



Report: Childhood in the age of Artificial Intelligence

20-22 April 2026

In partnership with
the UK Department for
Science, Innovation and
Technology (DSIT) and the
National Society for the
Prevention of Cruelty to
Children (NSPCC), and the
support of Common Sense
Media.



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Department for
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Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming industries and societies worldwide, offering unprecedented opportunities for innovation and efficiency. However, the rapid development and deployment of AI mean children will be growing up in an age that potentially looks very different from the current one. Harnessing these technologies in the best interests of children and future generations, as well as understanding and addressing risks, requires a coordinated effort. Initiatives to prepare children for the future in an online world are already underway, e.g. through the government's 'Growing up in the online world: a national consultation'.

This Wilton Park policy dialogue was a critical step in the journey to ensure children and young people are protected and safe in the future. It brought together representatives from major tech companies, civil society organisations, HM government, and regulatory authorities, alongside an experienced group of youth advocates to understand what that future could look like, and to bring children's and young people's perspectives, often missing in tech design, into the conversation. The policy dialogue was designed to equip participants with the latest knowledge and motivate them to ensure that AI technologies are developed and used responsibly, with a focus on protecting and benefiting children. The dialogue was genuinely inclusive of youth voices - including designing and leading the opening session - and was seen by many participants as one of the best experiences of young people being fully integrated into policy dialogue.

Summary

Key messages from the meeting emerged in the areas of the harms, risks, and opportunities of AI; young people's trust and participation; and the complexities of governance and regulation of AI. Highlights included:

- AI offers huge opportunities to transform lives, education, work, and to drive economic growth in the UK, but it also carries the potential for enormous harm, especially to children and young people who are increasingly exposed to its ubiquitous presence unsafely.
- As the potential harms of AI are severe, the UK should not sleepwalk into this revolution. Instead of a belated response, the UK has an opportunity to develop responsible AI, with powerful guardrails in place to protect children. Children's rights and protection must be at the forefront of AI development and deployment.
- The lived experience of children and young people, and findings from research, are crucial to developing AI systems and platforms that are safe and provide a scaffold for human relationships and human development.
- Young people at the meeting expressed a strong sense of responsibility to represent children and young people from across the country, to stop harms from escalating further, and to contribute to a positive vision of the future for their lives.
- Some participants argued for a fast regulatory response for AI in the UK, highlighting the need to channel and harness innovation, and foster the flourishing of AI that benefits society. A young participant remarked that "AI is ubiquitous. It is unrealistic to eradicate it. We should be more aggressive in regulating AI for innovation in the UK."
- Policy should incentivise safety and create opportunities for companies that can play a positive role in identifying and responding to risks of harm against children, building in safety from the start.
- The governance of AI should take a multi-layered, society-wide approach which engages young people meaningfully in decision-making and implementation at all levels.

Suggestions for actions included:

- 1 Ensure diversity among children and young people who participate and advocate in decisions around AI, and include a range of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds as well as broad geographical representation from all four nations.
- 2 Create a new body called Youth TechNet, which connects existing youth advocates across the country from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This streamlines access to youth voice for government and companies, to support decisions on policy and innovation. It should be funded by voluntary members from industry, government, and civil society organisations.
- 3 Create a new UK institute to set global standards for AI that actively support children's development and ensure collaboration across sectors.
- 4 Build a strategic and multi-layered approach to governance and regulation that targets multiple areas, including safety at the infrastructure level, in searches, on platforms and the device itself. Ensure an ambitious 'whole of society approach' and ensure the regulatory system is responsive to change and innovation, including dialogue with tech companies.
- 5 Co-develop a vision and a set of principles for tech companies by which AI can be developed and deployed in ways that protect children and young people from harm and support their development and relationships with others.
- 6 Apply a combination of technology and partnership to protect children from the beginning, and to find and remove harmful material. Do more work to deploy AI classifiers which can block harmful content.
- 7 Communicate clearly what legislation already exists to protect children from AI harms.
- 8 Ensure that the education system at all levels is fit for purpose for the new world of AI.

Harms, risks, and opportunities of AI

Participants discussed the harms, risks, and opportunities throughout the meeting, and their key points are summarised here.

Risks and harms

Given that AI is evolving quickly and increasingly ubiquitous, the risk of AI harms is almost inescapable.

Children and young people are already experiencing multiple harms because of AI, for example: deep fakes are being used to generate sexual abuse material; the boom in agentic AI increases the risks of agents distributing and socialising child sexual abuse material; children are engaging with AI chatbots for mental health support, including in ways that may expose them to unsafe content or harmful guidance; and AI generated images are being used to inflame violence in conflict or post-conflict communities.

