

# Parental Phubbing Among Mothers of School Age Children and it's Risk for Child's Behavioral Problems

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## Abstract

The present study assessed parental phubbing among mothers of school-age children and its risk for behavioral problems. Objectives included determining the level of parental phubbing, assessing children's behavioral risk, finding the correlation between the two, and identifying associations with socio-personal variables. The study was based on Nola Pender's Health Promotion Model and used a descriptive design. It was conducted in the Pediatric OPD of KIMSHEALTH among 120 mothers selected through consecutive sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, the Spanish version of the Phubbing Scale, and SAEBRS.

Results showed that 2.5% had mild, 63.3% moderate, and 34.2% severe phubbing. The mean behavioral problem score was  $29.08 \pm 8.738$ , indicating a significant risk. A negative correlation was found between parental phubbing and children's behavioral outcomes. Significant associations were observed with mother's age, number of children, education, type of family, and phone usage ( $p < 0.05$ ). The study concluded that parental phubbing poses a significant risk (77.5%) for behavioral problems in school-age children.

**Keywords:** Parental Phubbing, Risk for child's behavioral problems, School-going children, Mothers of school-age children, Behavioral problems, Spanish version of phubbing scale, SAEBRS - (Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener)

## Introduction

In today's digital age, smartphones have become an integral part of everyday life, offering instant access to entertainment, communication and information. While the main purpose of early mobile phones was to make and receive calls, modern phones are multifunctional devices equipped with features such as web browsing, gaming, high resolution cameras, video playback, and GPS navigation systems.<sup>1</sup> Mobile phone use has several advantages, such as easy and fast communication, which surpass certain minor disadvantages, especially in terms of the quality of relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Phubbing is defined as "the act of ignoring someone present in favour of a mobile phone" or "using a smartphone in a social setting of two or more people, and interacting with smartphone rather than the person or people present".<sup>3</sup>

The term "phubbing" was coined by an Australian marketing agency in May 2012 to describe the growing trend of people checking their phones rather than engaging with those physically present. Shortly after, the movement to "Stop Phubbing" was launched.<sup>4</sup> In the modern digital age, where digital distractions often divert parental attention, the issue of parental phubbing has gained attention,

particularly for its potential effects on child development and behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

As of 2022, there were approximately 6.4 billion subscription of smartphone mobile network globally; by 2028, that figure is expected to rise to over 7.7 billion.<sup>6</sup>

In India, 658 million people were using the internet, according to the Digital 2022 report. At the beginning of 2022, 47% of Indians were online. However, it is important to note that research on internet adoption may still be affected by COVID-19-related challenges, suggesting that actual numbers of internet users may be higher than those reported.<sup>7</sup>

According to a study done at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK, nearly 17% of persons phub other people a minimum of four times every day. Two or three phubbing's each day are reported by nearly 32% of respondents. Research indicates that phubbing may be harming interpersonal relationships and possibly mental health, even though the habit may not seem like a major concern.<sup>8</sup>

The quality of communication, the warmth of the parents, the attachment style of the parents, and the externalizing and internalizing issues that teenagers face can all influence on the relationships between parents and children. Parental distraction from technology, especially cell phones, can have a detrimental impact on the connection between parents and children.<sup>9</sup>

### **Need and Significance of the Study**

Parental Phubbing is a manifestation of a harsh parenting style that involves parents' psychological attacks on children, such as neglect, rejection, and denial of their psychological needs, and their negative feelings or attitudes toward children, such as insensitivity. The negative consequences of parental phubbing include children feeling ignored or rejected and even a decline in their bond to their parents.<sup>10</sup>

A descriptive study conducted among 50 mother-child pairs (aged 10-16 years) in a hospital

in Kozhikode, Kerala, assessed maternal phubbing and mother-child relationship. Using purposive sampling, the study found that 70% of mothers had mild phubbing, and 88% reported closeness in the relationship. However, maternal phubbing showed a positive correlation with interpersonal conflict ( $r = 0.644$ ) and a negative correlation with closeness ( $r = -0.392$ ).<sup>11</sup>

Parental phubbing is an emerging issue that adversely affects children's physical, emotional, and psychological development. Despite high smartphone use in India, research on its impact on children's behavior remains limited. Hence, this study aims to assess its prevalence among mothers of school-age children and its association with behavioral problems.

