Growing Up Digital

The Children's Commissioner's Taskforce to create a new digital settlement for children

Childhood has been transformed by technology. It has happened swiftly, in a creative but socially and legally disorganised way. We should remember that the internet was not designed with children in mind, but children are some of the greatest users. Young people today have opportunities undreamt of 20 years ago – to have access to the sum of human knowledge at a moment's notice; to create new online groups and societies and to make instant connections all around the world. At the same time, entertainment has moved away from the social, community sphere – a family grouped around the telly - and into the private, personalised sphere of the bedroom; increasingly accessed via YouTube and other media sites. Whereas children's media consumption used to be in the same room with the family, the 'social space' is now digital. Children no longer expect to play out with their neighbours but regularly engage in a digital world of online games with unknown actors from across the globe.

The potential for creativity, for knowledge and innovation is immense. But it carries challenges with it which are unprecedented.

It is the belief of the Children's Commissioner therefore that we need to prepare children better for this digital world. A child whose hands cannot yet write the letter 'A' now literally has the world at her fingertips via internet enabled touchscreen technology. How have we taught her to negotiate it?

Young people may appear to have the technical skills to negotiate the internet but increasingly, it is becoming clear that they do not have the social skills because information technology may be having a deep impact on their cognitive and social development. Unable to disconnect, unknowing about the online world, careless of their own data, too often young people are walking blind into wide alleyways of risk.

Excellent work has been done in this field already: Tanya Byron's review of internet safety in 2008 led to the establishment of the UK Council on Child Internet Safety. Equally, Reg Bailey's review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood showed the influence of online activity in this area. But the pace of change is so rapid that the majority of the adult world still struggles to keep up with children's digital lives.

We particularly welcome the work on iRights. The organisation which began with one film-maker's concern has created a unique association of internet companies, charities, entrepreneurs, ministers and media entities with an interest and ability to bring about change.

iRights has shown that there is a collective civil concern. It has engaged with young people and found them bewildered and angered by their loss of power and control online. It has worked with the legal profession to analyse the legal basis of children's digital engagement and has worked with technology companies and the wider digital industry to understand the power and the potential of the internet and look to the future in the challenges and opportunities that it offers to children.

This important work leads to a powerful conclusion. If children of today and tomorrow are to grow up digitally, we need to be sure that the rights to protection and empowerment that they enjoy in their lives are extended to cover the new digital world they inhabit. As the legal guardian of children's rights and best interests in England, this is of uppermost concern to the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield. She wants to build on this ground breaking work to create a new digital proposition to support and protect children.

Children's Commissioner for England: Anne Longfield OBE
Sanctuary Buildings | 20 Great Smith Street | London SW1P 3BT
T 020 7783 8330 E info.request@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk W www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Advice, Assistance and Representation T 0800 528 0731 E advice.team@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk
officeofthechildrenscommissioner @childrenscomm YouTube childrenschampion

Children's Commissioner's Growing Up Digital Taskforce

The Children's Commissioner is therefore planning to establish a new Taskforce to examine and explore children's experiences, ambitions, needs and concerns about the digital world and examine and challenge the industry response.

The Children's Commissioner is uniquely placed to lead this work. Her statutory remit to promote and protect children's rights and represent their views and interests enables her to speak with authority on behalf of children, placing their voices at the heart of the digital debate. As the independent champion of children, she is able to negotiate a unique path through potential conflicts of interest which pepper discussions about children's online lives.

The Children's Commissioner also has statutory powers to obtain any relevant information held by public bodies which is unavailable to others, including unpublished data and research and can summon individuals to give evidence on any issue of interest to children. This allows her to take evidence in more detail and with more precision. She can provide expert opinion and expect considered responses from decision makers at every level.

The *Growing Up Digital Taskforce* is an opportunity to make real and lasting improvements to children's lives – present and future. As technology continues to develop, the complexity of online connections will continue to increase. The amount of personal information about us all available online continues to grow. Soon it will be virtually impossible to function in British society without a substantial online footprint, as essential services become unavailable other than digitally. Understanding everyone's rights online, and how children in particular can be empowered to exercise them, will only become more important.

Thirty years ago mobile phones were unknown apart from to a select group of high earning adults. Today, increasing numbers of babies are engaging with digital technology in the cradle even before learning to speak or walk. It is vital we predict and plan for the effects this will have on children's lives.

That's why we want to understand better how to put in place a system which allows children's understanding of the emotional and cultural aspects of technology to keep pace with their technical knowledge.

Bringing together policy experts, child psychiatrists, legal experts, educationalists, technology experts and young people themselves, the task force will bring a unique perspective to the digital debate to inform and shape future policy. Put simply, the Taskforce will put children and young people centre stage, working with experts to draw up the brief for the web of the future. The task is to redesign their internet of the future – with children's rights at its heart.

The Taskforce will be looking for answers to some key questions:

- What is it like growing up in a digital age and how does it shape the way you think and act?
- What are the pressures/worries about the online world and what would you like to be different?
- How do you learn online and how can that helped?
- What would help you feel safe and more 'in control' of your digital experience?
- Do laws need to change to make this happen?
- Are there things parents need to do to help?
- What technological changes are needed?
- How do we hardwire the digital world to meet children's needs?

- Does the UNCRC framework need to change to incorporate children's rights in their new digital world?

By the end of 2016, we aim to put forward a manifesto for change which has been driven and informed by children and young people themselves.

It will create the framework and impetus for a new digital settlement for children capable of promoting and protecting their rights into the future.

Anne Longfield

Children's Commissioner

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Children's Commissioner for England: Anne Longfield OBE
Sanctuary Buildings | 20 Great Smith Street | London SW1P 3BT
T 020 7783 8330 E info.request@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk W www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Advice, Assistance and Representation T 0800 528 0731 E advice.team@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk
officeofthechildrenscommissioner @childrenscomm YouTube childrenschampion