

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71317/kjard.2.10.2026.891>

Kashmir Journal of Academic Research and Development

Journal homepage: <https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/KJARD>

Parental Emotional Availability, Child Anxiety and Digital Parenting Stress Among Young Children

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Email: Qamar.Tania@ucsiuniversity.edu.my**ARTICLE INFO****ABSTRACT****Received:**

September 18, 2026

Revised:

September 26, 2026

Accepted:

October 14, 2026

Available Online:

October 26, 2026

Keywords:

parental emotional availability, child anxiety, digital parenting stress, early childhood, parent-child relationships

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Parental emotional availability is an important aspect of parent-child relationships that may be associated with children's emotional adjustment, while digital parenting stress represents a potential challenge for caregivers in technology-rich environments. The present study examined the relationships among parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress among parents of young children. A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design was employed, involving 250 parents or primary caregivers selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 26. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the associations among the study variables. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between parental emotional availability and child anxiety ($r = -.23, p < .01$), indicating that higher parental emotional availability was associated with lower levels of child anxiety. Parental emotional availability was also negatively associated with digital parenting stress ($r = .12, p < .05$). Furthermore, a significant positive relationship was observed between child anxiety and digital parenting stress ($r = .46, p < .01$), representing the strongest association among the study variables. These findings highlight the relevance of emotionally responsive caregiving and the potential importance of considering technology-related parenting challenges when examining anxiety in young children. The results may inform future research and parent-focused support initiatives aimed at promoting children's emotional well-being and strengthening family functioning. However, given the cross-sectional correlational design, the findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal relationships.

Introduction

Early childhood is a period of rapid emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioural development, and caregiver-child relationships are central contexts in which children learn to regulate distress and seek support (Bowlby, 1982; Morris et al., 2007; Thompson, 2011). Early relational experiences may be relevant to later emotional adjustment, although developmental outcomes reflect multiple interacting influences rather than a single parenting factor (Sroufe, 2005; Rutter, 2006). The present study examines parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress among young children. Emotional availability describes the affective quality of caregiver-child interaction, including sensitivity, structuring, non-intrusiveness, non-hostility, and the child's responsiveness (Biringen, 2000; Biringen et al., 2014). It is conceptually related to attachment-informed perspectives emphasising sensitive and consistent caregiving in children's developing sense of security (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). However, emotional availability should not be treated as interchangeable with general warmth or parenting

style; it focuses on the emotional quality of interaction and the caregiver's capacity to respond while respecting the child's autonomy (Biringen, 2000; Senehi et al., 2025).

Child anxiety can include excessive fear, worry, avoidance, separation-related distress, and apprehension that are disproportionate to developmental expectations or interfere with functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Spence, 1998). Some fears are developmentally typical, so symptoms should be interpreted in relation to the child's age, context, persistence, and level of impairment (Egger & Angold, 2006; Spence, 1998). Family processes are relevant to childhood anxiety, but the relationship is potentially reciprocal: caregiver characteristics may shape children's distress, and children's anxious behaviour may also influence caregiver responses (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Shek et al., 2025). Parental emotional availability may be associated with child anxiety because sensitive caregivers can support co-regulation and help children manage challenging experiences. Research on parenting and child anxiety has linked parental control, rejection, and other interaction patterns with children's anxiety, although effects may vary by parent, child age, and gender (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Verhoeven et al., 2012). Emotional availability has also been examined in relation to child and parent stress, reinforcing the importance of relational quality in stressful contexts (Senehi et al., 2025).

According to Qamar and Majeed (2020) examined parenting styles alongside self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and academic achievement in medical students; this provides adjacent context on parenting research, but it is not direct evidence about emotional availability or anxiety in young children. These associations do not establish that caregiving alone causes anxiety; temperament, caregiver mental health, adversity, and socioeconomic context may influence both parenting and child adjustment (Rutter, 2006; Sroufe, 2005). Digital technology is embedded in contemporary family life and may support communication and learning, while also creating competing demands on caregiver attention (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Stiglic & Viner, 2019). The term technofence describes interruptions to interpersonal interaction associated with technology use, and studies have examined links between parental device use, parenting stress, and child behaviour (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018b). Digital parenting stress, however, should be operationalised precisely: it may refer to stress related to managing children's digital experiences, technology-related concerns, or digital demands on caregivers, and is not automatically equivalent to general parenting stress or screen time (McLaughlin et al., 2026; Moreira et al., 2026).

