



Challenge Day: The Future of Childhood in the Digital World

Summary Report

Date: Wednesday, 13th May 2026

Time: 9:00am – 3:30pm

Venue: Edgbaston Park Hotel, Birmingham

Aims and Background

The Centre-UB Challenge Day 2026 focused on the theme of Digital Future Childhoods. The day was built around a question that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore: *What does growing up in a digital world mean for children?* The day aimed to tackle the complexity of this question, exploring how the relationship between children and digital technologies are shaped by varying factors, including: children’s vulnerabilities, policy contexts, family and social environments, schools, commercial interests and more. The aim was to bring doctoral researchers and post-doctoral researchers together with external partners to think about how behavioural research can contribute to this conversation in ways that are practical, impactful, and grounded in evidence. In particular, the Challenge Day was informed by and aligned with [The Go Science recent Foresights project on Future Childhoods](#).

Structure of the Day

Prior to the Challenge Day attendees were provided with a summary report on issues concerning the future of childhoods from partner and academic perspectives. The report incorporated insights from Social Media Resilience, ukactive, GPs, Clinical Psychologists, young adults, and academics working across education, linguistics, sport and exercise, health and social care, and AI ethics. The Challenge Day itself involved groups of PhD students and doctoral researchers working together to design a behavioural research project to address the challenge of Digital Future Childhoods. Group-work was informed by a series of talks on behavioural research, and research designs. The day concluded with group presentations, evaluated by a panel of experts.

Behavioural Research Talks

Professor Jet Veldhuijzen van Zanten

Professor Jet Veldhuijzen van Zanten spoke about several theories for understanding behaviour change. Her talk provided an overview of COM-B, Self-Determination Theory and Self-Efficacy, as ways to understand behaviour and behaviour change. Additionally, the 3 stages of the Health Action Process Approach were discussed to frame the key factors that sustain behaviours. This talk emphasised the importance of internal motives, and values, driving behaviours.

Professor Jessica Woodhams

Professor Jessica Woodhams explained the development of psychological theories from the 1990s, that recognize the person and the situation interact to produce behaviours. The Cognitive Affective Processing System (CAPS) Model was discussed, where it was identified that features of situation lead to cognitive affective units, which then lead to change in behaviour. Professor Woodhams also explained how a person's behaviour can affect the situation, where a situation can trigger thoughts and emotions. This challenges the idea that behaviour is driven only by individual characteristics, for children, their CAPS is more fluid, and this provides implications for considerations of childhood behavioural research.

Dr Marie-Louise Sharp

Dr Marie-Louise Sharp's talk explored the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which suggest that intention is the main driver of behaviour, influenced by a person's attitudes, social norms, and how much control they perceive they have. The Integrated Model of Mental Health Help-Seeking was used as an example of the application of this theory in practice. The Socio-Ecological Model was then explained to frame behaviour, which considers the broader layers of influence on behaviour- from the individual all the way up to society and policy.

Behavioural Research Designs

Professor Victoria Goodyear

Professor Victoria Goodyear explained that the current evidence reporting on children's engagement with digital technologies is mainly correlational and drawn from observational studies. This presents a challenge for decision makers, as there is a lack of rigorous causal evidence to inform current policies or practices. To improve the evidence-base, Professor Goodyear outlined different options for behavioural research designs, including - Randomized Control Trials, Natural Experiments, National Data Sets, Ecological Momentary Assessment, Conceptual Studies, Qualitative Studies, and Objective Measures of Technology Use. This discussion was informed by a recent report published by the [Department of Science Innovation and Technology, led by Professor Orben \(2026\)](#).

PhD Students/Fellows Research Projects

DICE

Digital Interventions for Childhood Education (DICE) explored the use of educational technologies in schools. The study was exploratory and comprised of three phases: (1) scoping review of educational apps used in schools; (2) focus groups with teachers, parents and children; (3) an experimental study to explore the use of apps in schools and their impact on attainment. This study provided evidence of how digital technologies are embedded in classroom environments, and their impacts on children.

INFORM

Intervention For Misinformation (INFORM) aimed to investigate how secondary school children distinguish between real and misinformation on short-form social media content, including both AI-generated and human-generated formats. Using a randomized repeated measures experimental design over one school year, the study planned to expose students to non-controversial climate change videos across platforms like TikTok and YouTube, measuring their perceived accuracy at two time points. The study planned to measure two types of accuracy in detecting true versus false information, and accuracy in distinguishing between human-generated and AI-generated content. Finally, this study aimed to identify key personal, social, and contextual factors that influence accuracy.

PARENTS

Parents Attitude, Reasoning, Emotions, Negotiations for Technology and Screen use (PARENTS) proposed a three-year mixed-methods study to address the issue that, despite guidance stating children aged two and under should not use screens at all, in a digital society under two's are exposed to and engage with screens. The study included a co-design PPI (Patient and Public Involvement) component, an Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and a collaborative workshop with parents, policymakers, researchers, and professionals in the technology industry. The aim was to understand the reasons behind parents' screen use decisions and to develop appropriate guidance and interventions.

ECHO

The Emotional Choices and Help-seeking Online (ECHO) team examined the use of AI in mental health support-seeking among children. This study was motivated by growing concerns about the risks of AI, alongside a limited evidence base for its benefits. The study plans to take place across two phases: 1) focus groups exploring the views of children aged 11–16, parents, educators, and mental health clinicians on AI-based mental health support; 2) surveys and follow-up interviews to assess how AI was being used. The study aimed to raise awareness among schools and mental health services about both the risks and potential benefits of AI, and to contribute to future policy development in this area.

BASIC

Behaviour, Anxiety and Social Interaction in Childhood (BASIC) focused on the effect of different social media usage policies on the social behaviour of young teenagers in England. This study responds to the current policy landscape, noting that while England has opted for school-based phone restrictions, others have pushed back on this, arguing for digital literacy education instead. The proposed study will recruit teenagers aged 13–14 across 30 schools, and they will be assigned to one of three groups - restricted evening use, a weekly digital literacy app, or a control group. Social anxiety, communication skills, and socialising behaviours will be assessed at three time points. The aim was to establish clearer causal links between social media use and social competencies, and to produce findings that could directly inform policy both in England and internationally.

Panel thoughts and conclusion

The research projects by PhD students and fellows were reviewed by an expert panel including Professor Dominique Moran (PVC-Impact), Freya Gadsen-Bolton (Go Science, Policy Advisor), Abi Edmunds (Social Media Resilience), Tim Mayo (Communications Manager), and Dr Bethany Skinner (Post-Doctoral Behavioural Researcher). The panel praised all groups for engaging with the challenge and handling the Q&A well, noting that each team demonstrated a logical and achievable research design. INFORM were commended for acknowledging that online communication can both support and harm social development, adding nuance to their proposed study. DICE were praised for their thoughtful engagement with children as stakeholders and their deep understanding of the issue. PARENTS were noted for their creative use of an analogue presentation to address a technological challenge, demonstrating that innovative thinking does not always require digital solutions. ECHO were recognised for highlighting the ethical complexity of AI use in mental health support. BASIC was praised for their clarity around stakeholders and for carefully considering both the potential benefits of digital literacy interventions, and the risks of unintended consequences such as increased anxiety or reduced peer interaction. PARENTS were announced as the winners.

Challenge Day 2026 was an engaging event that brought together researchers, doctoral students, and external partners around a topic that could not be more relevant. The talks were thought-provoking and the PhD student and fellow presentations were impressive, each demonstrating a clear research vision and strong methodological thinking. It was an energising day that highlighted the important role behavioural science has to play in shaping the future of childhood in a digital world.

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