Satisficing in the Scroll: How Good-Enough Decision Making Shapes Children's Digital Consumption

M.C. Davis, Fellow CDT Harvard, DSc Candidate Capitol Tech, ED NM-CCCR

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Satisficing in the Scroll: How "Good Enough" Decision-Making Shapes Children's Digital Lives

M.C. Davis

Fellow, Center for Digital Thriving, Harvard Graduate School of Education Doctor of Science Candidate in Cyberpsychology, Capitol Technology University Executive Director, New Mexico Center for Cybersecurity and Cyberpsychology Research (NM-CCCR)

ORCID: 0009-0005-9313-9494

Correspondence: michael@merek.io

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ABSTRACT

Herbert Simon's satisficing — the tendency to select the first option meeting a minimum acceptability threshold rather than optimizing across all available options — has been extensively applied to adult decision-making in economics, organizational behavior, and consumer psychology, but remains largely unexplored in the context of children's digital behavior. This paper proposes that children's digital choices are governed substantially by satisficing heuristics that interact with interoceptive signals in ways not previously articulated. When a child scrolls through content, selects a game, or responds to a notification, the body provides a rapid pre-conscious assessment — a felt sense of "good enough" — that drives selection before reflective evaluation occurs. This framing explains the limited efficacy of cognitive-behavioral digital literacy approaches with young children and suggests that interventions targeting the body's assessment process through interoceptive awareness training may be more developmentally appropriate. We examine how digital platform design exploits children's satisficing architecture through features such as autoplay, infinite scroll, and algorithmic content curation, and propose the Interoceptive Gap — the temporal space between satisficing impulse and behavioral response — as a primary point of intervention. This paper contributes to the MaaS 2.0 theoretical framework and has direct implications for the design of the MindfulBytes K–5 digital wellness curriculum.

Keywords: satisficing, bounded rationality, children's digital behavior, interoceptive awareness, digital literacy, platform design, K-5

1. INTRODUCTION: DECISIONS CHILDREN DIDN'T KNOW THEY WERE MAKING

A child sits on a couch with a tablet. A video ends. Without conscious deliberation, the child's eyes track to the next thumbnail. The hand taps. A new video begins. Thirty seconds in, the body makes its assessment: good enough. The child continues watching. This sequence — assessment, selection, continuation — repeats dozens or hundreds of times in a single viewing session. At no point does the child experience the sequence as a series of decisions. It feels, from the inside, like one continuous activity: watching.

But every tap is a decision. Every moment of continued viewing is a decision. Every instance of not stopping is a decision. These decisions are not deliberative — they are not preceded by conscious evaluation of alternatives, consideration of consequences, or reference to internalized rules about appropriate behavior. They are satisficing decisions: rapid, pre-reflective assessments of "good enough" that drive behavior before the child's slower deliberative systems can engage.

This paper argues that Herbert Simon's satisficing framework, when integrated with embodied cognition and interoceptive awareness, provides a more accurate and more useful model of children's digital decision-making than the deliberative-rationality model that implicitly underlies most digital literacy education. Understanding how children actually make digital choices — through bodily satisficing rather than cognitive deliberation — is essential for designing interventions that can effectively support digital agency in K–5 populations.

2. SIMON'S BOUNDED RATIONALITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

2.1 The Original Framework

Herbert Simon introduced the concept of bounded rationality in 1956 as a challenge to the classical economic assumption that decision-makers optimize — that they survey all available options, evaluate each against a comprehensive set of criteria, and select the option that maximizes expected utility. Simon observed that real decision-makers operate under constraints: limited information, limited time, limited cognitive processing capacity. Under these constraints, optimization is not merely difficult; it is impossible.

Satisficing is the decision strategy that bounded rationality produces. Rather than evaluating all options, the satisficer sets a minimum acceptability threshold — a "good enough" standard — and selects the first option that meets it. The search terminates not when the best option has been found but when an adequate option has been encountered. The strategy is efficient, adaptive, and — Simon argued — the dominant mode of human decision-making in virtually all real-world contexts (Simon, 1956, 1990).

