Young Children and YouTube: A Global Phenomenon

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Abstract

YouTube has risen in popularity to become a global phenomenon. Children use YouTube for entertainment and educational purposes. Some benefits of YouTube have been reported such as helping children learn and develop skills and knowledge about their world. However, concerns have been raised about children's exposure to inappropriate and disturbing YouTube content, screen time, and limited video quality. This article defines what YouTube is, discusses current research on YouTube, and explores what young children are doing with YouTube. It also provides practical strategies and recommendations for parents and teachers about how to use YouTube to support young children's early learning and development at home and school.

What is YouTube?

In the 60's and 70's the popular digital device viewed was Television (TV), the 80's were dominated by VHS (Video Home Systems), the 90's by portable camcorders that allowed video production, and the 2000's by DVDs (Digital Versatile Discs). In 2005, with the proliferation of the World Wide Web, the concept of video was transformed when the YouTube platform was launched.

YouTube's popularity with young children is becoming universal

YouTube is the most popular digital media site used by young children from birth to 7 years old. A recent report surveyed 3,154 families and showed that 80% of children aged 0-7 years, use YouTube and 59% use YouTube Kids. However, only 11% of these children have their own YouTube account with 16% registered with the YouTube Kids app (Marsh et al., 2019) suggesting that young children more likely use their parent's accounts to access YouTube.

Children were reported to spend on average 1.39 hours each weekday and 1.47 hours each weekend day viewing YouTube videos. Young children like to watch YouTube videos on topics such as play, toys, nursery rhymes, TV interests, funny videos, and animal videos that are approximately 4 to 9 minutes in length (Marsh et al., 2019).

The YouTube Kids app has had over 10 million downloads worldwide. Children aged three years and older are increasingly using YouTube to view a range of videos such as humorous cartoons. For example, the DisneyCollector YouTube channel has had over 11 billion views and over 11 million subscribers.

The multimodal features of YouTube (e.g., audio, text, special effects, animated characters) capture children's attention. YouTube is easily accessible by children and has low barriers for participation with a simple and intuitive interface design. It can be accessed

through any digital device (e.g., tablet, phone, laptop) connected to the internet and has a simple home page layout that allows for fast access to content searched through key terms.

What are children watching on YouTube?

The most popular genres of videos are those presented by children and include “unboxing” videos (e.g., DisneyCollector channel) where children watch someone open a product (e.g., Kinder surprise egg). This is perhaps a similar and exciting experience to opening their own presents. Videos of children opening presents have been superseded by “unboxing” videos containing products such as FunToyzCollector which reviews toys from a range of commercial companies (e.g., Pixar, Nickelodeon, Claymation) and has gained widespread attention and popularity amongst young children. Popular culture videos on children’s favourite characters (e.g., Peppa Pig, Dora the Explorer, Disney Princesses, and Minions) also dominate YouTube content.

A YouTube video “Play Doh Sparkle Princess” has over half a billion views. This video presents and discusses each Disney princess toy and provides a tutorial on how to make princess dresses from playdoh. The popularity of rhyme genre videos for young children is demonstrated by high number of subscribers. The Cocomelon Nursery Rhymes channel has 45 million subscribers and their “Wheels on the Bus” video has had 65 million views. The Chu Chu TV nursery rhymes Kids songs Channel has had over 20 million subscribers and their Baba Black Sheep video has gained over 480 million views. Nursery rhymes have very catchy tunes and children enjoy repeatedly watching them.

How are children interacting with YouTube?

Children’s interactions with song and dance videos on YouTube was explored by Yadav, Chakraborty, Mittal, and Arora (2018) who studied how 55 Indian children (aged 6 to 24 months) interacted with the videos. Children were visited every six months in their homes and were observed watching YouTube for 10 minutes. Children were observed to enjoy

watching videos with song and dance performances that contained melodic music as well as videos that contained toys and balloons. At six months of age children liked to imitate dance movements when they heard the music while at 18 to 24 months old, they pressed and touched the buttons on the tablet screen more often than at six months old. From 12 to 24 months old, children began to identify characters (e.g., cartoon or fairy-tale characters) that were shown to them on the screen. At two years old children were reported to enjoy viewing advertisements of familiar food products (e.g., baby food, biscuits). This shows that children's screen-based interactions and behaviour with YouTube changes over time and that they engaged with YouTube in positive ways.

