

# GENERATION DIGITAL



years since the  
**Children Act 1989**  
& the birth of the  
**World Wide Web**

September 2019

Believe in  
children  
 Barnardo's

# Introduction

30 years ago children had to knock on their friend's door or call on their landline to ask if they wanted to go out to play. They watched films on VHS, recorded programmes off the TV, and listened to music on cassettes. They had to go to the shops to buy a new game, or the local library to get a book.

30 years on, with the development of the World Wide Web and new technologies, childhood – and adult life too – have been transformed. We can now do virtually everything and anything at a much faster pace, with infinite information just a couple of clicks away.

Children born after the digital revolution do not know any other way. The internet has radically changed the way we learn, play and communicate. It provides incredible new opportunities, from connecting with people across the world, to creating and sharing your own content, to accessing different careers. But alongside this have come new harms including cyberbullying, online grooming and exposure to indecent content.

1989 was a landmark year for children, with the establishment of the Children Act and the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). For the first time, the Act provided a legislative framework for protecting vulnerable children – and it's the basis of the laws and practices we still have today. Over 30 years our laws and systems have evolved to cover different groups of children and better meet their needs.

However, we have not managed to keep pace with technological change and respond effectively to the challenges and risks it creates.

So the question is: does the Children Act 1989, and the system it underpins, sufficiently protect children growing up in today's world? And will it be able to protect them in 30 years' time when they've moved from instant messages and video chat to holograms and robots?

In this report we consider the impact of digital technology on childhood using key principles in the Children Act:

- Children's welfare
- Education
- Parental Responsibility
- Listening to the voice of the child

We then identify some immediate changes which are needed to help keep children safe today, and also tomorrow.

## About Barnardo's

As the UK's oldest and largest national children's charity, last year we supported around **300,000** children, young people, parents and carers through more than **1,000** services. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this we work with partners to build **stronger** families, **safer** childhoods and **positive** futures.

## The Children Act

The Children Act placed children and family law under one centralised statute, assigning clear legal duties and rights to children, parents and local authorities. It is the basis of the current legislative framework for the child protection system in England.

### Leading principles of the Children Act:

- **The child's welfare is paramount in all decisions concerning them.**
- **Whenever possible children should be brought up and cared for in their own families and parents with children in need should be helped to do this.**
- **Children should be safe and be protected by effective intervention if they are at risk of significant harm.**
- **The views of children should be sought according to their age and understanding.**
- **Parental responsibility – parents are to be kept informed about their children and participate in decisions made about them even when they are no longer living with them.**