2.2 Satisficing in Children's Digital Environments

The application of satisficing to children's digital behavior requires attention to three features of contemporary digital environments that amplify and distort the satisficing process.

First, the option space is effectively infinite. A child browsing a video platform or scrolling a content feed faces a supply of options that never runs out. Unlike physical environments — where satisficing naturally terminates when available options are exhausted — digital environments provide an inexhaustible stream of options, each designed to clear the "good enough" threshold. The satisficing process that normally produces a decision and a termination instead produces a decision and another option, endlessly.

Second, the satisficing threshold is externally calibrated. In natural decision environments, the "good enough" threshold is set by the decision-maker's internal standards, needs, and preferences. In algorithmically curated digital environments, the threshold is calibrated by the platform's recommendation engine, which learns the child's preferences and serves content designed to consistently clear the acceptability threshold with minimal effort. The child is not choosing from a random assortment; they are choosing from a curated selection optimized to be "good enough" by the platform's model of the child's preferences.

Third, the natural dissatisfaction signals that would terminate the satisficing loop are suppressed by design. In a non-digital context, a child browsing a bookshelf will eventually encounter a book that fails to clear the "good enough" threshold, producing a mild dissatisfaction signal that may terminate the browsing and redirect attention elsewhere. Infinite scroll, autoplay, and algorithmic curation minimize the frequency and intensity of these dissatisfaction signals, keeping the child in a perpetual state of "just good enough" — never dissatisfied enough to stop, never satisfied enough to feel complete.

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3. SATISFICING AS EMBODIED PROCESS: THE INTEROCEPTIVE CONNECTION

The integration of satisficing with interoceptive awareness — the core theoretical contribution of this paper — requires a reconceptualization of satisficing as an embodied process rather than a purely cognitive one.

3.1 The Body's "Good Enough" Assessment

When Simon described satisficing, he framed it as a cognitive strategy: the decision-maker sets criteria, scans options, and evaluates each against the criteria until one passes the threshold. This framing, while analytically useful, does not accurately describe how satisficing operates in rapid, real-time decision contexts — particularly for young children whose cognitive deliberation capacities are developmentally limited.

We propose that the satisficing threshold, in practice, is set and evaluated by the body rather than the mind. The "good enough" assessment is not a thought; it is a feeling — a pre-conscious somatic signal that registers as interest, comfort, excitement, curiosity, or simply the absence of dissatisfaction. The child scrolling through videos does not consciously evaluate each thumbnail against explicit criteria. Instead, the body provides a rapid assessment — a subtle quickening of attention, a micro-shift in

arousal, a felt "yes" or "not this" — that drives selection before the deliberative mind has composed a thought.

This somatic satisficing process operates through the interoceptive system. The body's internal state — its level of arousal, comfort, need, and readiness — provides the baseline against which incoming stimuli are assessed. A video thumbnail that registers as "interesting enough" produces a micro-shift in interoceptive state (a slight increase in heart rate, a subtle forward lean, a brightening of visual attention) that the body reads as clearance of the acceptability threshold. This entire process — assessment, clearance, selection — can occur in milliseconds, well before conscious thought has engaged.

3.2 Why "Think Before You Click" Fails

This embodied satisficing framework explains a puzzling finding in digital literacy education: that cognitive-behavioral approaches — teaching children to pause, think, and evaluate before making digital choices — have limited efficacy with young children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2023). The standard explanation is developmental: children lack the cognitive maturity to implement reflective strategies consistently. This explanation is partially correct but incomplete.

The deeper issue is temporal. The instruction to "think before you click" assumes that thinking precedes clicking — that there is a natural gap between impulse and action into which reflective thought can be inserted. But somatic satisficing closes this gap. The body's assessment and the behavioral response are experienced as simultaneous. There is no moment of "before the click" available for cognitive intervention because the click is the body's expression of its already-completed assessment.

