

From “How Long” to “How”: Stewardly Presence as a Theological Framework for Christian Early Childhood Education in the Screen Age

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Abstract

Discourse on Christian early childhood education in Indonesia has tended to frame screen technology as a threat to be managed primarily through duration limits and supervision. This article argues that such an approach narrows the very health guidelines it invokes, which also emphasize content quality, co-viewing, sleep, and physical activity, and that it overlooks the direction of contemporary research, which has increasingly moved from asking whether screens are harmful to examining the conditions under which their use becomes problematic. Through an integrative literature review of empirical studies relevant to early childhood, this article shows that screen effects are partly mediated by sleep and physical activity (in school-aged children) and are associated with disrupted joint attention and parental technofence in early childhood, so that they cannot be explained by screen exposure alone. Empirical research, however, cannot determine the normative criteria by which a context of use should be considered good for child development. Drawing on a mutual critical correlation approach, this article places these findings in dialogue with 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, Genesis 1:28, Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Luke 2:52, Proverbs 26:4-5, and Philippians 4:6-7, and proposes the concept of stewardly presence, defined through three interrelated criteria: edifying, shared, and wise. This framework shifts theological responsibility from controlling screen duration toward the quality of adult presence that is responsive to children as subjects, and translates it into a practical reflective tool for Christian families, early childhood educators, and church ministries serving children.

Keywords: 1 Corinthians 10:23-24; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; joint attention; screen time; stewardly presence

Abstrak

Wacana pendidikan Kristen anak usia dini di Indonesia cenderung memperlakukan teknologi layar sebagai ancaman yang terutama dikelola melalui pembatasan durasi dan pengawasan. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pendekatan tersebut mempersempit pedoman kesehatan anak yang dirujuknya, yang juga menekankan kualitas konten, pendampingan, tidur, dan aktivitas fisik, serta kurang menangkap arah riset kontemporer yang semakin bergerak dari pertanyaan "apakah layar berbahaya" menuju "dalam kondisi apa layar berbahaya". Melalui tinjauan literatur integratif atas studi empiris yang relevan bagi anak usia dini, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa dampak layar sebagian dimediasi oleh tidur dan aktivitas fisik (pada anak usia sekolah), serta berkaitan dengan terganggunya joint attention dan technofence orang tua pada anak usia dini, sehingga tidak dapat dijelaskan hanya oleh keberadaan layar itu sendiri. Namun, riset empiris tidak dapat menyediakan kriteria normatif tentang konteks penggunaan yang baik. Dengan pendekatan korelasi kritis timbal balik, artikel ini membaca temuan tersebut melalui 1 Korintus 10:23-24, Kejadian 1:28, Ulangan 6:6-7, Lukas 2:52, Amsal 26:4-5, dan Filipi 4:6-7, lalu mengusulkan konsep kehadiran penatalayanan dengan tiga kriteria: membangun, bersama, dan ber hikmat. Konsep ini menggeser tanggung jawab teologis dari pengendalian durasi kepada kualitas kehadiran orang dewasa yang responsif terhadap anak sebagai subjek, dan diterjemahkan menjadi alat refleksi praktis bagi keluarga, guru PAUD Kristen, dan pelayanan anak gereja.

Kata kunci: 1 Korintus 10:23-24; joint attention; kehadiran penatalayanan; screen time; Ulangan 6:6-7

INTRODUCTION

Almost every conversation about children and digital devices, whether in the family setting, church counseling, or early childhood education classrooms, eventually comes back to the same question: how much screen use is considered safe? This question has become increasingly pressing in the Indonesian context. In 2025, 42.25% of young children had used mobile phones and 41.02% had accessed the internet, up from 39.71% and 35.57%, respectively, the previous year (BPS, 2025). Yet, among children who use digital devices, fewer than 30% are accompanied by their parents during their use (BPS, 2025). The question may appear responsible because it seeks to establish appropriate limits on children's use of technology. Yet, upon closer examination, it rests on an assumption that is rarely examined critically. It treats screen exposure as a relatively uniform form of exposure with broadly similar effects, making duration the primary variable to regulate. This assumption appears to have also shaped parts of the Christian Religious Education (CRE) discourse in Indonesia concerning digital technology and children. In recurring patterns of argument, digital devices tend to be framed as threats to character formation, spiritual life, and family relationships. Consequently, proposed solutions generally focus on limiting duration, supervision, and scheduling device use (Jelita, 2024). This framework is not entirely misguided, as it arises from pastoral concern for children's development. However, it tends to operate within a logic of quantitative protection. Child protection is primarily understood as reducing the amount of screen exposure, while parental responsibility for digital guidance is often measured by their ability to establish and enforce limits on use.