## The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

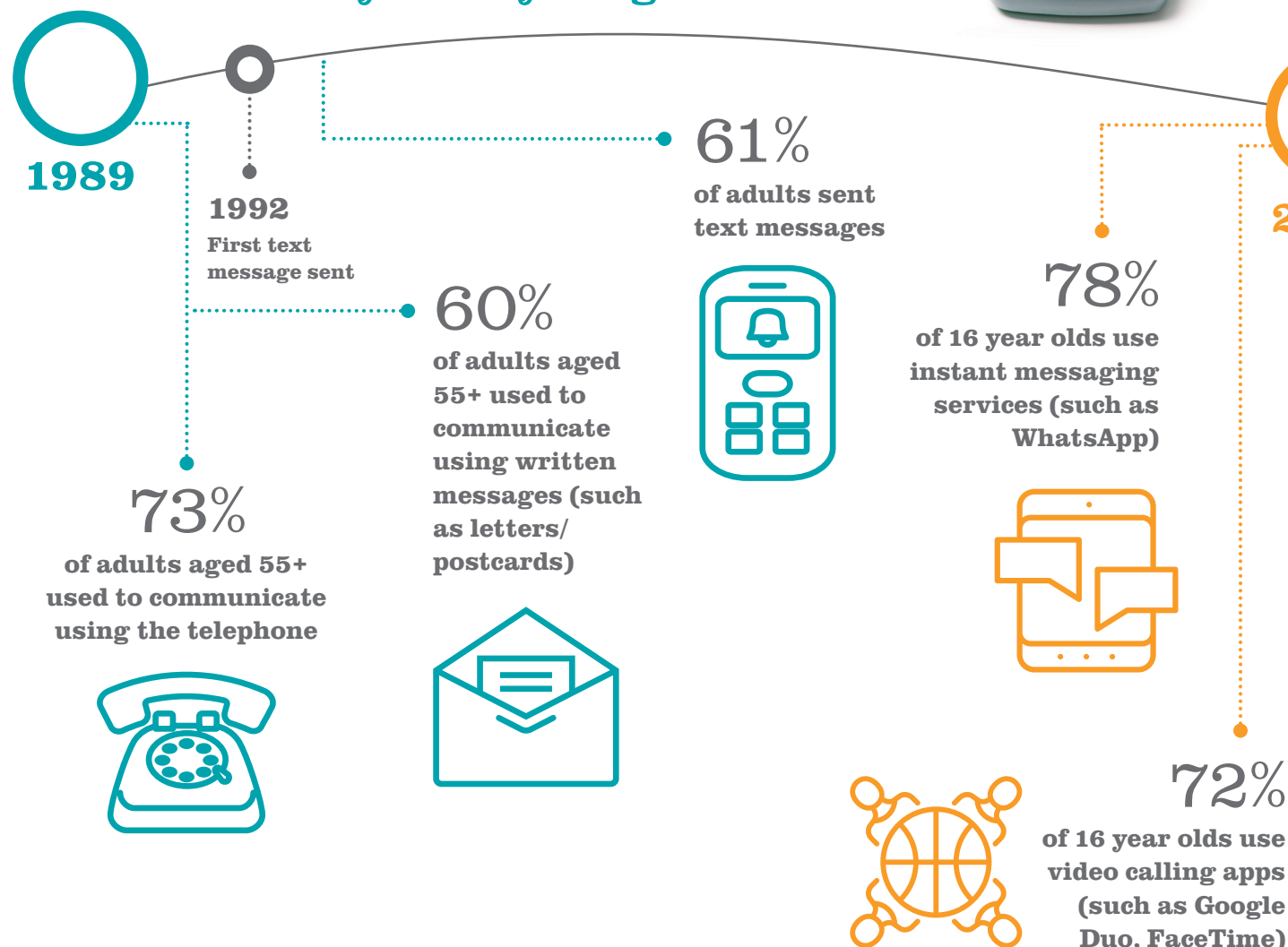
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was first introduced in 1989 and ratified by the UK in 1991. The UNCRC is a legally binding, international convention which sets out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that every child is entitled to. The Convention includes 54 Articles, outlining the specific rights of children. All of the rights outlined in the UNCRC are equally important, however all state signatories should uphold the "General Principles", which should be used to interpret all other rights:

1. **Non-discrimination (Article 2)**
2. **Best interest of the child (Article 3)**
3. **Right to life, survival and development (Article 6)**
4. **Right to be heard (Article 12)**

# The past, present and future of technology<sup>5</sup>



## How adults communicated when they were younger...



## How children and young people communicate in 2019...

50% of 16 year olds use technology they can wear (such as smart watches)



14% of 14 year olds use written communication (such as letters, postcards)

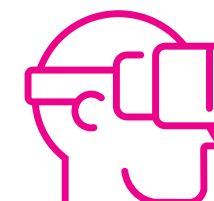


**2049**

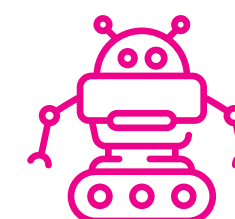
## How children and young people think we will communicate in 30 years time...



60% think that we will use technology that we can wear (such as smart watches)



48% think that we will use virtual assistants



36% think that we will use telephones



13% think that we will use letters and postcards



49% think that we will use hologram technology



<sup>5</sup> YouGov surveyed more than 2,000 adults and over 1,100 young people (age 12-18). Fieldwork was undertaken between 19th – 23rd August 2019. The survey was carried out online.