This is not a failure of the child's willpower or attention. It is a structural feature of embodied satisficing operating in an environment designed to exploit it. The intervention, therefore, cannot be cognitive alone. It must be somatic — targeting the body's assessment process directly through interoceptive awareness training that makes the pre-conscious assessment visible to the child before it is automatically translated into behavior.

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4. PLATFORM DESIGN AND THE EXPLOITATION OF SATISFICING ARCHITECTURE

Children's digital platforms are designed by adults who understand — whether through explicit behavioral science knowledge or through iterative A/B testing that achieves the same result — how to interact with the satisficing process to maximize engagement. Several design features deserve specific analysis.

4.1 Autoplay: Eliminating the Decision Point

Autoplay removes the moment at which the satisficing process would naturally produce a termination decision. When content ends, the child faces a decision point: continue or stop? This decision point is the satisficing system's opportunity to assess whether continued engagement still clears the "good enough" threshold. Autoplay eliminates this decision point by starting new content before the assessment can occur. The child never faces the question "do I want to keep watching?" because the next video is already playing. The satisficing system, deprived of its natural evaluation opportunity, defaults to continuation — because the incoming stimulus is already clearing the "good enough" threshold before the system has registered the gap.

4.2 Infinite Scroll: Suppressing the "Enough" Signal

In a finite content environment — a shelf of books, a stack of DVDs, a limited game library — the satisficing process encounters natural endpoints: the options run out, the quality declines, the novelty diminishes. These endpoints produce dissatisfaction signals — bodily states of restlessness, boredom, or the positive feeling of "I'm done" — that terminate the satisficing loop and redirect attention.

Infinite scroll eliminates these natural endpoints. Content continues indefinitely, algorithmically refreshed to maintain the "good enough" threshold. The child's satisficing system never encounters the "enough" signal because the environment is designed to prevent the conditions under which "enough" would naturally emerge. The body, receiving a continuous stream of adequately stimulating content, never generates the dissatisfaction signal that would trigger disengagement.

4.3 Notification Interrupts: Resetting the Satisficing Clock

Notifications exploit a different feature of the satisficing system: its responsiveness to novel stimuli. When a notification arrives — a message, a game update, a social media alert — it resets the satisficing assessment. The child's body responds to the notification with a micro-arousal (the orienting response) that clears the "good enough" threshold regardless of what the child was previously doing. Each notification is a new satisficing event, pulling the child into a new engagement loop that must run its course before the satisficing system can assess whether the overall pattern of digital engagement has crossed the "enough" threshold.

4.4 Variable Reward Schedules: Calibrating the Threshold

Variable reinforcement — the unpredictable delivery of rewards at irregular intervals — is the most potent schedule for maintaining behavior across species and developmental stages (Skinner, 1953). Digital platforms employ variable reward schedules through likes, comments, game rewards, loot boxes, and content quality variation. The satisficing threshold is calibrated to these variable rewards: the child learns that continued engagement sometimes produces high-value rewards (a great video, a social validation, a game achievement) and adjusts the "good enough" threshold downward to accommodate the periods between high-value events. The result is sustained engagement through content that would not, on its own, clear the threshold — sustained by the anticipation that a high-value reward is coming.

5. THE INTEROCEPTIVE GAP: A POINT OF INTERVENTION

The Interoceptive Gap is the temporal interval between the body's satisficing assessment and the behavioral response to that assessment. In unaware states, this gap is effectively zero — the assessment and the action are experienced as a single event. The child sees, the body assesses, the hand taps, and the child experiences the sequence as "I chose that video" without recognizing the pre-conscious somatic process that drove the choice.

Interoceptive awareness training expands the Interoceptive Gap by making the body's assessment visible as a somatic event before it is acted upon. When a child has been trained to notice the felt sense of "wanting to tap" — the micro-arousal, the forward lean, the hand-device orientation — they gain a moment of awareness between impulse and action. In that moment, the child can observe the impulse as information rather than as a command. The impulse says "this is good enough." The child can ask: "Is it? What does my body actually feel right now? Am I enjoying this, or am I just not-stopping?"

