

Editorial

It is a great pleasure to present this edition of the Children's Research Digest on the theme of our 2018 conference 'Growing up in the Digital Environment'. Digital technology is increasingly a normal part of Irish children's lives and the consequences for their safety and well-being is often a topic of public concern. In a single week at the end of 2019, newspaper headlines reported that "*One in four children 'have problematic smartphone use'*" (The Guardian, 29th November 2019) "*Social media is fuelling eating disorders among children as young as TWELVE*" (The Daily Mail, 4th December 2019), and even, "*Selfies and smartphones blamed for rise in head lice among schoolchildren*" (The Irish Times, 26th November 2019). Should we be concerned or is there an element of moral panic at play? This timely edition of the Children's Research Digest raises the question: what it is like to grow up in a society where everyday life is shaped by digital technology?

As with previous generations, a healthy childhood still involves playing, taking risks, forming our first significant relationships, developing a sense of identity and a sense of independence from family. For contemporary children, these activities sometimes now take place in the digital environment. Children often report the positive opportunities they gain from engaging with digital media, such as finding a safe space for expression and for developing a sense of identity, and a means for creativity and learning far beyond the boundaries of their immediate physical environment. The problem lies in the transposition of these essential developmental activities to an environment that is primarily created for adults, and is highly commercialised and monetised (Livingstone, 2019). It is hard for anyone to predict how a child's digital footprint, which commences from the moment a parent posts their first baby photos on social media, could be exploited in the future.

In 2019, as we celebrate thirty years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is developing a General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, which will set a new international standard for children's rights in a digital world (5Rights, no year). The intention of the General Comment is to support the child to fully participate in the digital environment and to develop their digital skills, while protecting them from exposure to harm during their digital interactions. The range of research papers presented in this edition equally suggest a balanced approach to researching both the opportunities and risks for children and young people as they engage with technology.

Our guest editors for this edition are Cliona Curley and Ruth Geraghty. Cliona is an advisor to CyberSafelreland CLG which is the Irish children's charity for online safety. In December 2018 Cliona delivered a keynote address at the Children's Research Network conference on the work of CyberSafelreland to educate and empower Irish children to be stronger, smarter and safer online. Ruth has been the Data Curator for the Prevention and Early Intervention Research Initiative since 2016 and has worked with many researchers to digitally archive their research data. This editorial is presented in the form of a conversation between Cliona and Ruth.

Ruth: There has been much discussion about the ongoing encroachment of digital technology into our personal lives, especially through social media, and how this might interact with our

mental health. For example, the My World Survey 2 found "a significant relationship between time spent online (more than 3 hours) and higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of body esteem" (Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A. & O'Reilly, A., 2019, pp. 138). The authors of this research emphasised that this is not necessarily a causal relationship, for example young people with depression may be using social media more often to minimise their negative mood. Another longitudinal study of teenagers found no association between time spent online and depression and anxiety (Coyne et al., 2020) and the authors suggest that it is worth examining the context in which social media use occurs. To ensure a positive experience from social media, in this issue, Colman Noctor proposes that we must become critical consumers, by learning to question the authenticity of what is presented to us online, and by regulating our own desire-response to what we see. This would seem pertinent advice particularly for individuals already experiencing with mental health difficulties. From what you see in your work with teachers and children in primary school, does online media play any role in generating or fuelling anxiety in primary school-aged children? Are there ways in which children and young people are more vulnerable than adults to these, as Noctor refers, "personalised and rich mediums [that] steer and drive our desire"?

