Play and digital technology

Mobile digital technology is quickly becoming the way most children and young people access the internet. This information sheet takes a critical look at children and young people's use of mobile phones and other mobile devices, focusing on play. How children use devices in their play will be examined, as will different perspectives and suggestions to support those working with children. While written from a playwork perspective it is also relevant for parents and carers, other professionals working with children, and policy makers.

Widespread access to mobile technology has changed the way we live our lives, becoming essential to modern living. As adults many of us are constantly on our phones, often using smartphones to coordinate nearly everything in our lives[1]. Not everyone has the same access however, and income, interest, age and ability (as well as signal reception) affects how we make use of mobile technology.

Looking forward, devices with screens may turn out to be an interim measure as technology becomes more embedded in other objects, such as watches, glasses, and other wearable accessories.

Children see young people and adults online with smartphones and want to be involved. Part of this is expressed, naturally, through play. Children increasingly use mobile devices to access the internet, as a symbol of status and maturity, to play games on and to play with. Sometimes a phone is a phone, sometimes it's a transportation device to another galaxy, sometimes it's even an object of desire in a chasing game.

The age at which children are exposed to the internet and online environments is decreasing, with smartphones increasingly the first phone they own[2]. They are the most popular way of accessing the internet, either in the home or outside and especially as children get older[3]. Mobile phones and tablets are preferred for interacting with friends, while laptops and desktops are more likely to be used for schoolwork[4].

Children regard online access as virtually essential, bordering on a right[5], although UNICEF recently reported that 'children's rights are largely absent from internet governance'[6]. The Children's Commissioner for England has called for a champion for children's online rights[7] and Sonia Livingstone has 'edited' the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to include digital issues[8].

'Children and young people should be empowered with the knowledge that they have the same rights online as offline ... It is crucial that we safeguard the long term needs of children by putting children's rights at the centre of all the environments they inhabit, and this includes the digital environment. Empowering young people with an understanding of their rights is a fundamental step in protecting their welfare, both online and offline.'
Children's Commissioner for Wales, Sally Holland[9]

How children use phones

There is continued debate about whether today's children are 'digital natives'[10] – always having known a world of digital connectivity – the situation is generally more complex[11], and not all children have equal enthusiasm and capabilities for engaging with technology. For example, significant numbers of children can't block pop-up adverts or stop their phone sharing their locations[12].

Many still enjoy riding their bikes, playing football or spending time chatting with friends. Children don't play outdoors or play with technology; sometimes they do one, sometimes the other,

and sometimes they do both at the same time. Instead of the idea of a balance between more 'traditional' forms of play and technology, which still suggests they are opposites, it's useful to think of technology and 'traditional' play as interwoven, or hybrid.

Children don't always play with (or at) one thing or another; sometimes they play with one thing and another. It's the same with phones. Sometimes they don't just climb a tree or play on their phones, sometimes they climb trees and Snapchat their friends while they're in the branches, or listen to music from their phones when they're climbing. And sometimes they don't. How they use digital technology and what they think of it is influenced by their own interests, what they see as the benefits and risks, and what their friends think about it[13].

Childhood itself is ever changing, and children no longer live in the same world their parents did; and perhaps children can even 'extend their worlds through technologies'[14]. Children from the age of six start acquiring their own technology-based toys rather than traditional types[15], and younger children in particular often play similarly online as they do offline[16]. For example, if they enjoy making dens outside they may well construct them online too, with programmes such as Minecraft®.

Some academics have taken existing play and playwork ideas and brought them into the digital age[17] with one suggesting for example that 'it is not so much the types of play that have changed as a result of new digital contexts as the nature of play'[18].

Digital spaces

The internet creates digital spaces, ranging from social networking sites to virtual worlds. Since children and their devices are always geographically together, 'digital' space is never completely separate from the physical one, as accessing digital spaces always has a physical/geographical element. Digital spaces have varied rules, cultures and etiquettes, and children spend considerable effort playing in and with these. They also exhibit many of the same types of play[19]

that they do in physical spaces[20]. One academic[21] suggests that 'play in virtual worlds is not virtual play, a reproduction of playful behaviour in the "real" world; these activities are "real" to the users of virtual worlds'. A recent development, is augmented reality, such as the game Pokémon Go™, which overlays digital characters onto existing physical spaces. This blending of physical and virtual may become more prevalent as mobile access and the internet moves into the future.

Affordances

Children incorporate mobile digital technology into their everyday play in a number of different ways depending on the situation and context. Their main functional qualities (affordances) are:

• Texting and messaging, including using photo messaging apps

• Speaking on the phone

• Playing games, including both offline and online and virtual worlds

• Taking photographs and video

- Showing photographs and videos to others

- Playing music

- Using phones as a status symbol – showing off

- Using phones as a subject to talk about, particularly to break the ice and initiate conversation

- Watch, clock or stopwatch

- Accessing media (for example YouTube videos)

- Phone as a personal or valuable object for chasing. At one time children may have 'borrowed' someone's bicycle or book as a play cue to start a chasing game, now they 'borrow' a phone

- Pretending to be busy or have friends

- Accessing information (for example Googling)

- Negotiating with parents, for example for more time to play

- Social networking[22].

