

Submitted to Screen use by children aged 5-16: call for evidence
Submitted on 2026-06-28 16:05:37

About this call for evidence

Section 1 Respondent information

1 What is your name/the name of the organisation you are responding on behalf of?

What is your name/the name of the organisation you are responding on behalf of?:
Dr Sarah Turner

2 Please tell us about your role, expertise or organisation, and why you are responding to this call for evidence.

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I am a Senior Research Fellow at UCL's Knowledge Lab. I research the social aspects of the adoption of emerging digital technologies: I have undertaken various projects exploring the implications of technology use for children and families. During this response, I will refer to two pieces of my research without citation. One, a piece of research into how young people reacted to the Growing Up in the Online World's Young People's survey ("Social Media Consultation") worked with 46 young people between the ages of 8–21. The research explored the way that the survey elicited information from young people as well as the way in which the young people would answer (or want to answer) the questions. The research resulted in a response to the full Growing Up in the Online World consultation, but has not yet been written up for formal publication. The second is my current research project, a three-year British Academy postdoctoral fellowship, exploring how young people use AI in all aspects of their lives ("Children and AI"). The empirical aspects of this work are in the very early stages, and so cannot yet be fully drawn upon.

3 Do you consent to the Department for Education contacting you via email about your response? Please note: we ask for your name, information about your role, expertise or organisation so that we can understand the context and credentials of respondents, assess the evidence submitted appropriately, and contact you if clarification or follow-up is needed.

Yes

4 If you are happy to be contacted about your response, please provide your email address.

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s.turner@ucl.ac.uk

5 Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

Reason for confidentiality:

Part A: The use of screens by 5–16-year-olds, questions

6 Impacts and outcomes

Impacts and outcomes:

7 Types, purposes, and design features of screen use

What evidence is there on how different forms of digital screen use affect children aged 5–16:

This answer covers activity performed on a computer or equivalent device, in line with the focus of my research. It treats the question as one about design rather than activity type, because that is where the evidence is clearest and where my discipline has most to offer. The factor most consistently associated with greater risk is not the type of activity or the amount of time spent, but particular design features that shape how use unfolds once it has begun. However, benefit and risk are contextual. Where a child retains meaningful control over their use, the experience tends toward benefit. Where a design removes or withholds that control, it tends toward risk. The categories in the question are hard to separate in practice, because many activities share features. This was evident in my Social Media Consultation research (young people aged 8–21): e.g. gaming platforms often carry messaging and social-media functions, and vice versa. In what follows I treat most online activity as a single block ("social media") unless otherwise noted, and treat chatbot-style generative AI separately, given the distinct concerns it raises.

Autoplay shows the pattern most directly, because it removes the natural point at which a child would decide whether to stop. Young people across the relevant age range in my Social Media Consultation research found it intrusive and likely to extend viewing even when they had meant to stop. This echoes research with younger children. Hiniker et al. (2018) found that when children aged 3–5 and their parents were helped to plan what to do after watching videos on YouTube, the children were far more likely to ignore that plan when autoplay was on, and far more likely to put the device down as intended when it was off. As described by some young people in my Social Media Consultation research, autoplay heightens inertia, leading to negative feelings.

Recommender systems are noted in the research as being both positive and negative. Personalisation can make a feed more engaging and more enjoyable, and Nyhan et al. (2026), working with teens aged 15–18, describe young people actively trying to influence the algorithm by scrolling quickly past unwanted content and engaging more with content they like. When this worked, they found the feed more rewarding, with the predictable cost of (sometimes) staying on it too long. Conversely, without that sense of control, the same systems produce passivity: around 1 in 3 children (aged 10–13) in the studies interviewed by Wang et al. (2024) described their algorithmic social-media use as passive, creating a feeling of being a "zombie". Returning control reverses the effect. The intervention in Wang et al. (2024) allowed for the adjustment of personal data being fed into a social media algorithm, leading to changes in recommendations and with it a positive change in the young people's views. Garg (2021) found teens aged 13–17 irritated by system guidance that pushed them in particular directions. What separates benefit from risk in this case is whether the child has meaningful control over what they see.