This is not the same as "think before you click." The Interoceptive Gap does not ask the child to think about their choice; it asks them to feel their body making the choice. The distinction is crucial: feeling is faster, more developmentally accessible, and more closely connected to the decision-making process than thinking about the decision-making process.

In the MindfulBytes curriculum, the Interoceptive Gap is cultivated through structured practices: brief body check-ins during digital activities ("What does your stomach feel like right now?"), transition pauses at natural stopping points ("Before you tap the next video, notice what your body wants"), and post-engagement reflections ("Did your body ever tell you it was ready to stop? What did that feel like?"). These practices do not prohibit digital engagement; they make the engagement process visible to the child, transforming automatic satisficing into aware satisficing.

6. DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS ACROSS K–5

The satisficing process and its relationship to interoceptive awareness manifest differently across the K–5 developmental range.

Children in kindergarten and first grade (ages 5–7) operate with the most pronounced reliance on somatic satisficing, possessing the least cognitive capacity for reflective override. Their satisficing thresholds are relatively simple — binary assessments of "like" versus "don't like" — and their interoceptive awareness is nascent but developmentally available. Interventions at this age focus on basic body-signal recognition: "Does your body feel like 'more' or 'done'?" The vocabulary is simple, the check-ins are brief, and the emphasis is on noticing rather than evaluating.

Children in second and third grade (ages 7–9) develop more nuanced satisficing thresholds and begin to differentiate between types of "good enough." A child at this age can begin to distinguish "good enough because I'm enjoying this" from "good enough because I can't think of anything else to do" — a

distinction that relies on interoceptive discrimination between the somatic signatures of genuine satisfaction and passive default behavior. The fourth-grade transition (around age 9–10) is particularly significant, as children's increasing social awareness introduces social satisficing into the digital equation: content may be selected not because it meets the child's own acceptability threshold but because it meets a perceived social threshold — what peers would find acceptable.

Children in fourth and fifth grade (ages 9–11) develop sufficient metacognitive capacity to reflect on their own satisficing processes. They can begin to identify patterns: "I always keep watching even when I'm bored because the next one might be good." This metacognitive awareness of satisficing is the developmental endpoint the MindfulBytes program cultivates across the K–5 span — the point at which the child can observe their own decision-making process, recognize the satisficing heuristic in operation, and choose whether to follow or override the body's "good enough" assessment.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINDFULBYTES CURRICULUM DESIGN

The satisficing framework has direct implications for the design and delivery of the MindfulBytes curriculum.

7.1 Teaching the "Enough" Signal

A primary curriculum goal is helping children develop awareness of the "enough" signal — the bodily state that corresponds to genuine satisfaction or readiness to transition away from digital engagement. This signal exists in every child's interoceptive repertoire but is typically below conscious awareness and is actively suppressed by platform design features. MindfulBytes activities that ask children to practice noticing when their body feels "done" with an activity — first in non-digital contexts (playing a game, reading a book, eating a snack) and then in digital contexts — build the interoceptive infrastructure necessary to detect the "enough" signal even when the platform is designed to prevent it.

7.2 Exposing the Satisficing Process

Children cannot modify a process they cannot see. The satisficing framework provides vocabulary for making the decision-making process visible. When a facilitator asks, "What made you choose that video?" and a child answers honestly — "I don't know, I just tapped it" — the facilitator can validate this response as accurate rather than treating it as insufficient. The child tapped it because the body's satisficing assessment cleared the threshold. The next step is not to demand conscious justification but to develop awareness of the pre-conscious process: "Next time you're about to tap, see if you can notice what your body feels right before your finger moves."

7.3 Creating Natural Stopping Points

The curriculum can counteract the suppression of natural stopping points by deliberately inserting them into digital activities. When a MindfulBytes session includes a digital activity, the activity is structured

with built-in pauses — moments when the screen dims, a body check-in prompt appears, or the facilitator invites a brief interoceptive scan. These pauses restore the decision points that autoplay and infinite scroll eliminate, giving the satisficing system its natural evaluation opportunity.