# Children's welfare

A key principle in the Children Act 1989 is that the welfare of the child should be a key consideration in decisions affecting them.

## What positive impact has the internet had on children's welfare?

### Family life

The World Wide Web has allowed families to communicate, including with relatives living overseas. Young people can stay in touch with parents, carers and other family members using instant messaging and (free) video or audio calls. This carries huge benefits for safety and relationship building.

**"You can book appointments online such as GP appointments."**  
Barnardo's young person

Increasingly, young people in particular are also using the internet to access public services – for instance to check health and book medical appointments for family members. This is especially helpful for groups like young carers – children looking after relatives with an illness or disability.

**"I've got family living in London and Cornwall so it's really hard to actually see them. My cousin is seven and I've only seen her in person like three times in her life but we can facetime."**  
Barnardo's young person

### Staying safe

Young people are using online services like Google Maps because it helps them feel safe when travelling by themselves – for example if they get lost or need to find out what time the bus comes, to avoid waiting alone for too long. Children can also stay in touch with their parents through messaging and tracker apps.

**"When I started going out with friends in year 5 and 6 my mum downloaded the tracker app so she could see where I was going."**  
Barnardo's young person



42%

of girls aged 12 to 18 said that they use the internet to stay safe through communicating with family members on group chats such as WhatsApp<sup>6</sup>



81%

of 16 year olds said that they stay safe by using map apps (such as Google Maps) so that they don't get lost<sup>7</sup>

### Preparing for the future

The internet can empower young people by providing opportunities that did not exist for previous generations. Children use the internet to learn new skills, experiment with and establish their identity, and debate their social and political beliefs.<sup>8</sup>



**"I work with a lot of care leavers and some of them can feel quite lonely, whereas before (the internet) they would never find that network of support...they can go online and find a lot of people experiencing a similar situation to them."**  
Barnardo's practitioner

**"Young people who identify as trans have been able to express themselves and showcase their identity to a wider audience. They are able to socialise [online] with others with similar life experiences and seek support."**  
Barnardo's practitioner

The internet allows young people to connect with peers who may have similar lived experiences.

**"I like the internet because it gives me inspiration."**  
Barnardo's young person

The internet can also help children and young people to explore career options, interests and hobbies.

**"Young people on the internet can find other people who have similar views to them."**  
Barnardo's practitioner

**"I use an app called Wattpad and you can read other people's stories and it helps me write mine. I look at how they've structured their work and what kind of writing they've used and look at my stories and think – what can I do next time that will make my stories like this?"**  
Barnardo's young person

<sup>6</sup> See no. 5

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2019) report highlights that social media can act as a platform for children and young people to engage in open discussions and to be exposed to political discourse. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/822/82202.htm> (accessed 09.09.2019)



## What negative impact has the internet had on children's welfare?

### Exposure to inappropriate material

A survey of Barnardo's frontline workers found that children as young as 5 had accessed unsuitable content online and that this was much more common amongst older children.<sup>9</sup>

We know that children in our services are approached by strangers

online, who can discuss self-harm, depression or suicide, which can trigger mental health problems.<sup>10</sup>

Young people told us that they report inappropriate content to online services but that often the content is not removed.

**"You report things on social media sites but then nothing happens."**  
Barnardo's young person

**66%**  
of girls think that there is a risk of young people seeing things that they don't want to see online<sup>11</sup>



**79%**  
of children aged 12-15 had potentially harmful online experiences in 2018/19.  
71% of this related to interaction with other people or content<sup>12</sup>



**38%**  
of parents are concerned about their child seeing content online that encourages them to harm themselves<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Papamichail, M and Sharma, N (2019) Left to their own devices, Barnardo's <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/campaign-with-us/childrens-social-media-and-mental-health> (accessed 03.09.2019)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Ofcom's (2019) Online Nation report also highlights that children have experienced potentially harmful conduct from others on the internet. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/online-nation/narrative> (accessed 03.09.2019)

