

Children's Rights through Children's Eyes

A methodology for consulting children

Digital Futures Commission

March 2023

The Digital Futures Commission

The Digital Futures Commission (DFC) is an exciting research collaboration of unique organisations that invites innovators, policymakers, regulators, academics and civil society to unlock digital innovation in the interests of children and young people. It seeks to put the needs and interests of children and young people into the minds and work plans of digital innovators, businesses, regulators and governments. It calls for a critical examination of how children's lives are being reconfigured by innovation to reimagine the digital world in value-sensitive ways that uphold rights and to take practical steps to meet children's needs.

The DFC focuses on three areas: play in a digital world, beneficial uses of education data, and guidance for innovators. Each work stream is informed by children's voices and underpinned by a research programme and outputs geared toward real-world change for children. The research is led by Professor Sonia Livingstone, OBE.

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Consulting children about digital design

Digital technologies promise abundant opportunities for children to play, learn, develop, connect and build relationships with others. However, how these technologies are designed and operated, especially concerning data processing, can pose risks to children’s safety, agency, sociality, privacy, collective wellbeing and civil freedoms, especially if they fail to consider children’s evolving capacities and best interests.

Children’s rights apply to the digital environment just as they do in the physical world, as set out in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No 25. This includes consulting children on matters that affect them in relation to the digital environment (article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

At the start of the Digital Futures Commission’s work, we reviewed previous consultations with children (Mukherjee & Livingstone, 2020). We found that children have a lot to say about the elements of the digital world they engage with. However,

while they gain enormous agency, pleasure and value from it, they are frustrated when digital design, provision and regulation fail to meet their needs.

To inform the Digital Futures Commission's Guidance for Innovators' work stream – and to support the development of our Child Rights by Design toolkit, we consulted children afresh in the summer of 2022. Our Child Rights by Design toolkit sets out for digital innovators 'what good looks like.' It is grounded in internationally accepted children's rights. It aims to counter mainstream design norms that are often blind to children's diverse needs and circumstances. This matters since every design decision may affect the children who use digital products and services, whether or not these products and services are intended for them.

The children's consultation aimed to enable children to explain how digital affordances enhance or undermine their rights. And to discover the design changes they wish to see that could help better realise their rights in the digital world. This meant engaging children as research partners to learn from children's vision of a child rights-respecting digital world. Here we describe our participatory research methodology.



Developing the methodology

Conceptual framework

From a child rights perspective, we adopted a child-focused participatory approach that positions children as our design research partners and learns from their views about their digital experiences. We use deliberation as a protocol for communication and to support children in developing a rights-based language to articulate the changes they want.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has 54 articles. To focus the discussion with children and to explain the Convention to digital innovators, we synthesised the 54 articles into 11 principles of Child Rights by Design (see Livingstone & Pothong, 2023) and linked them to technology design.

From a digital design perspective, we also drew on Value Sensitive Design (Friedman & Hendry, 2019). This offers a way to account for “human values” in technology design and development. It recognises “what is important to people in their lives, with a focus on ethics and morality” (Friedman & Hendry, 2019, p. 4). This orientation towards human values emphasises the understanding of people’s, in our case, children’s experiences with technologies and their contexts of use, and the use of this understanding to influence technology design.

Methodology for engaging children

The emphasis on children's experiences of their rights in the digital environment as sources of insights to influence technology design necessitates methods for engaging children and capturing their genuine voices.

We combined the child rights framework with design methodologies for engaging children (Druin, 2002) and deliberation (Coleman et al., 2018; Pothong, 2019) to synthesise a method for eliciting children’s experiences of their rights in the digital environment. This respected children’s evolving capacities and ways of communicating and generated insights that could inform technology design.

Workshop activities

Recognising children's evolving capacities and the broad age groups of children we intended to engage, we designed our consultation activities to involve verbal and non-verbal communication, following the contextual inquiry technique (1998, p.2). We also devised a list of prompt questions and invitations for self-reflection that could be adjusted in accordance with children’s evolving capacities.

Our consultation with children took the form of a workshop, with dynamic activities and discussions. Each workshop was designed to fit within one school period of 50 minutes to an hour. First, we devised four activities per workshop to orient children towards the technologies in their lives. Next, we scaffolded that experience into their understanding of children’s rights and how they manifest in the digital environment. Then, we invited their critiques and recommendations for improving digital products and services.

Our workshops started with introducing the research team, the research project and the activities in the consultation. We also told our participants about our ethics, how we recorded the conversation and how we would use the recording.

Activity 1

This activity was designed as a warm-up exercise to orient children towards their technology-rich world.

We handed out post-its and sharpies and asked children to write the apps, games, digital products or services they use on the post-its, one per each post-it, and stick them on the poster (on the wall). For younger children (primary school children), we gave them an image of a smartphone home screen and asked them to draw the apps they use on the image (see Figure 1). We gave them 10 minutes to complete this exercise.



Figure 1: The Apps we use and why (Activity 1) from Year 4, Greater London and Year 8, Essex

Activity 2



We introduced children to their rights, using cartoon illustrations (see Figure 2), and invited them to discuss with their peers what they found exciting or any questions they had. We gave 10 minutes for this activity.

We used this activity to help familiarise children with the concepts of children's rights in relation to the digital environment.

Figure 2: Visual prompts for children's rights in the digital environment (Source: 5Rights)

And your rights apply whomever you are, wherever you live, whatever your shape, age, gender, religion, race or beliefs.

Activity 3

Building on the first and second activities, we focused children on their experiences of our 11 child rights principles in relation to the digital environment. We created groups of three to six children to ensure discussion depth so that everyone could talk. We asked each group to focus their experience on two to three principles and assigned them different principles to ensure even coverage. As part of the discussion, children were

asked to judge the technologies (apps) that afforded the experiences being shared. We gave 20 minutes for this activity.

We reviewed each selected child rights principle individually, starting each discussion with prompt questions to invite children's interpretation. For example, we asked: "what comes to mind when I say Equity and Diversity?" or "what does it mean to be equal and diverse?". We followed this opening prompt with further questions to help children bridge their understanding of these principles with our definitions (see Annex 1).

Once children were sufficiently oriented with the given child rights principle, we asked them to refer back to the apps they wrote down in the first activity and identify which one(s) were good and bad for the principle in question. We then asked the children to put the post-its with a relevant app in the appropriate box on the poster (see Figure 3). We also asked children to explain why they thought the app was good or bad for the child rights principle under discussion.



Figure 3: Children's judgement of the apps they use, according to the 11 child rights principles, from Year 9, Yorkshire and Year 8, Essex

Activity 4

Having reflected on their experiences of children's rights in the digital environment and evaluated how the digital products and services they used contributed to their experiences, we invited children to make a wish! This was our way to invite children to articulate the changes in design features and functionalities of digital products and services they use. We also asked children to explain how they envisioned the change would affect their rights in the digital environment.

Generally, we asked children to write their wishes down on a post-it, one wish per post-it and stick it on the board (see Figure 4). For primary school children and quieter groups of secondary school children, we used a letter template to describe the changes they

The consultation process

Ethics approval

The project received ethics approval from the Research Ethics committee at the London Schools of Economics and Political Science (LSE) following a thorough review of research design, methodology, possible ethical and safeguarding issues, participant and parental consent, confidentiality and anonymity, the sensitivity of data, risk assessment (for both participants and researchers) and data management plans.

All project members were subject to enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. The certificates were presented to the participating schools in advance.

Recruitment

Aware that children as young as three years old have access to digital devices, mainly mobile phones and tablets, and online services (Ofcom, 2022), we wanted to capture the digital experiences of a broad range of children. So, we contacted primary and secondary schools around the UK in the summer of 2022. Four schools across three different regions responded. From these schools, we included children from Year 3 to Year 9, thus covering the age range between 7 and 14.

The schools were recruited through personal and professional networks, for example, from the school governors or schoolteachers we have worked with, who recommended contacts in other schools who might be interested. We invited the recommended and interested schools, including details about the project and staff. Participating schools then organised a whole class or groups of children volunteering to participate. Upon confirmation from the schools about the date, time, the number of pupils joining the consultation and their year groups, we sent each school information sheet and consent forms for schools to send to both children and parents. Schools administered the consent process for us and confirmed the receipt of completed consent forms from both children and parents on the day of our consultation. Where schools could not get parental consent, schools permitted us to run our workshops with children on behalf of parents.

Our recruitment prioritised diverse representation in age, gender, ethnicity and religious background. We asked schools to factor this requirement into their recruitment. As a result, we achieved diverse representation across all these criteria in every participating school.

