



DIGITAL CHILD WORKING PAPER SERIES 2025-01

# Exposure to and Use of Social Media in Childhood: A Scoping Review Protocol

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The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child acknowledges the First Australian owners of the lands on where we gather and pay our respects to the Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits of this country.

## A MESSAGE FROM PROFESSOR SUSAN DANBY, CENTRE DIRECTOR

In 2021, the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded a Centre of Excellence devoted to studying and researching ‘the digital child’. The focus of this Centre is on very young children from birth to age 8, and describes and examines their everyday lives with and through digital technologies, their learning and their health in the family, and various kinds of kindergarten, childcare and early primary education experiences.

The Centre brings together six universities across Australia, as well as partner investigators from North America, Asia and Europe and a range of public bodies and civil society stakeholders, to focus on a holistic understanding of what it might mean to ‘grow up digital’ today.

The Digital Child Working Paper Series reports on our work in progress. There are five series of papers aimed at different audiences:

A **teal** series offers ‘how to’ papers aimed at early career researchers or those new to the principles and practices of systematic review.

A **red** series consisting of discussion papers aimed at the scholarly community, raising larger conceptual challenges faced by researchers at the Centre and drawing on forms of literature review.

A **green** series consisting of scoping reviews, literature reviews and systematic reviews, all addressing specific research questions particular to any of the programme disciplines in the Centre.

A **yellow** series consisting of digital research capacity building resource-rich discussion papers, offering more technical support for the research community and allied scholarship. These are more focused on methods and methodologies.

A **purple** series consisting of more public facing, policy-oriented papers produced for stakeholder engagement.

Each of the working papers has been authored by members of the Centre and has been subject to review as explained in each paper. The arguments in each paper represent the view of the authors.

We hope that readers find each of these papers stimulating and generative and that all sections of society can draw on the insights, arguments and ideas within the papers to create healthy, educated and connected futures for all and every child.

*Professor Susan Danby*

*Director, Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child*

*June 2022*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is part of a series consisting of scoping reviews, literature reviews and systematic reviews, all addressing specific research questions particular to any of the programme disciplines in ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. This paper has been checked by an editorial team to ensure it meets basic standards around clarity of expression and acceptable and inclusive language.

Social media has woven itself into daily life, shaping how people - including young children - communicate, learn, and interact. However, public discourse often highlights parents' and adults' concerns about children's social media use, safety and choices, leading to growing support for restrictive measures such as age-based social media bans (or screen time limits). Yet, these methods fall short of fostering digital literacy or creating meaningful and safe digital opportunities for their wellbeing and development.

For the purposes of this review, social media is defined as any digital platform that allows a user to view, consume, create and share content amongst virtual communities and networks, as per the definition by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (2023). It also extends to include any online video game that enables social interaction through play via a chat function. Despite evidence of steady increases in engagement of young children on social media platforms, existing research largely focuses on adolescents and adults. While social media companies set minimum age requirements for platform use (usually 13 years and over), there are many reports (formal and anecdotal) that indicate the use of social media commences at a much younger age.

In Australia, the eSafety Commissioner reported that 84% of children between 8-12 years had used at least one social media or messaging service, while 40% of those children had their own account on at least one of these services (2025). According to Ofcom (2024), in recent years a higher proportion of children in the United Kingdom aged 5-7 years are not only using social media platforms independently such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, but they have their own profiles with the approval of their parents. In the United States, Common Sense Media reports (2025) that almost half (48%) of children aged under 8 years have watched videos on social media platforms TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. Social gaming among children aged 5-8 years has also increased in recent years, most often with peers, caregivers or siblings, but at times with strangers. Common Sense Media (2025) reports around 42% of children in the United States aged 5-8 years are playing 'social' games online with people they know (26%) as well as people they don't know (17%). In the United Kingdom, Ofcom (2024) found around 70% of 8-11 year olds engaged in social chat while playing games, often with friends (64%) but also with strangers (31%).

