Digital Parenting

10 years helping families enjoy a happier, safer digital life

by vodafone

Welcome to Digital Parenting:

your family's guide to a smart life with tech

Catherine Russell

Head of Sustainable Business

Sharing music instantly, sending uplifting Instagram posts and swapping silly Snapchat-filtered photos are all regular occurrences in my family, as I'm sure they are in many others. But "Can I show you something funny on TikTok?" is a phrase I can't imagine ever saying to my mum when I was a teenager.

Because the world of parenting has changed completely in a single generation through the advent of digital technology.

We're celebrating the 10th anniversary of our Digital Parenting magazine – a huge anniversary that marks a decade-long commitment by Vodafone to helping parents and carers navigate the unchartered waters of raising kids against a backdrop of rapidly evolving tech. We've distributed almost nine million magazines to schools and parents over that period.

I've been involved with the magazine for the past five years and, as a parent myself, have found the process of bringing it to life both cathartic and informative. It's so wonderful to know each of us isn't alone in not being able to keep up with the latest trends – the number of eye-rolls I get from my kids over dinner is staggering!

I'm deeply grateful that I've had the benefit of raising my children whilst also working on a programme that helps me figure things out as I go. I'll always make mistakes as a parent – but that's OK, we're all learning and finding our way through together. That's what Digital Parenting is all about.

I hope you find this edition useful – let us know what you think by tweeting **@VodafoneUK**.

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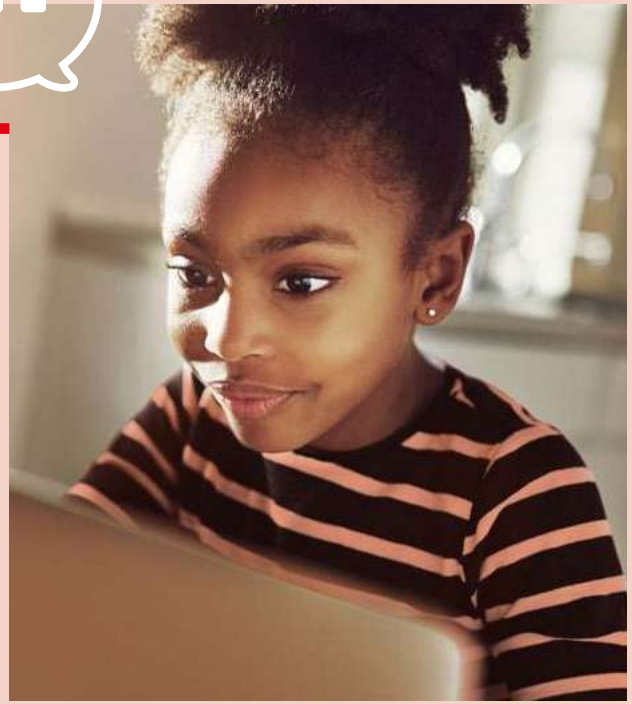
10 years of Digital Parenting

What are kids talking about?



As an online safety organisation, it's been fascinating for us at Digital Awareness UK to see just how much our relationships with technology have changed since the start of COVID-19. We've learned how to work, learn, socialise, shop, entertain ourselves and much, much more in ways that would have been unrecognisable pre-pandemic.

Having spoken to young people throughout this time, it's been remarkable to discover how well they've adapted to this ever-changing digital landscape. And for parents, it's been just as remarkable to see the speed at which they've adapted to keep their children safe online amid the challenges of remote working, intermittent quarantines and the general uncertainty many of us still feel.

As the digital world continues to evolve for our children, we as parents must continue to evolve with it. With that in mind, here's a breakdown of trends we're seeing in schools for parents to be mindful of, so they are best equipped to ensure that their children can safely enjoy all the fantastic benefits technology has to offer.

10 years of Digital Parenting

In 2012, a quarter of kids aged 8-12 had a profile on MySpace and Bebo... RIP Foursquare!

Early years trend: Independent use increasing

With many of us parents juggling remote working with busy family lives, children are spending more and more time using devices independently. A trend that we have seen as a result is that preschool-aged children are increasingly being exposed to harmful content that may be sexual, violent, include bad language, or otherwise be inappropriate. This happens most often when young children are left alone using video streaming platforms, in particular.

So what should I do? Parental controls are a fantastic tool for parents of very young children, to help filter out inappropriate content (please go to **Vodafone News Centre** for advice on parental controls). We recommend teaching children from a young age that it's not their fault if they unintentionally come across upsetting content online, and that the most important thing is that they come and talk to their parents for support.