Two further risks attach to recommender systems specifically. Young people in Nyhan et al. (2026) noted how easily they reached content they did not want, from distressing world-news material to a quick pipeline from searching for dresses to pornography. They also expressed no confidence in platform content moderation. Reporting inappropriate content or behaviour, they said, made no difference.

Notifications work by the same logic of pulling the user back, and young people respond by reclaiming what control they can. In my Social Media Consultation research, young people aged 14–16 found notifications intrusive and had turned them off in part or entirely. This exemplifies another aspect of all the features mentioned so far: the action for reducing engagement being incumbent upon the user to switch off or modify designed features turned on by default.

Gamified obligations take the idea of a notification for action into a penalty for inaction. Kuo et al. (2026), studying children aged 6–12, examined retention-oriented design in Duolingo and similar apps. What began as positive engagement, including parents welcoming a child's wish to learn a language, shifted into obligation, with learning reduced to maintaining a streak and the alternative being paid streak freezes. Arif et al. (2026) corroborate the pressure children aged 11–13 felt to continue engagement in popular online games. Children reported getting family members and friends to continue streaks for them, paying money for features, and, disconcertingly, attributing losses as a result of not paying for features (or "grinding" to make up for lack of payment) as personal failure. Risk to children rises where stopping is penalised and the design profits from continuation.

Companion and anthropomorphic chatbots place the same question of control inside a relationship. I have not yet encountered children using chatbots for emotional or companionship purposes in my Children and AI or Social Media Consultation studies, though this is increasingly reported elsewhere. Most children appear to use these tools without treating them as a substitute for in-person friendship. Emotional-support use is more common among lonelier children, however, and a meaningful proportion do not tell a trusted adult about it (Common Sense Media, 2026, covering 9–17 year-olds; McStay and Bakir, 2026, on UK teens). The factor is vulnerability, which moderates how the same tool is used, although these reports do not establish that the chatbot substitutes for support that is otherwise unavailable: Common Sense Media note that the direction of the link between loneliness and use is unknown.

These design features are not incidental to the benefits young people describe. They are how the benefits are delivered, which is why benefit and risk cannot be cleanly separated by activity type. Young people in my Social Media Consultation research reported using these tools for fun and relaxation, connection with others, education, access to news, creativity and entrepreneurship, and treated these as integral to daily life. Messaging is now the normal way to reach a parent (as reported by 12–16 year-olds) and often the only consistent contact with family and friends at a distance. Across all ages (8–21), platforms such as YouTube and Pinterest supported creative work regardless of skill level, with two 14–15 year-olds crediting YouTube with the decision not to give up the violin. Access to news through social media is a feature worth noting, as it may feel an alien concept to those used to accessing TV News or even directly navigating to news websites: recent research from Australia found that for those children (10–17) that had been impacted by the social media ban, 1 in 2 found that their access to news had been restricted, and this loss fell hardest on those whose news diets were already most restricted (Notley et al., 2026).

AI chatbots occupy a less settled place. Young people taking part in my research have reported using them for support with schoolwork, testing the tools' limits, and, for a smaller number, planning activities such as sports training. Teachers in my Children and AI research have reported that secondary pupils use chatbots to help with, or sometimes to carry out, homework, with a sharp rise over the past year that is too recent to assess. The same tools serve as both amusement and frustration: young people described an image tool that produced a picture of a football with the word "rugby" on it rather than a rugby ball, and a text chatbot that kept agreeing with the wrong answers a child fed it. Where wrong answers are the point, this is amusement. Where the output is meant to be useful and is not, it is frustration.

Across this evidence, the factor most consistently associated with greater risk is design that removes or withholds meaningful control: autoplay that removes the stopping point, recommenders that withhold ownership of the feed, notifications that are effortful to refuse, and gamified systems that penalise exit. Greater benefit is associated with the reverse, design that returns control to the child. The implication for policy is that the most reliable lever is design, not time. Time spent is a symptom of these features rather than the mechanism, and addressing it directly leaves the mechanism in place.

This also explains the language young people reach for. Young people in these studies, and in my own observation, sometimes describe feeling "addicted". By all accounts this does not typically meet the clinical threshold of lacking control to a harmful degree, or neglecting one's life (NHS, 2026). They do not attribute their overuse to an inability to do homework, attend school or keep up planned activities. The word reflects the experience the design produces, reinforced by a common societal message that all device use is inherently bad, which the young people in the Social Media Consultation explicitly identified as an underlying message in the question framing of the Young People's survey. The design features set out above are what produce both the experience and the language that young people reach for.

