

Digital Lives – Technology and the future of childhood

Wendy Ellyatt, Chief Executive, Save Childhood Movement

“Every civilized society acknowledges its primary obligation to ensuring the security and nurturing of its young, and any policies or practices, in any field, which are incompatible or inconsistent with that purpose fall outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour. This approach has been accepted in the physical world for many years, and it ought to be applied equally, without distinction, in the virtual one. No one would argue this is going to be easy.”

Agnes Nairn, When Free Isn't – Business, Children and the Internet, 2017

An estimated one third of internet users worldwide are under the age of 18. The part that the internet plays in children's lives continues to grow: among 3-4 year olds in the UK, time online increased in the last year from 6 hours 48 minutes to 8 hours 18 minutes a week, and 12-15 year olds now spend over 20 hours a week online.¹ The movement's particular focus is the early years i.e. pre-birth to eight years, as we know that for the creation of healthy, happy and sustainable societies, this is the single most important period of the human lifespan. This document summarises what we feel are the key points to be considered in order to ensure that we protect the developmental rights of the child within an online world.

Never in human history has a technology so rapidly changed the day-to-day life of children and families and it is clear that this is having a profound impact of human learning and interactions. What we now need to more clearly understand is how best to balance the digital risks with the digital benefits. Some high profile academics are warning of an impending health disaster^{2,3} whereas others argue that we are simply seeing the fourth industrial revolution⁴. Whatever the truth of the matter we need to be concerned that children in the modern world are being exposed to a hitherto unknown environment that is potentially damaging for their health and wellbeing and that research is struggling to keep up with.

The Digital World

What we currently know

- Young children are born 'wired to learn' and accept digital technology as simply another element of the learning environment.
- Young children are born 'wired for experience' and too little stimulation is detrimental to developing brain architecture - it literally results in less neural connections (for example learning all about a kitten on a tablet is significantly different to holding and feeling the purring body of a kitten⁵).
- Young children are born 'wired to connect' – they are social beings and relational wellbeing is fundamental to their healthy natural development.
- Young children now live in homes where they are being exposed to a wide variety of foreground and background screen use.

Save Childhood Movement – Roundtable Discussion Document 2017

- Young children are increasingly being targeted as online consumers. Long-established rules and practices designed to protect children from unfair commercial practices in the physical world in relation to deceptive or aggressive advertising, have not been adequately translated into the virtual space.⁶
- Young children (often through the activities of older members of their families) are increasingly being exposed to non-appropriate, age-sensitive materials.
- The earlier young children experience screen technology the more likely they are to want more. The fast reward nature of the online experience is resulting in a growing tendency to choose technology over more traditional childhood pursuits such as playing with others and outdoor games. We are seeing a profound change in normal early childhood behavior.
- From an increasingly young age children are being exposed to online judgment and cyber-bullying.
- Children from disadvantaged family backgrounds are likely to be impacted more severely, as their screen and media use patterns in the home are more problematic.

Child Wellbeing

What the evidence is telling us

- British children spend disproportionately large amounts of time in front of screens, compared to their counterparts in other Western European countries (Children's Society, 2013)⁷ Ofcom's 2015 report showed that over half of those aged 3–4 use a tablet and 1 in 7 have their own tablet, the amount of time 8-11s and 12–15s spend online has more than doubled and 12–15s now spend nearly three and a half hours a week more online than they do watching television.⁸
- Young children are experiencing significantly reduced interaction with their primary caregivers (e.g. a young mum and dad at home or in a supermarket both focused on their smartphones rather than interacting with their baby)⁹
- One in four children in the UK currently lacks secure attachment (Sutton Trust, 2017)¹⁰
- We have some of the most consumerist kids in Europe, but this stems mostly from adult role models and behavior e.g. parents compensating for lack of quality family time.¹¹
- Young children in the UK are significantly more impacted by inequality than other children in Europe.^(ibid)

"In the UK inequality was also seen in access to outdoor, sporting and creative activities, with poorer children spending more sedentary time in front of screens whilst the more affluent had access to a wide range of sports and other pursuits. It was also noticeable that the most important feature of these activities for many affluent children was demonstrating superiority over others by winning a match or coming first in a race or a test. The impetus to succeed in Spain was more motivated by pleasing parents and personally doing well in school (rather than better than others) whilst in Sweden sporting and creative activities were rarely associated with social comparison."