Primary school trend: Rules relaxed

We have noted a marked increase in the number of children using social media, messaging apps and games rated for a much older audience at our primary schools. According to research from the Office for National Statistics, half of parents said they had had to relax rules about what their child did online during the first lockdown, and from the conversations we're having, it seems many parents are yet to revert to pre-pandemic rules.

Many parents have faced pressure to ensure their children are entertained and socialised since the start of the pandemic, perhaps allowing them to have a social media account earlier than planned. Sadly, while this has many benefits, we've spoken to numerous children who've experienced issues such as online bullying and grooming when using these sorts of platforms at such a young age.

So what should I do? Remind yourself of the age restrictions across social media platforms and messaging apps as well as PEGI (Pan European Game Information) ratings for video games. It can be helpful to use these as a guide, but by no means can they be relied upon to prevent someone underage from accessing digital platforms. If your child is using social media, messaging apps or games rated for older users at primary school age and you aren't feeling confident that they are fully aware of the risks, it may be time to rethink the boundaries you have in place and have an open conversation about some of your concerns.

Secondary school trend: Digital awareness is soaring

It's been incredible to see the extent to which secondary-school aged children's digital awareness has grown in the last year. We believe that a number of things may have contributed to this, namely the fact that digital news is now dominating our headlines, with a constant stream of information about everything from racism on social media during Euro 2021 through to the Everyone's Invited sexual harassment movement. This has generated lots of debate about how young people can best protect themselves and treat others online. In addition, digital issues such as online scams and misinformation have spread like wildfire over the past year, making us all alive to the fact that we have to think very carefully before believing anything we see online.

While their digital awareness is increasing, teens are being exposed to a tsunami of wonderful and extremely challenging experiences online and parents often only learn as much about their digital lives as they want us to know.

So what should I do? Having conversations with children about their digital lives (we recommend that parents do this little and often) is critical if we are to share the struggles and joys of their lives online. If you want to arm yourself with the latest digital trends to help guide those conversations in an informed way, visit **Vodafone News Centre**.

EMMA ROBERTSON is Director and Co-Founder of online safety agency Digital Awareness UK

Safety by numbers

Technology changes even faster than our children do, so it's important to keep up with the most appropriate safety settings. Getting the balance right between giving children the freedom to learn, socialise and play, and ensuring that they are kept safe can be tricky.

Here are tips for each age group:

Toddlers

You can activate safety features starting with the settings on your broadband, so that a password must be entered before content is shown.

Toddler profiles on shared devices can feature bookmarks and apps. Try the YouTube Kids app, which ensures that your toddler will not accidentally discover videos with adult themes, and a child-friendly search engine such as Google's Kiddle or its Microsoft equivalent, WackySafe.

In a pinch, enable airplane mode so they play offline.

Primary years

Online safety at this age is about who children are contacting as well as what they are seeing.

Apps like Google's FamilyLink or Qustodio (free on up to five devices) give you complete visibility on everything your child views and whom they contact.

Children are likely to request access to social networks and games with chat functions. Check the PEGI rating (like a film rating for games) as well as the recommended age range before letting them sign up. Adding a parental pin and locking down the chat settings so they can only chat with known friends is vital too, as well as disabling in-app purchases to prevent bill shock.

Tweens

Many music and video sharing apps have a 13+ age restriction, but that won't stop today's hyper-connected tweens from requesting them.

For parents who allow their tweens onto social media, safety stipulations should include ensuring accounts are private. Time limits should be set on the device itself, and also on individual apps and games.