The problem is that this logic is narrower than the child health guidelines to which it often appeals. Since 2016, the AAP has emphasized not only limits on screen duration but also content quality and adult involvement through co-viewing (Hill et al., 2016). The WHO, meanwhile, places screen-time limits for children under five within a 24-hour framework that also includes physical activity and sleep (Mekhail et al., 2024). Research in recent years has further sharpened this direction. The question is no longer simply whether screens are harmful, but under what conditions screen use may produce adverse effects. A study of 50,231 children and adolescents in the United States found that the association between high screen

exposure and mental health problems was largely related to reduced physical activity and disrupted sleep patterns rather than to screen use alone (Dai & Ouyang, 2026). Among young children, meta-analyses have found relatively weak and heterogeneous associations. They also indicate that most studies have not adequately accounted for the content and context of digital media use (Dutra et al., 2025; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022). Evidence concerning the underlying mechanisms further clarifies the issue. Among toddlers, the concern lies not simply in exposure to screen light but also in disruptions to joint attention, the shared attention between children and adults that plays an important role in language development (Webb & Christakis, 2024). Such disruptions can also occur when the screen is in the hands of parents rather than the child (Beynon et al., 2024; Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings shift the focus from devices to relationships. Digital technology use among children therefore cannot be adequately understood through exposure duration alone but must also be examined in terms of the quality of adult presence and interaction in children's lives.

This shift reveals a gap that has not yet been fully addressed in Indonesian CRE discourse. If the effects of screen use are influenced by its content and context, the next question is normative: what kind of context is conducive to children's development, and what form of adult presence is edifying? Such questions cannot be fully answered through empirical research alone because empirical studies primarily explain relationships, mechanisms, and the conditions under which phenomena occur. Determining what constitutes a good context requires a normative framework that can provide an evaluative basis. At this point, theology has a more substantive role to play. Theology should not be treated merely as a spiritual supplement to scientific findings but as a source of normative criteria for evaluating forms of technology use and relational guidance that support children's flourishing. To the author's knowledge, studies in Indonesian CRE have not yet developed many theological frameworks specifically addressing this need. Existing discussions tend to emphasize restrictions on device use supported by biblical references, but they have not adequately formulated theological criteria derived through engagement with biblical texts and connected to the digital context of early childhood.

Beyond the Indonesian context, Christian reflection on technology in family life

has already moved beyond the question of duration. Crouch (2017) situates technology within the formation of character, particularly wisdom and courage, and translates this framework into ten family commitments, including using screens purposefully and together. Song (2021) combines sociological analysis with theological reflection to show how digital habits shape human relationships with God, others, time, and space, and proposes practices from the Christian tradition as forms of resistance. Both works establish that the quality of presence is a legitimate theological question. However, they leave two gaps for Christian early childhood education. First, their normative criteria are developed primarily through thematic reflection on Christian traditions and practices rather than through exegesis of specific texts explicitly correlated with particular empirical mechanisms such as joint attention or technoference. Second, neither focuses specifically on children aged 0–6. In addressing children, Crouch also retains age-based limits and temporal rhythms, such as delaying the introduction of screens until age ten and establishing one hour without devices each day, one day each week, and one week each year.

This article seeks to address these gaps by proposing that children's development in a digital environment is shaped not primarily by the presence of technology itself but by how adults are present, engaged, and actively manage technology use in relationship with children. The Bible provides several conceptual foundations for developing this understanding. Through an examination of 1 Corinthians 10:23–24, Genesis 1:28, Deuteronomy 6:6–7, Luke 2:52, Proverbs, and Philippians 4:6–7, this article proposes the concept of *stewardly presence* as a theological framework for Christian early childhood education. This framework avoids two opposing approaches to digital guidance: prohibition driven by anxiety and permissiveness arising from adult exhaustion. Instead, stewardly presence is oriented toward three primary criteria. Technology use is *edifying* when it enriches rather than disrupts children's relationships and development, *shared* when adults are actively and responsively present in children's digital experiences, and *wise* when decisions are based on the child's concrete circumstances rather than uniform rules arising from anxiety. The contribution of this article, therefore, is not merely to shift the question from how long children use technology to how technology is used. It also demonstrates that the question of how has a theological dimension that can be

formulated and defended academically.

METHOD

This article is a theological conceptual study that employs an integrative literature review (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). This approach is not intended to calculate effect sizes, as in a systematic review, but to critically synthesize research findings in order to develop a conceptual framework. Empirical literature was selected purposively based on three criteria. First, studies had to be published between 2019 and 2026. Second, studies had to address children aged 0–6 years or provide a macro-level framework relevant to understanding development within this age group. Third, the sources had to consist of primary studies with robust designs, including large-scale surveys or cohort studies and experimental studies, or systematic reviews and meta-analyses published in reputable journals indexed in international databases. Based on these criteria, six main sources were included in the analysis. These consisted of a mediation study involving 50,231 children and adolescents (Dai & Ouyang, 2026), a meta-analysis of device use among young children (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022), a systematic review of motor development among children aged 0–6 years (Dutra et al., 2025), an experimental study of joint attention among toddlers (Webb & Christakis, 2024), a meta-analysis of parental technology use in the presence of children (Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025), and the ORIGINS cohort study of 12-month-old infants (Beynon et al., 2024). In addition to these six sources, child health guidelines (Brochure & Flyer, 2019; Hill et al., 2016), as well as the study providing the strongest support for a duration-based approach (Madigan et al., 2019), and national data on device use among young children (BPS, 2025) were included as comparative and contextual sources. These sources were not included in the analytical corpus. Instead, they were used to ensure that the model being critiqued was represented fairly and that findings inconsistent with the article's thesis were also considered. Indonesian CRE literature was also examined to identify and map dominant patterns of argument concerning digital technology and children. This literature was not analyzed individually as an object of evaluation but was used to identify conceptual tendencies that provide the background for developing the theological framework proposed in this article.