Digital parenting stress could plausibly relate to emotional availability when caregivers experience overload, distraction, or uncertainty about children's digital environments. Research on parenting stress suggests that caregiver strain can be associated with parenting practices and child outcomes, while longitudinal research on technofence highlights possible reciprocal relationships between technology use, stress, and child behaviour (Abidin, 1992; McDaniel &

Radesky, 2018b). Recent work also suggests that the relationship between children's digital media use and parental stress may depend on the type of device and the level of parental involvement (Wang et al., 2026). These associations may vary by family resources, work arrangements, cultural expectations, and children's developmental needs, making direct empirical testing necessary. The supplied exemplar used a correlational design, purposive recruitment, questionnaire-based measurement, internal-consistency estimates, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. Its participants and constructs differ from the present study, so its coefficients and findings cannot be transferred to the current variables. The present manuscript uses the exemplar only as a broad structural reference and interprets the current hypotheses according to the user's report that they were supported; exact statistics must still be inserted from the study output.

Study Objectives

The proposed study has three objectives: (1) to examine the association between parental emotional availability and child anxiety among young children; (2) to examine the association between digital parenting stress and parental emotional availability; and (3) to examine whether digital parenting stress is associated with child anxiety, including whether it explains additional variance after relevant covariates are considered.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Is parental emotional availability associated with child anxiety?

H1: Higher parental emotional availability is expected to be associated with lower child anxiety scores.

RQ2: Is digital parenting stress associated with parental emotional availability?

H2: Higher digital parenting stress is expected to be associated with lower parental emotional availability.

RQ3: Is digital parenting stress associated with child anxiety?

H3: Higher digital parenting stress is expected to be associated with higher child anxiety scores. According to the author's clarification, the hypotheses were accepted/supported in the study. The exact coefficients, confidence intervals, p-values, and model statistics should be reported from the

Method

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the relationships between parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress among parents of young children. This design was appropriate for investigating associations among the study variables at a single point in time. The study aimed to determine whether parental emotional availability and digital parenting stress were associated with anxiety symptoms among young children. As the study used a cross-sectional design, the findings were interpreted in terms of associations rather than causal relationships.

Participants and Sampling

The study recruited a sample of 250 parents or primary caregivers of young children. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach based on their eligibility and relevance to the research objectives. The target population comprised parents or primary caregivers responsible for the daily care and upbringing of young children. Parents or caregivers who met the study's eligibility criteria and provided informed consent were invited to participate. The sample size of 250 participants was intended to provide data for examining the relationships among parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress using appropriate statistical techniques. The inclusion of participants with experience of caring for young children was important for obtaining relevant information regarding parental emotional experiences, children's anxiety symptoms, and stress associated with digital parenting practices. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established according to the study protocol. The children's age range, recruitment setting, participants' demographic characteristics, and specific eligibility requirements should be reported based on the actual study procedures and recruitment records.

Measures Parental Emotional Availability

Parental emotional availability was assessed to examine the extent to which parents or primary caregivers were emotionally accessible, responsive, and supportive of their children's emotional needs. The construct focused on parents' capacity to recognise and respond sensitively to children's emotional expressions and to provide a supportive emotional environment. The selected assessment instrument was intended to measure parental emotional availability in relation to the study objectives. The instrument's name, authors, item count, response format, scoring procedure, and relevant validity and reliability evidence should be specified according to the measure actually used in the study.

Child Anxiety

Child anxiety was assessed to examine the presence and severity of anxiety-related symptoms among young children. The assessment focused on indicators of anxiety, such as excessive worry, fearfulness, nervousness, and anxiety-related distress, as appropriate to the selected instrument. Information was obtained from the designated respondent using an age-appropriate assessment measure. The instrument's name, authors, number of items, subscales, response options, scoring procedures, and psychometric properties should be reported based on the instrument administered. The use of an appropriate measure was important to ensure that children's anxiety symptoms were assessed systematically and consistently.

Digital Parenting Stress

Digital parenting stress referred to the psychological strain experienced by parents or primary caregivers in managing parenting responsibilities in the context of children's digital media use and technology-related demands. This construct included stress associated with managing children's screen time, regulating access to digital devices, responding to digital-related behavioural concerns, and balancing technology use with children's developmental and emotional needs, where these dimensions were covered by the selected instrument. Digital parenting stress was assessed using the measure specified in the study protocol. The instrument's name, authors, item count, response format, scoring procedure, and psychometric evidence should be included in the final manuscript based on the measure actually used.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted with parents or primary caregivers who met the study's eligibility criteria. Before participation, prospective participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained before the administration of the

research instruments. Participants completed the assessment measures relating to parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress. Relevant demographic information was also collected to describe the sample and support the interpretation of the findings. Participants were given appropriate instructions for completing the measures, and responses were collected using the data-collection procedure established for the study. Confidentiality was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. The collected information was handled securely and used exclusively for the stated research purposes. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their rights in accordance with the approved research protocol. Ethical approval details, recruitment dates, the data-collection setting, the language of administration, and the mode of questionnaire administration should be reported according to the procedures actually followed.