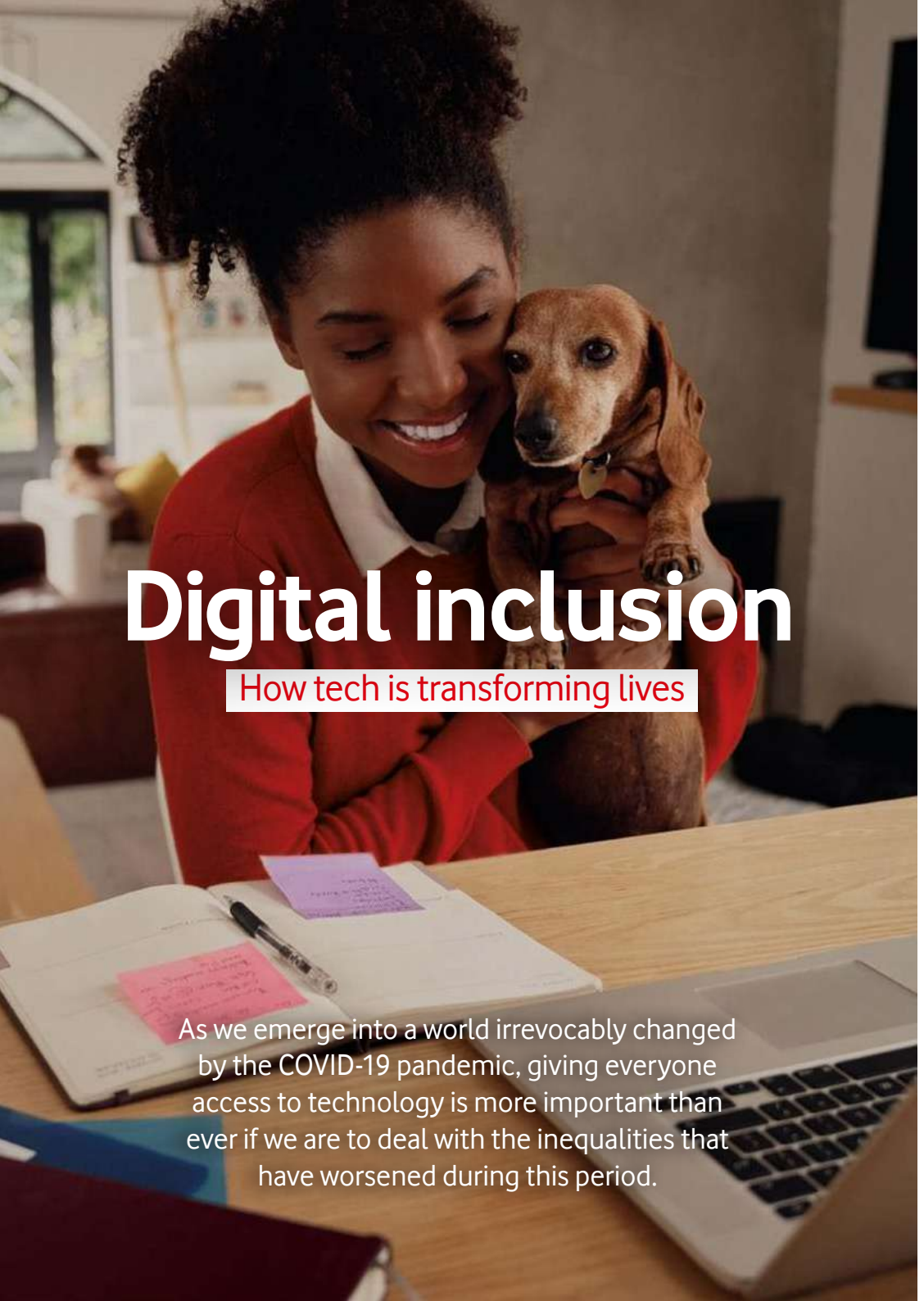
Most important: keep talking through issues tweens encounter, from images of airbrushed perfection to online bullying.

Teens

Discussions around digital wellbeing, screen breaks and the effects of social media will be relevant in the teen years.

Personal devices have become conduits for learning as well as play for all of us, but it is vital to know when to switch off. Individual time limits on apps can help, as can the stipulation that social media accounts can be private, not open.

While apps like Forest can encourage downtime and help teens focus on things like school revision, make sure Snap Maps is operating in ghost mode, so they aren't sharing their location.



Digital inclusion

How tech is transforming lives

As we emerge into a world irrevocably changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, giving everyone access to technology is more important than ever if we are to deal with the inequalities that have worsened during this period.

Repeated UK lockdowns led to an acceleration in our use of technology, but many people were left behind. Figures from charity Age UK show that 42% of over-75s do not use the internet, while the Government's Children's Commissioner says that 9% of families with children do not have a laptop, desktop or tablet at home, and so were unable to access online learning.

Post pandemic, ensuring digital inclusion will be more important than ever, as the rapid acceleration of technology means that those who do not have digital access are even more likely to be left behind.

Making work more accessible

During the pandemic, some marginalised groups have benefited from increased use of technology, which has broken down the barriers that have stopped them from accessing work or learning.

Joe Martin, who is the Managing Director for Digital Inclusion for disability charity Leonard Cheshire, says that the shift to remote working using technology has allowed those with disabilities to do a lot more, as they do not have to physically attend a workplace, and can use customised software such as speech recognition programme Dragon, and Claro software for the visually impaired.

"Because of the technology, people with disabilities are seeing a more level playing field," he says.

Figures from Unison, the public service union, show that nearly three quarters of disabled staff felt they were more productive or as productive working from home compared to their pre-lockdown place of work. More than half (54%) felt they would benefit from working from home in the future but nearly two in five (37%) believed their employer was unlikely to allow this.

9%

OF FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN DO NOT HAVE A LAPTOP, DESKTOP OR TABLET AT HOME, AND SO WERE UNABLE TO ACCESS ONLINE LEARNING.

Opening up skills and careers training

Technology can also be a social equaliser for the homeless and other disadvantaged groups.

