



Screen Time at the Table: An Investigation of Children in Non-Formal Restaurant Settings

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Abstract: This article analyzes the phenomenon of screen time in childhood, with a particular focus on screen use in informal dining settings. After a review of the international literature on the risks and educational implications of digital exposure, it presents a study conducted in Naples on children and adolescents. This exploratory-descriptive study, based on parent questionnaires, highlights widespread practices of screen use at the table and explores the various implications.

Keywords: Screen time; Food service; Developmental age; Parenting practices; Digital education.

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Introduction

In the West, screen time, the amount of time spent on and exposed to screens, is constantly increasing among children of developmental age. For years, the impact of early exposure to screens on growth, motor development, and social skills on the generation of so-called "digital natives" has been investigated. While the debate on the different uses of screens is ongoing, the debate on digital excess now seems to be over for a good part of the international scientific community.

A third of subjects under one year of age spend an hour and a half a day in front of devices. At two years old, a child spends 600 hours a day/year in the company of a screen. Dedicating this time to screen time means reducing crucial experiences for emotional and motor development. As children grow, their exposure to digital screens increases. Children over two years old have about three hours of screen time per day, between eight and twelve years old they reach five hours, while between thirteen and eighteen they exceed seven hours (Desmurget, 2020). For a child in early childhood, this means about a thousand hours a year, for an adolescent 2,400 hours. This represents 40% of waking hours, with significant impacts on the circadian rhythm.

The reasons that push parents to provide screens are: Entertaining children in public places (65%); Distracting the child during household activities (58%); Having time to shop at the market without having to entertain the child (70%). The most commonly used screens are: television (90%), portable devices (65%), and

15% video games (Desmurget, 2020). The increase in screen time, which goes hand in hand with the increasing age of child-adolescent consumers, has been portrayed for decades as an absolutely normal fact, given that they are the generation of "digital natives". The media has for years reported that Generation Z has developed immediate skills in use of digital technologies, but research on the subject shows a very different reality.

The scientific community now talks about the disadvantages and dangers of prolonged exposure to screens. A European Commission report states that students' digital skills are substantially poor. Furthermore, a study by Stanford University reveals that young people have difficulty critically evaluating information they find online, often believing fake news. This peculiar lack of critical ability is described by researchers with the term "darkness" (Desmurget, 2020).

Therefore, digital natives do not have superior digital skills and, on the contrary, application interfaces are generally so simplified that they don't support the development of cognitive skills, critical thinking, and language abilities. Only 3% of children's online time is spent creating creative content or using school applications. Furthermore, many of these so-called educational applications have little educational potential and are often designed without the input of professional educators. For these reasons, media education must be implemented in the classroom and beyond, which can transform the digital ecosystem from a potential amplifier of vulnerability to a strategic resource for learning, inclusion and well-being (Formisano, 2023) and it therefore becomes crucial to design



educational environments that are sensitive to different stages of development and learning styles, capable of mitigating factors of discomfort (Felaco, 2025a).

Impact on subjects in developmental age

The most relevant issue, regardless of the different types of devices, applications and programs used, is therefore the overall time spent on screens. A Japanese study on 7,097 mother-child pairs observed an association between increased time spent in front of a screen and age of 1 year and delays in communication and problem-solving development at 2 and 4 years, directly connecting socioeconomic disadvantage to the time of screen exposure (Takahashi, Obara, Ishikuro et al., 2024). New digital technologies then amplify the illusion of knowing and remembering everything. Through ICT, new generations are continuously On-Line, increasingly interconnected with technologies, in a world where the natural and artificial boundaries are dissolving (Floridi, 2017). Of course, scientific research is also multiplying, such as that of University of Padua, which shows how children with dyslexia can increase their scores in video game therapy, speeding up reading and improving short-term auditory memory (Franceschini et al., 2013). This does not protect the younger generations from the pitfalls of excessive screen time. Rather than digital technology itself, the culprit is screen time—the constant exposure to screens during both school hours and recreational time, not to mention the time spent on primary activities, such as eating during meals.