Perspectives on digital play

Two main topics usually emerge when talking about play and digital play. Firstly:

'It's not proper play'

As adults it's easy to romanticise play and feel that running around, building dens, or freeform Lego construction is 'proper' play and anything else is second rate. However, as playworkers we support children to own their play, not to impose our ideas of play on them[23] and so it's important for us to acknowledge that children do play with phones – as do many playworkers!

Some academics[24] suggest that digital play reflects children's everyday experiences and worlds, and should be considered valid alongside more traditional forms of play. To remain relevant to children and up to date in our practice, according to Playwork Principle 6[25], we acknowledge how children actually play and make decisions accordingly.

The second criticism is that:

'Children are out of touch with nature'

It's also easy to think that children who use mobile technology are disconnected from nature, but many of them still enjoy playing outside. Children do find accessing 'natural' spaces more difficult, but this is not their fault. As adults we try to protect children from traffic and strangers and we often end up restricting their ability to roam. Research shows that social pressures to constantly supervise children also limits their movements[26].

If children's access to natural or outdoor spaces is restricted, then they will play in other places, and increasingly these are digital ones[27], and the more we restrict access to the internet the more they will try and challenge us. It's also worth remembering that generations of children in cities have played happily in streets and city parks, however the urban environment is increasingly designed on the assumption that children will only play in designated areas[28]. Street play projects across the UK play an important role in challenging this.

Safeguarding

Many adults still don't feel comfortable with children using smartphones and other mobile devices, yet have trouble expressing their fears. Some of these concerns are the same as when children access the internet through laptops, desktops or gaming consoles, but mobile devices are far more personal and intimate. This makes it more difficult for adults to know what children are doing without feeling like they are spying or intruding, and children often pick up on this and feel disrespected and mistrusted.

The Play Safety Forum suggests 'Children need and want to take risks when they play'[29], and this is equally applicable to playing online. We often consider all internet related risks having terrible consequences. In the UK we are generally more concerned about minimising risks rather than maximising benefits[30], although children who have broad experiences with digital technology are more likely to benefit from it and keep safe as they grow older.

Significant numbers of children however are not skilled at keeping themselves safe, they don't understand the implications (and legalities) of sharing images or personal information, and often don't understand what the terms and conditions of online services mean[31]. Although '15% of UK 9- to 16-year-olds have been bothered, uncomfortable or upset by something online in the past year'[32], 'not all risk results in harm: the chance of a child being upset or harmed by online experiences depends partly on their age, gender and socio-economic status, and also on their resilience and resources to cope with what happens on the internet'[33].

Children learn how to use phones and tablets through a combination of copying others (including parents and playworkers), through playing and experimenting, and through periods of more sustained attempts to figure out how to get things done. To maximise the benefits and minimise hazards, to enable 'children to be educated to become competent and resilient digital citizens'[34] there is a role for formal education. It is also equally important children are able to benefit from using technology in play. As playworkers, parents and carers, getting involved in what children do online and how they use their devices can support them to learn, have fun, and stay safe.

Policies and procedures for play provision

There are many comprehensive sources for safeguarding policies and procedures (example links provided below). For playworkers and play settings, a well-defined policy on digital technology, including benefits as well as risks of phones and tablets, by children and adults, can benefit everyone. Children can also be included in these discussions. Playworkers' attitudes to mobile technology also needs to be considered as part of the culture of the play setting. Play provision aims to offer the greatest range of opportunities for different types of play, and can usually include children who choose to play on their digital devices. Apart from safeguarding issues, there are no wrongs and rights about whether settings allow mobile phone use or not.

It is important be aware whether children want to play on their smartphones when they come to the setting. If they do so in preference to anything else then this may mean there are underlying issues, or it may just mean the child finds the setting boring! Often the lure of loose parts play resources[35], calls from friends to join a game, or the silent invitation of the tree to climb are stronger than the tiny electronic glow of the smartphone screen.

Conclusion

The modern world is a hybrid one, a blend of the digital and physical. Children navigate the digital world everyday and don't see it as separate from the physical; it's all part of their world. Through their play children constantly rework their present, their future, and who they are, and it's no different when their play involves technology. As playworkers and those interested in the value of play, a playful and slightly critical attitude is the best one to adopt.

Children incorporate what's happening here and now into their play culture, and it is likely that the online and offline worlds will further converge and blur. Children are essentially strong, and actively create their own present and futures through their actions, including their play. Supporting them to play with both mobile technology and the outdoors, without setting them up as opposites, will enable us to continue making a positive contribution to their lives.

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Links

Top 10 tips for mobile phone safety: www.safetynetkids.org.uk/personal-safety/mobile-phone-safety
UK Council for Child Internet Safety: www.gov.uk/government/groups/uk-council-for-child-internet-safety-ukccis
Online safety: www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety
Wise Kids: http://wisekids.org.uk

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www.playwales.org.uk

Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.