



Series name: The OII Podcast (Oxford Internet Institute)

Link to series: <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/oii-podcast-oxford-internet-institute>

Episode name: The digital lives of children

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Transcript

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Hello and welcome to the Oxford Internet Institute podcast, part of the University of Oxford. In each episode, we look at issues and developments in the digital world that matter to us all. Today we're joined by professors Vicki Nash and Katya Hertog. Vicki is the Director of the OII and an expert in online safety. Katya is an expert on parental control apps and domestic AI. I'm Veena. Welcome to the podcast. Vicki, it'd be great to start with you. How has the role of digital technologies in children's lives evolved over the past couple of decades?

Vicki

It has changed so much in such a remarkably short period of time. I've been in this area for probably just over 20 years. And we've moved, first of all on the technological front, which I'll explain and then perhaps on the sort of the context of use. On the technology front, we started out where really families had a PC, a single PC, you put it in the hall or the lounge and you could watch over what your children did. That's sort of early 2000s. Then there's the move to mobile. and obviously what that introduced was the possibility suddenly that children had their own device in their pocket that they could use away from their home in their own rooms and away from parental eyes. That's a big enough change. Then. If we think about the move to app based interfaces and tablets and so on, you see the rise of what I would call. The preliterate Internet user you don't need to read in order to be able to go online. And now you know, thinking about where we are in the 2020s. Obviously we have a context where children aren't just using screens to go online and use digital tools. They are surrounded by them through smart devices, you know, smart toys, monitoring devices, etc, which may not obviously appear to connect to the Internet. So that's a technological change. I guess the other thing I suppose I'd flag is the way in which the places we've used them have changed. So as I say, started off maybe just in the family lounge and now you know kids are using the Internet using digital technologies everywhere they go. On the bus, you know, walking to school, they are an integral part now I think of education even at really early ages. I think that we've seen a really significant shift over the past two decades.

Veena

Building on that, what changes do you expect to see happen in the near future?

Vicki

I'm really bad at futurology, and there's a reason why I've never invested I think in new technologies. But for me, some of the things that I'm interested in watching at the moment are particularly around the integration of AI, in sort of things like social media, obviously also in programmes and apps that are used, to monitor children, not track their progress in schools. Also just in seeing how these ever sort of smarter devices become an increasing part of young children's lives. I think the other thing that we are, you know increasingly seeing that's worth watching is the way in which data from a lot of these different types of apps and tools are being used to make decisions about children and young people. And I think that is only going to get ever greater.

Veena

Is the UK doing enough to prepare children for life in the digital age?

Vicki

So I'm going to answer Yes and no here, because arguably no you can never do enough. I think you know we do need to be aware that you probably could never do this perfectly, but actually I think. We are doing quite a quite a significant amount which it is worth, you know, praising us for. So the UK has been quite quick, I think to embrace, two aspects which really matters. So one is around ensuring that children have access to technology in learning and in schools. So in particular, if we think about the sort of social inequality in people's homes. It's really, really important that kids get to to use the Internet in their education, so that's a sort of universal approach. So we embrace that pretty early on. We've been arguably a little bit less good at thinking about, say, what we might call media literacy skills as opposed to technological skills. So there are certainly places for it in the curriculum. But I think what we lack is a sort of wholesale investment in that. I think there was an all-parliamentary group, a few couple of years ago. Back in 2022, they said, we need a proper media literacy bill. I know that Internet matters. One of the big children's charities, has just in the last year launched a manifesto saying we need much more joined up action in this space. Maybe, you know, I was thinking we talk more if you want about things like legislation and safety. So I think we've been pretty good, but we've definitely better at some aspects than others. And I would say we're better at teaching technical skills than we are maybe teaching life skills.

Veena

Right. And are there enough safety measures to protect children?

Vicki

Again, I'm going to suggest that we need to wait and see here. So one area where again the UK has been quite forward thinking has been in developing specific safety regulation around children's use of digital technologies and specifically user to user services and search services. We have something called the Online Safety Act came into effect last year. It has yet to sort of be enforced though. So we are at a period where if you like, we have the law in place, we have a regulator, but they're developing specific guidance which will affect how companies responsibilities need to change. I think that legislation

is quite an interesting approach. It introduces, you know, what's been called a duty of care. So suggesting that actually, these types of companies have to ensure that they are keeping children protected from the worst sorts of online harms. And so, you know, to the extent that we've got that, we've got other regulation, things like the appropriate design code so I think we're quite well supported in law, but I am aware there are already critics as to how how effective these can or would be, and for me, I suppose I'm ever the cautious academic. I would quite like us to wait and see what effect these particular frameworks have before we decide whether or not we need more measures, particularly on the regulatory side. Right.