Data collection

We held workshops with children from two primary schools in the Greater London area, one secondary school from the Yorkshire area and one in Essex. From the two primary schools, we had Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5 joining our consultations. From the secondary school in Yorkshire, we had pupils from Year 7 and Year 9 joining our consultation. From

the secondary school in Essex, we had pupils from Year 8 and Year 9 joining our consultation.

Each consultation workshop took between 50 and 60 minutes and was audio recorded. We also collected participants' hand-written post-it notes, letters to the app boss and drawings of the apps they use as part of the workshop activities (see Figures 1-5). In addition, we took photos of the consultation settings and participants' hand-written post-it notes and letters. We did not take any photos of the participants themselves.

All audio recordings were securely transferred to a vetted GDPR-compliant external transcriber (Way with Words) and were transcribed. Way with Words ensured that all recordings were stored securely and only for the transcription period. In addition, all recordings and transcripts were securely deleted once we confirmed the receipt and satisfaction of the transcripts.

In reporting our findings, the names of schools and child participants were anonymised. We only referred to child participants by gender (where possible), year group and the region in which their school is based (e.g., Greater London or Yorkshire) to avoid jigsaw identification. Only named research staff on the project could access the data we collected as part of our consultation. No personally identifiable data were shared with third parties or into the public domain.

Participants

Through the four participating schools, we recruited a total of 143 children (see Table 1). We achieved satisfactory representation across age groups, gender, ethnicity and religious background. Our participants spanned Year 3 to Year 9, thus the age range of 7 and 14. Across the consultation workshops, we managed a relatively equal split between boys and girls and a good mix of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Data analysis

We typed up all participants' hand-written post-its and letters to the app boss and analysed them along with the transcripts. We used the computer-enabled qualitative software package NVIVO to code the data based on our 11 child rights principles. We ensured consistency of the coding procedure by having one researcher complete the first coding and another researcher check the coding for any discrepancies. Both researchers discussed the differences and updated the coding.

Our analysis aimed to identify patterns of understanding – how children interpreted each of our 11 child rights principles and the features and functionalities of digital products and services that children associated with the principles.

Table 1: Participants

Location	School	Year group/ age	Number/ gender of participants	Date of consultation (2022)
Yorkshire	Secondary school 1	Year 7 (12 years)	7 children (4 girls, 3 boys)	13 th July
	Secondary school 1	Year 9 (14 years)	10 children (5 girls and 5 boys)	13 th July
Greater London	Primary school 1, Class A	Year 3 (7-8 years)	28 children (14 girls, 14 boys)	14 th July
	Primary school 1, Class B	Year 3 (7-8 years)	28 children (14 girls, 14 boys)	14 th July
	Primary school 2, Group A	Year 4	7 children	15 th July
	Primary school 2, Group B	Year 5	24 children	15 th July
Essex	Secondary school 2, Group A	Year 8	13 children (7 girls, 6 boys)	18 th July
	Secondary school 2, Group B	Year 8	13 children (6 girls, 7 boys)	18 th July
	Secondary school 2, Group C	Year 9 (13-14 years)	12 children (6 girls, 6 boys)	18 th July

Indicative insights from children

This report concerns methodology, but it would be incomplete without including children's voices and indicative insights from the consultation.

Children could not be clearer that they long for a child rights-respecting digital world. They understood all our 11 child rights principles and enjoyed sharing with us how they experienced these principles and what they wanted to change.

They told us they did not appreciate the current arrangement that exploited their interests and attention. They want to exercise their agency rather than being manipulated into signing up for a deal they could not even bargain for.

"I think they just use you. For example, when you're playing a game and it says it's free, and then you press it and then it's like, you have to put your bank details in it." (Year 4, Greater London)

Children expect the digital world to treat them fairly and be inclusive by providing more accessibility features and addressing cost barriers.

“Please [do] not make apps so expensive because people can’t all buy the app they want, and the app workers can’t make much money.” (Year 3, Greater London)

Children also expect the digital world to put their best interests at least on par with business interests.

“It’s [the app is] made in a way that it is for me, as well as being they want loads of money” (Year 8, Essex)

“I wish the world wasn’t money hungry, and they purely made apps and games for entertainment only. Listen to people’s thoughts.” (Year 9, Essex)

Children care about their right to privacy and data protection. They expect the processing and usage of their data to be proportionate and purpose-specific.

“When you download a game, it says, can this game access your files? Then it’s, why do you want to see what my files are? That’s in my bad interest because I don’t want it going through my files, thank you very much.” (Year 8, Essex)

This expectation is consistent with what the law (UK GDPR) says. This request also shows that children expect businesses to act responsibly by complying with relevant laws.

