

A framework for digital resilience: supporting children through an enabling environment



When children use the internet they encounter both risks and opportunities but their ability to self-regulate their media use and avoid the negative effects makes a difference between experiencing online benefits or harms. For www.parenting.digital, [Cliff Manning](#) discusses the development of the Digital Resilience Framework and how children and young people can be supported to become resilient users of the internet. Developing children's digital skills and pro-active online engagement, as well as supportive and enabling parenting, have a more positive impact on resilience than strategies that only restrict or monitor internet use and limit children's digital skills.

It has been over ten years since the landmark [Byron report on children's online safety](#). Yet, we still find that most policies, safety tech and public discussion are mainly driven by two of its objectives – reducing the availability of harmful material and restricting children's access. As children's lives become [digital by default](#), there is a growing recognition of the importance of digital resilience – the third strategic objective of the report – as a way of [recognising children's rights](#) to digital inclusion. As defined by the [UKCIS Digital Resilience Working Group](#):

Digital resilience is a dynamic personality asset that grows from digital activation i.e. through engaging with appropriate opportunities and challenges online, rather than through avoidance and safety behaviours.

Digital resilience is developed through four connected elements: understanding when you are at risk, knowing what to do to seek help, learning from experiences, and having appropriate support to recover. Developing digital resilience is not a linear process, all of the elements are equally important and can apply, to different degrees, at any time.

Related to resilience, *'learning how to recognise and manage risk, learn from difficult experiences, recover and stay well, is a vital part of individual development and agency'* ([UK Council for Internet Safety](#)). Building digital resilience is an effective [way to ensure children are safer](#) online and can [benefit from the opportunities](#) the internet offers. However, resilience is a complex, nuanced approach that seeks to reflect the complex, nuanced ways that children understand, recover and learn from risk online, both individually and collectively. Digital resilience is not a simple checklist or switch – but therein lies the value.

As we so often seek simple solutions to complex problems it is perhaps unsurprising that resilience-based responses have fallen into the shadow of initiatives that favour a simpler 'rules and tools' approach to online safety. As our digital lives and understanding of online harm have evolved and other approaches have not resolved all the issues, 'digital resilience' has gained more traction. However, whilst the term may be more widely used it is often conflated with notions of 'grit' and the ability to bounce back. Sometimes it is used as an excuse for poorly designed systems and to justify inequitable power – none of which are about digital resilience.

Whilst resilience may contribute to a child's agency and self-efficacy it is not linked to an individual's effort nor is it cast in stone. Digital resilience is dynamic and often context-specific. A child may identify the risks in one online space and know what to do if they are concerned but on another platform, or at another time, they may not.



Understand

An individual understands when they are at risk online and can make informed decisions about the digital space they are in

An individual knows how to seek help and to ask for support



DIGITAL RESILIENCE



Learn

An individual learns from their experiences and is able to adapt their future choices, where possible

An individual can seek support and receive help when things go wrong

Many factors may contribute to [children’s vulnerability online](#) – often linked to [offline vulnerabilities and intersections with other risk factors](#). This inevitably shapes the nature of the approach, support and opportunities children need in order to develop resilience and recover from online harm. Recovery is a key part of digital resilience but it is only achievable with appropriate support, systems and opportunity in place. Resilience and recovery are not solely the responsibility of an individual, they are the result of collective action.

Our resilience adapts and grows through activation – in response to context, experience and learning but that does not mean that children should simply be expected to cope with bad situations. A system that relies on users having high resilience is toxic. To enable everyone to be safer online, resilience can and should define how systems are designed and managed.

Developing the Digital Resilience Framework

The [UK Council for Internet Safety \(UKCIS\) Digital resilience Working Group](#), chaired by Vicki Shotbolt and Dr Richard Graham, was established to develop and coordinate a digital resilience strategy aiming to enable the development of digital skills, emotional understanding, and effective response to online problems. As part of this work, the group produced the [Digital Resilience Framework](#) and [an online hub](#) to support the dissemination, application and development of a resilience-based approach to online safety.

The Digital Resilience framework was developed to offer practical guidance and enable organisations, communities and groups to apply digital resilience at all levels. The framework provides an accessible way to review and develop services, policies and content so that they may better support the development of digital resilience. The framework is available via the [Digital Resilience Hub](#) which also features case studies of how the framework has been applied in different settings, blog posts exploring resilience in more detail, and quick links to relevant resources available elsewhere.

How can children develop digital resilience?

[Existing research shows](#) that with suitable support children and young people can build resilience which is beneficial to them. The ability to self-regulate their internet and media use and navigate away from potentially harmful or inappropriate content increases children's resilience. It also allows them to take advantage of the benefits the internet affords and engage more actively online. In addition, factors related to children's social environment can also boost their resilience. Supportive and [enabling parenting](#) where children are encouraged to use the internet and shown how to do this safely is one of the key factors in the development of children's digital resilience. On the other hand, when parents restrict their children's device or internet use or just monitor their online activities, without active encouragement or support, parents might unintentionally reduce children's ability to build resilience, [lower the benefits](#) of internet use and negatively affect their [digital skills](#). Therefore, [supporting families to choose the right approach](#) to children's technology use is a vital, yet often overlooked, factor in addressing [online risk](#). Finally, [resilience depends](#) on children's overall view of digital technologies and their [digital skills](#). Children who believe in the positive role of the internet and those who were better able to navigate the online environment have better resilience. Hence, supporting children's media literacy can have additional benefits in improving their ability to resist harms. Some programmes such as [Parent Zone's Resilient families](#) are specifically designed to help families with these choices and to develop their media literacy but more of these resilience-based programmes are required to reach all families and children.

Digital resilience – like the internet itself – is built on connection. Developing children's digital resilience must be a collective response. This requires having the evidence to know what actually works, the will to design better services, the understanding to apply regulation appropriately, and the capacity to provide relevant and accessible support. Through the application of the digital resilience framework and a resilience-based approach, the ambition from 2008 may finally be realised and education, support, systems and policies will be designed in more effective ways that truly help children thrive online.

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