<sup>11</sup> See no.5

<sup>12</sup> Ofcom (2016) Children and parents : media use and attitudes report [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0034/93976/Children-Parents-Media-Use-Attitudes-Report-2016.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0034/93976/Children-Parents-Media-Use-Attitudes-Report-2016.pdf) (accessed 03.09.2019)

<sup>13</sup> See no.5

### Cyberbullying

It is estimated that 1 in 5 children aged 11 to 19 in England experience cyberbullying.<sup>14</sup> Unlike contact bullying, cyberbullying doesn't end when children leave school, it follows them home through social media, in-game chat and messaging apps. The mobility of cyberbullying and its ability to reach children anytime and anywhere, even in physically 'safe' places, can have a profound effect on their mental health and wellbeing.

**"Certain issues facing young people are there 24/7 due to social media such as online bullying."**  
Barnardo's practitioner



**80%**  
of 15 year olds in our recent poll thought that cyberbullying was a risk for young people online<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> NHS Digital (2018) Mental health of children and young people in England 2017. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017> (accessed 03.09.2017)

<sup>15</sup> See no. 5

<sup>16</sup> See no. 5

### Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse can threaten any child in every community across the UK. Children by their very nature as children are vulnerable to child sexual abuse. However, children with additional vulnerabilities such as children in care or children with special education needs or disabilities, are at increased risk. The development of the World Wide Web and new technologies such as sharing pictures, video calling and live streaming have enabled perpetrators to interact with more children and young people than before.

**"Technological advances means young people are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation."**  
Barnardo's practitioner

**"I got groomed, I was very vulnerable. I hid my tablet because I didn't want my carer to find out."**  
Barnardo's young person



**83%**  
of 11 year olds see 'people they don't know talking to them online and asking them to do things they don't want to do' as a risk<sup>16</sup>

# Education

The Children Act 2004 introduced a duty on local authorities to promote educational achievement for children looked after by them.

The internet is an integral part of how children and young people learn. Young people supported by Barnardo's say they receive their homework online, conduct independent research and explore areas of interest.

*"All my homework is emailed to me and is on online sites."*  
Barnardo's young person

It's important that children are taught how to make the most of the internet and new technology (such as coding), to help them prepare for the economy of the future.

*"When I'm at college, I'd say most of my three hours would be spent on research and coursework that I do online."*  
Barnardo's young person

At the same time, it is extremely important that children are taught how to use the internet safely.

We welcome the introduction of compulsory Relationships Education in primary schools; Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) at secondary schools; and Health Education in both primary and secondary schools, from September 2020.

However, it is important that teaching about online safety also extends to children outside of mainstream education. Every day, an average of **40 children** are permanently excluded from schools in England.<sup>17</sup> Vulnerable, disadvantaged children are more likely to be excluded – **78% of excluded children** have special education needs and disabilities, receive free school meals; or are 'in need' of support from local authority children's services.<sup>18</sup>

Young people who have been excluded are particularly vulnerable to being targeted by gangs for child criminal exploitation, including county lines. Barnardo's believes exclusion should be the option of final resort.



<sup>17</sup> Department for Education and Race Disparity Unit (2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/school-exclusions-review-call-for-evidence> (accessed: 29.08.19)

<sup>18</sup> ibid

# Parental responsibility

The Children Act 1989 emphasised the importance of the family in a child's upbringing.

In today's digital world, parents play a crucial role in keeping children safe, including by engaging actively with the risks and opportunities associated with the internet.

First and foremost, in order to help children stay safe on and offline, Barnardo's frontline workers say it is vital that parents and carers understand online safety so they can provide advice and guidance to their children.

*"There needs to be more direction and information" [about online safety for parents and families].*  
Barnardo's practitioner

At the moment, many parents do not feel confident and knowledgeable about how their children are – and should be – using the internet. For example, only a minority of parents can correctly state the minimum age requirement for the social media platforms that their children had profiles on.