Results

The data was analyzed using Statistical Packages for Social Science, version 26 (SPSS-26).

First of all, the data was screened to find missing values. Firstly, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to find the relationship between all variables. The table additionally reports correlation of independent variables with Dependent variable.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis (N=250)

Variables	1	2	3	M	SD
1. Parental Emotional Availability -		-.23**	-.12*	42.67	5.76
2. Child Anxiety -		-	.46**	78.71	20.76
3. Digital Parenting Stress -		-	-	81.08	23.44

** P < 0.01, *P < 0.05

Note: PA= Perceived Attractiveness, M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

The results in above table shows that Parental Emotional Availability has significant negative relationship with Digital Parenting Stress. Child Anxiety has significant negative relationship with Digital Parenting Stress.

Table 2: Regression Analysis (N= 250)

Predictors	Television Viewing		Social Anxiety	
	B	SE	B	SE
Perceived Attractiveness	-.83	.20	-.40	.00
Social Anxiety	-.06	.21	-.06	.21
R ²	.01			

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 Note: β = Standardized coefficient, SE = Standardized error Results of direct effect revealed that Television Viewing was significant positive predictor of Social Anxiety, while Perceived Attractiveness was found to be significant negative predictor of Social Anxiety.

The present study examined the relationships among parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress among parents of young children. Using data from 250 participants, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the associations among the three principal study variables. The findings indicated that parental emotional availability was negatively associated with child anxiety (($r = -.23$, $p < .01$)) and digital parenting stress (($r = -.12$, $p < .05$)). In contrast, child anxiety was positively associated with digital parenting stress (($r = .46$, $p < .01$)). Collectively, these findings suggest that emotional availability within the parent-child relationship may be relevant to children's emotional adjustment, whereas digital parenting stress and child anxiety may co-occur within families. However, the correlational nature of the findings precludes conclusions about causal direction.

Discussion

The negative association between parental emotional availability and child anxiety suggests that greater emotional responsiveness and sensitivity within the parent-child relationship are associated with fewer reported anxiety symptoms among young children. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives that emphasise the role of sensitive caregiving, emotional security, and supportive parent child interactions in children's socioemotional development. Emotionally available parents may provide reassurance, recognise children's emotional cues, and respond appropriately to situations that evoke fear or uncertainty. Such interactions may contribute to children's perceptions of safety and support during emotionally challenging

experiences. The present finding is broadly consistent with Senehi et al. (2025), who investigated parental emotional availability and children's physiological stress responses in two diverse Early Head Start samples. Their findings indicated that emotional availability moderated the association between parental adverse childhood experiences and children's hair cortisol concentrations. Specifically, greater parental emotional availability appeared to buffer the association between accumulated parental adversity and children's physiological stress responses. Although that study examined physiological stress rather than anxiety symptoms, it provides complementary evidence for considering the quality of parent–child emotional interactions when investigating children's responses to stress.

One possible explanation for the observed association is that emotionally responsive parenting supports children's developing capacity for emotional regulation. When caregivers acknowledge children's distress, provide developmentally appropriate reassurance, and encourage the expression of emotions, children may have greater opportunities to develop adaptive ways of responding to unfamiliar or threatening situations. Conversely, inconsistent emotional responsiveness or limited parental availability may leave some children with fewer opportunities to obtain reassurance and support when experiencing anxiety. These explanations are theoretically plausible, but the present study did not directly measure emotional regulation, attachment security, or the specific parenting behaviours through which emotional availability might be associated with anxiety. The magnitude of the observed correlation ($r = -.23$) indicates a modest negative association rather than a strong relationship. Accordingly, parental emotional availability should not be interpreted as the sole determinant of childhood anxiety. Children's anxiety may also be associated with temperament, developmental characteristics, family adversity, parental psychological difficulties, and environmental stressors.

Furthermore, the direction of the relationship remains uncertain: although emotional availability may be associated with lower anxiety, children's anxiety-related behaviours may also influence parental responsiveness and the emotional climate of parent–child interactions. Within the broader context of psychological research, Qamar and Yasin (2023) examined psychopathological distress and suicide-related outcomes among adults with major depressive disorder, highlighting the importance of examining psychological vulnerability alongside protective factors such as resilience. Although their population and outcomes differ substantially from those of the present study, this work reflects the relevance of investigating both psychological difficulties and potentially protective factors. The current findings extend this general research perspective to early childhood by examining parental emotional availability in relation to anxiety symptoms. Nevertheless, direct comparisons should remain cautious because the developmental stages, constructs, and study populations differ.

The second finding was a statistically significant negative association between parental emotional availability and digital parenting stress ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$). This result suggests that greater parental emotional availability was associated with slightly lower digital parenting stress. However, the correlation was small, indicating that emotional availability alone may account for only a limited proportion of the variation shared between these constructs. One possible interpretation is that emotionally responsive parent–child relationships may facilitate communication and cooperation around technology-related routines. Parents who are attentive to children's emotional needs may be better positioned to discuss screen-time expectations, recognise distress associated with digital-device restrictions, and respond to disagreements in a supportive manner. Such practices could potentially reduce conflict surrounding children's technology use. These mechanisms, however, were not directly tested in the present study and should be considered hypotheses for future investigation rather than established explanations.

Digital parenting stress may also arise from challenges that extend beyond the immediate parent–child relationship. Parents may experience competing demands involving work, childcare, online safety, screen-time regulation, digital content, and the management of children's behaviour. Family resources, caregiver workload, digital literacy, household routines, and access to alternative childcare activities may therefore contribute to stress independently of emotional availability. Consequently, the relatively small correlation observed in this study suggests that the relationship between emotional availability and digital parenting stress may be complex and influenced by additional contextual factors. Recent research has similarly highlighted the need to consider the circumstances surrounding family technology use rather than treating digital media exposure as an isolated influence. Wang et al. (2026), for example, investigated parental involvement in the association between children's digital media use and parental stress. This research provides a relevant contemporary context for examining how parental involvement and family digital practices intersect with stress.

Nevertheless, the available evidence does not establish that parental emotional availability necessarily reduces digital parenting stress, and the present correlation should not be interpreted as demonstrating a protective causal effect. The distinction between digital parenting stress and general parenting stress is particularly important. Digital parenting stress concerns challenges associated with raising children in technology-rich environments, whereas general parenting stress encompasses a broader range of parenting demands. The extent to which these constructs overlap depends on their operational definitions and measurement instruments. Accordingly, the interpretation of the present finding should be considered alongside the specific measure used to assess digital parenting stress and its demonstrated validity in the study population.

The strongest correlation in the study was the positive association between child anxiety and digital parenting stress ($r=.46$, $p<.01$). This finding indicates that higher levels of child anxiety were associated with higher levels of digital parenting stress. The magnitude of this association was greater than those observed between parental emotional availability and either child anxiety or digital parenting stress. The result therefore identifies the relationship between children's anxiety symptoms and caregivers' experiences of digital parenting as an important area for further investigation. Several explanations may account for this association. First, parents of children who experience greater anxiety may encounter additional difficulties when establishing and maintaining technology-related boundaries. For example, some children may become distressed when access to a preferred digital activity is restricted or may use digital devices to seek reassurance or regulate uncomfortable emotions. In such circumstances, parents may experience greater difficulty negotiating screen-time limits or maintaining consistent routines. These possibilities depend on the children's individual characteristics and the functions served by digital media use; they were not directly established by the current findings.

Second, parents experiencing digital parenting stress may find it more difficult to maintain predictable routines and consistent responses to children's emotional needs. Where family interactions are already strained by technology-related disagreements or competing responsibilities, children's anxiety symptoms and parental stress may occur together. This interpretation is consistent with a transactional perspective on family functioning, in which children's behaviour and parental responses are understood as potentially interrelated rather than operating in isolation. However, the cross-sectional design cannot determine whether parental stress precedes children's anxiety, children's anxiety contributes to parental stress, or both are associated with other factors. Third, the association may reflect shared influences, including caregiver psychological distress, socioeconomic pressures, family conflict, children's temperament, or broader difficulties in family functioning. If these factors are not measured and statistically accounted for, the observed relationship may partly reflect their influence on both variables. Future research should therefore examine whether the association between digital parenting stress and child anxiety remains significant after adjustment for theoretically justified family and child characteristics.

The positive correlation also has practical implications for the assessment of families experiencing difficulties related to technology use. When parents report substantial digital parenting stress, practitioners may benefit from assessing children's emotional and behavioural functioning alongside screen-time routines and digital-media practices. Similarly, when children present with anxiety symptoms, assessment may consider family stressors and technology-related conflicts as possible contextual factors. Such assessment should remain comprehensive and should not assume that digital parenting stress is necessarily the cause of anxiety. The result should not be interpreted as evidence that digital media use itself causes childhood anxiety. Digital parenting stress, children's screen exposure, the quality of digital content, parental mediation, and children's emotional responses are distinct constructs. The present study examined the association between digital parenting stress and child anxiety, not the direct effect of screen time or particular digital activities on anxiety. Further studies should measure these dimensions separately to clarify the processes involved.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings have several implications for psychologists, counsellors, early childhood professionals, and researchers. First, the negative association between parental emotional availability and child anxiety supports the importance of considering the emotional quality of parent-child relationships when assessing young children's psychological adjustment. Parent-focused guidance may include recognising children's emotional cues, responding sensitively to distress, and promoting developmentally appropriate emotional communication. Second, the positive association between child anxiety and digital parenting stress suggests that technology-related parenting challenges may warrant attention during broader assessments of family wellbeing. Practitioners should explore the specific sources of digital parenting stress, including disagreements about screen time, difficulties maintaining routines, and concerns about online content, where relevant. Recommendations should be tailored to each family's circumstances rather than based on assumptions that all digital-media use is harmful.

Third, the findings suggest that research on young children's emotional well-being may benefit from combining individual, relational, and family-context variables. Studies that examine parental psychological functioning, parenting practices, children's emotional regulation, digital-media exposure, and family socioeconomic circumstances together may provide a more comprehensive account of the factors associated with anxiety symptoms. These implications should be interpreted cautiously. The current results demonstrate statistical associations, not the effectiveness of parenting interventions or the causal influence of any study variable. Recommendations for clinical practice and programme development should therefore be regarded as provisional and should be evaluated through appropriately designed intervention studies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional correlational design prevents conclusions about temporal order and causality. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether changes in

parental emotional availability or digital parenting stress precede changes in children's anxiety symptoms. Repeated assessments could also clarify whether the associations are reciprocal over time. Second, the study included 250 participants recruited through the sampling procedure described in the methodology. If purposive or convenience sampling was used, the sample may not represent all parents of young children. The generalisability of the findings will depend on the participants' demographic characteristics, recruitment setting, and the extent to which the sample reflects the wider target population. Future studies should report these characteristics clearly and, where feasible, recruit participants from diverse family and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Third, the findings depend on the validity and reliability of the instruments used to assess the three constructs. If parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress were measured exclusively through caregiver self-report, shared-informant effects and socialdesirability bias may have influenced the observed associations. Future research could combine validated parent-report measures with age-appropriate child assessments, observational measures of parent-child interactions, or additional informants where developmentally and ethically appropriate. Fourth, the correlation analyses do not establish whether the observed relationships remain after controlling for potential confounding variables. Subsequent studies should consider theoretically justified covariates, such as child age, caregiver psychological distress, family socioeconomic circumstances, and relevant developmental characteristics. Longitudinal designs and formal mediation or moderation analyses may also help clarify potential mechanisms, provided that the research design and sample size support those analyses.

Finally, the regression results supplied alongside the correlation table require verification before the manuscript is submitted. The regression table contains variables such as television viewing, social anxiety, and perceived attractiveness, which do not correspond directly to the three principal constructs examined in this study. Moreover, the accompanying narrative describes predictive relationships that are not adequately supported by the reported coefficients and significance information. These results should not be incorporated into the interpretation of the present study until the original SPSS output has been checked and the table has been corrected. Future research should also examine cultural and contextual differences in digital parenting practices. Parental expectations concerning children's technology use, access to digital resources, childcare arrangements, and family communication may differ across settings. Investigating these factors could improve the contextual relevance of interventions designed to support parents and young children.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationships among parental emotional availability, child anxiety, and digital parenting stress in a sample of 250 participants. Parental emotional availability was negatively associated with child anxiety and digital parenting stress, whereas child anxiety was positively associated with digital parenting stress. The strongest observed association was between child anxiety and digital parenting stress, suggesting that these difficulties may co-occur within families and merit further investigation. The findings highlight the potential relevance of emotionally responsive parenting and the importance of considering technology-related parenting challenges when studying young children's emotional well-being. Nevertheless, the observed associations do not establish causal relationships, and the modest correlation between parental emotional availability and digital parenting stress warrants particular caution in interpretation. Longitudinal and multi-informant research is needed to clarify the direction and mechanisms of these relationships. Subject to these limitations, the study provides a basis for further examining relational and digital-context factors in research on early childhood anxiety and family well-being.

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