A research conducted in Lithuania connects, screen use by children aged two to five is linked to obesogenic factors. Children who are fed in front of a screen are more likely to consume junk food and develop behavioral problems (Jusienė et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant in southern Italy, such as the Campania region, where childhood obesity rates are higher than in the rest of the country, with evident pockets of poverty and educational deprivation. Research has not yet adequately explored the possible connections between socioeconomic hardship and screen time, and between excessive screen time and school performance or dropout.

This is where the research of July 2025 in the capital of the Campania region, the city of Naples, starts, which focuses on use of screens by pre-school, school-age and adolescent subjects in typical restaurant settings (Felaco, 2025b). The restaurant represents, in fact, a non-formal context in which, more and more frequently, implicit forms of digital literacy are witnessed through interaction with new technological tools. At the same time, these spaces are characterised by the lack of shared rules on use of devices brought from home, making the particularly interesting direct observation of the habits and practices that emerge spontaneously from parents and, in general, adults who accompany minors.

Screen time in informal dining venues: a field study

The research had multiple objectives, including: providing further tools and data to reflect on the implications that the use of screens in restaurants can impact children's well-being and assess any potential impact on eating habits and socializing at the table. This study is exploratory and descriptive, as it does not aim to test preconceived hypotheses, but rather to explore a little-researched phenomenon and describe its characteristics through direct parent input.

Furthermore, unintentional parental educational practices, implemented in contexts where food and beverages are served to

the public, may reflect implicit values and educational models. It is therefore useful to ask whether the social motivations that drive, for example, a parent to “feeling the duty to reassure the child”, in such a context through electronic devices equipped with screens, are really predictive of a certain parental approach aimed at managing children's behaviour or not and how much such a motivation can weigh in the parent's choice towards administering screens to minors (Felaco, 2025b).

From a methodological standpoint, a mixed-method approach was chosen for the research, combining quantitative tools (closed questions, Likert scales) and qualitative tools (open-ended questions to gather opinions and perceptions). This exploratory-descriptive approach allowed us to explore a little-researched phenomenon: screen use by minors in restaurants, describing its characteristics through data collected from parents themselves. This allowed us to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon, integrating numerical data and interpretative analyses, providing a more detailed and reliable picture of the practices related to the use of screens in catering contexts.

A questionnaire was therefore administered through a web-based platform belonging to a suite of cloud applications. This tool allowed for the design, distribution, and management of interactive electronic forms for structured data collection through dynamic user interfaces. To collect data useful for this study, a 24-item questionnaire was developed and administered to parents, who were voluntarily involved through word of mouth and instant messaging applications, within a 24-hour time window. Twenty-three parents participated in the questionnaire. To participate, the adult declared that he had been to a restaurant at least once in the week preceding the survey, in the company of children or adolescents and that he was resident in the city of Naples.

Results

Regarding the reference sample, more than three-fifths of the parents interviewed are always accompanied by minors when at a restaurant. Nearly half of the children involved are of school age, and 30% are in infancy or preschool. Forty percent of the children began using electronic screens before the age of four. This figure is consistent with industry studies in Italy on general screen exposure based on age. The primary purpose of children's presence at the table with adults stems directly from parents' choice to share a family meal with their child, even though 17% claim to bring their child along because they have no alternative (Felaco, 2025b).

The first striking finding concerns the use of digital technologies at the table, particularly smartphones. By the interviewees' own admission, the data shows that only 2 in 10 adults do not use screens during lunch in typical restaurant settings, while 7 in 10 children do so during restaurant meals. This suggests that the presence, use, and even the perceived need for screens at the table is widely permitted, tolerated, and desired by adults rather than their children. Essentially, children can more easily do without digital devices at the table than adults, or adults choose not to introduce screens to their children, but most do not apply the same regimen to themselves.

