoming changes to kids content on YouTube.com* <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9383587?hl=en>

⁸ Neumann, M. M. (2015). Young children and screen time: Creating a mindful approach to digital technology. *Australian Educational Computing*, 30(2). Retrieved from <http://journal.acce.edu.au/index.php/AEC/article/view/67>

For Further Reading

Harnessing the Power of YouTube in the Classroom

By Monica Burns

Tips for using YouTube in the classroom, from finding and distributing appropriate content to exploring virtual reality and sharing student work.

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/harnessing-power-youtube-in-classroom-monica-burns>



YouTube in the Classroom: 7 Tips and Best Practices

By Vawn Himmelsbach

Ways YouTube can be incorporated into the classroom to increase student motivation when incorporated into student-centered learning activities.

<https://tophat.com/blog/youtube-in-the-classroom/>

