

Children's Law Centre

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES

YOUTH@CLC'S PARTICIPATION IN 'OUR WORLD, OUR SAY'

A global consultation with children and young people on their rights in the digital environment. Designed and organised by the UN Human Rights Office, Rights Foundation, and the Digital Futures for Children Centre.

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“There's a lot of hypocrisy on this. Young people have a better awareness of how much social media and online activity plays a role in real world activities...We need to learn to live with it and use it responsibly. And young people already do use it responsibly, and have the skills to do so, much more so than adults do”.

- Member of Youth@CLC during workshop

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Introduction

Youth@CLC are a group of 14-17-year-olds from across Northern Ireland who are committed to making children's rights a reality. They act as the youth advisory panel to the Children's Law Centre (CLC) and aim to make sure that all children and young people's voices are heard at local, national (and in this specific case) international, levels of decision-making. The work of Youth@CLC is underpinned by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child which states:

'You have the right to an opinion, for it to be listened to and to be taken seriously.'

The primary aim of Youth@CLC is to promote awareness of children's rights, with the ultimate goal being for every child and young person in Northern Ireland to be fully aware of their rights and the laws which affect them. To fulfil this, Youth@CLC engage in lobbying, consultation on policies relating to children and young people, issue-based campaign work, and working with other groups of young people on children's rights issues.

This document reflects the findings of two workshops that were conducted with Youth@CLC on the topic of their rights in the digital environment. This is part of a global consultative project – *Our Digital World, Our Say* - designed by the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), 5Rights Foundation, and the Digital Futures for Children centre (DFC), which seeks to meaningfully engage children and young people in shaping policies on their rights online.

The background to this is that, in 2021, after consulting children around the world, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment no. 25¹, which explains how States party to the Convention should implement it in relation to the digital environment. Since then, the digital landscape has rapidly changed with the rise of generative AI, expansive data extraction, widening inequalities and ever-emerging online risks. It was therefore considered critical to once again consult young people and ensure their insights feed directly into global advocacy and decision-making.

While the workshops with Youth@CLC were conducted primarily to contribute to the global consultative project referenced above, (the findings of which will be published by the OHCHR in early March 2026), the live policy discussions in Northern Ireland about how children's lives engage and are impacted by the online world indicated that it was crucial to publish Youth@CLC's viewpoints on these issues. For clarity, the following document is not reflective of the wider *Our Digital World, Our Say* project; it reflects the views of Youth@CLC only.

The document is structured in the same way that the activities in the workshops were, by first exploring young people's use of the digital environment, then reflecting on topics such as access, privacy, safety and participation, before proposing practical recommendations for a

1 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child: General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. Accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-25-2021-childrens-rights-relation>

more rights-respecting digital world. Where possible, we have included direct quotes from members of Youth@CLC.

Workshop Activity 1: Our Digital Lives

The first activity in the workshop sought to explore young people's everyday digital experiences, including the devices and digital products that young people use, and how and where they access the internet in their everyday lives. The devices and digital products that Youth@CLC highlighted included: phones, laptops, smart watches, interactive whiteboards, TVs, and iPads. They noted that their phones were mostly used for social media, while the likes of laptops and iPads were mostly for education/school. The apps that they used across these devices, and the ways in which they access the internet in their everyday lives included through the use of: TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Chat GPT, BBC News/news apps, Snapchat, Duolingo, Microsoft Teams, Uber, Pinterest, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Google Classroom, and Spotify.

Workshop Activity 2: Young People's Digital Realities and Rights

The second activity in the workshops explored children's rights in relation to their experiences of using digital technologies. They were asked to reflect on summaries of the principles that are in General Comment no.25, and consider some questions associated with them, such as:

- **Wellbeing:** How do you feel when you're online/using digital technologies?
- **Equity and Diversity:** Do all children have the same opportunities to be included and protected in the digital world?
- **Age-appropriate:** What makes digital technology feel 'right' for someone your age? Does the internet feel age appropriate?
- **Participation:** Can you participate freely, express your opinions, and find reliable information online?
- **Privacy:** Do you know who sees your personal information and how it is used?
- **Safety:** Do you feel safe and protected from harm online?
- **Development:** Does technology help you learn, play and belong?
- **Agency:** Do you feel in control of your digital world?

