Childhoods in a Digital World

Help us **transform** the lives
of the UK's most vulnerable children.

Believe in children
Barnardo's

The advance of technology and the changes it has driven in society have been revolutionary. In particular, the digital world has transformed childhood.

So swift has been the pace of change that future historians will likely view this period as an overarching era of change, much the same as we now view periods such as the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, ecologists and economists have identified the start of this millennium as a new human epoch – the Anthropocene – because of the fundamental shift in society brought by our mass access to commerce, automation and data. And so, internet access is both the biggest challenge but also the biggest opportunity for young people growing up in the UK today.

For the youngest children, technology continues to expand the gap between children and parents. Since Barnardo's 2015 paper '*Youth and the Internet*', we have seen Millennials' position at the cutting edge of technology and society being displaced in the popular press by the 'iGeneration' – the first generation for which the Internet has always existed. The experience of today's youngest children, with access to touchscreens from birth, is already substantially different to the cohort of children just a decade older than them, born before the iPad even existed. Far from expecting the gulf between generational experience being bridged as 'digital natives' start to have their own children, if anything the pace of technological change and its impact on shared experience suggests it may be fragmenting and speeding up.

The children and young people Barnardo's work with are amongst the most vulnerable in society and the internet too often serves to accentuate, rather than lessen, the risks children face. They tell us how social media in particular is initiating or exacerbating peer pressure, sexual pressure, addictive behaviours, ease of access to sexual content and social isolation. Barnardo's and many other organisations have a responsibility to ensure that our children are equipped and supported with the day-to-day skills and knowledge they need to navigate this landscape effectively.

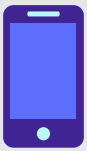
Yet, at the same time, the opportunity presented by this change is immense. While they're at school, children have access to information, media and ways to communicate with people across the world like never before. This has broadened horizons and transformed homework and hobbies. While the risks facing them may be heightened, the most vulnerable children also have potential opportunities like never before; to learn about the world, to connect with others, to create and flourish regardless of their material or family circumstances.

And once they finish school, today's children will graduate into a world of work which will be substantially different even to the previous generation. By the time current Year 1 pupils graduate in 2030, many basic jobs in British manufacturing, retail, healthcare and defence are likely to have been automated and life-or-death decisions on roads and in hospitals will routinely be informed by computers. Humans may even have set sail for Mars. And the confident, internet-enabled current workforce will have quite different expectations around retirement and old age.

Our *Technology through the ages* timeline provides a sharp reminder of how much has changed and how differently our children and grandchildren are learning about the world compared to our own experience.

Young people are still fundamentally the same emotionally – it is important that adults take time to think about how they might have found their childhood if they had had access to the kind of technology available to today's youth.

Young people...	†Then	Now
Who play outdoors	83%	48%
Who get enough sleep	66%	50%
Who read books	79%	54%
Who send postcards	55%	11%
Favourite toys	Bicycles, dolls and record players	Smartphones, iPads and Xboxes



And...

53% of 13 year-olds have dumped a boyfriend or girlfriend by Whatsapp, Twitter, Snapchat or Facebook

*YouGov surveyed more than 2,300 young people (aged 13-15) and †adults aged 18 and over. Fieldwork was undertaken between 3, 4 and 8 August 2017. The survey was carried out online.

How quickly do we perceive new technologies taking off compared to times past?
Uptake of the telephone took 50 years, but the smartphone has the same coverage in a decade. Social media networks replace news outlets, or disappear without a data trace when 'the next big thing' comes along.
How do we evaluate the role of communication, information sharing, and socialising in the childhoods of young people born just a few years apart? What has changed for the better since the Sinclair ZX-81?

Nowhere is the changing experience of childhood through technology better exemplified than in social media trends. For Millennials, the boundaries between online and offline are blurred. For subsequent generations the distinction is even less clear. Barnardo's services report that some young people increasingly view Snapchat, Whatsapp or Instagram simply as different spaces in their life in the way previous generations might have identified 'school', 'scouts' or 'dance class'. Social media sites are used for differing purposes. For instance, Facebook for presenting a 'best self' for family and employers, Snapchat for banter with friends, Instagram as a showcase for likes and dislikes. Just as previous generations would have shown off different sides of their personalities in different social settings, today young people may experiment with different identities or versions of themselves in online spaces. The sharp rise and fall of social networks and the shifting nature of how they are used impedes our ability to understand the different roles that online spaces play in children's lives; and how we can best support young people to benefit from them.

Barnardo's does not claim to hold expertise in technology. But it does have a substantial insight into the fears, hopes, needs and expectations of children and young people, especially the most vulnerable.

More than anything, we must reduce vulnerability in this and future generations of children. But at the same time, we need to address the risk to those who might otherwise miss out on the internet's opportunities.

Putting children at the centre

We will do this by putting children and childhood at the centre of technological development. That means understanding sooner the direction technology is taking us – not always playing catch up with it.

We can do this most effectively working in partnership with organisations that are experts in the fields of emergent technologies and incubating trends – the social media giants, internet service providers, new media start-ups and the academics and thinkers surrounding the tech sector. Barnardo's wants to bring its expertise in the safety and welfare of the most vulnerable children and young people to a new and energetic dialogue with these visionaries.

This means:

- We need to ensure technology is designed, legislated for and used responsibly, including ensuring Britain takes a global lead on the regulation.
- We need to ensure children know their rights, and adults their responsibilities, online, especially within social and personal networks
- We need to empower and enable children by giving them tools to take control of their lives, free at the point of access, developed by and with the companies who have a vested interest in the internet continuing to be seen as a force for good.

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), established by the Government nearly ten years ago, has done great work bringing together the right expertise to improve our response to online child protection issues and helping to bring to justice some of the worst perpetrators of child abuse. Yet the challenges ahead go beyond the issue of online safety – we need to think more broadly about the welfare of and chances for our children too. We need to stop reacting and start anticipating – and shaping – change for the benefit of children. And that means working with our children and young people so that they themselves are part of the solution that works for them.

The world is changing at a pace unimagined even in the very recent past. We need to recognise that technological development is an inexorable feature of childhood and will only exert more influence going forward as Virtual Reality, the Internet of Things (connecting devices over the internet, letting them talk to us, applications and each other) and machine learning begin to become part of daily life. This will create vast opportunities for children and young people but also throw up new threats of which we must all be mindful. We need to identify and mitigate the downsides but also recognise that action now gives us a real chance to shape the future and give all of this generation's children the opportunities their parents missed out on. **The time is now.**

Key digital changes

1987	1997	2007	2017
Internet access in households			
0%	9% (based on 1998 figure)	61%	89% (based on 2016 figure)
Percentage of mobile phone users			
0%	20%	78%	95% (based on 2016 figure)
Number of Facebook users worldwide			
0	0	50 million	2 billion
Worldwide email usage			
negligible	70 million	1.3 billion	3.7 billion
Sales of film cameras worldwide			
circa 23 million	circa 31 million	circa 1 million	negligible (although a revival among pro photographers has buoyed the market a little apparently)
State of the art gaming machines over time			
Commodore Amiga/Atari ST	Playstation 1/ Nintendo N64	Playstation 3/ Xbox 360/ Nintendo Wii	Playstation 4/ Xbox One/ Ninendo Switch

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