Veena

Katya, moving on to you. Should we potentially restrict at least young children's access to smartphones? You know, maybe only allow children to have smartphones from a certain age?

Katya

That's really interesting question. I think my first answer to that would be that the risks and harms of young people, children, adolescents face online are not just technical in nature, they're sociotechnical. Even if we arrive at the perfect design and we have a really thoughtful consideration on when it is appropriate for young people to start using those perfect devices. This design would not affect the social nature of those risks and harms so. I think it's a conversation very much worth having, but at the same time it should not be the only conversation we're having. I think we have to be very aware that it's not going to be a magic bullet that will solve all the problems and the risks potentially will be reduced and maybe some of them will be removed but will also need to be considered in this effort to have a perfect design. We also need to think about what opportunities we are forgoing in supporting young people. In looking at the social aspects of the risks and harms that young people may be facing.

Veena

And how can parents and teachers support children with technology when they may not even know much about it themselves?

Katya

I think that actually again takes me back to the sociotechnical nature of the risks. Technology changes in some ways. Vicki started her conversation saying in 2000 it looked like this and in 2024, we have a completely different picture. Children's digital lives look very different for parents than they were from anyone who is parenting now. So many parents may feel at very least insecure with these new technologies and new capabilities brought in by Generative AI for example, and many can feel completely powerless and overwhelmed by this rapid change. At the same time these technologies might be amplifying certain risks. Some of the risks may be new, but I think to a large number of risks and harms, they're all risks and harms that are in a new guise. To give you an example. Young people's lives were not completely risk free before we had mobile phones. A couple of decades ago, young people drank more often, the drug consumption was up. The teenage pregnancy rates were much higher than they are today. All these trends have been going down. So maybe in the physical sense, in the

UK, young peoples lives are somewhat safer today than they were two decades back. There are multiple reasons why this is the case, but one of these is also that children are spending larger proportion of their lives online where they encountering new social risks. Parents could be addressing these risks to some extent, through tools of communication with young people, trying to find out what's going on in their lives. Maybe in the past a young person was out and about with a group of friends that parents might think could bring about risks or harms for that child. And in a the way they could address that, especially for an older child, we're not talking about a 5 year old, but especially for an older child was probably talking to them, finding out more about what's going on, advising them when we as parents feel that something that this is not quite right. I think this is where many parents could address these risks. But because it's digital they feel it's completely different and there's nothing I can do about it now.

Veena

And on that point what do we need to consider when we think about the role of parents and safeguarding children? You've covered some things, but I'm curious if there's anything else to add there.

Katya

Thinking as an academic now, I think the first thing is, thinking about the concept of connective labour. This is not only relevant for relationships between parents and children, but it's something that we do as humans where we do better when we talk to each other, we can listen to each other, and we feel that we get heard by for the other side. This is something that's a very important part of parenting in particular. I think that one of parents important roles is to keep children safe, but the other is to help them grow. And much of that safety also happens through communication, helping them grow. Communication is a very important part of it. I think sometimes in our conversations around digital technologies and smartphones , the part of helping children grow, as they hit adolescence , reaching the age of 16 and 17 when they are at the cusp of becoming legally adult , we need to remember that children need autonomy. I think that the role of parents is not just to keep children safe, but to remember about supporting the autonomy and helping them to grow up to be adults who can stay safe and well online. At the point when they're adults, parents don't really have much, or maybe don't want to have much control and oversight over their young person's lives.

Veena

So you mentioned autonomy there and control and the importance of clear communication between parents and children. What do we know so far about how digital lives are controlled or perhaps monitored by parents?

Katya

So I think there is a lot of anxiety. Parents experience a lot of anxiety about their children's digital lives. I think some of it comes from this fast pace of change and the fact that growing up parents have not experienced the environment that their children are growing up in. They don't really have any one to fall back on very easily. So there's a lot of anxiety, and that might be one of the reasons why one of the first things we think about is how can we control it, how can we keep children safe, so safety control is

featuring very prominently. If we look just at one statistics OFCOM published in their annual report asking about various aspects of children's digital lives, one of the statistics is how often do parents use monitoring and control technologies. 70% of parents in the UK with children aged between 3 and 17 yrs old say that they use some kind of technology to control their children's access to online content, so this is something that is very prevalent. This is very commonly used.

Vicki

Can I add one more thing to that that I think is also really interesting? One of the things I've been looking at a little bit of the last few years is the variety of products that are available for parents to conduct this sort of monitoring and surveillance. I think it's very fascinating to me quite how many of those products effectively have tag lines that suggest you are a better parent, or you love your child more if you use you know a location tracking device for example, or an online content filter of some sort so it doesn't surprise me that the figure has got to the point that it has.