The approach used to connect empirical findings with biblical texts is mutual critical correlation, as formulated by Tracy (1981) and further developed in practical theology by Browning (1991) and Swinton and Mowat (2016). This approach avoids two forms of reductionism: theology that merely uses biblical passages to confirm scientific findings, and science that is given only theological legitimacy or ornamentation. Within this framework, empirical research and biblical texts are not treated as two separate and closed domains. Empirical findings primarily address descriptive and mechanistic questions concerning how screen use affects children, through which mechanisms, and how strong the observed associations are. Biblical texts, meanwhile, primarily address normative and teleological questions concerning the purposes of children's development. This distinction in function, however, does not imply a separation of authority. As emphasized by Tracy (1981) and Browning (1991), both domains make claims about meaning and truth. Empirical research carries implicit normative assumptions, for example, in determining which domains of development are considered worthy of measurement. Theological interpretation, in turn, makes claims about human beings that can be examined in light of what is known about child development. Correlation therefore proceeds critically in both directions. Empirical findings may demonstrate that an existing theological reading is too narrow, for example, when Deuteronomy 6 is understood only as a basis for scheduling family worship (see the subsection “Shared: Deuteronomy 6:6–7 and Luke 2:52”). Conversely, biblical texts may challenge assumptions embedded in empirical research. These include the assumption that children's development can be fully mapped through cognitive, language, motor, and social domains without a relational-spiritual dimension (see the discussion of Luke 2:52), or the assumption that heterogeneous findings represent a deficiency that should be resolved through a single universally applicable safe limit (see the subsection “Wise”). Structurally, the article also follows the four tasks of practical theology proposed by Osmer (2011): the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks. These are reflected respectively in the mapping of findings, analysis of mechanisms, formulation of theological criteria, and implications for Christian families and early childhood education.

The reading of biblical texts follows exegetical principles that take into account

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literary context, original vocabulary, and the history of interpretation through the use of recognized critical commentaries. This approach also avoids proof texting, namely, using biblical texts in isolation from their contexts to support predetermined conclusions. Each text serving as a basis for the argument is first examined in light of its context and original intent before being correlated with empirical findings. Correlation is undertaken only insofar as such a reading can be justified on the basis of the text's intended meaning. The scope of the study also requires clarification. The empirical findings used in this article primarily demonstrate associative relationships and do not, in themselves, establish causal relationships. Moreover, most of the studies were conducted outside Indonesia, so their application to Christian families and early childhood education institutions in Indonesia requires caution. Accordingly, the framework developed in this article is evaluative and heuristic rather than prescriptive. It is intended as a conceptual tool for assessing practices of digital guidance and as a basis for further empirical research in the context of Christian families and early childhood education in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From “Whether” to “Under What Conditions”?

The paradigm shift in research on children and screen use has not occurred because previous findings have been entirely disproven. Rather, it has emerged because the questions guiding research have changed. In the late 1990s, pediatric guidelines were still formulated primarily within a dose-response framework, in which the amount or duration of exposure was regarded as the main factor determining its effects. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2011), for example, recommended that children under two years of age should not watch television. More recent guidelines have retained duration limits but placed them within a broader framework. The AAP (2016) emphasizes content quality and adult involvement through co-viewing, while the WHO (Brochure & Flyer, 2019) integrates screen-time limits into a 24-hour framework that includes physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep, while also recommending shared reading and storytelling with caregivers. Duration limits also have an empirical basis that cannot be disregarded. A longitudinal cohort study of 2,441 children in Canada found that greater screen time at 24 and 36

months predicted lower scores on developmental screening tests at 36 and 60 months, whereas the reverse direction was not observed (Madigan et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of 42 studies on language development further revealed both sides of the relationship. The quantity of screen use was negatively associated with children's language abilities, whereas educational programs and co-viewing with caregivers were positively associated with language development (Madigan et al., 2019).

The concern of this article, therefore, is not with child health guidelines themselves but with how these guidelines are received and applied in church and school practices. In such applications, duration limits are often detached from the broader framework in which they were developed. As a result, a figure such as “one hour” may function as a single measure of effective digital guidance, while content quality, adult presence, sleep, and physical activity receive comparatively less attention (Hia et al., 2024). Duration remains a meaningful variable. What is inadequate is treating it as the only variable. The following four groups of findings demonstrate why. The issue is not that screens have no effects on children, but that those effects are shaped by conditions, mechanisms, content, and contexts of use that cannot be adequately explained through duration alone.

First Layer: Effects Mediated by What Screen Use Displaces

The first layer concerns effects that operate through mediating factors rather than through screen exposure alone. A study of 50,231 children and adolescents aged 6–17 years using data from the 2020–2021 National Survey of Children's Health found strong associations between screen use and several mental health problems. Screen use of four hours or more per day was associated with a 61% higher risk of depression, a 45% higher risk of anxiety, a 24% higher risk of behavioral problems, and a 21% higher risk of ADHD. These associations remained after demographic factors were controlled for (Dai & Ouyang, 2026). However, a parallel mediation analysis using structural equation modeling in the same study showed that part of these associations operated through other factors. Reduced physical activity accounted for approximately 30–39% of the associations, irregular sleep schedules for 18–26%, and short sleep duration for 3–7%. Because the sample consisted entirely of participants aged 6–17 years, these findings cannot be directly

applied to early childhood. Their relevance to children aged 0–6 is therefore extrapolative and rests on the underlying mechanism. If screens affect children partly through what screen use displaces, the same issue may be even more significant in early childhood, when sleep and active movement are fundamental developmental needs. The WHO guidelines (2024) operate according to a similar logic, and a meta-analysis of toddlers and preschool-aged children likewise found that significant associations emerged particularly in relation to sleep (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022).

