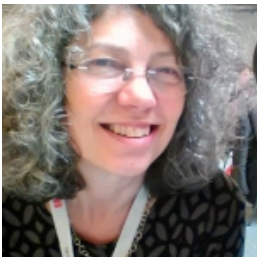


Six myths about children in the digital age



Today Sonia Livingstone is presenting on the panel at the Digital Families 2018 conference discussing the future for young people online – risks, opportunities and resilience. In this post Sonia talks about some of the myths about children in a digital age. [Sonia Livingstone](#) is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. [Header image credit: W. Vota, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.jpg]

Every age has its myths. Myths are often equated with falsehood, but their very persistence reveals society's deeper commitment to particular values. Some myths in the digital age are remarkably hard to shake, even though evidence from research and experience often contradicts them. Here are my top myths about children in the digital age.

1. Children are 'digital natives' and know it all.
2. Parents are 'digital immigrants' and don't know anything.

These are linked, a reversal of the generational power hierarchy between adults and children that has held sway throughout history. It fascinates many that, seemingly only now, in the digital age, do children know more than adults, so that adults could – and perhaps should – learn from them.

But the evidence suggests that children are often the most confident and experimental online, but that [doesn't mean they understand](#) the internet or how and why people act online better than their parents do.

Rather, both children and parents vary hugely in what they know and many children turn to their parents for trustworthy guidance, [just as many parents do their best](#) to provide it.



Professor Sonia Livingstone speaking at the Digital Families 2018 conference on 10 October.
Taken by @ReasonDigital

3. Time with media is time wasted compared with 'real' conversation or playing outside.
4. Parents' role is to monitor, restrict and ban because digital risks greatly outweigh digital opportunities.

These together underpin the popular [screen time discourse](#) which expresses our anxieties about social change. It's never quite clear in all the advice to parenting whether the screen time 'rules' (no screens for infants, no more than two hours per day, etc.) are motivated by the view that the non-digital world is more 'real' and thus 'better' (myth 3) or, contradicting this, if the online world is too real and thus 'worse' (myth 4).

Here the evidence is [weak and confusing](#). For example, [it has not been shown](#) that more screen time results in more childhood harm. It is clear that conversation and free play are good, but unclear that these are always best done in the physical rather than virtual world.

It does appear that if we restrict children online, this makes them safer but it also [leads to conflict](#) and to evasion. So this is not to deny the [risk of harm](#) from internet use but, rather, to say: it's [not so simple](#) as to restrict and ban – because restrictions don't necessarily make for safety, but they [do undermine the opportunities](#).

5. Children don't care about their privacy online.
6. [Media literacy is THE answer](#) to the problems of the digital age.

These are also linked, contradicting the view of children as knowing it all (myth 1) and adults knowing little (myth 2) by claiming instead how much we have to teach children. If we could make kids care about their privacy, then they wouldn't give their data away or put themselves at risk. If society could educate children, maybe everyone, about how the digital media really work and their problems, then [there'd be no need to regulate the internet](#), thereby avoiding unwarranted interference in digital or market freedoms.

The evidence here is that [children do care](#) about interpersonal privacy – but they also want to be part of the group and to share according to its norms. They care less about companies gaining access to their data because they know less about it. But knowing might not change behaviour nonetheless, because those companies [force a binary choice](#) – give us your data or don't use the service. Education isn't what will make the difference in this situation.

If myths persist because they represent our deepest hopes and fears, then I might conclude that what we really worry about is that:

- Adult knowledge is losing its value and authority.
- Children's lives – their values and wellbeing – are getting worse.
- We can't change the world so let's try to improve the individual.

Now, there's a debate worth having. It requires different kinds of evidence and argument. And it's much more political.

Of course, the nature and uses of the internet matters greatly. But often when we think that's what we're arguing about, we're missing the point, for our concerns about social change go deeper, as do our disagreements.

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