In the pre-school classroom, Davidson, Given, Danby, and Thorpe (2014) described how a YouTube video about a family's weekend road trip was a positive activity that supported teacher-child conversations and fostered shared understandings. The researchers stressed the importance of providing opportunities for children to talk about the YouTube videos. The use of gestures and embodied actions by teachers further supported children's understanding of the video content. Shared viewing of the video and using questioning strategies helped children deepen their understandings, share in others' experiences, and interpret it through productive conversations. This suggests that YouTube videos may be a positive learning tool for use in the pre-school classroom.

In the home setting, Marsh (2016) described how a popular 8-year-old YouTuber, named EvanHD presented his video by talking straight into the camera and unboxing a toy LEGO set box (NinjaCopter); and how at home, a 4-year-old boy named Garth enjoyed watching and listening to Evan describing his unboxing experience. Garth identified and connected with Evan's passion for LEGO. This type of peer-peer modelling and sharing of information appeals to young children as they can engage with the presenter and learn new skills and information.

What are potential benefits of YouTube?

Video technology can be used to support learning, can be an effective mode of instruction, and an engaging springboard for classroom activities. Videos stimulate a range of emotions such as anger, empathy, sadness, love, excitement and provide children with opportunities to experience these emotions through watching videos. YouTube can be an information resource for inspiring children's play, creativity, and curiosity and help children research and prepare for school projects about a range of exciting and interesting topics (e.g., Vikings, Dinosaurs) and select tutorials for science activities or how-to-do videos (e.g., making slime, building a volcano).

Through YouTube experiences, children may also begin developing critical media skills about how to make informed choices which could provide an important foundation for learning at school. In telephone interviews with 110 children, questions were asked about YouTube (e.g., "What kinds of videos do you watch on YouTube? Have you learnt anything on YouTube and if so, what was it? Is there anything you don't like about YouTube?"). It was found that by 14 years of age children were careful to avoid pop-up advertisements and clickbait. Their exposure to inappropriate content was dealt with by quickly clicking off it and pressing dislike and children also showed an understanding of commercialisation issues and expressed their viewpoints on YouTube celebrities. This shows evidence of older children's thoughtfulness and responsibility in their use of YouTube.

However, this may not be the case for *all children* or *younger children* who may need greater adult guidance and support when using YouTube. Parent, teacher, or carer scaffolding during young children's use of YouTube may support digital literacy skills and help children interact with the YouTube interface to select and view videos (e.g., type in search terms in Google or YouTube, tap the YouTube icon application, scroll up and down, skip

advertisements, enlarge and reduce the image, fast-forward to a favourite section of the video, pause the video, and repeat the video).

What are the concerns about YouTube?

Concerns have been raised about the impact of YouTube on early childhood learning and development, including risks of increased exposure to commercial advertisements and “disturbing” videos (Papadamou et al., 2019). YouTube’s algorithms for circulating videos may expose children to distressing content and lead to children watching similar video content over time. Popular children’s characters (e.g., Spiderman, Mickey Mouse, Frozen movie characters) may be combined with depictions of violence and inappropriate connotations and posted online with an innocent thumbnail associated with it. Papadamou et al. (2019) argues that these types of disturbing videos are driven by monetised opportunities and strategies are needed to reduce the risks of un-curated predatory content and advertisements.

Some commercial content may be deceptively integrated into children’s content such as in “unboxing” videos of candy and toys (Burroughs, 2017). For example, pop-up advertisements appear prior to watching videos that children must view for a period of time before allowing to skip them. Children do learn to click off adds or jump to another video to avoid watching an advertisement. Jindal and Kanozia’s (2019) survey of 100 parents reported that 75% of parents were concerned that their children would be exposed to inappropriate content. It is suggested that parents should be cautious and critical when selecting YouTube content for children and greater research into the ethical guidelines of children’s engagement with social media is needed.

To work towards alleviating these risks, YouTube policies have recently been introduced to comply with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) Children’s Privacy Protection Act (COPPA; Google, 2020). It requires YouTube video creators set their content

as “Made for kids” or “Not Made for Kids”. If a video is categorised as “Made for Kids”, certain YouTube features are removed such as the comment functionality while advertising limitations are enforced. Despite tighter regulations around this classification of video content made for kids under 13 years, further work is needed to ensure that YouTube content categorised as “made for kids” is designed and created at a high-quality standard that supports early learning.

What are the implications of kids using YouTube?