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on the Penders Health Promotion Model (HPM) designed by Nola J Pender (2002)<sup>12</sup>. The Health Promotion Model was designed to be a "complementary counterpart to models of health protection."

The major concept of the model is Person, Environment, Nursing, Health and illness. The Components of The model focuses on three areas: individual characteristics and experiences, behavior-specific cognition and affect, and behavioral outcomes. It emphasizes that each person has unique traits influencing health actions. Behavior-specific factors like perceived benefits, barriers, self-efficacy, and interpersonal influences can be modified through nursing interventions. These changes promote health-enhancing behaviors, leading to better health, improved function, and enhanced quality of life.

In this study, the outcome focuses on adopting behaviors that improve well-being, especially reducing parental phubbing to enhance parent-child relationships and family dynamics. Nursing intervention includes providing an informational booklet to raise awareness about phubbing and its risks to children.

Nola J Pender's model for health promotion is the very acceptable modal to be employed in the present study because the self-learning through planned

teaching program enables mothers to get adequate awareness regarding parental phubbing.<sup>12</sup>

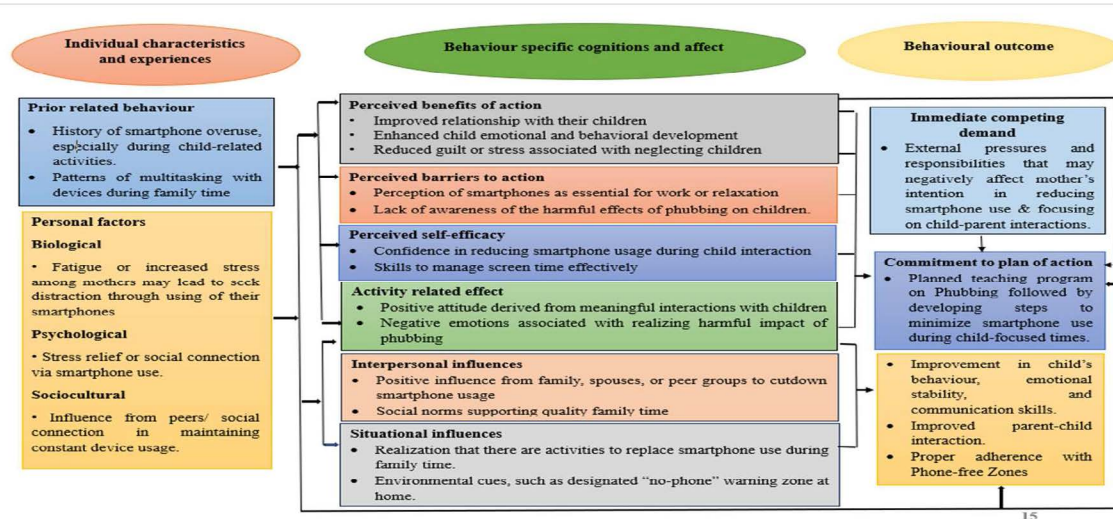


Figure no 1: Conceptual framework of the study based on Pender's Health Promotion

## Pilot Study

To check the feasibility of the study, a pilot study was conducted from 20.11.2024 to 20.12.2024 among 10 mothers of school-age children in the Pediatric OPD of KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram. Samples who satisfied the inclusion criteria were selected using the consecutive sampling technique. Data were collected after obtaining consent and assent from the participants. The pilot study was found to be feasible, and the tools were found to be executable.

## Data Collection Process

After obtaining ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board on 21st June 2024 (KIMS/CON/SYN/73/2024) and permission from KIMSHEALTH, Thiruvananthapuram, data were collected from 03.02.2025 to 28.02.2025 using purposive sampling. Informed consent was obtained from mothers of school-age children using smartphones. Parental phubbing was assessed using the Phubbing Scale, and children's behavioral risk was measured using SAEBRS. An information booklet on parental phubbing and its effects was provided after data collection.

## Plan for Data Analysis

- The data were analyzed in terms of objective of the study using descriptive and inferential statistics.
- Descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage, were used to describe socio-personal variables and parental phubbing.
- Inferential statistics, such as Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient, were used to determine the correlation between parental phubbing and behavioral problems of school-going children, and the chi-square test was used to find the association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables.

## Analysis and Interpretation

The findings of the study were analysed based on the objectives of the study and are grouped under the following sections.

**Section 1:** Distribution of mothers of school-age children based on socio-personal characteristics.

**Section 2:** Distribution of mothers of school-age children based on parental phubbing.

**Section 3:** Risk for child's behavioral problems secondary to parental phubbing.

**Section 4:** Correlation between parental phubbing and risk for child's behavioral problems.

**Section 5:** Association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables.

## Results

This section presents the findings drawn from the main study. Data collection and analysis were carried out based on the objectives of the study.

### Objectives

- Assess parental phubbing among mothers of school-age children using Spanish version of phubbing scale.
- Assess the risk for child's behavioral problems secondary to parental phubbing using Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS).
- Find out the correlation between parental phubbing and risk for child's behavioral problems.
- Find out the association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables.
- Prepare a booklet regarding awareness on parental phubbing and risk for child's behavioral problems.

### Hypothesis

- **H1:** There is significant correlation between Parental Phubbing and behavioral problems of the child
- **H2:** There is significant association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables such as age of mother, marital status, number of children, education, occupation, type of family, age group of children, frequently used digital device, frequently used mobile app and duration of mobile usage.

## Findings of the Study

Findings of the study are presented under the following sections

### Section 1: Distribution of mothers of school age children based on socio-personal characteristics.

The following are the major findings of the study.

- Among the mothers of school age children 34% of the participants were 36-40 years old.
- The majority (97.5%) of the study participants were married (Legally married and living with spouse)
- The majority(65%) of the study participants havetwo children.
- 45.83% of the study participants were graduates.
- 45.83% of the study participants were unemployed.
- The majority (62%) of the study participants belongs to nuclear family.
- 38% of the study participants have children aged 6-7 years.
- The majority (96.67%) of the study participants were used smart phones frequently.
- The majority (69.17%) of the study participants were used WhatsApp mobile app frequently.
- Most (58%)of the study participants used a smartphone for 1-3 hours per day.

### Section 2: Distribution of mothers of school age children based on parental phubbing.

Among the study participants, 63.3% of the study participant had moderate phubbing and about 34.2% had severe phubbing.

### Section 3: Risk for child's behavioral problems secondary to parental phubbing.

The findings show that 74.2% of children were at risk for developing social behavioral problems, 62.5% were at risk for developing academic behavioral problems, 90.8% were at risk for developing

emotional behavioral problems, and 77.5% were at risk for developing behavioral problems in school-going children. The mean score of total behavioral problems secondary to phubbing is 29.28 with a standard deviation of 8.738. Therefore, the result shows that there is a risk for developing child behavioral problems secondary to parental phubbing using the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS).