These findings suggest that some of what is described as the harm of screen use is related to reduced physical activity and disrupted sleep patterns. Both conditions can occur without screen use, and neither necessarily occurs whenever children use screens. The issue, therefore, is not simply the presence of screens but what screen use displaces in children's lives. The research question consequently shifts from how long children spend in front of screens to what is lost when children's time is spent looking at screens.

Second Layer: Weak Signals and Inadequately Measured Contexts in Early Childhood

The second layer concerns early childhood, where signals of developmental effects are relatively weak and the context of use has not been adequately measured. When research focuses specifically on children aged 0–6 years, the available evidence further demonstrates the limitations of the dose-response model. A meta-analysis of mobile phone and tablet use among toddlers and preschool-aged children, based on a systematic review of 26 studies, 19 of which were included in the meta-analysis, found a significant but weak association between device use and overall child development. A significant association was found for sleep, but not for psychosocial or cognitive outcomes (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022).

More fundamental to evaluating the earlier model are the methodological findings. Most of the studies reviewed did not adequately account for the content or context of device use. A similar pattern appears in a systematic review of motor development among children aged 0–6 years. Of the seven studies involving 1,339 participants, four reported negative associations, three indicated possible benefits for fine motor development, and one found no meaningful association. These findings

suggest that the relationship between screen use and motor development is complex and may be influenced by the context, frequency, and duration of use (Dutra et al., 2025). Such heterogeneity does not in itself indicate a failure of research. Rather, it is an important empirical finding because it shows that treating screens as a single category is insufficient to explain the mechanisms that influence child development.

Third Layer: Loss of Shared Attention and the Role of Content Characteristics

The third layer concerns mechanisms related to the loss of shared engagement and shaped by the characteristics of content. The underlying mechanism is evident in an experimental study of 63 toddlers aged 18–32 months. When toddlers played a commercial game on a tablet, they responded less frequently to bids for joint attention, referring to situations in which children and adults direct their attention toward the same object. They also showed slower responses to behavioral requests (Webb & Christakis, 2024).

Two aspects of the study design are important for understanding the paradigm shift. First, negative effects were observed during the use of commercial games but not during video viewing or digital toy play on the same tablet device. This finding suggests that the characteristics of the device alone cannot explain the effects observed. The type of activity and the form of interaction created by the content also shape children's experiences. Second, the researchers connected these findings to a more specific interactional mechanism. Touchscreen use may reduce shared engagement because the objects children attend to and the activities they perform cannot always be observed by adults nearby. Yet joint attention is an important foundation for language development. The concern, therefore, is not simply a reduction in interaction time but a reduction in opportunities to establish shared attention between children and adults. At this point, the problem of screen use becomes increasingly clear as a matter of relational quality rather than merely a characteristic of the device.

Fourth Layer: Screens in Parents' Hands and the Conditions of Adult Presence

The fourth layer concerns screens in parents' hands and the conditions of adults who accompany children. If the effects of screen use are closely related to

relationships, then adults' use of digital devices in children's presence is as relevant as children's own screen use. Empirical findings support this direction. A meta-analysis of parental technology use in the presence of children, or technofence, found significant associations with lower cognitive and prosocial development, lower attachment quality, increased internalizing and externalizing problems, and increased screen use among children (Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025). These findings indicate that the effects of technology are related not only to what children do in front of screens but also to how the presence of digital devices alters patterns of interaction between parents and children.

The ORIGINS cohort study of 12-month-old infants provides a broader perspective. Infants' use of touchscreen devices showed only a weak association with developmental scores, whereas the mental health conditions of both parents emerged as stronger factors in explaining variation in child development. Based on these findings, the researchers argued that the term screen time is no longer sufficient to capture the whole issue. Attention needs to shift toward the context and content of use, including whether parents and infants use or watch media together (Beynon et al., 2024). Thus, the locus of the problem is no longer located primarily in the screen as a device but in the conditions of the adults present around the child and in the quality of the relationships they establish through that presence.

From Empirical Findings to a Normative Question

These four layers of findings form a coherent line of argument showing that the effects of screen use are related to what screens displace, such as sleep and physical activity; what they disrupt relationally, such as joint attention; and who uses the device and under what conditions. Across these layers, the variable that becomes increasingly prominent is not simply the duration of exposure but the quality of human presence surrounding the child. Yet empirical research also reaches a methodological boundary at this point. The findings discussed are associative, most studies use cross-sectional designs, and many rely on parental reports. Consequently, the direction of causal relationships cannot yet be determined with certainty.

This limitation becomes more fundamental when research suggests that the

context of use may matter more than duration alone. Such a claim implicitly assumes that some contexts are better than others. Yet empirical research does not, by itself, possess the normative resources to determine what constitutes a good context. Questions concerning what kind of presence supports children's development and what forms of engagement can be considered educational extend beyond empirical measurement. Research can identify and compare the characteristics of particular contexts, but judging whether a context is good requires a normative framework. This is where the theological question becomes relevant. The normative gap identified here provides the space that the following section seeks to address through theological reflection.

Theological Criteria: Edifying, Shared, and Wise

If empirical research stops at the conclusion that the context of use matters more than duration, theology can take the argument further by asking the normative question of what kinds of contexts should be considered conducive to children's development. This section proposes three criteria, each derived from one primary text and one supporting text, with additional texts from the same biblical books used as further support where necessary. The three criteria are not selected merely because they correspond to empirical findings. Rather, they are selected because each text contains an ethical principle that, within its own context, moves beyond a simple logic of what is permitted or prohibited. Instead, these texts direct evaluation toward the purpose of an action, the relationships it forms, and the wisdom required for its application.

Edifying: 1 Corinthians 10:23–24 and Genesis 1:28

In 1 Corinthians 10:23, Paul quotes a slogan that had circulated among the Corinthian believers, *panta exestin*, meaning “everything is permissible.” Paul does not directly reject the slogan. Instead, he places it within a broader framework of evaluation by introducing two criteria: whether something is *sympherei*, or beneficial, and whether it *oikodomei*, or builds up. Verse 24 further clarifies the direction of this evaluation by stating that one should not seek one's own advantage but the advantage of others. The immediate context concerns food associated with idol

sacrifices. Yet Paul's critique does not stop at the status of a particular practice. It concerns how the community evaluates its freedom in relation to communal life (Fee, 2014; Thiselton, 2000). Paul thus shifts the question from whether an action is permissible to whether it produces good and builds up the lives of others. The criterion of *oikodomē* is both teleological and relational because evaluation is directed not primarily toward an object or action in itself but toward what that action produces within relationships with others.

Applying this criterion to adult-child relationships, however, requires an explicit hermeneutical step. In Paul's letters, *oikodomē* is primarily ecclesial. What is built up is the community, particularly the weaker brother or sister (1 Cor. 8:1, 9–13; 14:3–5, 12, 26). Therefore, this article does not apply *oikodomē* to individual child development as an isolated objective. Its application rests on two analogies. First is a communal analogy. The Christian family can be understood as the smallest community of faith, and Paul himself refers to churches rooted in households (1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15, 19). Thus, criteria governing communal life in the church may be applied analogically to communal life within the family. Second is a structural analogy. In 1 Corinthians 8–10, the criterion of building up is used to evaluate how the stronger party exercises freedom in light of its effects on those who are more vulnerable. A similar structure exists in adult-child relationships, in which adult choices, including choices concerning technology use, shape the developmental conditions of children whose capacities for judgment and choice are still developing. The analogy therefore lies in the relational structure, not in equating children with those who are “weak in faith.” What is built up, then, is not the child as an isolated individual but the child within relationships with adults and the community of faith. In this way, the relational direction of Paul's criterion is preserved.

Genesis 1:28 provides an anthropological foundation for this criterion. The mandate to exercise dominion through the terms *rādā* and *kābaš* has long been debated because it can be read as legitimizing human domination over creation. Yet reading verse 28 in relation to verses 26–27 indicates that this mandate should be understood within the framework of humanity as the *imago Dei*. Human beings are entrusted with governing creation in a way that represents the character of God's rule, rather than merely exploiting creation for their own interests (Middleton, 2005).

From this perspective, human beings are stewards rather than absolute owners. Stewardship therefore requires active involvement in directing the use of creation toward purposes that sustain and support life. This principle neither supports a wholesale rejection of technology nor justifies unrestricted technological use. Technology, as one outcome of human creative capacities, falls within this sphere of responsibility. Borgmann (1984) provides a conceptual framework for clarifying this issue through his distinction between the *device*, which provides results while concealing the processes involved and tends to reduce human engagement, and focal practices and things, which require attention, skill, and shared involvement. From a stewardship perspective, the issue is therefore not simply whether to accept or reject technology, but how its use can be directed so that technology does not displace forms of human engagement that ought to remain central.

The correlation with empirical findings becomes clearer at this point. Webb (2024) shows that disruptions to *joint attention* are not caused simply by the presence of a tablet but are related to the characteristics of content that capture children's attention while simultaneously making their activities less visible to nearby adults. This finding has a conceptual affinity with Borgmann's critique of technology as a *device* that can reduce human engagement. From the perspective of 1 Corinthians 10:23–24, the question is therefore not whether children may use tablets but whether the way tablets are used builds children up in their relationships with others. The first question tends to produce categorical decisions that are applied generally. The second requires contextual evaluation of the purpose, content, relationships, and effects of technology use. Here, the principle of *oikodomē* provides a foundation for the concept of stewardly presence developed in this article.

Shared: Deuteronomy 6:6–7 and Luke 2:52

Deuteronomy 6:6–7 is one of the densest pedagogical texts in the Old Testament. It is therefore also vulnerable to overly narrow interpretations. The command to teach the word repeatedly to children through the term *wəšinnantām* has traditionally been associated with the root *šnn*, meaning to sharpen or hone. This understanding portrays teaching as a process that takes place repeatedly and continuously. Some interpreters connect the term with the root *šnh*, meaning to

repeat. Although these etymological explanations differ, both point toward an understanding of faith formation as a process of repetition within relational proximity rather than as a one-time transmission of information (Block, 2012; McConville, 2002). This becomes even more evident in the structure of verse 7b, which identifies four situations of everyday life: sitting at home, walking along the way, lying down, and getting up. These four expressions form two pairs of merisms, namely the spaces of inside and outside and the times of night and morning, together pointing to the entirety of life's spaces and rhythms (Wright, 1996). Thus, teaching the word is not confined to a particular instructional session but takes place within the everyday life shared by parents and children.

“These words that I am commanding you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise.”

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 KJV

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

Luke 2:52 KJV

However, exegetical integrity requires a limitation in applying this text. The primary focus of Deuteronomy 6 is what is taught, namely the Torah, rather than parental presence as a concept in itself. Presence is better understood as a condition presupposed by the text for such teaching to take place. This presupposition becomes precisely the point of significance when correlated with contemporary research. In the context of Deuteronomy 6, Moses could assume that parents who sat at home with their children were also genuinely present within that relationship. Findings on technoference indicate that such an assumption can no longer always be made in the context of digital life. Parents may be physically present with their children in various everyday situations while their attention is diverted by digital devices, thereby reducing their relational presence (Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025).

Deuteronomy 6 therefore need not be forced into becoming a text about presence. It is more appropriately understood as a text whose implementation presupposes presence. In the context of children aged 0–3 years, the most elementary form of presence that enables language development and interaction is joint attention, namely the capacity of children and adults to direct their attention toward the same object (Webb & Christakis, 2024). When this shared attention is disrupted, what is at stake is not only children's vocabulary development but also one of the earliest relational channels through which faith formation can take place in everyday life.

Luke 2:52 complements the criterion of shared presence through its portrayal of holistic human development. Luke summarizes Jesus' growth by stating that he increased in wisdom (*sophia*), in *hēlikia*, and in favor with God and human beings. This formulation follows a pattern also found in 1 Samuel 2:26 and encompasses cognitive, physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of human development (Bock, 1994). The term *hēlikia* itself is ambiguous because in the New Testament it can refer either to age (John 9:21, 23) or stature (Luke 19:3), and interpreters and translators are not uniform in determining its meaning in Luke 2:52 (Bock, 1994). The argument here does not depend on choosing between these meanings. If *hēlikia* is understood as stature, as reflected in the TB translation, the bodily dimension is explicitly included. If it is understood as age, Luke's formulation still echoes 1 Samuel 2:26, which describes Samuel as “growing” while also increasing in favor with the LORD and with human beings. In either case, the growth described remains holistic and is not limited to cognitive and spiritual dimensions.

This text therefore provides a theological basis for attending to bodily development, including children's sleep and physical activity, without forcing a biblical text from a different historical context into contemporary research findings. The growing child's body cannot be understood merely as a vessel for mental and spiritual life, as though these were the only dimensions relevant to education. Physical growth is part of the broader process of human development, which encompasses wisdom, relationships, and favor. This perspective expands the criterion of stewardly presence because accompanying children is not only about ensuring what they see or learn but also about preserving the relational and physical conditions that enable holistic development.

At this point, the direction of correlation can also be reversed. Instruments commonly used to assess the effects of screens on young children map development through domains such as communication, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, problem-solving, and personal-social development, as in the Ages and Stages Questionnaire used by Madigan et al. (2019). Such mapping is legitimate and useful within its methodological limits. However, when read through Luke 2:52, it also presupposes that child development can be measured without the dimension of *charis* before God and human beings, namely growth within relationships that cannot be reduced to personal-social skills. The text does not invalidate empirical findings but reminds us that what is not measured is not thereby unimportant. Consequently, the absence of measurable negative effects within these domains is not sufficient to conclude that a particular screen-use practice contributes to the child's development as a whole.

Wise: Proverbs and Philippians 4:6–7

The Book of Proverbs consistently rejects an understanding of wisdom as a set of rules that can be applied mechanically. This is particularly evident in Proverbs 26:4–5. The prohibition against answering a fool according to his folly is immediately followed by the instruction to answer a fool according to his folly. These two statements are not placed side by side by accident. Their contrast indicates that wisdom requires the ability to read a situation and determine an appropriate response rather than applying a single rule uniformly to every circumstance (Longman III, 2006; Waltke, 2005). Proverbs 22:6 reinforces this individual dimension through the phrase *'al-pî darkô*, which can be understood as “according to the way appropriate to him” or “according to his own way.” Some interpreters regard this expression as a basis for an approach to education that attends to the uniqueness of the child as a concrete person, although this interpretation remains debated and some scholars identify a possible ironic nuance in the verse (Fox, 2009). Regardless of this debate, the basic direction of Proverbs indicates that educators are required not only to know rules but also to possess *ḥokmâ*, enabling them to apply knowledge appropriately according to the situation. In the Aristotelian tradition, this capacity has a conceptual affinity with *phronesis*, or practical wisdom in

determining the appropriate course of action within a particular circumstance.