Children demand to be consulted and have their views taken seriously. They are unhappy with the current arrangement in which many adult innovators appear dismissive of their voices.

“We have the right to speak up, and people should listen.” (Year 7, Yorkshire)

Children want to feel safe online and be offered age-appropriate experiences.

“All ages should be protected, not just certain ages.” (Year 9, Yorkshire)

“Valorant, the game where you can play with 50-year-olds...Because of the way that you play it, guns shooting at people to win, ... it’s rated at 16. But you can turn those stuff off in your settings...you can turn off the explicit words in chat and in other places. So, I don’t understand why it should be a 16.” (Year 9, Essex)

Though it is not always possible, they want to express themselves and participate in the vibrant digital world.

“Sometimes social media can make you feel like you can’t be you. You have to be someone else and be like other people.” (Year 7, Yorkshire)

Children enjoy and want to enjoy more creative and development opportunities and other activities that enhance their wellbeing.

“Can you make more apps based on Toca World? Because it is so creative for lots of children - so they can do something creative instead of watching something.” (Year 3, Greater London)

“When it comes to Yousician, it can go at your own pace, and I can do what I want. If I want to learn shredding, which is something you play really fast on guitar, I can start learning that straight away.” (Year 9, Essex)

Incorporating children’s voices in guidance for innovators

Children’s understanding of the 11 child rights principles guided our interpretation of these principles and their relevance to children’s lives and concerns – in their own words - in the development of the Child Rights by Design toolkit. We also included direct quotations of children’s descriptions of specific digital features and functionalities that they deemed to hinder or enhance a particular principle in the design cases. In this way, we bridged children’s views and the perspective of the digital innovators who will use the toolkit. For example, here’s a request for change from a child participant that articulates how the delivery of age-appropriate digital experiences can be improved:

“I believe that age restrictions should become harder to bypass as I see many young children below the age of 12. You also should look into higher censorship as there have been many events in the past of extremely gruesome clips: a guy shooting himself, a guy getting hit... and children playing with guns.” (Year 8, Essex)

We further synthesised what children identified as enablers and barriers to their enjoyment of their rights in the digital environment into design considerations in the forms of prompt questions mapped onto the universally accepted prototypical design process known as the Double Diamond (Ball, 2019). In crafting our prompt questions, we supported children’s perspectives and experiences with policy principles, standards and regulations related to children’s rights, online safety, privacy, security and online wellbeing.

In this way, we integrate children’s experiences and perspectives throughout our articulation of each child rights principle and the considerations designers and developers must give throughout their design and development processes.

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Annex 1: Moderator script

Introduction (5 min)

Hi, thanks for joining our consultation. We're excited to speak with you! Does everyone have their consent form signed by you and your parents? [Check/collect consent forms].

I'll give you a name sticker - please write your FIRST name on it with BIG writing and stick it on you. [Hand out stickers and pens, put on our own stickers and introduce ourselves].

We're from the Digital Futures Commission, a research collaboration led by a university and a children's charity. We are working to make the digital world better for young people 😊

We're interested in how you see your rights in relation to the digital technologies you use in your daily life. When we say, "your rights", we're thinking of adults' responsibility to make sure you are treated fairly and that get the support you need for your wellbeing, privacy, safety, and things like that. Those adults include the government, your school and businesses who make digital products, such as social media or apps or games.

What you tell us today will help us develop guidance for businesses that make digital products - to help make them safer, fairer and happier for children.

Our conversation will take [xxx] minutes. We're audio-recording today's discussion. What you say will be confidential. We won't tell your teachers or parents anything you say. Our report won't include any names – nor the name of your school. If there's anything you don't want to answer, that's fine. Please keep what other people have said here confidential too.

Turn on ONE audio-recorder

Activity 1 (10 minutes)

Let's start by thinking of the different apps that you use. Use one post-it [hand these out] for each app. [after they finish writing] Now stick them on the poster [on the wall – audio record the conversation]

Prompts – what others do you use? At home, at school, games, social media, shopping, music, homework, etc. etc. What's this or that app for? What else? Be sure to include EdTech (e.g. Google Classroom or Timetable Rockstars or maths apps or homework apps etc); don't expect younger children to use social media for 13+ but if they mention them, ask about them without judgment or expectations.