UNICEF, Children's Wellbeing in UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality and Materialism

Save Childhood Movement – Roundtable Discussion Document 2017

- Some cartoons average twenty acts of violence in one hour and by the age of 18 children will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on television (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017)¹² It is becoming increasingly difficult to shield the youngest children from inappropriate digital content.¹³
- Children’s freedom to play has been significantly eroded.¹⁴ Less than 1 in 10 children now regularly play in wild spaces, compared to 5 out of 10 a generation ago (Natural Childhood Report, 2011).¹⁵
- The UK has the highest rate of child obesity in Western Europe, which is estimated to cost the NHS about £4.2bn a year (Public Health England, 2009). One in three is now clinically obese (Young Minds, 2017).¹⁶
- One in ten children in the UK has a diagnosed mental health disorder. (Young Minds, 2017).
- Depression is now increasing in children under 10 years old (Young Minds, 2017) and one in four girls in the UK currently have depression by the time they are 14 (NCB and University of Liverpool, 2017).¹⁷
- One in twelve adolescents deliberately self-harms (Young Minds, 2017).
- Admissions for psychiatric conditions, eating disorders and self-harm among young people are soaring (Sunday Times Mental Health Campaign, 2017).

The Way Ahead

We believe there is an urgent need to protect the developmental rights of our youngest children so we can ensure that they can flourish in a digital world.

For better or worse the digital world is reshaping children’s lives and more children, families and communities rely on technologies as part of the taken-for-granted infrastructure of everyday life. The current UK government has announced its intention to appoint a Digital Champion and to remodel the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), but it lacks an overarching vision when it comes to children in the digital world – and particularly so for the vital early years.

We agree with CRAE that we need a digital version of the UNCRC and repeat our call for the creation of an independent research body that can bring a balanced understanding of biological, neuro-physiological, psychological and spiritual development to bear on all public decision and policy-making. We also believe that we need the establishment of a new cross-party Department for Children and Families with a Cabinet-level Minister for Children. To ensure that we protect the generations of the future, the speed of these changes needs to move beyond party politics to parallel the dramatic speed with which young children’s lives are currently being impacted.

“In the future, EU policies that directly or indirectly affect children should be designed, implemented and monitored taking into account the principle of the best interests of the child as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental rights and in the UNCRC.”

House of Lords, Select Committee on Communications, 2016/17

-
- ¹ Livingstone, S, An updated UNCRC for a Digital Age
- ² Greenfield, Dame S, Mind Change, 2015
- ³ Sigman, A – The Impact of Screen Media on Children <http://www.ecswe.net/qoc-vol3/>
- ⁴ Brown-Martin, G, Learning reimagined, 2017
- ⁵ Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2017
- ⁶ Nairn, A, When Free Isn't – Business, Children and the Internet, 2017
- ⁷ Children's Society, Good Childhood Report, 2013
- ⁸ Ofcom, Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes, 2015
- ⁹ Radesky et al 2014
- ¹⁰ Sutton Trust 'baby Bonds' 2014 <https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/baby-bonds/>
- ¹¹ UNICEF, Children's Well-being in UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality and Materialism
- ¹² National Television Study, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017
- ¹³ Ofcom Research, 2014
- ¹⁴ United Nations General Comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (article 31)
- ¹⁵ National Trust, Natural Childhood Report, 2013
- ¹⁶ Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk
- ¹⁷ NCB and UCL, Mental ill-health among children of the new century, 2017