Alex Stephany, founder and CEO of social enterprise Beam, says that the falling price of smartphones gives us "a historic opportunity".

"At Beam, we provide our beneficiaries with smartphones, laptops and WiFi dongles," he says. "This enables them to complete online training courses, apply for jobs and help their kids with schoolwork."

These devices and connectivity are necessary to replace hubs that once provided access to technology for the disadvantaged but have not been available due to the pandemic.

"Before, people could rely on public libraries or day centres to access the internet, COVID-19 closed down many of these services," Alex says.

10 years of Digital Parenting

In 2014, only 3.9% of people in the UK were WFH. Now it's 44%.

Vodafone's Great British Tech Appeal similarly aims to help families who are not able to connect with remote schooling and other opportunities by collecting and redistributing used smartphones, tablets and laptops, along with free data, to the people that need them most.

Allowing those with other responsibilities to work remotely

Remote work has been a double-edged sword for many of those with caring responsibilities throughout the pandemic, who faced homeschooling and working at the same time.

However, if remote working is to remain a part of many of our lives now, increased access to tech at home will give everyone the chance of a more equal future. For example, a study from the University of Kent found that working from home allowed women to stay in jobs after the birth of their first child, and meant they were less likely to need to reduce working hours.

Before the crisis, homeworkers were less likely to be promoted and were paid less than their counterparts in the office, a situation that may be set to change as hybrid working becomes more of a standard work pattern.

What happens next?

As we open up society after the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the key will be to balance the technological breakthroughs that have helped those who have previously felt marginalised with a return to the aspects of work and education that we have all missed.

Beam's Alex Stephany says that the most interesting ways in which technology will develop to help with social equality will be those that fuse human interaction with data and software.

"Technology alone is not going to be the answer to all of our problems. It's going to be a combination of technology and human-based, personalised services," he says.

But for many, the first step will be getting hold of devices and a reliable internet connection in the first place.

"Access to devices and an internet connection can be a barrier for many disadvantaged people," Alex adds. "Digital exclusion during lockdown has been incredibly disempowering."

Vodafone has launched everyone.connected, a campaign to connect one million people as part of its long-term commitment to tackling digital exclusion.

If you have used, working devices that could help others, please donate them to the Great British Tech Appeal. If you need help for you or your family, visit our website to see which charities we're working with, or reach out to your local charity which may have some form of connectivity to give out from our charities.connected programme.

Learn more at vodafone.co.uk/everyone-connected

How digital changed the world

10 years of Digital Parenting

Ten years ago, when this magazine was first printed, parents were shifting away from friends and family for parenting advice and turning firmly to their online communities. In the decade since, we have learnt much about ourselves through our digital lives. Where a decade ago mothers might have set reminders on their mobiles to breastfeed at intervals, now we chart every moment of our children's lives digitally – from photo album organisation to getting most of our medical advice not from village elders or our mums, but in the middle of the night from the internet. And then there's education, for us and for the kids. Where will the next decade take us? You, as parents, are in charge of that. **But first, let's consider how we got here.**

2011: The blossoming of parent power online

Instagram, Facetime and the iPad were all launched in 2010. That year, the General Election was labelled 'the Mumsnet election' after the main parties ran adverts on the parenting site (as it was celebrating its 10th birthday) in recognition of the platform's power and, by extension, that of mothers'.

2014: Dr Google will see you now

The search engine revealed that new and expectant parents conducted twice as many Google searches as non-parents. "Universally (and unsurprisingly), 'health' is the top concern, but we can even see differences there depending on stage," said Google analysts. "Expectant and new parents are especially interested in 'weight,' whereas 'fever' is the top concern at the toddler phase."

2015: Finding your tribe on social

Founded in 2004, by 2015 Facebook was the world's largest social network with 1.5 billion users. That year, Pew Research found that almost three-quarters of online parents were using the site. Seventy-five per cent of these logged on daily, 51 per cent did so several times a day.

Online mothers were more likely than online fathers to use the social media site (81 per cent vs. 66 per cent). They were also twice as likely to use Pinterest, and a little more likely to use Instagram (30 per cent vs. 19 per cent of fathers).

Seventy-nine per cent felt they got useful parenting information from their social media networks. Almost three-quarters of the parents on social media agreed that they received support on the platforms, while half of the mothers on social media said they had received 'social or emotional support' about a parenting issue from their network over the previous month.

2015: Shopping at a click

Halfway through the 2010s, parents woke up to the time-saving potential of online shopping. One survey of the UK, Germany, Spain and USA found that British mothers were leading the way – 64 per cent said they purchased online on a daily to weekly basis, compared to an average 41 per cent in the other three countries. In fact, 37 per cent of British mothers now preferred to buy things online rather than in-store, the highest rate across the surveyed countries.