It is clear that children are now beginning to watch YouTube more than television (Rideout & Robb, 2019; Rideout, 2017) and it is utilised daily by children for a wide range of purposes (e.g., researching, creative, curating, sharing, showcasing). This online platform has the potential to benefit early learning through increasing children’s knowledge of the world, creating and sharing ideas and building their confidence, voice and agency. Teachers can also use YouTube videos to inspire and motivate young children in their play, creativity and innovation. For example, children can watch a YouTube video on how to use a recipe to make a cake, then with assistance from an adult make their own cake.

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

Selecting good quality YouTube videos

Importantly, teachers and parents need to be careful when selecting videos for classroom use as some may not be appropriately designed for children. Key factors that should be considered when selecting YouTube videos for kids are age appropriateness,

content quality, video design features, and potential for the video to support learning outcomes.

- **Age appropriateness:** ensures that the video is suitable for the child's gender, age, needs, it appeals to their personal interests, the subject matter is appropriate for children and the behaviour of actors modelled on the screen is positive.
- **Content quality:** video images and content should encourage children to perform or engage in creative and positive activities and the video message, content and dialogue should be easy for children to follow and comprehend.
- **Video design features:** words, pictures, animations, and graphics should be engaging and multimodal, congruent with and accompanied by appropriate audio (e.g., narration, sounds, music, or song).
- **Learning outcomes** in one or more developmental domains (*Cognitive* e.g., literacy, language, numeracy; *Social-emotional* e.g., resilience, self-esteem; *Physical* e.g., fine and gross motor skills).

Further research is needed on how to best design clear and comprehensive evaluation criteria to help teachers and parents identify positive and negative design features of YouTube videos. The quality and suitability of YouTube for supporting child development and learning also needs to be determined. For example, how does watching a song and dance YouTube video (e.g., Baby Shark) support children's language and literacy learning?

The delivery of evidenced-based professional development can also better help teachers understand how to effectively use YouTube in the classroom and integrate it into the curriculum and existing teaching and learning practices.

Be mindful when using YouTube

It is also important to be mindful of the time children spend viewing YouTube videos. Strict screen time guidelines with a “*one-size fits all*” approach should be reconsidered in terms of meeting the needs of diverse learners and taking into account individual family and child circumstances and backgrounds (Neumann, 2015). Rather than focussing on the length of time a child is spending on their screen, a deeper and more differentiated analysis should be conducted into what device is being used, what a child is doing on YouTube (e.g., watching and listening to nursery rhymes, unboxing videos, science tutorials) and how that is associated with learning. Greater flexibility in screen guidelines and provision of family-based strategies and advice for using tablets and devices at home to support learning is needed.

Jindal and Kanozia (2019) recommended that parents who co-watch YouTube videos with their child, assist by performing physical gestures and actions that are seen on the screen such as the nursery rhymes (e.g., Wheels on the bus). Parents can also share moral themes and lessons by referencing YouTube actors and characters, make links to the real world, regulate screen time, actively set parent controls, and create a personal playlist for children’s interests and learning needs.

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

What are some practical strategies for using YouTube?

Having ongoing and constructive conversations with children about what they are watching on YouTube can encourage the development of 21st century skills such as critical

thinking and reflection. This will help children become more mindful when they are using YouTube and assist them in developing a self-regulated approach to monitoring the time they spend on YouTube under the guidance of their parent or teacher. Chatting with children about what they are doing on their tablet and screens has the potential to foster skills such as language and words (e.g., by pointing out words on the screen). This conversational approach can be achieved through applying the 5Ws (Who, What, Where, Why, When).

1. **Who:** Ask your child: “*Who are you watching the YouTube video with?*” It is important for young children to view their screens in a social context and with others (e.g., peers, family members). These interactions can help support children’s experiences with YouTube.
2. **What:** Ask your child: “*What YouTube video are you watching?*”. Check that the video is appropriate and of reasonable quality.
3. **Where:** Ask your child: “*Where are you watching the YouTube video?*” Being in a room isolated from others is not recommended. Encourage children to change body positions when viewing their mobile device (e.g., lying on your tummy to vary neck positions).
4. **Why:** Ask your child: “*Why are you watching that video?*” Ensure that it is a purposeful and meaningful experience.
5. **When:** Ask your child: “*When are you watching YouTube?*” 15 to 20 minutes is a suitable time frame for a YouTube session and watching YouTube videos at bedtime should be avoided.

Active adult-child conversations and co-viewing with YouTube will support children’s learning and participation in meaningful online and offline activities. This in turn has the potential to help children become critical thinkers, creators, and problem solvers who become producers of content rather than just consumers of digital content.

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