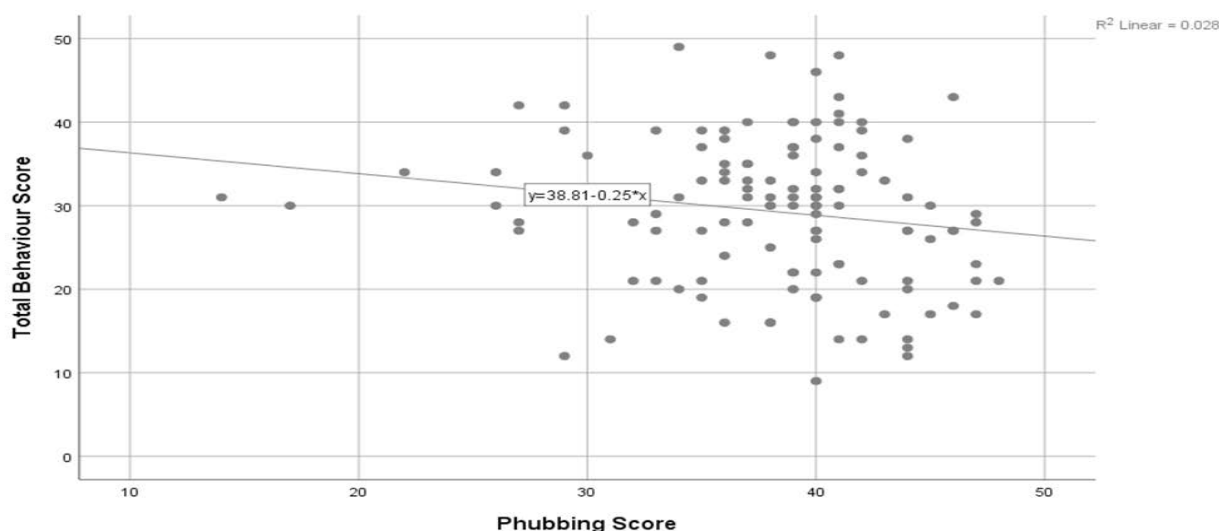
	Mean	Median	SD
<b>Social Behaviour Score</b>	9.62	10.00	3.584
<b>Academic Behaviour Score</b>	8.35	9.00	3.302
<b>Emotional Behaviour Score</b>	11.28	11.00	4.241
<b>Total Behaviour Score</b>	29.28	30.00	8.738

#### Section 4: Correlation between parental phubbing and risk for child's behavioral problems.

	Pearson Correlation Co-efficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
<b>Social Behaviour Score</b>	-0.276	0.002
<b>Academic Behaviour Score</b>	-0.073	0.426
<b>Emotional Behaviour Score</b>	-0.073	0.427
<b>Total Behaviour Score</b>	-0.168	0.066

There is statistically significant negative correlation between parental phubbing and child's behavior ( $r = -0.168$ ).

- There is statistically significant negative correlation between parental phubbing and the risk for child's behavioral problems



#### Section 5: Association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables.

- The result shows that a statistically significant association was found between phubbing and the age of the mother ( $\chi^2 = 14.332$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), number of children ( $\chi^2 = 28.746$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), education ( $\chi^2 = 22.046$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), type of family ( $\chi^2 = 7.178$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and usage of phone ( $\chi^2 = 20.007$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )

- There is statistically no significant association between phubbing and the marital status ( $\chi^2 = 1.465$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), occupation ( $\chi^2 = 4.537$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), the age group of children ( $\chi^2 = 3.290$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), frequently used digital device ( $\chi^2 = 0.294$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) and frequently used mobile app ( $\chi^2 = 3.394$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Hence null hypothesis ( $H_{02b}$ ,  $H_{02e}$ ,  $H_{02g}$ ,  $H_{02h}$  and  $H_{02i}$ ) is accepted.

## Discussion

The study shows widespread moderate-to-severe phubbing among mothers, which significantly increases the risk of emotional, social, and behavioral difficulties in their children. Parental inattention due to persistent phone use disrupts bonding, reduces emotional availability, and may contribute to behavioral challenges. The findings emphasize the impact of digital distraction on child development and the importance of mindful parenting.

This section discusses the results obtained from the statistical analysis of the data based on the objectives and hypotheses.

The first objective of the study was to assess parental phubbing among mothers of school-age children using Spanish version of the phubbing scale. In the present study 63.3% of the study participant had moderate phubbing, 34.2% had severe phubbing and 2.5% had mild phubbing.

The present study findings are supported by a cross-sectional correlational study conducted among 340 mothers of hospitalized infants in a training and research hospital in Corum (March–September 2023). Using the Generic Scale of Phubbing and the Self-Perception of Parental Scale, the study found that mothers spent an average of  $6.86 \pm 1.64$  hours per day on social media. Increased maternal phubbing was associated with a decreased perception of competence in the parenting role.<sup>13</sup>

The second objective was to assess the risk of children's behavioral problems due to parental phubbing using SAEBRS. Results showed that 74.2% of children were at risk for social problems, 62.5% for academic problems, 90.8% for emotional problems, and 77.5% overall. The mean score was  $29.28 \pm 8.738$ , indicating a significant risk of behavioral problems associated with parental phubbing.