Activity 2 (10 minutes)

Now let's think about your rights! [hand out poster depicting their rights]. In pairs, please discuss this – 3 mins. Be ready to share something that interested you, something that surprised you, and any questions you have.

Discuss as a group/class (audio record)

Activity 3 (10 minutes X 2 = 20 minutes)

Now let's get into two groups [divide by surnames A-L, M-Z] and talk more about your rights when you use these apps. Keep the focus where possible on what the businesses and designers could do better.

Each moderator takes one group, with the audio recorder ON; do the activity for 2+ principles.

Let's talk about X. What comes to mind when I say X? What does it mean to be X? We're just thinking generally here, about what this idea means to you, in your everyday life at home, school etc. This is to get their general understanding of the relevant right.

Judging the apps: Now, think about the apps that you use. Let's look at all the post-its on the wall. Which apps are really good for X? Why? What makes them so good for X? [Use principle prompts to see how they understand how the concept applies in a digital world]

Please write 1 reason on each post-it and stick it on the poster in the box that says good for X. You could write something like: Instagram is good for X because....

Now think about the apps that are not so good for X. Why? What makes them bad for X? What is missing in this app? How does it not support X? [Use the principle prompts]

Please write 1 reason on each post-it and stick it on the poster in the box that says NOT SO good for X.

Now make a wish! If you had one wish [for older kids: think of one improvement!], what would you like this app to include? How would that make the app better at X? Please write 1 feature/function on each post-it.

[JUICE AND BISCUITS BREAK FOR 5 MINS; Repeat Activity 3 for another principle...]

Activity 4: (10 - 15 min)

[Return to main group, all together, ONE recorder]

You have all got your wish list written out on post-its. Now, let's put everything together and rebuild digital products on your own terms. So, please stick your wish in the right place on the poster. [Give children a few minutes to put the post-its in the relevant box.]

Is there anything else anyone wants to add? Is this all the changes you want to see in your digital world? [Wait to see if anyone wants to add. Then read out what is on the poster according to each principle.]

If your wishes came true, what kind of digital world would you get? What problems would this solve? What opportunities would you enjoy most? **Discuss.**

Optional activities – ensure they write their age and gender on the back of the page

- (a) Individual activity: **Letter to the boss.** What would you write to the boss of YouTube or Zoom or Teams or whatever. Remember – you wish to claim your rights!
- (b) Individual activity: **Draw the apps** on the phone or tablet you use – just little kids.