The minimum age requirement for many social media platforms is often arbitrary and inconsistent, lacking an established evidence base of support (e.g., Montag et al., 2024). They also do not account for the diverse ways children engage with these platforms, often through indirect access (e.g., digital profile set up by parents) or peer interactions (e.g., co-viewing social media content via a friend's account). Additionally, the term 'social media' itself remains ambiguously defined, particularly in relation to

younger users. The multifaceted nature of social media, ranging from traditional social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) to newer and more interactive platforms (e.g., TikTok, Discord) blurs the lines between gaming, social interactions, content creation, and media consumption.

Accordingly, this review aims to map the evidence currently available pertaining to the exposure to social media platforms (i.e., indirect and secondary involvement through parents/ carers, siblings and peers) and the use of platforms (i.e., direct, active and intentional engagement) enabling content creation, consumption and interaction for children aged between 5-12 years.

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## REVIEW SCOPE AND TEAM

### REVIEW TITLE

Exposure to and Use of Social Media in Childhood: A Scoping Review

### ANTICIPATED START DATE

01/02/2025

### ANTICIPATED COMPLETION DATE

31/12/2025

### STAGE OF REVIEW AT TIME OF SUBMISSION

- Not started yet
- Preliminary database searches completed
- Piloting of the study selection process completed
- Formal study screening commenced**

### CORRESPONDING REVIEWER

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### REVIEW TEAM MEMBERS AND THEIR AFFILIATIONS

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Amanda Cipriani	Curtin University

### **FUNDING SOURCES/SPONSORS**

This work is funded by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child (CE200100022)

### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Authors declare no conflict of interest

## REVIEW METHOD

### TYPE OF REVIEW

- |                                                |                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Systematic review     | <input type="checkbox"/> Review of reviews      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meta-analysis         | <input type="checkbox"/> Umbrella review        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Scoping review</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Qualitative Synthesis  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Narrative review      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) |

### REVIEW QUESTION

What are the key concepts, definitions, and characteristics related to exposure to and use of social media by children aged between 5 and 12 years of age?

### SEARCHES

Titles of the sources/ database to be searched: MEDLINE, PsychINFO, SCOPUS, ERIC

Search dates: From 2014 to present (last decade to reflect evolving priorities and shifts in platform use and experiences in the field)

Restrictions: Peer-reviewed, English only

Are unpublished reports included? No

Sample search strategy appended

[SPIDER](#) - applicable (please skip to SPIDER framing)

## SPIDER framing (more suited for qualitative or mixed-methods reviews)

### SAMPLE

Children aged 5 to 12 years; families with children aged 5-12 years; educators working with children aged 5-12 years

There will be no limitations on settings within which the studies take place (e.g. literature may pertain to home/ caregiving settings, experimental settings, educational settings as long as the age criteria is met).

### PHENOMENON OF INTEREST

Children's social media exposure and use; we will adopt a definition of social media as any digital platform that allows a user to view, consume, create and share content amongst virtual communities and networks, as per the definition by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, as detailed below.

*“Social media refers to any online social network. An online social network is a website or app that allows a user to create and share content online, for example, Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. This often involves sharing personal information in comments and messages, and photos and videos.” (OAIC, 2023)*

Accordingly, only social media or messaging services that are authentic and publicly available will be considered (i.e., not closed platforms or private platforms developed for specific purposes). This includes online games commonly used by 5 – 12 year olds that have a chat function (e.g., Minecraft, Fortnite, Roblox, the three most popular online games; eSafety, 2024) and excludes any closed platforms or services developed for specific purposes (e.g., communication or social learning within a school).

Further, ‘use’ of social media will be defined as any direct, active and intentional engagement with any social media platform (e.g., creating, consuming or interacting), while ‘exposure’ will be defined as more indirect and secondary involvement on social media platforms through other avenues such as through a parent/ carer (e.g., parents’ own profile or content shared of the child by parents), siblings, or peers (e.g., co-viewing of social media content via others’ profiles).

### DESIGN

Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods designs.

### EVALUATION

It is hypothesised that children within the age range of 5-12 years are using social media on their own or are being exposed to social media through secondary (through parents/carers, siblings, peers) avenues, as per the definitions of ‘use’ and ‘exposure’ outlined above. As social and learning experiences increase

throughout primary school aged years, it is anticipated that use of and exposure to social media may also increase.