2016: YouTube became your parenting guru

Nearly a decade after its launch, a Google/Ipsos survey found that 72 per cent of millennial parents were using YouTube with the aim of making more informed purchases for their children. The same percentage used the site to "stay in the know" about their children's worlds. Meanwhile 86 per cent of millennial fathers were turning to YouTube for guidance on parenting topics. 62 per cent sought out parenting tips, 59 per cent information about their baby's health, 55 per cent watched product reviews and 46 per cent had watched content about pregnancy and baby development.

2017: Mobile Mums

By January 2017, usage data indicated that parents had made another important change to their digital habits. UK-based mothers aged between 25 and 54 now accessed the internet from a smartphone 59 per cent of the time. By comparison, women in the same age bracket who didn't have children were more likely to access the internet from a computer. Lighter, more accessible, and easier to use with one hand while carrying a baby in the other, smartphones were now also more popular with fathers than other men.

2017: 'Appy families

In 2017, Apple picked Parent Tech as a 'trend of the year', reflecting the rapid rise in apps designed to make parenting easier, more scientific or just a little more fun. Google data revealed that 'searches for parenting/family-related apps,' such as "allowance and chores app for kids" and "brushing teeth app for kids free" had grown 65 per cent since the previous year. It was only four years since the very first app was downloaded, but now 75 per cent of parents with app-enabled devices were sharing them with their children, while over a third of British parents saw them as an integral part of their family life.

2018: Socialising (offline and on)

The group messaging app Whatsapp hit 1.5 billion global users at the end of 2017. Soon, it seemed as if every school-gate conversation had migrated onto a smartphone screen, allowing parents to share questions about World Book Day costumes and teachers' leaving presents from the office or at home, at any time.

Meanwhile, babysitting apps were booming among parents keen to be liberated to socialise offline. Apps such as Bambino, Bubble and UrbanSitter enabled parents to access a network of local babysitters in seconds and book them from their phones. Another, called Sitters, said the number of people using their service had grown by 65 per cent in just three years.

2018: Self-diagnosis by social media

By 2018, around 90 per cent of parents were searching for health information online. According to one study, published in the Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, 29 per cent of parents used online parenting forums, while 27 per cent used social media to gather information about their child's health. Yet only 29 per cent thought the information they found online was correct, and just 61 per cent understood it.

2019: Tracking our teens

As the end of the decade approached, the wearable technology market was booming. Especially popular were devices such as GPS-enabled smartwatches, designed to be worn by children. Sales were predicted to top £600 million by 2025, leading to a debate about balancing the benefits of keeping children safe against the ethics of doing so through tracking.

2021: Online Education

Then, of course, came the pandemic. During the UK's first lockdown, the word most frequently Googled by parents was "homeschooling": searches for this term increased by 1,000 per cent when schools closed.

Thirteen years after its launch, Education is now the App Store's third most popular category, (pipped to the post only by Games and Business). It features more than 75,000 education apps, illustrating just how digitally-saturated our family lives now are, and how digitally-savvy parents across the globe have become during the last decade.

What will the next decade bring to our families' digital lives?
Join us at:
Vodafone News Centre
for the latest on Smart Living and world of tech.

How to be an ally online

According to the Office for National Statistics, around one in five children aged 10 to 15 years in England and Wales experienced online bullying last year, whether on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms or mobile phones.

"By raising your voice, calling out bullies, reaching out to trusted adults or by creating awareness of the issue. Even a simple act of kindness can go a long way."

Scary? Yes. But look at those numbers: odds are, your child will be in a position to support those in trouble, with their self-worth and values intact. Recently, charities and campaigners have been stressing the importance of teaching children not just about the negative impacts of bullying, but about the positive influence of allies, too. The Collins Dictionary describes an ally as: "someone who supports people who are in a minority group or who are discriminated against, even though they do not belong to that group themselves." When it comes to online bullying, such allies are very important, says Dr Wendy Sims-Schouten, child psychologist and Associate Professor in Childhood Studies at the University of Portsmouth.

Such bullying exists in many forms, she explains "from exclusion, name-calling and racism through to stigmatising as well as sexting..." Whatever its shape, one thing remains constant for the young person on the receiving end: "From my conversations with young people, it is clear that they want peer support."

The question is, what support could your child give, and how?

KINDNESS IS THE KEY

Global children's charity Unicef's campaign against cyberbullying highlights a number of ways in which young people can be allies: "by raising your voice, calling out bullies, reaching out to trusted adults or by creating awareness of the issue. Even a simple act of kindness can go a long way."