AI impacts multiple dimensions of young people's lives, such as learning, mental health and wellbeing, cognitive development, bodily autonomy, critical faculties, activity displacement, emotional dependency, and data privacy. Worrying signs show a 200% increase in Childline counselling sessions relating to AI. Young women fear 'nudifying' tools, deepfakes, and for their own personal safety; some are choosing not to participate in the public realm of politics. Many university students consider their chosen degrees to be worthless in the face of a challenging job market further transformed by AI. Furthermore, harms are not always immediately evident, and broader societal harms can emerge over time.

AI has the potential to increase access to tools and lead to greater empowerment among children and young people; however, AI tools can make inequality worse. This is especially the case when deployers and users do not understand how AI models are trained, the inherent bias of data, and the sources and use of personal data. It is extremely challenging for children, young people, and parents to educate themselves on AI. AI literacy is critically important, yet there is a huge inequality gap between those who have access to understanding and using AI meaningfully and those who do not. Children and young people in lower socio-economic groups who do not have access to education are likely to be at greater risk of harm.

Young people also expressed that while workplaces and employers are using AI in methods to hire people, and in graduate roles, the education system is not quick enough to respond to equip students for their future in a world of AI. The education system at all levels must become fit-for-purpose to respond to AI in a changing world, including improving literacy and accessibility.

Opportunities

Young people expressed disillusionment and distrust in the systems that should protect them from the harms of AI, while tech companies expressed greater positivity around the potential of AI to improve lives and economies. More optimism emerged when campaigners and technologists talked about using AI to ensure that AI is safe.

Participants discussed how AI can be used as a tool to combat harms that children experience online, and how it can be used to disrupt the commercialisation of harms. Safety interventions can sit in many places, such as guardrails in AI, safety at the infrastructure level, in search functions, on platforms and on devices; all offer different opportunities and challenges. Safety tech companies have built AI tools that give children safer online experiences, but they are fighting against the economic model of online platforms financed by advertising.

Contentious issues of privacy, inclusion, and freedom of speech can challenge the overall direction and moral decisions that we need to take as a matter of urgency to protect children from AI-generated harm.

Suggestions for action included:

- Ensure a pro-social element in the principles of AI design.
- Use AI classifiers more widely to detect harms and block the ability to view harmful material.
- Do not just focus on technological solutions, but work to overcome the political and economic barriers that exist in keeping children safe online.
- Gather evidence from existing initiatives and programmes about the harms, risks, and opportunities of AI.
- Create and fund a research institute focused on AI and childhood, which includes academia, tech companies and government inputs.
- Conduct a year-long research project in schools based on level of AI use (high, medium, low, none).
- Run a long-term trial of youth use of AI companions.
- Conduct a long-term longitudinal study on AI and the brain.
- Promote digital literacy in schools, communities, and homes.

Young people's trust and participation

Throughout the discussions, young people shared their experiences of and wishes for participation in decision-making around AI, and other participants contributed their perspectives from civil society, tech companies, regulators, and government to the discussion.

Young people expressed a deep level of disillusionment and distrust due to their lack of involvement in decisions and actions that affect their lives: about the education system, which does not seem designed to equip them for the future; towards politics,

as the government does not legislate for them; and with tech companies, which do not consult and engage them in safety and systems.

Participants felt that the disillusionment and political apathy of young people and is dangerous for society, and could lead to detachment or radicalisation of extreme views. Young people should be meaningfully engaged in decision-making at every level, including how AI is rolled out across the UK's health and education systems, in local councils, in Parliament, and more ordinarily in how AI is showing up in their everyday lives. Focus groups and research led by and for young people are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of their lives in relation to AI, while also helping them navigate AI safely and purposefully.

Young people highlighted how their participation often feels tokenistic, stressed the importance of ensuring their genuine participation to speak about the actual issues they face and be listened to, and asked for proper follow-up meetings. They have also noted that questions they receive in public forums are sometimes inappropriate and irrelevant, and they requested information briefs and better communications to support them when they are asked to speak in policy spaces.

Young people's experiences of harm are very varied according to where they live and their backgrounds: geographic, socio-economic, educational. A broad range of young people's perspectives must be ensured in any decision-making and advocacy fora, as the extent and range of harms that exist are not yet fully understood.

As part of this discussion around youth representation, young people also highlighted that the same individuals are often invited to meetings and consultations, leading to pressure on them and reducing the diversity of views. Participants discussed how to deal with the ethical considerations of engaging young people, whether to pay for their time, and how much to expect small tech companies to engage meaningfully with youth. One suggestion was for a larger organisation to host a group of young people to be able to engage with smaller companies that do not have the capacity to do this.

Suggestions for action included:

- Create and fund a young people's board on digital technologies, which should be intersectional and cover all socio-economic groups and the devolved nations.
- Ensure young people's participation in the development of responsible and safe AI, and a clear avenue for integrating youth voices in decision-making.
- For those doing R&D, bring in youth perspectives from across the country.