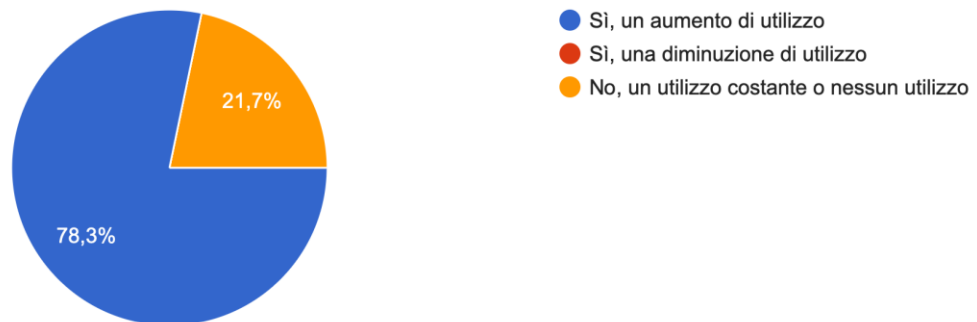
Regarding screen time, however, the situation changes, with evidence of prolonged use by minors or prolonged exposure to screens among children of developing age. Only three in ten children do not use electronic devices at the table. Most of them use screens for between ten and twenty minutes, with 17.4% of

children or adolescents in the sample using screens for between 20 minutes and an hour or more while dining alone (Felaco, 2025b). The most frequent time of exposure is while waiting for a meal (30.4%), and the primary reason parents provide devices is to entertain children (21.7%), followed by the fear that they might disturb other diners (13%) and the provision of screens out of pure habit (8.7%).

One in three children demonstrates opposition if they don't use or aren't provided with at least one digital tool to entertain themselves at the table, and this trend, according to the parents interviewed, is increasing over time. Eight out of ten parents, in fact, reported a marked increase in their children's or adolescents' screen use over the past year.

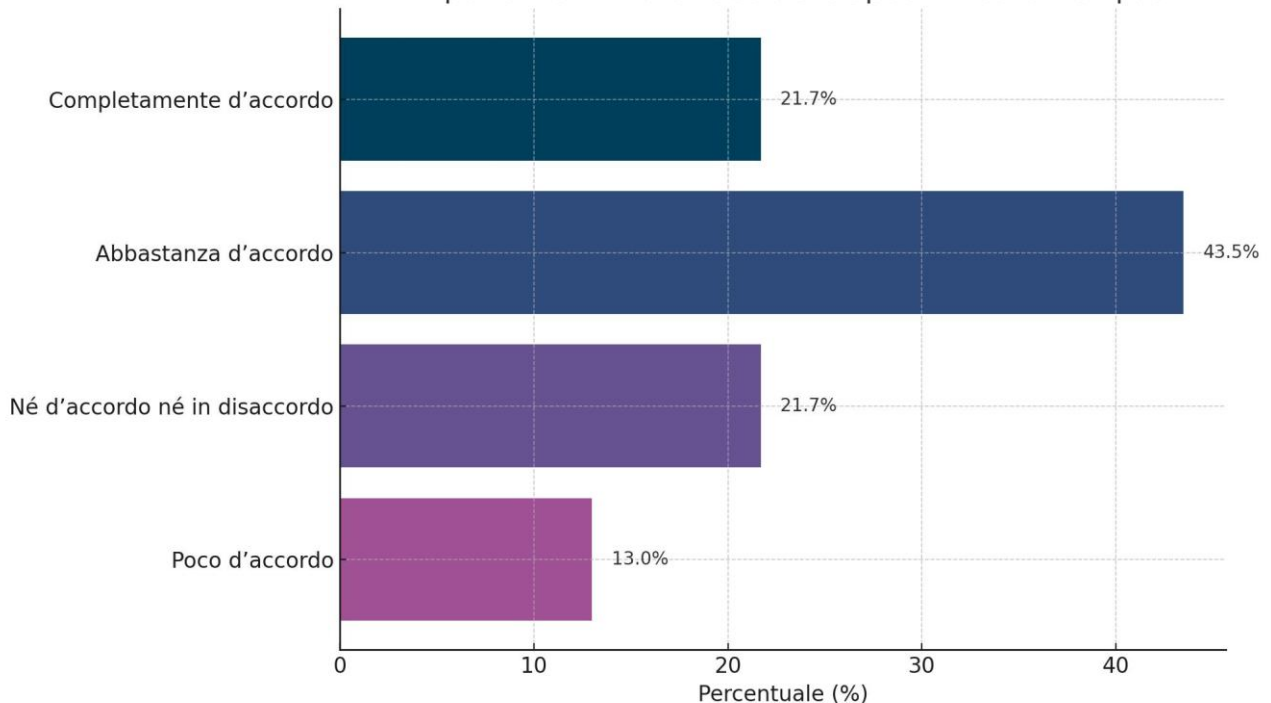
Nell'ultimo anno, hai notato cambiamenti riguardo al tempo di utilizzo dei dispositivi elettronici al ristorante da parte dei minori?

