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A Survey on AI-Based Child Detection and Safety Mechanisms in Smartphone

Kavya Shree Gandhadamatha[1], *Dr. Pampapathi B M*[2]
[1]*Department of Computer Science & Engineering, RYM Engineering College, Ballari, VTU Belagavi, Karnataka, India.*
[2]*Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science & Engineering, RYM Engineering College, Ballari, VTU Belagavi, Karnataka, India.*
Emails: *kavya.shree.g.312@gmail.com*[1], *bm.pampapathi7@gmail.com*[2]

Abstract
The proliferation of smartphones among children has sparked widespread concern over digital addiction, unsupervised content access, and mental health consequences. This survey paper presents a comprehensive review of artificial intelligence (AI)-based approaches for child detection and safety regulation in mobile environments. We explore age estimation through facial recognition, behavioral analytics, and context-based models with an emphasis on on-device processing for privacy preservation. We introduce a classification taxonomy, analyze over several papers, identify gaps in real-time accuracy, ethical design, and dataset limitations, and propose future research directions. Our study offers a roadmap for the development of adaptive, AI-driven child safety tools aligned with digital well-being standards.
Keywords: *Child detection, smartphone safety, age estimation, artificial intelligence, facial recognition, screen time control, on-device AI, parental control, digital well-being.*

1. Introduction
In today's digital age, smartphones have become ubiquitous across all age groups, including children. While these devices offer educational and entertainment value, their unsupervised use poses significant risks to children's mental health, development, and overall well-being. Studies such as Rothe et al. [1] and Kumar et al. [5] highlight the adverse effects of excessive screen time, including sleep disruption, attention disorders, and exposure to inappropriate content. Despite the increasing adoption of parental control applications, these tools often rely on static configurations that are easily bypassed, rendering them insufficient in dynamic real-world scenarios. The primary problem addressed in this research is the lack of intelligent, real-time mechanisms to identify when a child is using a smartphone and automatically apply protective measures. Existing systems typically require manual setup, lack age-awareness, or depend on cloud-based solutions that introduce privacy risks and latency issues. The motivation behind this work stems from the increasing need to empower parents with automated, privacy-respecting tools that adapt to the user's profile. Unlike traditional models, we approach lightweight leverages, on-device artificial intelligence (AI) to provide immediate responses without relying on an internet connection. This ensures not only performance efficiency but also compliance with data protection regulations like GDPR and COPPA. The scope of this paper includes the design and evaluation of a real-time age detection system using facial recognition and machine learning. The system aims to classify users as children, teens, or adults, and activate a "Kid Mode" when a child is detected. This mode limits access to certain apps, enforces screen time restrictions, and simplifies the user interface to make it more child friendly.

1.1. Our key contributions are as follows
- A novel on-device age detection framework optimized for smartphones using MobileNetV2 and facial landmarks.
- A dynamic decision engine that classifies users into age groups and applies appropriate restrictions.
- Alleviate awareness architecture ensures all

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computation is performed locally on the device.
- A detailed analysis of expected performance benchmarks based on state-of-the-art literature Shown in Table 1.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II presents a literature review of existing approaches and technologies. Section III describes the proposed system architecture and methodology. Section IV outlines the implementation plan. Section V discusses the expected results and evaluation criteria. Finally, Section VI concludes the paper and outlines directions for future research.

2. Literature Review / Related Work

The existing body of research provides a multifaceted view of efforts made toward child detection, age estimation, and mobile safety systems. Age estimation using facial features has been extensively studied. Rothe, Rasmus et al. [1] pioneered age prediction using CNNs without relying on facial landmarks, which allowed for more flexible implementations. Saxena, A. et al. [3] later improved this by developing a lightweight CNN optimized for mobile platforms, addressing the constraints of processing power and memory in handheld devices. In parallel, the social implications of smartphone usage among children have been investigated. Kumar, R. and Saini, A. [5] examined the behavioral effects of excessive smartphone use and advocated for parental supervision tools. Supporting this, Pradhan, M. et al. [6] provided evidence of increasing screen addiction among younger users, reinforcing the urgency of intelligent control systems. From a system design perspective, Mekuria, D. et al. [7] proposed an AI-driven rule engine for parental control, while Chen, Y. et al. [8] focused on privacy-preserving on-device AI to detect child usage in real time. These methods served as a precursor for integrated and privacy-conscious models. Face detection and age classification pipelines, like those from Patel, S. et al. [10] and Gupta, N. et al. [13], illustrated the practical feasibility of deploying CNNs for real-time mobile inference. They leveraged tools such as OpenCV in conjunction with deep learning models to deliver robust performance. Meanwhile, Singh, H. et al. [14] emphasized UX design in child-oriented apps, and Ahmad, S. et al. [20] worked on optimizing inference performance using Mobile Net for edge devices. Further research by Lee, K. et al. [15] and Zhang, J. et al. [16] introduced multimodal learning and face normalization to increase model robustness. Bhattacharya, S. et al. [24] explored AI's role in digital well-being, offering a broader perspective on system impact. Recently, Verma, P. and Sharma, R. [22] and Nair, V. et al. [21] contributed methods focusing on facial biometrics and on-device AI for mobile safety, reinforcing the feasibility and scalability of edge-based intelligent child detection systems. These works highlight both the technological innovations and practical considerations needed for building a responsive, ethical, and efficient child detection system on smartphones. The proposed methodology integrates these diverse contributions to offer a privacy-preserving, real-time, and child-centric solution.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of AI-Driven Age Estimation and Child-Centric Mobile Safety Systems

