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Children under 3 in the UK and digital tech

Toddlers Tech and Talk research project

Policy Context

The experiences of children with digital technology have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. There is also much concern about babies and toddlers' earliest interactions with digital media, although most evidence is anecdotal. Our ESRC funded project (2022-2024) is the only contemporary large-scale project researching 0-36-month-old children's technology use at home in diverse communities across the UK.

Key research findings

Our project comprised a UK-wide survey (N=1444); 60 interviews with parents, and early care and education (ECEC) practitioners, and 40 in-depth case studies in homes across the 4 UK nations, working with diverse communities.

- Technology is embedded in children's lives from birth. 98% of families have good internet access at home, and the same proportion has at least one smartphone.
- There are disparities between families in terms of access to, and attitudes towards, digital devices but all families and their very young children are engaging with digital technologies in various ways, at home and in the community. Many digital devices have screens, but many do not.
- Parents are thoughtful in balancing their concerns about the risks of tech overuse with the opportunities offered by digital media for learning, creativity and wellbeing.

... It's just part of our culture now as we're such a digital culture and I think if we don't let them use it young in a safe way, then we're almost like disadvantaging them a little bit, growing, moving forward.

Mother of 23-month-old boy in Scotland

- Babies and toddlers use digital technologies in many ways. Many interact with extended families and family friends over video calling. Playing with appropriate tech can involve learning about language, literacy, music, movement and maths.
- Some ECEC practitioners have negative views about young children's digital media use with their families, blaming parents for overuse. Some professionals feel they do not have the expertise or confidence to use digital technologies effectively in their settings. Others are very conscious of the opportunities, benefits and the dilemmas facing parents.

Policy recommendations

- Parents should be recognised as their children's first educators. They should be offered support in making the most of opportunities and avoiding risks in connection with digital media.
- Even very young children are capable of using digital media in beneficial and creative ways that can enhance their lives and learning. While recognising the need for greater security and protection from risks, they should be supported in accessing benefits.
- National early years curriculum frameworks, safeguarding guidance and related policies should be rescrutinised to take account of very young children's rights to digital media access and healthy use.
- Move away from a focus on 'screentime' and recognise the diversity of digital devices in family homes that are routinely overlooked in reports, including devices that do not have screens.
- More evidence is needed about the experiences of babies and toddlers with technology at home, in the community and in early education and care.
- Investment is needed in the ECEC sector to ensure high quality training and continuing professional development in the use of digital media in early childhood, including liaison with families.

Work with us

England: [Professor Rosie Flewitt](#), Principal Investigator, Manchester Metropolitan University. Methodology; Ethics; Language, literacy and communication; UK. r.flewitt@mmu.ac.uk

England: [Professor Julia Gillen](#), Co-Investigator, Lancaster University. Literacy; parental attitudes; digital voice assistants; England. j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk

Scotland: [Dr Lorna Arnott](#), Co-Investigator, University of Strathclyde. Early years education, technologies; play; Scotland. lorna.arnott@strath.c.uk

Wales: [Professor Janet Goodall](#), Co-Investigator, University of Swansea. Parental mediation; family and community engagement; Wales. j.s.goodall@swansea.ac.uk

Northern Ireland: [Professor Karen Winter](#). Co-Investigator, Queen's University Belfast. Social care; survey design and results; children's rights; Northern Ireland. k.winter@qub.ac.uk

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