23 risposte



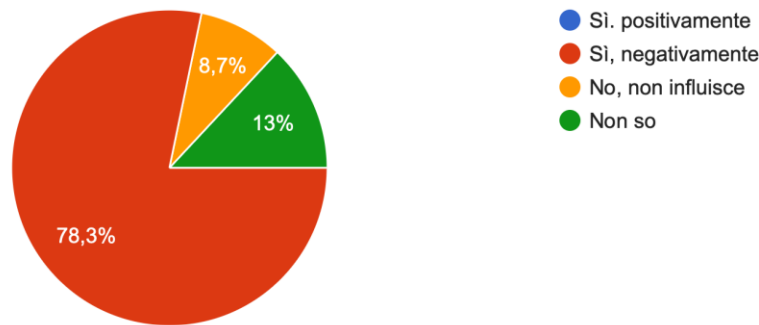
Parents' perception regarding screen time at the table is ambivalent: on the one hand, almost all of the sample, 95%, perceive it as normal use of electronic devices at the table, from other than the 80% recognize that the use of such tools also has harmful effects on children's health, and over 65% of those interviewed believe it is important to reduce screen time, which also negatively impacts family socialization.

“È importante limitare l’uso dei dispositivi durante i pasti”



L'uso di dispositivi elettronici influisce sulla socializzazione dei minori con te, con la famiglia o con altri minori presenti?

23 risposte



Finally, the strategies for reducing screen time at the table recommended by parents focus primarily on the need for alternatives to social or physical play, shifting the responsibility for device use onto restaurant workers and owners, and thus on the failure to provide valid alternatives within restaurant environments.

Over half of those interviewed, more than 6 in 10 parents, have no effective strategies for reducing or decreasing their children's screen time. This indicates a poor assessment of parental responsibility or the educational skills of the adults interviewed.

Conclusion

Regarding the possibility of a connection or correlation between data on socioeconomic hardship and screen time, and between excessive digital use, performance, or school dropout, most of the parents interviewed stated that their children attend school regularly. The rare exceptions are explained by the presence of children too young to access the system. Compulsory education. More than half of parents rate academic performance and the relationship with teachers as positive, while 13% do not know exactly what their child's academic performance and another 13% report distractions in class (Felaco, 2025b).

The distribution of pupils, and the enrolment of children in city schools, largely reflects their families' residence. Although the data we researched covers the entire city of Naples, residence in the various neighbourhoods and municipalities of the city significantly influences the different socioeconomic conditions of the interviewees. Over 40% of those interviewed have children attending schools in Municipalities 1 and 5, the more affluent areas of the city, while the rest of the sample is evenly distributed across the remaining eight municipalities. Municipality 1, despite its low child population, has high levels of education; Municipality 5 leads the way in terms of the percentage of university graduates. Conversely, Municipalities 6, 7, and 8 show more critical issues in terms of school dropout and economic hardship. Analysis suggests that 40% of the sample comes from families with a medium-high level of education, and therefore not socioeconomically disadvantaged. However, exposure to screens remains significant for the entire reference sample, thus indicating little or no correlation between disadvantage and excessive digital use. Therefore, to better investigate the phenomenon, the data should be

further explored with quantitative research on a larger, more evenly distributed sample across the reference area.

What is certain is that exposure to screens affects attention, performance, family relationships and health. WHO, the World Health Organization recommends not exposing children before the age of one to a screen, and up to the age of five, it sets the maximum daily screen time at one hour. Similarly, The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests a maximum of two hours of screen time per day for older children, always supervised by an adult (Iavarone, 2022).

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