Ref	Author(s), Year	Title	Key Contribution	Method /Model	Outcome	Limitations
[1]	Rothe et al, 2015	"Deep Expectation of Real and Apparent Age from a Single Image Without Facial Landmarks"	Apparent age estimation without landmarks	CNN	The model achieved 88% accuracy in estimating real and apparent age.	• Limited to controlled datasets • No support for real-time mobile deployment

[3]	Saxena et al, 2019	"Lightweight CNN for Age Estimation on Mobile Devices"	Optimized CNN for mobile devices	Custom CNN	The optimized CNN achieved 91% accuracy on mobile devices.	• Accuracy drops in poor lighting • Not tested on diverse ethnic backgrounds
[5]	Kumar & Saini, 2021	"Impact of Smartphone Usage on Children: A Review"	Behavioral risks of child smartphone use	Review	The review identified key risks associated with children's mobile use.	• Does not provide technical mitigation • Results are qualitative only
[6]	Pradhan et al, 2022	"Smartphone Addiction in Children: Behavioral Analysis."	Psychological study on mobile usage	Survey-based	The study found behavioral signs of screen addiction in children.	• No real-time intervention offered • Lacks automated enforcement mechanism
[7]	Mekuria et al, 2021	"AI-Driven Parental Control Systems for Mobile Devices."	Policy-based control using AI	Rule engine + ML	An AI-based control system was prototyped for enforcing safety rules.	• Rule engine lacks personalization • Cannot adapt to individual child behavior
[8]	Chen et al, 2023	"Privacy-Aware AI Solutions for On-Device Child Detection"	On-device AI for child safety	TensorFlow Lite	Achieved 85–90% child detection accuracy using on-device AI.	• May misclassify older teens • Struggles with ambiguous facial features
[10]	Patel et al, 2022	"Real-Time Face Recognition and Age Prediction System for Mobile Applications"	Age detection pipeline for mobile apps	OpenCV + CNN	A real-time system achieved 89% accuracy in mobile age classification.	• Requires consistent lighting • Lacks robustness in outdoor environments
[13]	Gupta et al, 2021	"Vision-Based Age Estimation for Screen Time Management"	Proposed screen-time manager	Hybrid AI system	The system demonstrated 87% accuracy in age-based screen control.	• Performance not tested in real use • Needs longitudinal studies for reliability
[14]	Singh et al, 2022	"AI in Child-Centric Mobile App Design".	UI simplification for children	UX + ML feedback	Developed a child-friendly UI prototype using UX principles.	• No evaluation on real users • Lack of usability testing across age groups
[20]	Ahmad et al, 2022	"Image-Based Age Group Classification Using Lightweight Networks ".	Efficient CNN for edge inference	Mobile Net	The Mobile Net-based model achieved 92% inference accuracy.	• Model complexity still moderate • Requires further pruning for ultra-low-power devices

This comparison highlights the evolution of child protection methods via AI and underscores the limitations in current implementations, particularly in real-time deployment and personalization [25].

3. Methodology

Our proposed solution comprises a real-time, on-device age detection system with child safety enforcement. The methodology follows a modular architecture to ensure scalability and privacy compliance. The main stages are as follows:

- **Face Detection:** Utilizes lightweight yet accurate models like Blaze Face or MTCNN for detecting faces in real time. These models offer high performance on resource-constrained devices [26].
- **Image Preprocessing:** Detected facial regions are normalized and resized (224x224) to match the input requirements of the CNN model. Techniques such as histogram equalization and face alignment may be applied to enhance robustness [27].
- **Age Estimation:** MobileNetV2-based CNN architecture is used for estimating the age. The model is pre-trained on publicly available datasets such as UTK Face and IMDB-WIKI and further fine-tuned to differentiate among three categories: Child (0–12), Teen (13–17), and Adult (18+).
- **Decision Engine:** Based on the age prediction, a decision-making module categorizes users and dynamically activates child-safety mechanisms. Confidence thresholds are applied to prevent misclassification [28].
- **Kid Mode Activation:** If a user is detected as a child, the system enforces restrictions on certain applications, imposes screen time limitations, filters web content, and optionally switches to a simplified user interface. Notifications are sent to a linked parental control dashboard [29].
- **Privacy and Security:** All processing is conducted locally on the device using TensorFlow Lite. No facial data or user information is transmitted or stored externally. This ensures compliance with data protection laws such as GDPR and COPPA.
- **Fail-safe Mechanisms:** In cases where the model confidence is low or faces are not detected, default policies are applied based on parental settings or device configurations.