Dr Sims-Schouten agrees that kindness is key but points out that children cannot be allies on their own. They need strong and effective systems in place to back them up, such as robust reporting mechanisms and peer support networks at school. Without these, "it's hard to ask a child to be 'brave' and call out bullying, because this may make them the victim themselves."

Ensuring your school is on board is therefore key. But there's plenty parents can do, too. Since 24% of 3-4 year-olds now have their own tablets, Dr Sims-Schouten says it is important to send clear messages about what positive and negative behaviour looks like online from the start. Rather than frightening or overwhelming small children with words like 'bullying', however, she suggests framing early conversations in terms of 'kind' and 'unkind' behaviour.

ROLE-MODEL ADULTS

If your tween or teen is reluctant to talk, don't panic. Modelling inclusive and kind behaviour yourself can have just as big an impact. Make sure that your children see you treating marginalised and minority groups with kindness and without judgement. Point out discrimination when you see it on TV or in the news and clearly reject it.

If you do want to start a conversation: "use what they tell you as a hook," suggests Dr Sims-Schouten. If they share a story about someone else's treatment online or at school, ask them gently how they felt about it, and explore the subject together. Indeed, when it comes to cyberbullying, the child psychologist says, many of us hit a hurdle: "a lot of parents do not have the knowledge and understanding of all the platforms that young people are engaging in." So the first step in raising an ally is to stop and listen. "This discussion should be a two-way street," she explains. "What do they think? What does online bullying mean to them?"

Whatever happens, children should know: "they are in a safe place to discuss this, where they won't be penalised or judged." Helping your child be an ally to others, it turns out, means being their ally first.

How to get the most out of your phone's camera

Everyone's a photographer now. But how can you best capture the moments of your family's life?

A decent smartphone can take photos that rival traditional cameras. Apple even features photos shot on iPhones in its adverts, blown up to epic proportions on train platforms and billboards.

So why do the photos you take of your children and pets always end up looking like the blurry inside of a washing machine, mid cycle? Julia Bostock is an award-winning children's fashion and family lifestyle photographer who shoots advertising campaigns and editorials for leading brands and magazines in locations around the world.

Matt Maran is a wildlife and landscape photographer who has won Wildlife Photographer of the Year, European Wildlife Photographer of the Year, and the British Wildlife Photography Awards. His work is featured in the Natural History Museum's new book, Wildlife Photographer of the Year: Unforgettable Photojournalism.

Here, the pair share their top hacks for making the most of your smartphone and taking beautiful photos that capture your children's characters and your local surroundings, whether you are a total beginner or a keen amateur.

10 years of Digital Parenting

Over the last decade the world has gone snap happy, with 1.43 trillion digital photos taken in 2020.

COMPOSE YOURSELF

"When it comes to smartphones, I think one of the great things about them is how they strip photography back," says Maran. "It's much more about the photographer's eye and perspective than any fancy tools or techniques.

Framing and composition are everything. When I run workshops, I talk a lot about avoiding the 'human-eye view' – that's standing upright with your phone, taking the photo from your eye-level. When we get down low with nature – be it a fox or your pet cat – you're at that subject's level and it makes for a much more impactful picture."

Bostock says that the same applies to photographing children: "You want the smartphone itself to be positioned at the same level as their eyeline. So, when you're shooting children, the key thing is to get down to their level. Crouch if shooting a toddler, lie on the floor if you're taking a photo of your baby."

FOCUS POCUS

Whether you're shooting on Android or on an iPhone, a simple way to boost the quality of your snaps of people is to select 'portrait' mode, says Julia. "This will throw the background into softer focus, creating a shorter depth of field and a more professional photo."

Also: "Don't forget to use the little yellow square that appears when you tap the screen." The square establishes the point of focus and will appear wherever you tap. "If you're shooting children, then positioning it around their eyes is the simplest way to make sure that you're focusing on what matters most – their faces and their curious expressions."

The same applies to shooting local wildlife, says Maran.

"Don't always have the focus point in the centre of your photo. Having your subject off-centre frame, and creating space around it, can make for a much more interesting photo.

LIGHTEN UP

"Turn the flash off," advises Bostock, since your smartphone's LED flash is likely to spoil the quality of your photos. "I always prefer natural light, so if you're shooting indoors, turn the

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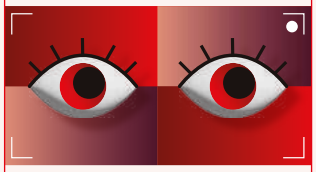
electric lighting off too, and open the curtains instead. If you're outside, shooting either at the beginning or end of the day will ensure you get soft light, coming from the side and creating gentle shadow and interesting side light instead of beating straight down from overhead and creating ugly shadows on the face." She also recommends the Camera+ 2 (camera.plus) app: "It allows you to use your phone like a professional camera and be in control of your aperture settings and shutter speed."