Wellbeing

Members of Youth@CLC noted that certain apps, such as Pinterest, were positive for wellbeing and were spaces where they felt they could draw inspiration, spark creativity, and generally make them feel good. Part of that was attributed to the app's specific use, where its purpose is to be creative, as well as being "*less in your face*" (less connected, less notifications etc.) than the likes of Instagram and TikTok. Youth@CLC also outlined that social media apps, such as Instagram, can be good for connecting with friends and seeing what they've been up to. This helps them feel in touch with and connected to people around them. Relatedly, they outlined that there are community spaces online where people can come together and that they can easily find people that they relate to. This was expressed as being positive for wellbeing. Access to educational content/the news/information more generally was also discussed as something that was generally positive for members of Youth@CLC's wellbeing, in particular their sense of self and understanding of the world. There was also discussion of the relaxing/meditative nature of scrolling and the ability to escape the real world by engaging with social media.

However, participants also identified that many of the things that make social media positive for their wellbeing can also have negative impacts. For example, while algorithms can lead you to community and shared interests, members of Youth@CLC highlighted that this could lead some people into spaces that are harmful e.g. the manosphere. They also discussed the negative impact on wellbeing resulting from addictive/uncontrollable algorithms. They noted that seeing content they don't like or don't want to see can have a negative impact on wellbeing, as does the addictive element of scrolling. Youth@CLC also discussed negative experiences associated with bullying, as well as how overuse can result in feeling unmotivated, lethargic, and hopeless. They also referenced the rise of influencers, consuming content that depicts lives that feel unattainable, and the way that this can make them feel insecure. The constant access to information and "*endless*" notifications also contributed to feelings of overwhelm for some members. Generally, when they felt in control of their use - including both time spent using social media, and content - their experiences were positive online. It was only when unwanted intrusion into their online space occurred and/or they were presented with content that they did not want to see, was wellbeing impacted negatively.

Equity and Diversity

Members of Youth@CLC discussed the fact that parents had a big say in access to use of the internet, stressing that what parents do and how they act causes differential access for young people. The discussion on parents led to a wider conversation about when different

stakeholders get to have a say around young people's access. In particular, the social media ban in Australia was raised, with some members expressing concern about how young people there will access information and/or community. They also discussed the fact that minorities have differential access to the internet and are treated differently online. This included references to people with disabilities for whom accessing the online world may be difficult, LGBTQIA+ young people and experiences of homophobia online, ethnic minorities and experiences of racism and xenophobia, and sexual harassment experienced by young girls. The group also noted that access can depend on what country you live in, outlining that politically repressive/authoritarian regimes greatly influence what people can access online. Relatedly, there was discussion of activism and free speech, with some participants highlighting how certain movements get blocked and shadow banned online, particularly if they express views that run counter to the government of the country they are in and/or run counter to what is politically popular in powerful countries (e.g. the US, UK). This was primarily discussed in relation to Palestine activism online. One member of Youth@CLC also brought up the importance of socioeconomic status and how this connects with young people's ability to be online; they stressed that poverty has an impact on access to devices and internet connection, and therefore the ability to engage in the online world.

Age-appropriate

There was a general sense amongst all members of Youth@CLC that the internet is not age appropriate. They stressed that ads play a role in age appropriateness, outlining how sometimes the content they are directly accessing may be fine, but the associated ads are not appropriate. They also discussed how to navigate the internet, and that sometimes certain links lead young people to sites that are not appropriate without their knowledge. Many also outlined how they often see content that they do not want to see, with one member stressing:

"There's a constant awareness that something could come on my feed that I don't want to see, and there's nothing I can do about it".

Some of the things that were discussed as inappropriate content included the video of the assassination of Charlie Kirk, the Bondi beach shooting, the murder of Renee Good, scams, pornography (in particular violent/unethical pornography), and general gore. One member noted that seeing this type of content can be desensitising and *"makes children grow up too quickly"*. As a result, some members supported the use of parental controls, especially for the likes of under 13s, as they are *"particularly impressionable"*. Equally, other members stressed that it's not a good idea to shelter children from things too much, with one member stating:

"There's a fine line between what is good and shapes you as a person, and what is growing up too quickly. Yes, some children are exposed to things too early and are forced to grow up too quickly, but gradual exposure, genuine discussion with young people, and teaching tools to deal with these things is the best approach. Seeing these things online is so dependent on the individual person, it's not really about specific ages".

This sentiment was also expressed by a 17-year-old member of Youth@CLC, who noted:

"At this stage, for me, it's not really a question of my age but just whether I want to see it or not".