The present study findings are supported by the findings from a study conducted in China to evaluate the association between mother phubbing and children's emotional and behavioral issues, as well as the mediating function of mother-child

attachment. The study found a substantial and positive association between mother phubbing and children's emotional and behavioral problems ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.13, 0.25]).<sup>14</sup>

The third objective of the present study was to find the correlation between parental phubbing and the risk for child's behavioral problems. The result showed that there is statistically significant negative correlation between parental phubbing and child's behavior, which implies, the lesser the phubbing, the better the child's total behavior.

The present study findings are supported by a large study conducted among 56,275 children in China, which examined parental phubbing and children's social-emotional adjustment. The study found that parental phubbing was negatively correlated with children's self-concept and social-emotional competence, and positively correlated with internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity), indicating its adverse impact on children's overall development.<sup>15</sup>

The present study findings are also supported by the findings of another cross-sectional study conducted among 614 adolescents from two middle schools in Central China from May to June 2022 during Covid-19 pandemic situation to assess the correlation between parental phubbing and adolescent depressive symptoms. The study revealed that Parental phubbing was negatively correlated with the parent-child relationship ( $\beta = -0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and self-concept clarity ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while it was positively correlated with depressive symptoms ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>16</sup>

The fourth objective was to determine the association between parental phubbing and selected socio-personal variables using the chi-square test. The results showed a statistically significant association between parental phubbing and variables such as mother's age ( $\chi^2 = 14.332$ ), number of children ( $\chi^2 = 28.746$ ), education ( $\chi^2 = 22.046$ ), type of family ( $\chi^2 = 7.178$ ), and phone usage ( $\chi^2 = 20.007$ ) ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The study examined the association between parental phubbing and socio-personal variables such

as age, education, family type, number of children, and phone usage. Significant associations were found with mother's age, number of children, education, family type, and phone use. Limited existing research highlights the novelty of this study and the need to explore how socio-personal factors influence parental phubbing.

These results could be pioneering for further studies that seek to identify the underlying causes and create remedies to address parental phubbing. The relations obtained in this study needs to be confirmed and expanded upon by other research using larger samples and in a variety of populations.

### Conclusion

Parental phubbing is highly prevalent among mothers of school-age children and poses a substantial behavioural risk (77.5%) to children. Promoting digital hygiene, limiting unnecessary phone use, and encouraging mindful parent-child interactions are essential to reduce adverse developmental effects.

The present study was designed to assess parental phubbing among mothers of school-age children and its risk for children's behavioral problems. The study concludes that moderate to severe phubbing is prevalent among mothers or parents of school-age children, which in turn contributes to progressive behavioral problems in children. Therefore, strategies should be devised to address issues in the younger generation caused by digital distractions and to help them adapt constructively to life situations for a better future.

### Policy Implications

#### Nursing Implications

The findings of the study have several implications for nursing practice, nursing education, nursing administration, and nursing research.

#### Nursing Practice

- Nurses, especially those in mental health, child health, and community health nursing, can assess parent-child interactions during routine checkups.

- Counsel mothers on the importance of mindful parenting and being emotionally present for their children.

### Nursing Education

- Incorporate the topic of digital behavior and family dynamics into the curricula of mental health nursing, child health nursing, and community health nursing.
- Educate nursing students on recognizing early behavioral signs in children that may be linked to parental neglect or inattention.

### Nursing Administration

- Public health nurse administrators could implement awareness programs and parenting workshops in hospital and community settings, focusing on responsible digital behavior.
- Encourage administrative policies that support family-centered care, where nurses engage both parents in discussions about child health and behavior.
- educators to manage behavioral problems linked to family dynamics.

### Nursing Research

- Evidence-based research activities should be emphasized to identify and manage parental phubbing and its impact on the behavioral and emotional problems of adolescents and children.

### Limitations

- Underreporting of phubbing may occur among mothers due to social desirability bias.

### Scope for Future Studies

- The present study could be replicated by using direct observation of behavioral and emotional deviations of children, rather than parental response.

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**Conflict of Interest Statements:** This study has no conflict of interest

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