Although not typically characterised as ‘social media’ within the literature, we also expect to find some ambiguity in the literature where some platforms could still fit within the review’s operational definition of ‘social media’ as comprising the ability for end users to view/ consume and create content (e.g., YouTube), communicate/chat, share material and/or facilitate social interaction (e.g., Roblox).

### **RESEARCH TYPE**

Reviews, non-peer-reviewed reports or grey literature will be excluded. Full-text articles not in English will also be excluded.

### **DATA SCREENING AND EXTRACTION PROCEDURES**

All studies captured within the search strategy will be uploaded to Covidence for screening. Covidence will automatically detect and remove duplicate texts before screening commences. Screening will then be completed in two phases: (1) title and abstract screening, and (2) full text screening.

Title and abstract screening will be undertaken independently by two authors to determine an initial list of potential studies for inclusion. 20% of the full texts of these studies will then undergo independent double screening, followed by single screening (upon establishing inter-rater reliability) to determine the final list of studies for inclusion in the review. Throughout the screening processes, any conflicts that arise will be resolved through regular discussion with the research team, consultation of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and by gaining agreement from additional author/s where necessary. Study details (authors, year, country, study design, and research aims/ objectives), demographic data of sample (e.g., age, sample size, sample characteristics), information relevant to social media (e.g., platform of interest), methodology (e.g., survey, interview) and key findings will be extracted from each included study by an independent reviewer (of which, 20% of the extractions will be checked by another reviewer).

### **RISK OF BIAS/ QUALITY ASSESSMENT**

Not applicable, as only a Scoping Review

### **DATA SYNTHESIS**

A narrative review addressing the research question will be conducted. Themes and categories of research will be mapped to contextualise how ‘social media’ has been defined and investigated with the focus on children aged 5-12 years. It is anticipated that the narrative synthesis will be presented in light of the research question, to outline the key concepts that research cluster into, and their associated definitions

and characteristics. Where appropriate, findings will further be synthesised based on the age groups (e.g., 5-8 and 9-12 years), direct (i.e., use) vs. Indirect (i.e., exposure) involvement within social media as well as types of platforms (e.g., YouTube vs. social networking sites vs. social gaming).

**KEYWORDS**

Scoping review; social media; children; digital platforms; social networking

**LANGUAGE/COUNTRY**

English

**OTHER INFORMATION (if applicable)**

Review will inform gaps within the literature and underlying themes to further explore via survey and interview methodologies with the samples of interest.

## SEARCH STRATEGY

Date run: 22/1/2025

### PsycInfo

S58	S16 AND S47 AND S57 (Limiters applied: Publication year: 2014- ; Language: English; Age groups: childhood (birth – 12 yrs), Preschool Age (2-5 yrs), School age (6-12 yrs); Population group: Human; Document Type: Journal article	256
S57	S48 OR S49 OR S50 OR S51 OR S52 OR S53 OR S54 OR S55 OR S56	2,085,559
S56	Learn*	568,670
S55	Engage	97,508
S54	Interact	55,825
S53	Watch	5,417
S52	Experience	712,497
S51	Usage	34,375
S50	Utilize	4,378
S49	Use	953,551
S48	Exposure	166,373
S47	S17 OR S18 OR S19 OR S20 OR S21 OR S22 OR S23 OR S24 OR S25 OR S26 OR S27 OR S28 OR S29 OR S30 OR S31 OR S32 OR S33 OR S34 OR S35 OR S36 OR S37 OR S38 OR S39 OR S40 OR S41 OR S42 OR S42 OR S43 OR S44 OR S45 OR S46	52,744
S46	Minecraft	117
S45	Grand theft auto	52
S44	Fortnite	25
S43	Call of duty	107
S42	Lego Life	0
S41	WeChat	477
S40	kidfluencer	1
S39	unboxing	17
S38	Influencer	2,033
S37	MM “social media use”	1,144
S36	MM “persuasive communication”	4,900
S35	MM “social media”	17,974
S34	MM “media exposure”	1,872
S33	Twitter	4,835
S32	Reddit	563
S31	online N3 profile	402
S30	sharenting	35