On this, they questioned what counts as 'adult content', and who gets to decide those labels. They also raised questions around who gets to determine levels of maturity, noting how brain development is dependent on each individual young person, that there are things online that aren't appropriate for *anyone*, and that it's not always necessarily about children and age appropriateness, but the individual's capacity to process information, which is not always dependant on age, but also life experience, disability, and mental health status. Following this thread, the social media ban in Australia was raised again, with many members stating that they don't think blanket bans like this are a good idea because young people need access to information, including things like rehab forums, access to information about relationship and sexuality education, abortion, healthcare, and places to seek support. They noted that labelling sites like this as 'adult content' and banning young people from viewing them was problematic and wrong. One member also outlined their worry about governments blocking the news from young people:

"We need real access to information about the likes of what is happening in Gaza, even if that content is horrible. It's so horrific that it's being labelled as inappropriate, but governments are using that as a reason to not show us when we have a right to see what is happening".

Similarly, another member stressed:

"If you're cut off from access to the internet, you're not being respected or trusted. Young people will always find a way around this and adults just need to have genuine conversations with us and trust us. We'll always find our way around a system that tries to block us off, and it forces young people into more dangerous places online that are really dodgy".

Participation

Members of Youth@CLC outlined that they mostly don't share opinions or thoughts that they have articulated themselves online, but that they would repost things that others have shared. They also described being more comfortable doing so on private accounts, with most of them using this sort of privacy setting online. One member stated that they see posting online as a creative practice, that they found it fun, enjoyed selecting photos, editing things, and adding music, but that they only felt comfortable sharing content to people that they know. Some members made note of the recent changes to Instagram that make your general activity more public, including followers being able to see what you like and comment on. They stated that this change has made them self-censor slightly, because people can see more about what you are doing online. Self-censorship, particularly regarding political opinions, was also raised due to doxxing culture and backlash. Those who felt more comfortable sharing political speech discussed the fact that they often weigh up consequences when posting and always consider the repercussions but are generally confident in sharing and seeking as wide an audience as possible on certain matters. With regards to accessing information online, participants were cognizant of the fact that a lot can be fabricated, and that the sheer volume of information can make attempting to get a full narrative on a particular issue feel overwhelming. They also discussed the rise of AI, fake news and misinformation, but there was consensus among participants that they had the skills to determine what was real and what was not, and that young people are better than adults/parents/teachers at spotting it. Further, many of the

participants made note of the fact that a lot of content on social media is based on opinion rather than fact, and that this can sometimes create an echo chamber. However, they noted that they generally try to seek diverse viewpoints and read content beyond socials.

Privacy

Members of Youth@CLC varied in their approach to privacy issues, ranging from not caring about the intricacies of privacy issues, to those who are concerned about it and would like to know as much as possible. Both groups, however, agreed that accessing adequate information about their online privacy is hard, and that they feel out of control, so there is minimal point in even trying to know. One member stated:

"Generally, I think I'm aware of how privacy works online, but really, what do I know? I just accept terms and conditions without reading them, and the task of actually trying to find out what all my privacy settings are and where my data is going in order to try and be 100% safe online feels like an endless task that is completely unattainable".

Others echoed this, and a discussion on terms and conditions outlined how they need to be more readable, while also acknowledging that tech companies intentionally do this so that the general public don't have a good grasp on how their data is handled. They expressed that they generally lacked trust in tech companies, as they felt like their data is being used against them to keep them online and to tailor algorithms:

"Our information is always being used without our knowledge and we just accept it".

One member stressed that they feel like only the person in charge of accounts should be allowed to see personal information, and if someone really needs access to it, the account holder should be given adequate information and justification as to why.

Safety

Members of Youth@CLC outlined some of the spaces that feel safer than others online, including specific teenage accounts and YouTube kids. They also discussed how screentime limits, passcodes, and privacy controls in direct messaging make them feel safer, as does when they feel like they have a general sense of control through the likes of blocking/reporting features and being able to choose the content that they see. There was some discussion about the role that parents and schools have in online safety, with some members stating that having a trusted adult to speak to helps them feel safer. However, others raise the point that pushing young people to tell a trusted adult isn't always effective, as even if they do have someone they feel they can tell, they don't always necessarily *"get it"*. Sometimes there is also a fear of punishment, and the shame that a young person can feel around how they use the internet can be a barrier to expressing issues to an adult. Members of Youth@CLC once again raised a general fear about deep fakes and AI generated images, and how this has contributed to a rise in feeling unsafe online. The necessity of constantly trying to figure out what is real and not has overall contributed to feeling unsafe. Further, one member outlined how they can find emotional safety online, stating:

"Your feelings can be validated, and you'll always be able to find people that feel the same way as you. It helps you feel less alone".