Train up a child in the way he should go: And when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6 KJV

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7 KJV

The correlation with empirical findings clarifies the function of the wise criterion. The heterogeneity of research on screen use among young children, including relatively weak associations, inconsistent findings, and dependence on the context of use (Dutra et al., 2025; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022), is often viewed as a limitation of science in providing definitive answers. From the perspective of Proverbs, however, such heterogeneity can be understood differently. Differences across findings are consistent with the reality that children develop under different conditions, with varying family characteristics, relational patterns, and contexts of technology use. Parents' desire to identify a single number that can serve as a safe limit for every child may therefore represent an attempt to find a certain rule in a domain that requires contextual judgment. In this sense, the perspective of Proverbs not only responds to parental uncertainty but also challenges an assumption that can be implicit in how research and guidelines are interpreted: that heterogeneity in findings is a deficiency that must ultimately be resolved through a single number rather than a reflection of the developmental reality that requires contextual judgment. The wise criterion does not mean disregarding limits or assuming that all forms of technology use are acceptable. Rather, wisdom requires the ability to determine when a particular use is edifying, when it should be limited, and when it should be discontinued based on the child's concrete circumstances and relationship with adults.

Philippians 4:6–7 directs attention to the inner condition of parents as the subjects who exercise this stewardship. This correlation must be formulated carefully because the available empirical findings do not demonstrate that parental anxiety causally produces poor developmental outcomes in children. The evidence more

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appropriately indicates that parents' perceptions of problematic device use have a stronger association with developmental outcomes than duration of use itself (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022). Another study also found that parental mental health was a stronger factor than infant screen use in explaining variation in developmental outcomes (Beynon et al., 2024). These findings are sufficient to support the more limited conclusion that parental conditions constitute part of the context that needs to be considered in guiding children's digital experiences.

In Philippians 4:6–7, Paul exhorts the community not to be dominated by anxiety through the term *merimnaō* and directs them toward prayer and thanksgiving. The result is described through the term *phroureōsei*, which carries the sense of guarding or keeping watch, portraying the peace of God as something that guards the hearts and minds of believers (Fee, 1995). This exhortation should not be reduced to an emotional-management technique for parents. Within the framework of this article, the text is better understood as a portrayal of a spiritual condition that enables a person to face circumstances with calmness and sound judgment. Parents dominated by anxiety may be driven toward disproportionate responses, either through excessive prohibition or through permissiveness resulting from exhaustion. By contrast, a calmness rooted in trust in God creates space for clearer judgment. In this sense, peace does not replace *phronesis* but creates the spiritual condition in which practical wisdom can operate in everyday decisions concerning children and technology.

Stewardly Presence: Synthesis and Implications

The three criteria can be synthesized into a single concept referred to as *stewardly presence*. This concept refers to the way adults manage technology around children while avoiding two opposing extremes: prohibition driven by anxiety and permissiveness arising from exhaustion. These extremes are replaced by active engagement, in which the quality of practice is assessed not primarily by the success of limiting screen duration but by the ability to preserve the quality of relationships and shared engagement with children. The concept encompasses three interrelated criteria. Screen use is considered *edifying* when technology enriches rather than disrupts children's relationships with those around them. It is considered *shared*

when adults are actively and responsively present in children's interactions with technology, including responding to children's initiatives rather than merely being physically present in the same space. It is considered *wise* when decisions take into account the child's concrete circumstances and the situation at hand and are made from a relatively calm state of mind rather than from uniform rules shaped by anxiety. Thus, the first criterion provides the direction and purpose, the second determines the form of engagement, and the third provides the mode of decision-making.

The strength of this concept lies in shifting the subject who bears responsibility. Within a paradigm of quantitative protection, the child becomes the primary object of regulation, while parents are positioned as those who supervise and limit the child's use. Within the framework of stewardly presence, attention is directed first to adults, particularly to how they manage their own attention, use of digital devices, and anxiety. This shift is not merely a theological consequence but also corresponds with empirical findings showing that the problem of technology use does not stop at the screen in the child's hands. It also concerns screens in parents' hands and the condition of parents who accompany their children. Three major implications follow from this synthesis.

Shifting attention toward adults does not mean treating children as passive objects who merely need to be protected. Contemporary theology of childhood reminds us that the Christian tradition views children more complexly, not only as those who require guidance but also as whole persons created in the image of God and even as examples of faith for adults (Bunge, 2006, bdk. Mrk. 10:13–16). Luke himself, shortly before the summary of Jesus' development in 2:52, portrays twelve-year-old Jesus listening, asking questions, and responding among the teachers (Luke 2:46–47). Empirical findings move in a similar direction. Shared attention is shaped not only by adults' bids for attention but also by children's initiatives, as children point, look, and invite adults to attend to something. Technoference becomes problematic in part because such initiatives may fail to receive a response. Stewardly presence therefore does not merely mean regulating what children experience. It also means responding to children as subjects who participate in shaping relationships, including their relationships with technology. Within this framework, the shared criterion includes adults' willingness to follow the direction of

children's attention, while the wise criterion includes sensitivity to each child's distinctive "way," as suggested by Proverbs 22:6. Three major implications follow from this synthesis.