Katya

Thank you, Vicki. This is a really wonderful addition. I've also looked a bit at those products and I think there's another aspect to it. What I've seen, is that they don't necessarily highlight the value of communication. I've seen one product which tracks childrens on and offline location and it's as if as you don't need to ask any more. It explicitly highlights the fact that your child will be safer and you don't necessarily need to talk. And on the one hand as a parent, I can think sometimes maybe talking to a teenager can be stressful, can be difficult. Maybe a child is at time in their life when they are really battling for their autonomy and as a result, or not as open to communication with the parents. So I could see how this sort of product or marketing line could feed into those difficulties people routinely experience, but at the same time I think it's a little bit risky or less than optimal that it's seems to discourage the product. It seems to say that what's important in parenting is safety and having the right information on your child, and now this product will deliver that information to you. But completely forgets about this whole other aspect of parenting, which is communication, talking, trying to share opinions, trying to bring the child over to your point of view, or learning from them and understanding their point of view actually, I thought about your activity on the Internet in this way, and I imagined it as something that doesn't seem safe or good to me. But now you've told me about what you're doing, and it has shifted my opinion somewhat.

Veena

It sounds like parental control apps are almost a can of worms with as many benefits as risks. I want to move on to the children's perspective. Do we know much about children's views of these tools?

Katya

So in the academic literatures, both Vicki and myself have been noticing recently, full disclosure we are collaborating, there is not much. Children's views are not completely absent, but they are a minority in this conversation. Much more often we hear we came more from parents, from experts. First, children's views might appear as perhaps part of

a survey with a list of preset questions. A survey is somewhere where someone prepared questions of what they think is important. So if you collect children's views in this way, there's some opinions you might miss because as an expert, you didn't imagine them. So over the past year, Vicki and myself have been running focus groups with 16 year olds to address specifically that gap. To address these questions, what do young people think and how do they feel about these technologies? And we've got some preliminary results which feel informative, surprising, interesting to us, so maybe I'll mention just a few small things. One of the things that was quite prominent to us is location tracking when parents used digital technologies for location tracking. This seems to be less contentious for children than parents using digital technologies to track their children's digital activity. While it's still an ongoing piece of work, one of the quite clear distinctions there is that location tracking is often experienced as something communal. It's often done jointly within families, for example, where parents are children, but children get also to track parents and can sometimes use it whereby one of the mums is passing by the shop, so can you get me X or I'm home already. I can see my mum will be back in half an hour. Children can see clear benefits for themselves with location tracking. Young people shared that sometimes it was often used by parents for children picking up children somewhere in the evening, from a pub maybe, so when they're out and about. Some young people, surprisingly even felt that location tracking was less intrusive than parents sending them regular texts, which can be experienced as a quite visible intrusion in a group of friends. One young man said, well, mum just sent me a text every hour and he had to pick up the phone and check on the text and tell her that he's still alive. Whereas the location tracking is done completely passively and in the background. There are other aspects there, like privacy infringement and so on, but at least in a sort of completely practical way, this was experienced as sometimes helpful and often done jointly and therefore less contentious. Those aspects were very much absent when we asked about digital tracking. I don't think we've heard of any family where a child would be digitally tracking their parents activities online such as which websites they've been visiting, how long they spend watching binge watching something on Netflix and so on. This is much more hierarchical and an an experience that's saturated with power and equality for young people. There was also in young people's experiences less joint understanding, less feeling that I can see how this benefits me or I can see that in a way when I'm out and about, it's quite difficult to explain where I am this location tracking app really helps. There were no similar experiences with digital tracking. The final thing I wanted to share was that communication was fairly limited around all kinds of tracking. We always asked young people, "how did you arrive at these family practises"? , "When your parents set up certain rules around that, have you discussed it?" And again, I would like to highlight, we're talking to 16 year olds, so they're not very young children, they are adolescents who are closing into adulthood and yet very rarely could they remember conversations about it within their families. When they did remember, quite often there wasn't much of a conversation. It was more of a parent explaining to the young person that they want to do this, and these are the settings rather than an exchange of opinion and arriving at the joint rules around it. I think that sort of very much coloured young people's experiences in this space.

Vicki

It's been fascinating quite how much, how, how much there have been common themes I think in these answers amongst these very different groups of teenagers we've been talking to.

Veena

And I'll open this one up to both of you. What might be some of the unintended consequences of parental controls of children's technology use? I know one you mentioned earlier, Katya was this idea that information and safety is now regarded or positioned as a more important part of parenting than effective and transparent communication. I'm curious about what other unintended consequences might be.