S29	social N3 gaming	537
S28	chat N3 gaming	10
S27	internet N3 social	2,586
S26	roblox	8
S25	social platform*	252
S24	messenger	4,036
S23	TikTok	351
S22	YouTube	2,028
S21	Snapchat	302
S20	Instagram	1,925
S19	Facebook	8,128
S18	social networking	5,888
S17	social media	25,718
S16	S1 OR S2 OR S3 OR S4 OR S5 OR S6 OR S7 OR S8 OR S9 OR S10 OR S11 OR S12 OR S13 OR S14 OR S15	257,592
S15	MM “child characteristics”	2,938
S14	MM “Childhood development”	63,750
S13	MM “early childhood education”	3,655
S12	elementary education	1,285
S11	elementary school*	32,755
S10	preadolescent	3,742
S9	early year*	5,503
S8	minor	29,461
S7	early school*	2,095
S6	primary school*	16,116
S5	early childhood	33,116
S4	kindergarten*	21,231
S3	pre-school*	3,817
S2	preschool*	48,827
S1	young child*	47,413

**ERIC**

Total results: 191

**MEDLINE**

Total results: 188

Note that MEDLINE and ERIC used the same search and equivalent limitations as PsycInfo.

### **Web of Science**

Total results: 2508

Search syntax:

Step 1:

(TI=(young NEAR/1 child\*) OR TS=(young NEAR/1 child\*)) or (TI=preschool\* OR AB=preschool\*) or (TI=pre-school\* OR AB=pre-school\*) or (TI=kindergarten\* OR AB=kindergarten\*) or (TI=(early NEAR/1 childhood) OR TS=(early NEAR/1 childhood)) or (TI=(primary NEAR/1 school\*) OR TS=(primary NEAR/1 school\*)) or (TI='minor' OR AB='minor') or (TI='preadolescent' OR AB='preadolescent') or (TI=(early NEAR/1 year\*) OR TS=(early NEAR/1 year\*)) or (TI=(elementary NEAR/1 school\*) OR TS=(elementary NEAR/1 school\*)) or (TI=(elementary NEAR/1 education) OR TS=(elementary NEAR/1 education))

Step 2:

(TI=(social NEAR/1 media) OR TS=(social NEAR/1 media)) or (TI=(social NEAR/1 networking) OR TS=(social NEAR/1 networking)) or (TI=facebook OR AB=facebook) or (TI=instagram OR AB=instagram) or (TI=snapchat OR AB=snapchat) or (TI=YouTube OR AB=YouTube) or (TI=tiktok OR AB=tiktok) or (TI=messenger OR AB=messenger) or (TI=(social NEAR/1 platform\*) OR TS=(social NEAR/1 platform\*)) or (TI=roblox OR AB=roblox) or (TI=(internet NEAR/3 social) OR TS=(internet NEAR/3 social)) or (TI=(chat NEAR/3 gaming) OR TS=(chat NEAR/3 gaming)) or (TI=(social NEAR/3 gaming) OR TS=(social NEAR/3 gaming)) or (TI=sharenting OR AB=sharenting) or (TI=(online NEAR/3 profile) OR TS=(online NEAR/3 profile)) or (TI=Reddit OR AB=Reddit) or (TI=Twitter OR AB=Twitter) or (TI=Influencer OR AB=Influencer) or (TI=unboxing OR AB=unboxing) or (TI=kidfluencer OR AB=kidfluencer) or (TI=Wechat OR AB=Wechat) or (TI=(Lego NEAR/1 Life) OR TS=(Lego NEAR/1 Life)) or (TI=Fortnite OR AB=Fortnite) or (TI=(Grand NEAR/1 theft NEAR/1 auto) OR TS=(Grand NEAR/1 theft NEAR/1 auto)) or (TI=Minecraft OR AB=Minecraft)

Step 3:

(TI=expos\* OR AB=expos\*) or (TI=use OR AB=use) or (TI=utilise OR AB=utilise) or (TI=usage OR AB=usage) or (TI=experience OR AB=experience) or (TI=watch OR AB=watch) or (TI=interact OR AB=interact) or (TI=engage OR AB=engage) or (TI=learn\* OR AB=learn\*)

Step 4:

#1 AND #2 AND #3 and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) or Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED) or Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) (Web of Science Index)

### **Scopus**

Total results: 842

Search Syntax:

(( TITLE-ABS ("young child\*") OR TITLE-ABS ( preschool\* ) OR TITLE-ABS ( pre-school\* ) OR TITLE-ABS ( kindergarten\* ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "early childhood" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "primary school\*" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "minor" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "early year\*" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "elementary school\*" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( preadolescent ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "elementary education" ) ) ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS ( "social media" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "social networking" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( facebook ) OR TITLE-ABS ( instagram ) OR TITLE-ABS ( snapchat ) OR TITLE-ABS ( youtube ) OR TITLE-ABS ( tiktok ) OR TITLE-ABS ( messenger ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "social platform\*" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( roblox ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "internet NEAR/3 social" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "chat NEAR/3 gaming" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "social NEAR/3 gaming" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( sharenting ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "online NEAR/3 profile" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( reddit ) OR TITLE-ABS ( twitter ) OR TITLE-ABS ( influencer ) OR TITLE-ABS ( unboxing ) OR TITLE-ABS ( kidfluencer ) OR TITLE-ABS ( wechat ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "Lego Life" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "Call of duty" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( fortnite ) OR TITLE-ABS ( "Grand theft auto" ) OR TITLE-ABS ( minecraft ) ) ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS ( exposure ) OR TITLE-ABS ( use ) OR TITLE-ABS ( utilise ) OR TITLE-ABS ( usage ) OR TITLE-ABS ( experience ) OR TITLE-ABS ( watch ) OR TITLE-ABS ( interact ) OR TITLE-ABS ( engage ) ) ) AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , "ar" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) )

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Jacquelyn Harverson**

Jacquelyn's research is focused on exploring broad factors of young children's digital technology use alongside presenting associations with indicators of childhood psychosocial well-being. To achieve this aim, Jacquelyn's research considers children's digital technology use and psychosocial well-being across both home and school settings. Jacquelyn aims to provide high quality evidence to support the integration of quality and contextual aspects of children's digital technology use into evidence-based recommendations. Her vision is for parents and teachers to feel confident and equipped to support children integrating digital technology into childhood in a way that enables both positive experiences and outcomes for the growing generations.

### **Dr Sumudu Mallawaarachchi**

Sumudu's research focuses on children's digital technology use from a child developmental perspective, with expertise in mixed-methods research including meta-analyses, longitudinal quantitative research, acute experiments, and qualitative thematic analyses. As a Research Fellow, she examines associations between children's digital technology use and engagement, design of digital environments and child developmental outcomes (with a particular focus on self-regulation). Sumudu hopes her research will inform evidence-based recommendations for families, clinicians and educators in optimising healthy technology use by young children. Her vision is for children to be able to engage with digital technology in such a way that it complements their wellbeing and development, minimising the potential risks.

### **Dr Kristy Corser**

Kristy has worked widely across the education, technologies and transformation industries. Her research interests include digital ecosystems and the use of technologies in classroom settings, particularly in the early and primary years of education. As a Research Fellow in the Educated Program, Kristy hopes to contribute to policy and practice that assists parents/carers, families, teachers, and students to be informed, confident and critical users of digital technologies and the internet.

### **Amanda Cipriani**

Amanda's research aims to understand how children's wellbeing online has been conceptualised and operationalised by social media platforms. By interrogating their logic of wellbeing as understood through their policy, controls and interface design, Amanda aims to understand how platforms are both shaped by culture and, in turn, shaping culture and the lives of children. Amanda hopes to provide a new perspective on children's wellbeing in the digital ecology through the lens of the companies controlling the popular platforms children use and giving children and parents a voice through their lived experiences.



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