They expanded by saying that this can go the other way too, where the online world can make you feel isolated and alone, but that the element of finding positive emotional safety with others online is not talked about enough. Overall, members of Youth@CLC felt like a feeling of safety online comes when they are in control and what they do online is of their own choosing.

Development

Members of Youth@CLC were overwhelmingly positive about the role that the online world plays in their personal development. Some members discussed the ability to find inspiration online. Apps such as Pinterest were discussed in relation to helping them be more creative, and TikTok and Instagram were mentioned as important for finding cooking/baking/crafting inspiration. Members also outlined the importance of the online world for their education. Some of them described how they use YouTube for guidance and step-by-step tutorials on things when they don't understand something in school. Some others also raised the helpful role that podcasts have in subjects such as history and politics. There was general recognition that there are so many resources online that assist with their education and learning that are overwhelmingly positive. Members of Youth@CLC also highlighted the fact that they can find opportunities through social media. One member outlined how being a part of Youth@CLC was something that they came across while scrolling through Instagram, and that they wouldn't be participating in these workshops if it wasn't for that. When discussing the ability for social media to provide opportunities, one member brought the conversation back to why banning social media for young people is a bad idea:

"I'd say again that banning is a bad idea cause you're dismissing the role that socials have in real life access to things and then you're just getting rid of opportunities that social media can provide".

Members of Youth@CLC also raised the role of social media and the online world in finding community online. In particular, this was discussed in relation to being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Further, members noted that being online has helped them learn about other cultures and find things like activities/restaurants/cafes that make their offline lives better. Finally, the group was overwhelmingly positive about how being online helps them feel closer to their friends, outlining their use of social media, group chats, and facetime for staying connected. The ability to make new friends online and receive open invitations to things was also mentioned as something that helps with positive emotional development and feeling connected. Some members did also raise the negative aspect of online community, noting once again the rise of the manosphere and far-right forums.

Agency

Members of Youth@CLC outlined how features such as deciding whether to have a public vs. private account, the ability to block people, report content, and ask that certain things are not shown, are all positive features that have helped them feel like they have an element of agency online. However, members also noted that they feel the least amount of agency and control over the time that they spend online. This went back to the conversation on algorithms and how not only are they designed to keep people online, but they can also show you things that you don't want to see. Ads were also raised as something that made participants feel like

they lacked agency, as they have no control over what ads they see. The element of pressure that comes with being online was also discussed as something that made members feel like they lacked agency, as they feel compelled to keep up with trends. This was all summed up by one member who stated:

"In theory, you have agency - you can choose settings, who to block, who to follow etc. - but you can't actually control the algorithm. All your information is shared, and it's all linked together. So, you don't really have the power or control."

Workshop Activity 3: What Do Adults Get Wrong?

The third activity in the workshops explored the gaps between children's experiences and adults' assumptions about their digital lives. This involved brainstorming about which adults impact their digital lives, before asking them what adults get wrong, and one thing adults should learn about their online lives.

With regard to thinking through the adults that impact their digital lives, members of Youth@CLC identified the following: meta bosses/tech company bosses, parents, teachers, broadband services, influencers, adult followers on social media, and politicians.

Members of Youth@CLC were then very keen to outline what adults get wrong about their experiences online. One member immediately stated:

"Adults are quick to want to control - what we see, how long we spend online - but if we are going to progress into adulthood and have our own self-control, we need to do that ourselves and not have it forced upon us".

Another member said:

"They need to understand that yes, there are things online that are a problem, but we're not as naïve as they think".

In relation to the wider conversation about social media, one young person stated:

"They think socials are only a bad thing. There are so many sensationalised headlines that have too-negative an opinion on social media and adults only think about them. They don't consider that it can be a good thing for us, and if you take that away you're taking away my access to so many things, including my friends, information, and opportunities".

Another member added:

"There's a lot of hypocrisy on this. Young people have a better awareness of how much social media and online activity plays a role in real world activities. We understand the benefits and opportunities, and how much online stuff facilitates our real lives. It's so interchangeable at this stage and is such a big part of our lives. We need to learn to live with it and use it responsibly. And young people already do use it responsibly, and have the skills to do so, much more so than adults do".