Cliona: We chat to thousands of children (usually aged eight to thirteen) each year about their online experiences through our schools programme. I genuinely believe that most of the children that we meet are having mainly positive experiences online. What they love most about the Internet, besides the sheer entertainment potential, is the ability to spend more time with friends either chatting on apps or playing games together online. It can also provide opportunities for much needed support, for instance for young people experiencing doubts over their sexuality. However, access to the Internet can exacerbate or magnify real life issues, in particular, concerns over popularity or self-image, as well as presenting additional opportunities to be bullied or harassed. Children and young people can also be bombarded with unhealthy images and information that could increase anxiety levels or even instigate harmful behaviour. Online pornography, and content glamorizing self-harm or anorexia would be obvious examples. But this can also be very subtle, in the form of unrealistic expectations of perfection presented by popular influencers and is likely that children will be more susceptible to these negative influences than an adult. Worryingly, in our research published in our 2018 report¹, we also found much higher levels of access and risky behaviour online, along with lower levels of parental engagement, among children from low-SES backgrounds.

Ruth: When we talk about keeping our children and young people safe online, sometimes parents and other adults are depicted, or self-depict, as being unable to keep up with the online experience of children and young people, in particular their use of popular social media apps and games. The WYRED project described by Paul Butler and his colleagues has taken an interesting approach to empowering children and young people as critical users, by guiding them through process of reflection about their digital lives, exploring issues that the children and young people have identified themselves as important. What role can adults take in

¹ https://cybersafeireland.org/media/1300/csi_annual_report_2018_w.pdf

enabling the children and young people that they care for to become critical consumers of digital media? Are there key skills we can help them to develop, without needing to know everything about what's popular online right now?

Cliona: The latter part of this question is the critical bit – as parents, we really don't need to know everything about every new app or game. What is vital, however, is that we are engaged in what our children are doing online. We need to know enough to be able to ask them intelligent questions, agree the rules, and to be able to keep an eye on their activity. If they are watching YouTube videos, ask them to tell you which they like and don't like. If they want to use a particular app, do a bit of research yourself (Common Sense Media² is great for a quick review), then ask them to tell you about the app. The more we can normalise these conversations, the better. As a parent or a teacher, you are continually shaping their minds, honing their critical thinking skills and teaching them the lessons that we hope will get them through life's challenges. It's tempting to treat their online activity as separate to this life skills preparation, but if we don't engage in it directly, we can't influence.

It's also really important that they understand that sometimes they will have to deal with difficult situations online, and that they may not know what to do. A typical example is someone saying something nasty about a classmate of theirs in a chat group. Help them to understand that the smartest thing that they can do is to chat with you, or another adult they trust, and that you can work out the best solution together. Regular open and positive communication between children and their parents about their online experiences is a worthwhile investment that will come good if and when things do go wrong for a child online.

Ruth: In terms of the positive aspects of technology, most children and young people have unfettered access to a vast library of knowledge, and the possibility for modes of learning that were unavailable when their parents were in school. Desmond O'Mahony suggests that computer usage can have a positive effect on a child's academic performance (in this case, their mathematical performance at ages nine and thirteen), when it is used for self-directed learning, such as surfing, and for discovery, such as for a school project. Chloé Beatty and Suzanne Egan found that five-year-old children who engage in a mix of screen time activities fare better in tests of non-reasoning ability than children who engage in a single type of activity - even if these are educational games. The authors of both of these articles have moved away from assessing the impact of screen time in terms the amount of time children spend on digital devices and have instead considered the types of activities children engage in - advancing a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between screen time and cognitive development. It also seems inevitable that technology will increasingly be incorporated into the pedagogy. The ongoing research study reported by Sandra O'Neill indicates positive attitudes among future educators on the use of technology in the early childhood setting. While the small experimental study by Lydia Mannion and Claire Griffin shows potential for the use of computer-based programmes for improving second language literacy in the primary school classroom. What do you see as the opportunities and the risks,

² <https://www.common sense media.org/>

for children's academic education, when this education is delivered side by side with digital technology?