The same applies to landscape photography: "Most smartphones have a function whereby you tap the screen to control the exposure – how light or dark your picture is," adds Maran. "It's almost always better to under expose. It takes away distracting highlights, helps the colours saturate a little more, it boosts contrast and, with outdoor photography, those are often the biggest issues."

BURST IS BEST

If you are photographing a child who is racing around, or some local wildlife in motion, Maran suggests trying the burst mode on an iPhone. "Being able to shoot rapidly just by holding your finger down on the button is a really useful function that replicates SLR photography. Even if you're just trying to capture insects buzzing around on a window box, it gives you a greater chance of capturing something in flight."



PRACTISE THE ART OF DISTRACTION

"This one's more about your own toolkit than your phone's," says Bostock, "but it's one of the most important bits of advice I'd give to people shooting their children."

"Older children and teens are now so used to taking photos of themselves on their phones that they'll often put a practised pose or 'selfie-face' on when you turn your own smartphone on them," she says. "Younger children will also put a really forced smile on if you ask them to pose for the camera. So, the art of distraction is key if you want to catch them in a more natural pose."

Luckily, there's an app for that. Talking Carl and Gugl (download from the App store) are characters who make cartoon noises and repeat anything you say in a high-pitched voice. Play the sounds from your phone, and they will immediately capture the attention and curiosity of babies and toddlers. As soon as they turn their heads to you, snap away.

Shooting older children and teens requires a more low-tech technique, says Bostock. Here you just have to keep them talking. "I'll ask them: What's your favourite food? Would you rather...? Oh my goodness, did you see that flying cat?" Anything to make them forget that they're having their photo taken, so that you can catch them in the moment when their cogs and imagination are whirring."

Being able to shoot rapidly just by holding your finger down on the button is a really useful function that replicates SLR photography.

Digital grandparenting:

how to optimise time spent together online

From reading stories to learning the names of birds, grandparents have been a source of love and wisdom since time began. But what happens when our interactions are virtual?

"There are things that are lost, of course, when our interactions move online," says Nilu Ahmed, a behavioural psychologist at the University of Bristol whose research revolves around ageing. "The smells we associate with people, home and habits... those can't be replaced. Touch can't either, but a lot is gained."

In fact, a study from the London School of Economics suggests that, rather than draining the magic out of grandparent/grandchild interactions, digital activities like watching films, playing games and keeping in touch via calls and messaging apps can bring families closer together.

This potential only grew during the pandemic, says Dr Ahmed. "While we've been physically apart, technology has enabled many of us to be more emotionally available to each other in lockdown than we were before," she explains. "People across generations are much more technologically capable and we've realised that the digital world is a really valuable space to share."

While tablets, apps and social media platforms are giving grandparents new opportunities to connect with the young people they love, getting to grips with them all can be daunting. The charity Age UK recently published a report showing that only a quarter of over-75s actually increased their internet usage during the pandemic. So which apps are best for connecting with grandchildren?

BABIES AND TODDLERS

Reading boosts children's self-esteem, vocabulary, imagination and even sleep. Yet according to the National Literacy Trust, fewer than half of nought to two-year-olds are read to daily by their parents. Here's where grandparents can step in even if they can't be at their grandchild's bedside physically.

Developed during the pandemic to bring families closer together, Tell is an app that enables grandparents to record their own voices reading classic stories.

Once shared, grandchildren can either listen to the audio alone, or play the story back while looking at the illustrations that the app provides to accompany each chapter. You can even create your own story, so the grandkids can hear the story of how grandpa met grandma, or the funny one about the time daddy was naughty in school.

Available on Google Play and the App Store (tellapp.com).

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PRE-SCHOOLERS

In 2018, cognitive scientists at MIT published a study suggesting that 'back-and-forth' interactions are essential to small children's language and brain development. In other words, it isn't enough to talk at children. You need to talk with them, asking them questions about what you read or see together. The principle is no less important in the digital world than in the physical one.

The Caribou app lets grandparents and grandchildren video call one another while sharing games and books in real time. Colour a picture together, and each of you can see the other's work developing on your own screen. You also see each other's faces in the corner, and can chat as you scribble.

Available on Google Play and the App Store (caribu.com).

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Once kids start school, grandparents can play a big part in their education. Video platforms like Zoom and FaceTime are a great way for grandparents to help with school subjects, or to teach extra-curricular skills like cooking – just send their parents a list of ingredients ahead of time, and prop screens in front of you, so each can see what the other is doing.