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Wang, G., Zhao, J., Johnston, S.-K., Zhang, Z., Van Kleek, M. and Shadbolt, N. (2024) 'CHAI Tok: a proof-of-concept system supporting children's sense of data autonomy on social media', in Proceedings of the 2024 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '24). New York: Association for Computing Machinery, article 123, pp. 1–19. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642294> (Accessed: 28 June 2026).

8 Problematic or compulsive screen use

What evidence is there on problematic, excessive or compulsive patterns of screen use among 5–16-year-olds:

9 Parental behaviours

What evidence is there on the role of parents, families and the home environment in shaping children's screen use and its impacts?:

My research with parents and children has shown both the burden that an assumed level of technical complexity places on parents, whilst also highlighting that children expect that parents are involved in the shaping of healthy and appropriate device use.

In research carried out with 553 parents and 25 interviewed families (Turner et al., 2022), we found a lack of parental understanding around the safety and security of different types of internet-connected devices. However, those with more confidence were no more capable than those with less.

Asked where knowledge of appropriate device use should come from, most parents had not formed a view; those who had were unsure, some looking to government, one naming DfE specifically, another doubting government's capacity. One thing was clear though: they wanted more support, but were unclear how to find it.

Children are very aware of the gaps in the knowledge of their parents and older family members. In my Social Media Consultation research, participants observed that parents and other adults often had weak digital literacy, specifically, currently, around verification of online facts and spotting AI-generated content. This builds on our findings in 2022, where seven interviewed families included a child who knew more than a parent. Ofcom's Children's Media Lives 2026 corroborates this too: parents described feeling outpaced and unable to hold their controls in place.

Young people do not want limits removed. The clearer view in my Social Media Consultation research was that parents are well placed to set them because they understand their own child, and that restrictions should ease with age, calibrated to the individual rather than applied uniformly by a government. Young people locate legitimate parental authority in knowledge of the child, not technical mastery of the platform.

The evidence is clearly verging on the contradictory. Parents are generally not skilled enough to create the sort of safe environment that a child might need, but children expect this sort of control to be part of their parents' role, as they are best placed to understand them. This leads towards the argument I make in Q7; where there are technical complexities that are too difficult for the users of the product to manage — particularly in the management of potential harm — this requires regulation or other mandates to make the products simpler to use.

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10 Interventions

What evidence is there on the effectiveness of interventions, programmes, guidance and other forms of support designed to help parents and families manage the screen use of 5–16-year-olds?:

11 Inequalities differences across groups

What evidence is there on differences in patterns of screen use, associated benefits and risks, and effective support strategies for different groups of children aged 5–16:

12 Inequalities differences across groups

What are the implications for guidance, support and policy?:

13 Policy and regulatory approaches

What evidence is there on the effectiveness, benefits, risks and unintended consequences of policy and regulatory approaches to children's digital screen use, including age-based restrictions on access to social media and other online services?:

The most effective regulatory lever for children's screen use is the design of the services they use, not the time they spend or the age at which they are admitted. This follows from my answer to Q2, where the factor most associated with risk was design that removes a child's control over their use. Current and proposed policy concentrates on access and time, ignoring the fact that the mechanism that produces the risk — the mechanism most easily constrained — remains in place.

Platforms are not required to constrain the features that extend or compel use, and as set out in Q2 those features are active by default, so the work of switching them off falls to the understanding of the child or parent. This is the failure age-based restrictions do not address, because they attempt to govern who is admitted rather than how a service behaves once a child is using it.

The early evidence from Australia bears this out. The under-16 restriction took effect on 10 December 2025 and places the duty on platforms, not children. Compliance among children has been low: the most recent statistic from the eSafety Commissioner in late June 2026 found 7 in 10 children still accessing social media mostly by declaring an older age or passing a selfie check (see, for example, BBC News, 2026). The government is now doubling platform penalties because the ban has had little effect on teen use. Of course, the impact is that a child who passes an age check is simply returned to the environment the restriction was meant to address.