- Cliona: I would see mainly opportunity rather than risk in using digital technology as an enabler in the education of children. In addition to the positive effects outlined in these studies and others, use of technology in learning also provides a direct opportunity for parents and educators to model and promote positive use of technology. In reality, children are individuals, with individual needs, and some may thrive on more traditional methods of learning, while others will respond better to clever uses of technology. A child that struggles with understanding how to multiply numbers may finally crack it with the help of an online app, while another finally develops their skills when they take a liking to the traditional board game Monopoly. We need to not fear technology, nor to lump it all in one basket. O'Mahony's reporting of positive influences of informational and exploratory uses of computers alongside negative influences of consumptive and interruptive styles of technology use demonstrates the need to differentiate. There is both good and bad, advantage and disadvantage, that comes along with technical innovation.
- Ruth: Over the past decade we have seen rapid technological development, particularly in the area of information and communication technology, along with enthusiastic uptake of this technology by the public. Many research studies, particularly using questionnaires, now rely exclusively on online methods for data collection, as discussed by Grainne Hickey and Francis Chance in this issue. Even the youngest members of society are engaging in digital services. Research from the UK in 2019 found that in the space of a decade the use of digital devices by pre-school aged children has increased from twenty-three percent in 2009 to seventy-six percent in 2019 (research by Childwise reported in The Times, November 2019). As digital technology becomes increasingly embedded in our lives, governments must rapidly update national policies to extend the preservation of the rights of citizens to include their digital interactions. And yet, it appears challenging to write policy that adequately defines roles and responsibilities of various actors who are operating in a chain of actors in the digital environment. For example, the 'surveillance capitalism' exposed by the Facebook data scandal in 2018 brought the issues of power and accountability of the technology industry into the public consciousness. The Government of Ireland's Action Plan for Online Safety is due to expire at the end of 2019. Edel Quinn's article calls upon the Irish government to take this opportunity to develop a national policy response that is based on an international standard, to address the issues faced by children in the online environment, particularly give our position as the European hub for many of the leading technology companies. Quinn puts forward the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (2018) 'Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment' as a useful framework for any new iteration of a national strategy, as these guidelines manage to balance the protection of children from harm with the preservation of their rights to engage with and utilize the online space. CyberSafeIreland has been very active in conducting research on Irish children's engagement with digital technology, and recently commissioned research on the age verification practices of social media platforms and messaging apps, and the resultant collection of data on children who are under the digital age of consent. This is perhaps one example of why a voluntary code of conduct for industry is entirely

unsatisfactory. What response would you like to see from government and from industry that would genuinely empower children, parents and teachers 'to navigate the online world in a safe and responsible manner'³ ?

Cliona: As outlined in CyberSafeIreland's annual report 2018⁴, we need a long-term national strategy in Ireland that sets out how we are going to address the risks that can arise from children being online. This strategy should set clear goals and measurable targets, ensuring effective regulation of the online service providers. It should also be developed following consultation with young people themselves, and recognize that young people may have different views and needs to adults in relation to their online experience. This is evidenced in this issue by the WYRED project and supported by Quinn who suggests that a Government response to supporting children to lead positive online lives should be based on a rights framework. We have lobbied hard for the institution of a Digital Safety Commissioner. It is essential that this office is given a proper mandate and the necessary resources to hold online service providers to account. It is complex as not all online platforms have a presence in Ireland, hence not all will be subject to any regulation that is brought in, so a two-pronged approach to regulation, such as the one adopted by Australia, is required. Providers should also be encouraged to develop platforms and apps that are ethical by design, with privacy and a safe and positive user experience at the forefront.

We also need strong response mechanisms available to parents, schools and particularly anyone working with children, with access to expert helplines, advice and resources. CyberSafeIreland is currently working on developing a public awareness campaign targeting parents and children and we would like to see the government supporting initiatives such as this. We need to establish social norms around online safety. We want to get to a place where parents are able to make informed decisions about their children's online use.

Finally, there needs to be much greater focus given to, and investment in, the education of all children on digital safety, literacy and well-being. We would like to see a digital champion in every school in Ireland to provide much needed expertise and support to principals and deliver up to date and effective education to children, parents and teachers.

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³ From <https://cybersafeireland.org/about-us/>

⁴ https://cybersafeireland.org/media/1300/csi_annual_report_2018_w.pdf

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