Vicki

So one thing that I think we do need to acknowledge a bit more when we when we use this word autonomy it covers quite a lot of things in the context of thinking about teenagers growing up. Some of that is about learning to take risks and some is about having your own private space, some it's about emotionally maturing. Of course there are aspects of that where parental oversight may in some rare cases be really problematic. So if you are in a household that is not a happy family or you have a parent that is, you know, controlling or abusive obviously these types of tools can be very badly misused and not just for children. Another, of course is if you are struggling with things like your sexuality or your gender identity or other really quite deep problems and questions that teenagers may want to ask, but which they don't yet want to talk to their parents about so that for me is a sort of major concern that I think we talk so much about Internet safety and digital safety and the risks of technology. We very rarely think about the benefits of having, yes, these very private devices in our pockets at a moment where we have many things that maybe are not yet ready to share with the world. And I really worry that that space will disappear the more that these tools are used. So yeah, that, that that definitely is a concern to me, I think.

Katya

Another thing that came became quite visible to me in our conversations with young people is that some of these controls and rules are experienced as a contradiction by young people. We've been talking about parental control technologies. Young people use digital technologies in their private lives for their entertainment and communicating with friends. In 2024, young people are expected to use digital technologies for their education. I think every young person, in our focus groups in their schools, they had to do a lot of their school life and homework on digital devices. Parental controls and schools controls sometimes came into direct contradiction with the assignments and requirements. One young woman, for example, I think she mentioned that she really liked, bow and arrows. She discovered that there were filters set up on her devices. She wanted some costume, I think, And she ran into trouble searching for it on the Internet and so on. Someone else was looking in depth into something like cannabis, I think, and it was a school assignment. They couldn't do it on a school device because of the control setup and they said I they just did it on their phone. What was interesting to me, particularly in those conversations, is when those contradictions became apparent to

young people, they lost a little bit of trust and in adults, and the experts and teachers in their lives. They felt like, you're setting me up with contradictory demands, And I can't do what you also want me to do. They were becoming a little bit less inclined to listen to advice or information that was being shared with them. And I think it's a shame. I think we should very much recognise how much we expect young people to use digital technologies as part of their education. I mean, for example Duke of Edinburgh scheme is very much an outdoorsy thing to do with young people to, but a lot of the signing up for it is done on an app. All the homework is done on an app. One young person said to me, "Well, my parents set the screen time control to seven hours a day. I mean, I just spent six hours at school and I'm on the device doing most of my school activities. How is that supposed to work?" I think we should be aware of these aspects as well and think a bit more carefully about what we want young people to do and how we want them to develop their relationship with technology.

Vicki

I would also just flag I suppose we haven't really in our research, had a chance to talk to the parents. I think one of the questions I'd love to answer in the future is whether or not these types of apps and tools make parents less anxious or more anxious maybe for further conversation.

Veena

And my final question is, what would you both like to see that would enable children and families to live their best lives with digital technologies?

Katya

First and foremost, I want to see a more nuanced debate around it, as we are still all working out of the roles we want digital technologies to play in our lives generally. Very importantly, for young people, children in particular, we want to promote their safety and well-being. More recently, it felt that certain voices were more dominant, potentially reflecting parents' anxiety in those spaces. And I would like to have more nuanced debates around it and to have more young people's voices coming in so we can learn from them and understand their perspectives and experiences with it to better to inform and guide our own thinking around these technologies.

Vicki

I would completely agree with all that and I really like the fact actually you've framed this question in terms of, you know, living your best life. So in a way, for me, that's the very first thing is I would like us to have bigger and better aspirations about what we expect from families and children's uses of technology. That is not just about keeping people safe, it's about flourishing. I spend a lot of time thinking about appropriate policy frameworks in this sort of area and if we're going to enact that and all the things that that Katya has just beautifully articulated, it does mean having again, a much more ambitious and much more joined up policy approach to this. So yes, it means having appropriate and effective and enforced regulation. And I guess we'll see whether we currently have that. We'll see how it does. I would like it to focus perhaps a little bit more on the design of these technologies and how they work as systems, what algorithms encourage us to do and not do it, et cetera, but we'll see. But it does also mean things

like investing in appropriate education for all children, media literacy critical thinking, embedding these technologies in appropriate and well governed ways in education and not beyond that. And actually, I think it also means we have to find some better way of engaging with parents because I do feel that at the moment they have the fewest resources, really, and the least support to engage in this process and sort of meaningful way. I fear it is going to be expensive and time consuming, but I I think we can get there.

Veena

Vicki and Katya. Thank you so much for joining me on the OII podcast today. It's been a pleasure.

Vicki

Thank you so much.

Katya

Thank you.