*"You do get those lessons about online safety but I don't think you pay attention as much as when your parents tell you... but I think a lot of parents don't tell you" [about online safety].* Barnardo's young person

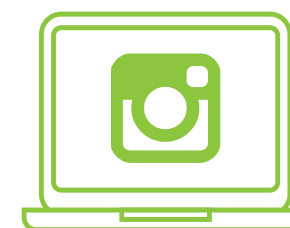
Although many parents and carers are already taking a proactive role in teaching children about online safety, there is a clear need for accessible guidance.

There's a growing recognition that alongside parents and carers, young people's peers and other adults can have a huge influence on their safety. Good parenting alone just isn't enough to keep children safe. This has led to what's called '**contextual safeguarding**' introduced for the first time in the 2018 statutory guidance **Working Together**. Government, local agencies, professionals and communities play a key role in preventing harm both on and offline.

Percentage of parents whose children use social media who are aware of the minimum age requirements (age 13).<sup>19</sup>



32%  
Facebook



28%  
Instagram



21%  
Snapchat

<sup>19</sup> Ofcom (2018) Children and parents: media use and attitudes report <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2018> (accessed 09.09.2019)



# The voice of the child

The Children Act 1989 makes clear that children and young people should be involved in decisions made about them and that we must take their ‘wishes’ and ‘feelings’ into consideration.

This links with the Right to be Heard – one of the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

*“Companies don’t have the best interests of children at the heart of designing online services. This needs to change.”*  
Barnardo’s young person

Young people and Barnardo’s frontline workers say the internet gives children the freedom and opportunity to make their voice heard. Young people tell us their voice and opinions can reach thousands of people on the internet and that they feel inspired and empowered by young activists such as Greta Thunberg (the 16 year old Swedish environmental campaigner), pointing out that the internet is an important tool for raising global awareness on particular issues.



However, young people also say they are frustrated, because although the internet provides the opportunity to speak out, it often feels like their voices are not being heard.

*“Children are the only group in society where people feel it’s ok for their opinions not to be considered.”*  
Young person

In a recent poll for Barnardo’s, **63% of young people (aged 16-24)** said they thought that when the Government makes decisions about what policies to follow or how to spend money they care more about older generations than about their own generation.<sup>20</sup>

*“We need to listen to the voices of children and young people.”*  
Barnardo’s practitioner



<sup>20</sup> Smith, L (2019) Overcoming poverty of hope, Barnardo’s <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Barnardo%27s%20new%20report%20-%20Overcoming%20poverty%20of%20hope.pdf> (accessed 09.09.2019)

# Conclusion

In the thirty years since the introduction of the Children Act 1989 and the birth of the World Wide Web, both have played a key role in shaping the experience of childhood.

The Children Act 1989 provides a legal framework designed to protect children from harm and promote the welfare of the most vulnerable. Over time, the Act has evolved as a result of repeated safeguarding reviews, and changes in our understanding about who is vulnerable and what kind of support they need. As highlighted in our timeline, legislation and policy have been extended multiple times including in response to serious cases of physical abuse and death. However, there has not (yet) been a similar response for children experiencing online harms, such as the case of Molly Russell.

We have identified some immediate changes needed to help keep children safe today. But to keep children safe tomorrow, it’s clear that legislation needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure it is taking account of the way children experience the world – and the constantly changing nature of new technologies.

**To keep children safe today, we recommend:**

- **The Government must not lose momentum on efforts made to regulate the internet. Proposals in the Online Harms White Paper should be implemented without delay.**
- **The Government should ensure schools and alternative education settings have the necessary resource and expertise to teach young people to navigate online environments safely and access support when they need it.**
- **The Government should ensure families in every community can access advice and support if they are concerned about their children’s safety or wellbeing – on or offline (such as through a Family Hub).**
- **Working with schools and organisations representing children and young people, children’s views and experiences must be taken into account by Government when formulating policies and practices which affect their access to, and use of, the internet and digital technologies.**



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