7.4 Practicing Dissatisfaction Tolerance

One underappreciated skill is the capacity to tolerate mild dissatisfaction — the briefly uncomfortable state that arises when the satisficing system has registered "not good enough" and the child must sit with the discomfort of wanting-more before transitioning to an alternative activity. Digital platforms minimize this discomfort by immediately providing new content. MindfulBytes activities that include brief moments of "waiting with the wanting" — noticing the body's response to not immediately receiving the next stimulus — build the dissatisfaction tolerance that sustained digital agency requires.

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8. IMPLICATIONS FOR PLATFORM DESIGN AND POLICY

The satisficing framework suggests several directions for platform design and policy that extend beyond educational intervention.

Design ethics. If platform features such as autoplay and infinite scroll function by suppressing children's natural satisficing termination signals, then these features raise ethical questions that should be part of the design conversation. Designing for children is not neutral; it is a choice about which cognitive and somatic processes to support and which to exploit. The satisficing framework provides a specific, mechanistic basis for evaluating design choices: Does this feature support the child's natural decision-making process, or does it bypass it?

Regulatory considerations. The satisficing framework contributes to regulatory discourse by identifying specific mechanisms of harm rather than relying on general screen-time arguments. A regulatory framework that addresses the suppression of children's natural satisficing signals — by requiring content stopping points, limiting autoplay for young users, or mandating transparency about algorithmic curation — would be more precisely targeted and more defensible than screen-time regulations alone.

Age-appropriate default settings. The developmental analysis suggests that default settings for children's digital products should account for the relationship between developmental stage and satisficing vulnerability. Younger children, whose satisficing systems are most easily exploited and whose interoceptive awareness is least developed, require the most protective default settings — not because they need to be restricted but because their decision-making architecture is most vulnerable to design exploitation.

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9. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this analysis should be acknowledged. The satisficing framework as applied to children's digital behavior is a theoretical proposal that has not been empirically tested through controlled studies. The integration of satisficing with interoceptive awareness is novel and, while grounded in established literatures, requires empirical validation to confirm that somatic satisficing operates as proposed.

The analysis of platform design features (autoplay, infinite scroll, notifications, variable rewards) draws on well-documented design patterns and established behavioral science, but the specific claim that these features interact with children's satisficing processes as described here has not been experimentally demonstrated. Future research should investigate whether children's behavioral responses to platform design features are mediated by interoceptive processes and whether interoceptive training modifies those responses.

The developmental progression described in Section 6 is based on established developmental literature about cognitive, metacognitive, and interoceptive capacity across childhood, but the specific application to digital satisficing has not been empirically mapped. Longitudinal research tracking children's satisficing behavior in digital environments across the K–5 range would provide the developmental data necessary to refine the framework.

Additionally, the framework focuses on individual-level decision-making and does not fully account for the social dimensions of children's digital choices. Peer influence, family technology practices, and cultural norms all shape the satisficing process in ways that the current framework acknowledges but does not systematically address.

10. CONCLUSION

Every scroll is a decision the child did not know they were making. Every tap is a verdict the body delivered before the mind was consulted. Every hour of digital engagement is the accumulated product of thousands of micro-assessments — each one a satisficing judgment rendered in milliseconds by a body that has no language for what it is doing.

The satisficing framework does not blame children for their digital behavior. It does not blame parents for insufficient oversight. It does not even blame platforms, exactly — though it does name what platform design does to the satisficing process with precision that general critiques of "addictive technology" do not achieve. What it does is describe the mechanism accurately, so that interventions can be designed to address the mechanism rather than its symptoms.

The mechanism is somatic. The body decides. The intervention, therefore, must be somatic. Teach the body to notice its own decisions. Teach the child to feel the "good enough" assessment as it happens. Teach the awareness that transforms automatic satisficing into aware satisficing — the same heuristic, operating in the same body, but now visible to the mind that inhabits it.

This is not the end of screen-time debates. It is a contribution to making those debates more precise, more mechanistic, and more useful — for the researchers who study children's digital behavior, for the educators who seek to support it, for the designers who shape the environments in which it occurs, and for the children whose bodies already know what their minds have not yet learned to hear.

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