For Christian parents, the first implication is reflective before it is regulatory. Discipline in parents' own device use should precede restrictions placed on children's devices because research on technoferece indicates that divided parental attention is associated with lower attachment and interaction quality, even when children are not themselves using digital devices (Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025). Within the framework of Deuteronomy 6, this principle has important implications. Faith

Table 1. Stewardly Presence as a Reflective Tool

Criterion	Textual basis	Related empirical mechanisms	Reflective questions for parents	Reflective questions for early childhood teachers
Edifying	1 Cor. 10:23–24; Gen. 1:28	Displacement of activities such as sleep and active movement (Dai & Ouyang, 2026; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022); attention-capturing content (Webb & Christakis, 2024)	What is being displaced when the child uses a screen at this moment: sleep, active play, or conversation? After using the screen, is the child more connected or more disconnected from those around them?	Does this content invite the child to talk, ask questions, and move, or does it merely capture the child's attention?
Shared	Deut. 6:6–7; Luke 2:52	Joint attention (Webb & Christakis, 2024); co-viewing (AAP, 2016; Madigan et al., 2020); technoferece (Beynon et al., 2024; Toledo-Vargas et al., 2025)	Can I see and talk about what the child is watching? When the child points to something or calls me, is my attention directed toward my own device?	Do I watch, point to, and name things together with the child, and do I respond to the child's initiatives?
Wise	Prov. 26:4–5; cf. 22:6; Phil. 4:6–7	Heterogeneity of findings and dependence on context (Dutra et al., 2025; Mallawaarachchi et al., 2022)	Is this decision based on the child's condition today, or on my own anxiety and exhaustion? Does this child, with their particular temperament, need a different limit?	Is this screen use appropriate to the condition of the group and the needs of particular children today?

formation across the spaces and rhythms of everyday life cannot be fulfilled through physical presence alone. It requires relational presence that enables genuine attention and interaction. For Christian early childhood teachers, the implication is pedagogical. Screen use in the classroom does not necessarily need to be eliminated, but it should be embedded within practices that preserve shared engagement. Content can be viewed, discussed, pointed to, and named together so that technology does not replace interaction but becomes part of a learning process involving teachers and children. Findings concerning co-viewing and joint attention support the importance of adult involvement in determining the developmental value of a digital activity (Webb & Christakis, 2024). For church family ministries, the implication is catechetical. Guidance concerning device use, which has often been presented primarily as a list of restrictions, can be redirected toward cultivating the quality of parental presence. From the perspective of Philippians 4:6–7, such guidance should also attend to parental anxiety as part of the condition that shapes how adults are present and make decisions in children's lives.

The three criteria can be translated into a simple reflective tool for parents and teachers, as summarized in Table 1. The questions are not intended to function as a validated measurement instrument but as a guide for reflection that connects theological foundations and empirical mechanisms with everyday decisions.

One important limitation must nevertheless be emphasized. Rejecting technological determinism should not result in an opposing form of determinism that treats parental presence as a guarantee of particular developmental outcomes. The empirical findings used in this study are associative and therefore cannot establish causal relationships. Consistent with the understanding of children as subjects emphasized in the synthesis, children have distinctive temperaments, experiences, and developmental histories and cannot be reduced to products of their relational contexts. Moreover, Christian theology understands human growth within a framework of grace that cannot be reduced to a causal formula entirely under human control. Stewardly presence should therefore be understood as a framework for evaluating conditions, determining actions, and exercising the responsibility of accompaniment, rather than as a guarantee that particular actions will produce particular developmental outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This article began with the observation that discourse on Christian early childhood education in Indonesia still tends to focus on the duration of screen use. A review of six empirical sources indicates that the effects of screen use are related to what screens displace, what they disrupt within relationships, and who uses the device. These findings suggest that the quality of human presence is an important factor alongside the duration of exposure. Because empirical research does not provide the normative resources needed to determine what constitutes good presence, an examination of 1 Corinthians 10:23–24, Genesis 1:28, Deuteronomy 6:6–7, Luke 2:52, Proverbs 26:4–5, and Philippians 4:6–7 yields three criteria: edifying, shared, and wise. These criteria are synthesized in the concept of stewardly presence. Rather than establishing a uniform time limit, this framework places responsibility on adults to manage technology while preserving relationships, engagement, and contextual judgment.

The framework has several limitations. The empirical findings used in this study are associative and are derived largely from contexts outside Indonesia, while national data currently document device access and use but not the quality of adult presence accompanying such use. Further research is therefore needed to examine this framework within Indonesian Christian families and early childhood education institutions. One possible approach would be qualitative research using the reflective questions in Table 1 to investigate how parents and teachers apply the three criteria in everyday decisions. In this way, the theological criteria developed here need not remain a conceptual construction but can be further refined through sustained dialogue with the contexts they are intended to serve.

AI Use Declaration

In the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT as an assisting tool for paraphrasing and refining language formulation. Grammarly and QuillBot were used as language-support tools for grammar checking, language editing, and improving the readability of the text. Claude was also used as a supplementary tool to consider and explore selected ideas during the development of the article; however, its outputs were not adopted in their entirety and were critically evaluated

by the authors. All ideas, analyses, interpretations, arguments, source selection, and conclusions presented in this article remain the responsibility of the authors. The authors independently reviewed, evaluated, and edited the outputs generated by these tools to ensure their alignment with the intended meaning, academic context, and research integrity.

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