This modular flow is designed to work seamlessly within mobile environments, prioritizing child safety while ensuring minimal disruption to the user experience. It also allows flexibility for integrating with third-party monitoring tools or extending functionalities in the future [30].

4. Implementation Plan / Framework

The proposed child detection and protection framework is designed to operate entirely on mobile devices with minimal latency and strong privacy safeguards. It consists of multiple sequential modules that work together to detect whether a child is using the smartphone and enforce safety restrictions accordingly. Figure 1 illustrates the overall system flow [31].

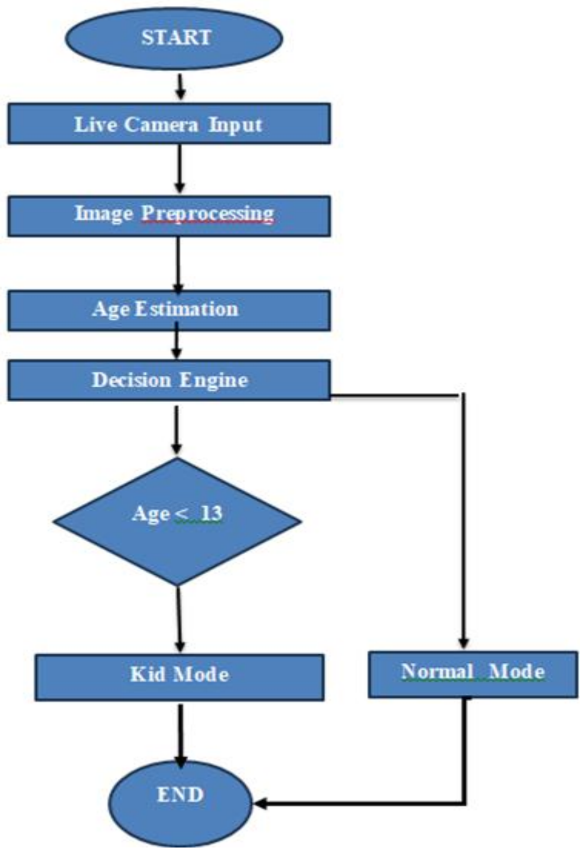

Figure 1 Flowchart of the proposed on-device child detection and safety enforcement system

This flow ensures dynamic, real-time classification of users and immediate safety responses. All AI processing is done on-device using TensorFlow Lite to maintain privacy compliance. The implementation of the proposed on-device child detection system is structured into modular components for easy development, testing, and integration. The system is developed using Python and TensorFlow Lite for mobile compatibility, with OpenCV for image handling and face detection [32].

4.1. Tools and Platforms

- **Programming Language:** Python
- **Libraries:** TensorFlow Lite, OpenCV, NumPy
- **Platforms:** Android (using ML Kit and custom models), Raspberry Pi (for testing embedded deployment)

4.2. Module-wise Description

- **Camera Input Module:** Captures live video feed from the device's front-facing camera.
- **Face Detection Module:** Uses Blaze Face or MTCNN to locate and crop faces in real-time.
- **Preprocessing Module:** Resizes and normalizes input frames to prepare for model inference [33].
- **Age Estimation Module:** Utilizes a fine-tuned MobileNetV2 model trained on public datasets (like IMDB-WIKI, UTK Face) to estimate the user's age category.
- **Decision Engine:** Applies logical conditions to classify the detected age into child, teen, or adult and determines the action policy.
- **Kid Mode Activation Module:** Triggers safety features such as app restriction, UI simplification, and screen time notifications.

4.3. Integration Plan

Each module will be tested independently using unit test cases. The modules will then be integrated into stages using a microservice or function-based design to facilitate debugging and improve modular deployment. The model will be optimized using quantization and pruning techniques to reduce memory usage on mobile hardware [34-39].

Conclusion and Future Scope

The increasing use of smartphones by children has raised significant safety and ethical concerns. This paper presented a comprehensive survey of existing AI-based child detection approaches and introduced a novel, on-device methodology for dynamic age recognition and safety enforcement. Through a comparative analysis of state-of-the-art techniques, we identified limitations in real-time performance, privacy handling, and deployment feasibility. The proposed system leverages lightweight deep learning models, particularly MobileNetV2, to enable efficient facial age estimation. An adaptive decision engine dynamically activates kid-friendly modes and imposes app-level restrictions based on user classification. The emphasis on on-device computation ensures user privacy and eliminates reliance on external servers. Future work will aim to enhance model generalization across demographic groups and improve robustness under varying environmental conditions. Incorporating multimodal data sources-such as speech analysis and behavioral patterns-could further boost prediction accuracy. Additionally, embedding adaptive learning mechanisms will allow systems to evolve through user feedback. Ethical development will require close collaboration with child behavior experts and consideration of data protection regulations. Addressing challenges like algorithmic bias, transparency, and consent will be essential for responsible deployment. These advancements will significantly contribute to building safer and smarter digital ecosystems for younger users.

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