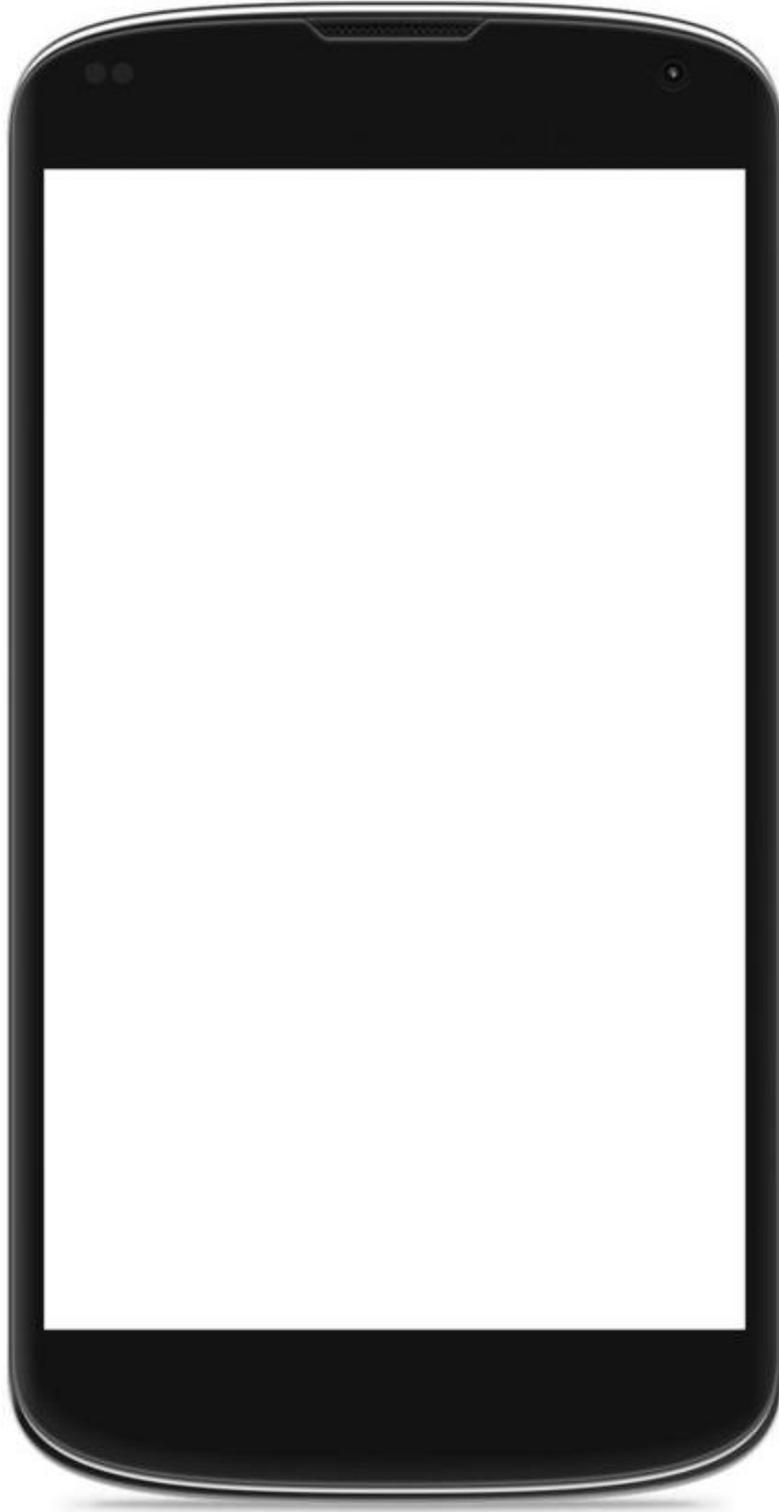
Closing

Wow, that sounds much better than how things are now. Thank you very much for your time and thoughts today. We will use what you told us to tell people who create these apps how they can build a better digital world. THANK YOU.

How was the discussion? Anything you enjoyed? Anything we should change when we visit the next school – anything boring or unclear? **Turn off recorder.**

Visual prompt for activity 1

Please draw the icons on the phone or tablet you use. Can you label them so we know what they are?



Visual prompt for Activity 2 (source: 5Rights)

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has just said...

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY

Digital services should not take your personal information and use it in ways that are unfair or unjust, or allow others to use your information in ways that don't benefit you.

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO HEALTH, EDUCATION AND JUSTICE

Digital technology can help you access services, but it must be accurate and not undermine your other rights.

"YOUR RIGHTS APPLY IN THE DIGITAL WORLD"

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

Digital services should not be used to stop you saying what you think (so long as it does not hurt others) or joining others to make a better world.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Information online should be true, clear and understandable to you - in a language you speak.

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO PLAY AND REST

Playing online should not mean that you are targeted to do or buy things that make money for others. It should be fun and appropriate to your age. All digital services should be designed to 'give you a break'.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE SAFE

You should not be sent pictures, videos and messages that harm you or suggest that you harm yourself. You should be protected from anyone who contacts you who may harm you in real life.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT NOT TO BE EXPLOITED

Digital services must not target you with advertising, selling your information or allowing others to do so. You must be protected from violence of all sorts.

YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD

You have the right to be heard. You should be consulted on things that make a difference to your life.

MOST OF ALL, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE YOU

Digital technology must not nudge, guess or tell others what you are thinking and feeling - that's for you to decide.

And your rights apply whomever you are, wherever you live, whatever your shape, age, gender, religion, race or beliefs.

Poster for Activity 3 (just hand draw on the poster)

Good for X	Not good (or bad) for X

Visual prompt for Activity 4

The image shows a large rectangular frame with a decorative, hand-drawn border. Inside the frame, there are several horizontal lines intended for writing. The lines are arranged as follows:

- Line 1: Indented from the right margin.
- Line 2: Indented from the left margin.
- Line 3: Indented from the left margin.
- Line 4: A full-width line.
- Line 5: A full-width line.
- Line 6: A full-width line.
- Line 7: A full-width line.
- Line 8: A full-width line.
- Line 9: A full-width line.
- Line 10: A full-width line.
- Line 11: A full-width line.
- Line 12: A full-width line.
- Line 13: A full-width line.
- Line 14: A full-width line.
- Line 15: Indented from the right margin.
- Line 16: Indented from the right margin.

A small watermark is visible in the bottom right corner of the frame, which reads "www.teachingwithanac.com".