Generally, members of Youth@CLC listed the following as important for adults to learn and understand:

- Adults need to stop thinking of extremes. The stories they use are always outliers and feed into moral panics around social media.
- Adults need to understand how and why young people use social media e.g. comfort, entertainment, connection, education, opportunities etc. They need to understand that the internet is useful and can benefit us in lots of ways.
- Adults need to trust young people more
- Adults need to listen more about our experiences and why we use the online world

- Adults need to understand that regardless of policies and bans, young people will find ways around them and continue to use social media and the internet

Members of Youth@CLC also felt it important to counter the fact that "*adults think young people are stupid*", with many of them expressing the fact that they are much more competent at using the online world, outlining how their parents/teachers are often unable to identify AI-generated content or fake news, whilst they are extremely adept at it.

Workshop Activity 4: Recommendations

The final activity in the workshop explored issues around reporting when something goes wrong online, as well as who is responsible and what changes need to be made for the future. This included forming forward-looking messages for policymakers, companies and designers.

On reporting, members of Youth@CLC highlighted how it feels like it's a hard, complicated, disorganised, or unclear process, and that it has been intentionally designed this way so that people feel less inclined to report. They also expressed fear that nothing will happen and therefore felt like there was no point in reporting things. Some members also noted that there's embarrassment and shame around reporting, that they feel like they're letting people down, or that they are disappointing people. These feelings generally stop them from taking any action. They also did not want to be accused of being overly sensitive or being a "snitch" or "tout". Differentiating between right and wrong online was also raised as something that complicates the process of reporting, as was the different rules that different platforms have. This could be made better by ensuring clear, consistent, user-friendly reporting mechanisms across platforms, and by providing clear guidance on what is reportable content and behaviour. Platforms must also take swift, tangible action on reports, to ensure that users feel listened to and respected. Privacy should be a priority in reporting processes too, and the person reporting should be consulted with consistently to ensure they are the ones with agency and control.

Regarding the changes that members of Youth@CLC suggested adults make, the following is a comprehensive list of their suggestions:

- Tech companies need to give us more control over our feeds.
- Tech companies need to tailor content to make things more appropriate for everyone (including adults) and give people control over content rather than censoring it.
- Tech companies should design platforms that are safe by design (for everyone, not just children and young people).
- Tech companies need to make terms and conditions clearer so that we understand privacy implications better.
- "*Policymakers need to touch grass*" and understand our reality. They should consult with young people and then actually put the things that we say into action.
- Policymakers should work to hold tech companies responsible in making platforms safer rather than proposing things like bans.
- Policymakers need to think about how we are being educated on this. There are lots of ways education on the online world could be better but right now, students know more than teachers, education is ineffective, and adults/teachers/policymakers/police rely on fearmongering as a tactic, rather than genuine, constructive conversations.
- Adults in our lives need to genuinely engage with us, listen to us, and trust us.

Conclusion

Overall, in exploring their digital lives through these workshops, members of Youth@CLC have articulated that their experiences of the digital environment are nuanced, and deeply embedded in their wellbeing, development and sense of belonging. They identified a clear understanding of both the benefits and risks of digital technologies, emphasising that positive experiences online are closely tied to feelings of choice, control, and trust, while negative experiences occur when their agency is undermined by invasive algorithms, inappropriate content, and unclear data practices. Through exploring themes of wellbeing, equity, age-appropriateness, participation, privacy, safety, development and agency, Youth@CLC stressed that the online world is both a vital space for creativity, learning, connection, identity formation, and access to information and opportunities (particularly for marginalised children and young people), while at the same time being unequal, opaque, and overwhelming.

In identifying this complexity, members of Youth@CLC challenged prevailing adult assumptions and media discourse that frames the online world as fundamentally negative for children and young people. They also stressed that young people are not naive or incapable, and subsequently called for trust, meaningful consultation, and shared responsibility in addressing issues online. Their recommendations include creating reporting mechanisms that are clear and effective, building platforms that are safe by design, engaging in meaningful, nuanced and collaborative conversations with young people, and prioritising policies that hold tech companies responsible rather than implementing blanket bans. Overall, they stressed the need to recognise young people not as passive users of digital technology, but as informed rights-holders with valuable expertise in navigating and shaping the digital world.

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The logo for Children's Law Centre features a stylized mountain range composed of several overlapping triangles in shades of blue and green. The text "children's law centre" is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font across the middle of the mountain range.

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