- Organise and fund research done by and for young people on how AI affects their lives and how they can navigate it safely.
- Rebuild young people's trust in governments and tech companies through well-informed engagement and participation in decision-making and action.
- Organise a nationwide digital literacy programme in education throughout all age groups.
- Establish an annual healthy AI week for schools.

Governance and regulation

Participants shared experiences of and opinions on how to strengthen the governance, regulation, and oversight of AI technologies, sharing knowledge of gaps and priorities for the future. Some summary points are listed below. The governance and regulation of AI is a complex policy area, particularly when it is unclear how AI will develop and the extent to which a few major companies will dominate versus the proliferation of emergent open-source AI. While there has been a long focus on voluntary commitments and codes on best practice, including transparency and labelling, some participants argued for binding and urgent regulation in the face of competitive commercial dynamics.

Regulators and governments across the world are working hard on approaches to AI, and over 70 countries worldwide have some form of AI regulation in place, with over 1000 regulators globally. But these efforts are fragmented, and it is hard for citizens and companies to navigate. The UK is taking a pragmatic approach, recognising that AI is a general-purpose technology and is applied in different contexts. However, much more work is needed to ensure the protection of children and young people.

Participants discussed responsibilities to keep children safe, and the balance between regulation that penalises unsafe AI use by children and putting the responsibility onto companies to manage products and prevent unsafe use. Clear lines of accountability are needed around individual and platform responsibilities, along with exploring liabilities for harms. Participants raised the dangers of stifling innovation and market competition and of driving companies overseas rather than supporting British industry. New technology is emerging constantly and there needs to be flexibility in the way that regulators can keep companies accountable.

Policy should be seen as a tool to incentivise safety and to create opportunities for British companies in an evolving market. Some participants suggested that regulators and companies should be in constant dialogue as technology evolves, to ensure companies are motivated from a place of optimism and enthusiasm and that they play

a role in identifying novel risks that emerge with AI. Lessons could be learnt from the experience of implementing GDPR, which, although it created furore at first, is now widely accepted and sustained.

Some participants argued there indeed could be a ‘race to the top’ by companies with specific interests to ensure AI is beneficial to humanity, and that systemic change happens when market forces align, with regulation inherently part of this. Keeping children safe online does not necessarily preclude monetisation, as companies can benefit from public perceptions of protecting children.

In the fast-paced world of growing AI, there are trade-offs between speed of legislation, parliamentary oversight, and implementation of regulation. For example, the Online Safety Act took four years to pass, and today’s rapid development and proliferation of AI does not allow for long deliberations in Parliament and the public.

Interdisciplinary conversations need to get specific about what concepts of law can support safety for children and young people. A framework and infrastructure for meaningful conversations about regulation of AI could support effective coordination between the UK government, tech experts, regulators, children and young people, parents, and civil society organisations.

Young people said that harms are often due to platform design choices over which they have no influence, but which platform providers can avoid. Many participants argued for safety by design, with a more intentional approach to protecting children from AI harms from the very beginning, throughout the life cycle of the product. Participants raised questions around entry points in the design process of systems, which may be challenging when companies do not want to share information at the design stages. One challenge of embedding safety by design is that AI is always evolving, and harms can emerge unexpectedly and at a later stage; good intent does not always deliver good outcomes.

Social media guardrails tended to emerge after the design was developed. The Online Safety Act has systems and processes at its heart, promoting a practical approach to integrating safety systems and processes into the design cycle, but it focuses on content regulation. Balancing systemic risks around AI safety, privacy, implementation, and practicality is challenging.

Suggestions for actions included:

- Implement binding and urgent regulation on AI.
- Build on existing standards and apply lessons learnt from governance and regulation in other areas.

- Consider a multi-layered approach to regulation that builds in safety from the start and combines general purpose tools to directly reach children and support parental responsibility.
- Hold a child safe AI Summit and other meetings to stimulate global action.
- UK top companies should innovate towards tech safety as part of their leadership and ensure 'safety-by-design'.
- Tech companies should have a named individual who has responsibility for the safety of children, protecting them against harm and upholding minimum ages.
- Build a plug-in that can be used on all social media platforms that flags harmful content to the Government.
- Create an AI child-friendly kite mark.
- Provide clear world-leading advice for parents.
- Require safety testing of AI products before youth can use them.
- Ensure a central unit in the UK government which supports UK academia and the tech industry with funding for innovation.
- Embed a free and open-source toolkit of AI safety tools in any online platform.

Next steps

Participants suggested the next steps could be to:

- Establish a UK set of principles to guide development and application of AI in relation to children and young people.
- Establish a nationwide representative youth forum (young people's board) for engagement around AI and key issues affecting children and young people.
- Create a youth AI safety institute.
- Continue the conversation among stakeholders.

Alison Dunn

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enquiries@wiltonpark.org.uk

Switchboard: +44 (0)1903 815020

Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning,
West Sussex, BN44 3DZ, United Kingdom

wiltonpark.org.uk