Earlier this year, The LEGO Foundation and the American over-fifties foundation AARP published a report showing that frequent video chats helped grandparents bond with young grandchildren. The more frequently they video called, the greater the enjoyment, but the calls did not have to last long – most reported video interactions of less than 30 minutes, with the majority lasting a brief 5-15 minutes. So keep it regular and snappy.

And use a big screen. A recent study from the University of Michigan showed that people's ability to understand content is directly linked to the size of the screen on which they view it. The bigger the screen, the better the recall.

TEENS

As teenagers explore their independence, digital platforms often become an even more valuable way to communicate and connect. During the pandemic, grandparents became surprise stars on social media channels like TikTok; research suggested a 32% increase in the number of older people taking up gaming as they adopted the hobbies of their younger relatives in order to connect with them remotely.

Letting your teenage grandchildren teach you something new is a great way to acknowledge their maturity and signal that you're happy to put them in the driving seat.

Digital careers: What job would I like to do, and how do I get there?

How to shine in the brave new world of digital careers

Britain is sleepwalking into a digital skills disaster. According to a new report from The Learning & Work Institute, 40% fewer students now choose IT-based GCSEs than in 2015.

Many employers say that young people aren't leaving full-time education with enough digital knowledge.

So how can the UK close the skills gap?

Fiona Taylor, Careers & Enterprise Coordinator at Sydenham School, London, says:

"Technology in school needs a big investment. Many students are put off because they try coding, don't enjoy it and then dismiss the whole sector."

Taylor's students discover new horizons through partnering with charities and companies such as Speakers for Schools and JP Morgan. But not all are so fortunate. Here's how they might map out a digital career path.

Understand where the gaps lie

Many school leavers don't understand what is available. Students who do can exploit the huge employment growth in this area.

Covering everything from cybersecurity to marketing insights, a work experience programme like Vodafone's Innovators can improve their knowledge of the digital world.

Nick Brand, from AI recruitment business OnSkil, says candidates with this knowledge really shine at interview.

"Candidates should talk about all areas of IT experience, including skills they've picked through university, clubs, forums or volunteering work." Vodafone's programme for increasing digital skills is also improving capability in this area.

Find the right role models

Many students are put off digital careers because of a lack of role models. Taylor says that mentoring schemes can help them understand what roles are available and that they're open to 'people like them'.

"Careers Ready, Diana Awards and Envision are just some of the charities that coordinate mentoring initiatives."

Get guidance on career paths

"Taking an interest in digital skills from a young age is key, so speak to a careers advisor who can highlight different routes into digital jobs," says James Hallahan, Director of the Technology Division at recruitment giant Hays.

Carolyn Pearson, Digital Strategist at Innovent Digital, has this advice: "For most in-company tech roles, the job is about the business, rather than the tech. Showing you understand the company's objectives, strategy, products and customers will demonstrate a level of maturity."

See past the obstacles

Young women often struggle to see digital careers as appealing. Initiatives such as the Code Like A Girl workshop can help – with 45% saying they enjoyed coding more and 12% being more likely to consider a job in technology.

5 digital roles you may not have considered:

1. Scrum master

Responsible for leading a small 'scrum team' through a project process.

Requirements: A degree is unnecessary, but you will need a good knowledge of Agile project management and Scrum principles. Some large organisations might require Scrum Master certifications.

2. Game designer

LinkedIn's Jobs on the Rise survey for the UK says the need for Games Designers and Developers rose by 58% last year.

Requirements: Knowledge of the programming language Go and Javascript.

3. Machine learning engineer

In the fast-growing Artificial Intelligence (AI) sector, Machine Learning Engineers design self-running systems.

Requirements: Many in this field have a master's degree or PhD in computer science/software engineering, plus data modelling abilities. Honing your Python coding skills will also help.

4. Digital marketer

Digital marketing involves promoting brands online.

Requirements: Enter with a degree in marketing or similar, or an apprenticeship. There are private courses on writing marketing copy for the internet, and many gain experience by helping a charity or other organisation market online.

5. Forensic computer analyst

With cybercrime on the rise, analysts are in demand.

Requirements: There are apprenticeships in this field, or you could do a degree in computer science or cyber security.

For further help and support

Internet Matters

internetmatters.org

The Mix

themix.org.uk

Digital Awareness UK

digitalawarenessuk.com

Think U Know

thinkuknow.co.uk

Child Net

childnet.com

Barnardo's

barnardos.org.uk

The Trussell Trust

trusselltrust.org

Good Things Foundation

goodthingsfoundation.org

Digital Parenting website

newscentre.vodafone.co.uk/smart living/digital-parenting/

Parental Controls & Filtering Advice

newscentre.vodafone.co.uk/smart-living/digital-parenting/parental-controls-and-filtering-advice/

10 years of Digital Parenting

Digital Parenting by vodafone

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