What does good look like for play in a digital world?

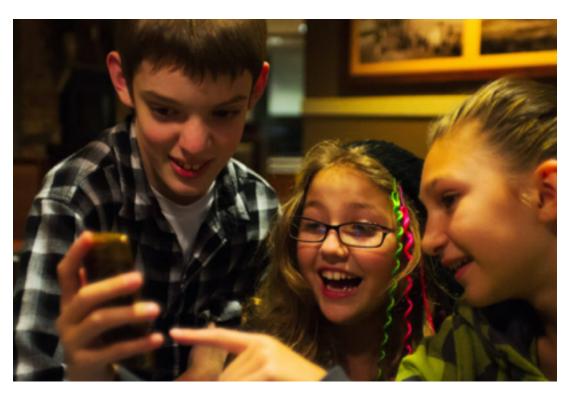**By Sonia Livingstone**

When we tell people that the Digital Futures Commission will begin its work by rethinking children's play, their eyes light up. There's something about play that seems to capture the essence of childhood, and that speaks to the child in us all. But what is it? Is it that it's fun, or child-led, or experimental or creative? Yet play can be serious, adult-guided, rule-governed, repetitive. Whatever it is, and play turns out to be difficult to define, the qualities of play make it so valuable that play is endlessly harnessed to other purposes – education most often, but also behaviour change, therapy and more – by all kinds of actors and organisations.

All kinds of play matter, but "free play" – child-led, voluntaristic, imaginative, etc. – seems most under threat offline and, perhaps even more, online. COVID-19 exacerbates the restrictions on children's lives, and the threats they face, while greatly increasing their reliance on digital technologies. This adds a new urgency to our inquiry. When it comes to digital play, a host of anxieties arise. Digital play seems risky in a heavily-commercialised and under-regulated digital environment. Children's freedom to explore or experiment online, let alone to push boundaries or transgress, is curtailed by commercial interests, regulatory protections and even by the anxieties of well-meaning adults. The effect is to crowd out children's freedom to play and to participate in a digital world. As we announced in soft-launching the DFC:

> "Children and young people are too often overlooked in the development of the digital world, and over-associated with the dangers of being online. The Digital Futures Commission will seek to redress this balance by offering practical steps to ensure that the best interests of children are reflected in the design of the digital world from the outset."

To guide these practical steps, we need a vision statement for children's play in a digital world, a language (or set of concepts) to discuss what good looks like from different perspectives, an evidence base, and the views of children and young people, among others.

Why a vision? As the title to this blog post suggests, rather than rehearse the many, undoubtedly important grounds for anxiety about children's digital play, our starting point is different: society has a vivid sense of the value of children's play, drawing on philosophy, psychology, the humanities and more. These have inspired child-centred interventions in urban design, learning, child rights, and, in the digital world, game design. We now want to draw on, and draw attention to, this rich resource of ideas and experiences to shape the digital environment.

This post introduces one part of the DFC's work on play: a series of expert interviews that we have found inspirational and thought-provoking. Many thanks to all our experts, to Kate Cowan, who conducted the interviews with me, and to Kate Gilchrist for her editorial work. These interviews raise fascinating questions about play, and pose some challenges too for digital providers and others whose actions have consequences for children's lives. Watch out for them in the coming weeks.

This blog is part of the play interview series. You can view the rest of the blog series here.

Professor Sonia Livingstone OBE is a member of the UNCRC General Comment's Steering Group, and leads the Digital Futures Commission. Sonia is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy, and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media for children and young people.