

The DFC Launch Event: Playful by Design

The Digital Futures Commission (DFC) has just launched 'Playful by Design: Free play in a digital world.' [The report](#) looks at a crucial important aspect of children's development – free play – and at how digital products and services succeed and fail in facilitating it.

At our launch event, Baroness Beeban Kidron OBE and Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE were joined by key experts in the field of free play who discussed and explored our reporting as well as their views on play in the digital space:

- [Professor Mimi Ito, University of California – Irvine](#)
- [Dr Tim Gill, Rethinking Childhood, Author of Urban Playground](#)
- [Dr Sangeet Bhullar, Executive Director, WISE KIDS](#)

We also heard from [our Commissioners](#) – Anna Rafferty from Lego, Adrian Woolard from BBC R&D North Lab and Michael Preston from Joan Ganz Cooney Centre – who discussed their experience of developing the [DFC's thinking on play](#) and what they enjoyed most about the journey.

Most importantly we hear from children and young people themselves on what they think about play.

Watch the launch video:

[A list of the resources shared in the chat during the launch event is available.](#)

Why is Playful by Design important?

- Free play is essential to the development and growth of children; and contributes hugely to their wellbeing.
- With the pandemic, children are spending more time online than ever before, yet many digital services do not facilitate meaningful and imaginative play, and often cause more harm than good.
- We always worry about physical spaces for children — playgrounds, parks — but digital spaces, where they spend so much time, are neglected and not held to the same standards.
- Children have a right to play (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). While there is a growing focus on the need to make the digital world safe for children, we need to go one step further by drawing attention to the need for this environment to be designed as a space where children can thrive.

Key findings

- Play in the digital world too often harms instead of enhancing children's lives:
 - Of the 1000+ 6-17-year-olds surveyed, a greater proportion agreed a lot that they had a great time playing offline (73%) than online (45%).
 - Children told researchers that too often, digital services share their information (49%), expose them to hateful interactions (56%), and make it too hard to disengage (67%).
- Children told us they want to see digital games designed to be age-appropriate and safe, with no commercial exploitation:
 - 58% want more age-appropriate features.
 - 45% want more products and services without advertising.

- 44% want better control over who can contact them in the game or app.
- 42% want more products and services that are kind, enable intergenerational play, and where people feel included.
- 42% want products and services that do not share their data with other apps or businesses.
- Of the eight digital services examined, children enjoy playing on Fortnite, Roblox and TikTok the most, and WhatsApp the least. But:
 - Two-thirds (67%) of children find digital services **compulsive**, finding it hard to stop playing. Researchers, parents and experts expressed concern about this finding.
 - 54% of children reported experiencing something **upsetting** in Fortnite while a smaller proportion of children reported experiencing something upsetting in Minecraft (36%), Roblox (46%), Nintendo Wii (48%), WhatsApp (48%), TikTok (43%), Zoom (47%) and YouTube (39%).
 - Commenting on these findings, experts call for more effective moderation, safety-enhancing features, more adaptable settings, and for services to prioritise creativity and stimulation over financial gain.
- Researchers identified eight qualities of free play, and the children consulted added four more to this list: intrinsically motivated; voluntary; open-ended; imaginative; stimulating; emotionally resonant; social; diverse; risk-taking; safety; sense of achievement; immersive.
 - “I feel like I’ve always got opportunities to talk to people with video games. That’s the main point of online, playing with friends while talking to them.” Boy, aged 17
 - “I like to learn all my new dances and film them... I was teaching my Nana a TikTok dance.” – Girl, aged 12
 - “So, when Fortnite went to... the zero event or something, where Fortnite switched off for two weeks. I know my neighbours, the 10 and the 12-year-old, they lost their minds. They’d become almost physically addicted to this game... It’s like they had a withdrawal.” – A theatre-maker working with vulnerable children
 - “I think you should get two [...] or three warnings on a social app like TikTok. Because you’ll get someone that could be showing their body parts, and they’ll often get reported, but because there are so many people on TikTok, TikTok doesn’t see immediately.” – Girl, aged 12

You can download a copy of the report [here](#) and a presentation of our survey findings [here](#). If you are interested in receiving a hard copy of the report, please fill out your details [here](#) and we can send one to you.

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