Access restrictions have been shown to cause perverse outcomes, where the action deemed most compliant by the platform is the removal of child/teen accounts. YouTube signed out under-16s in Australia. They can still watch while signed out as guests. The removal of child/teen accounts removes any capacity for children or their parents to attempt management of use: the wellbeing tools that pace use, named by the platform as Take a Break and Bedtime Reminders, and the supervised-account settings through which parents had set content limits and blocked channels (YouTube/Google, 2025). YouTube is integral to the life of many children for many beneficial reasons — under these rules, however, they will continue to use it, as guests, with far less control over what they see and how long they see it for.

Restriction also generates resentment among the young people it targets. In my Social Media Consultation research, young people aged 14–16 described being told that technology is the thing they must understand for their futures, while at the same time realising that they were going to be restricted in their access to it. This provoked anger because they did not choose to use the devices, they "were socialised into it" by the needs of wider society. The point is not that restriction provokes complaint. It is that restriction applied without a wider consideration of the more mundane ways that young people are required to use devices (e.g. for contacting parents, for storing bus passes, for checking bank accounts, for receiving homework, updates from school and so on) feels punitive, and a continuation of young people being ignored in decisions being made against them.

References:

BBC News (2026) 'Australia to double maximum penalty for platforms in breach of social media ban'. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c78yv5g74e9o> (Accessed: 28 June 2026).

YouTube/Google (2025) What's changing for under 16s and parents on YouTube in Australia. Available at: <https://blog.google/intl/en-au/products/whats-changing-on-youtube-in-australia/> (Accessed: 28 June 2026).

Part B: Screen time and usage in schools, questions

14 What evidence is there on the factors that influence the impact of classroom screen-based activities on pupils' learning outcomes, and how these effects vary by age and phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16)?

What evidence is there on the factors that influence the impact of classroom screen-based activities on pupils' learning outcomes, and how these effects vary by age and phase:

15 What evidence is there about how screen use in the classroom affects other pedagogical practices (e.g. handwriting, discussion, practical work, movement, teacher interaction) and how this varies according to age and phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16)?

What evidence is there about how screen use in the classroom affects other pedagogical practices (e.g. handwriting, discussion, practical work, movement, teacher interaction) and how this varies according to age and phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16)? :

16 What evidence is there of cognitive risks associated with screen-based practices (such as offloading, reduced effortful processing, or overreliance on automation, including AI-enabled tools)? Please indicate which classroom screen-based practices present the most risk and how risks vary by age and phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16).

What evidence is there of cognitive risks associated with screen-based practices (such as offloading, reduced effortful processing, or overreliance on automation, including AI-enabled tools)? Please indicate which classroom screen-based practices present the most risk and how risks vary by age and phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16):

17 What evidence is there regarding the optimal daily level of classroom screen use by pupils before negative impacts emerge on:

What evidence is there regarding the optimal daily level of classroom screen use by pupils before negative impacts emerge on a) learning, b) engagement, c) behaviour or d) health and wellbeing, and how does this vary by age or phase (reception to KS4/ age 4 to 16)?:

18 What evidence is there on the impact of pupils' cumulative screen use across both school and home settings (including all uses of screens for educational or leisure purposes) on their learning, wellbeing and behaviour?

What evidence is there on the impact of pupils' cumulative screen use across both school and home settings (including all uses of screens for educational or leisure purposes) on their learning, wellbeing and behaviour?:

19 What evidence is there on how school policies on homework and device use impact pupil engagement, motivation, and completion when homework is set or managed through digital platforms? To what extent is this affected by a lack of access to a suitable device or connectivity?

What evidence is there on how school policies on homework and device use impact pupil engagement, motivation, and completion when homework is set or managed through digital platforms? To what extent is this affected by a lack of access to a suitable device or connectivity? :

20 What evidence should we consider regarding how different forms of classroom-based screen use affect learning, engagement, and accessibility for pupils with:

What evidence should we consider regarding how different forms of classroom-based screen use affect learning, engagement, and accessibility for pupils with: a. Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) b. English as an Additional Language (EAL) c. Free School Meal eligibility (or 'socio-economic disadvantage?') d. Low prior attainment e. Other additional needs?: