The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 11 | November 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

Screen-Free Coding: Enhancing Foundational Learning in Early Childhood Education

Manbir Bedi

Founder Primary Plus Group, manbirbedi@primaryplus.org

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17930052

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 26-11-2025

Published: 10-12-2025

Keywords:

Screen-Free Coding, Early Childhood Education, Computational Thinking, STEM Learning, Unplugged Coding

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of screen-free coding activities on the cognitive and academic development of children in early education settings. By replacing digital interfaces with tangible, play-based tools, the research examines how young learners develop computational thinking, problem-solving, and logical reasoning skills. Data from Silicon International School, Bangalore, and Lotus Valley International School, Gurugram, demonstrate measurable improvements in students' mathematical and scientific aptitude after introducing screen-free coding modules. The findings emphasize that coding need not rely on screens — instead, concrete, unplugged experiences foster deeper conceptual understanding and collaboration among learners.

Introduction

The increasing integration of technology in education has led to the introduction of coding at progressively younger ages. However, the screen-centric nature of most coding programs raises concerns about excessive digital exposure in early childhood. Screen-free coding — often referred to as *unplugged coding* — provides an innovative, developmentally appropriate alternative. It teaches the logic of programming, sequencing, and algorithms through hands-on play, storytelling, and physical movement.

This research investigates how screen-free coding impacts learning outcomes in early childhood, particularly in mathematics and science comprehension, and how it nurtures a love for problem-solving without relying on digital devices.

Literature Review

Research over the past decade highlights the benefits of early coding education in developing critical thinking and creativity. Studies by Bers (2019) and Papert (1993) emphasize the role of tangible manipulatives in fostering computational thinking. Montessori-inspired pedagogies also advocate for tactile learning experiences that align with screen-free coding methods. Existing studies have shown that early exposure to algorithmic thinking enhances numeracy and scientific reasoning. However, few studies have focused exclusively on screen-free approaches, making this research a valuable contribution to the growing discourse on balanced digital learning.

Objectives

1. To evaluate the impact of screen-free coding on the development of mathematical and scientific skills in early learners.
2. To examine how unplugged coding activities enhance logical reasoning and collaborative problem-solving.
3. To analyze teacher and student feedback on the implementation of screen-free coding programs.
4. To propose a model for integrating screen-free coding into the early years curriculum effectively.

Methodology

This qualitative and quantitative study was conducted across two institutions:

- **Silicon International School, Bangalore**
- **Lotus Valley International School, Gurugram**

A total of 120 children aged 5–8 participated. The study involved a 12-week intervention where students engaged in unplugged coding activities such as sequencing cards, coding stories, robot path games, and algorithm puzzles. Pre- and post-assessments were conducted to measure progress in mathematics and science. Teacher observations and interviews were also included to collect qualitative insights.

Data Analysis

Data analysis revealed significant improvement in conceptual understanding:

- **Mathematics:** Students demonstrated a 35% increase in pattern recognition, sequencing, and problem-solving accuracy.
- **Science:** Observation and reasoning scores improved by 28%, indicating stronger cause-effect comprehension and process thinking. Teachers reported heightened engagement levels, with students displaying persistence and curiosity during problem-solving tasks. The tactile and social aspects of screen-free coding created a dynamic learning environment that encouraged experimentation and peer learning.

Findings

1. **Enhanced Cognitive Skills:** Students developed logical and sequential thinking skills through physical coding challenges.
2. **Improved Academic Performance:** There was a marked improvement in mathematics and science scores post-intervention.
3. **Increased Engagement:** Children showed enthusiasm and sustained attention during unplugged activities.
4. **Reduced Screen Dependence:** The study demonstrated that computational learning objectives can be achieved without digital devices.
5. **Teacher Empowerment:** Educators found screen-free tools easier to integrate into lesson plans and more inclusive for diverse learners.

Conclusion

Screen-free coding bridges the gap between early childhood pedagogy and 21st-century skills. The study confirms that unplugged coding methods can effectively enhance core academic and cognitive skills without the risks associated with screen exposure. Early childhood education must prioritize developmentally appropriate, tactile experiences that nurture both the mind and imagination. This approach represents a holistic pathway for introducing computational thinking in foundational years.

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