



Children Online:
Research and Evidence

Theories and Concepts for Understanding Children’s Digital Lives: An Annotated Bibliography

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This annotated bibliography provides a roadmap for understanding nine key areas of children’s digital lives. It has been designed for researchers and research users and provides essential and supplementary texts on each of the areas.

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Key areas of children’s digital lives

Children and young people The child, children, young people Development and evolving capacity Structures and cultures of childhood Diversity and difference	Digital environment Technology and affordances Uses, users and domestication Normative values in design Innovation, datafication and AI	Access Place and time of access In/equality and in/exclusion Fixed, mobile and wearable Transcending on/offline
Opportunities and benefits Internet engagement Engagement and participation Information and exploration Play, creativity, fun	Skills and literacies Learning and information skills Digital skills and competencies Data literacy and e-Safety Civic and other literacies	Risk and harm Content, contact, conduct, contract Familiar and emerging risks Cross-cutting risks including privacy Relation between risk and harm
Health and wellbeing Digital wellbeing and health Mental ill health and anxiety Resilience and coping Vulnerability	Social support Parental mediation Socialisation, family and school Sociality and peer support Professional help services	Policy and regulation Children’s rights in the digital age Law, policy and regulation Agency, voice and activism Responses to emerging challenges



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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The concept of the 'child' or 'children', along with alternative terms such as 'youth', 'kid', 'adolescent' or 'teenager', is surprisingly fraught. Even referring to age does not resolve matters. Many researchers follow the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in defining a child as a person from birth to 18. Others use the term 'child' until puberty and 'young person' thereafter.

The choice between 'adolescent' or 'youth' tends to signal a psychological or sociological approach, although some sources suggest ways to overcome this (and other) polarisations. Relatedly, theories of child, children and childhood differ in the emphasis they place on age, development and maturation or on societal processes of socialisation, culture, policy and critique.

These differing theorisations have consequences for how we conceptualise children online in terms of agency, vulnerability and the range of influences that shape children's outcomes.

 **Alper, M., Katz, V.S. & Clark, L.S. (2016). Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(1), 107–114.**

A short but powerful plea for an asset rather than a deficit approach to children and childhood, and to intersectionality in research with children in the digital age. This invites attention to the multiple factors that differentiate among children's life chances, including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability.

Barr, R. (2019). Growing up in the digital age: Early learning and family media ecology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28(4), 341–346.

This article adopts an ecological perspective to media use by children and their parents to unpack critical questions that derive from growing up in a digital age.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The Ecology of Human Development. Harvard University Press.

The classic socio-cultural account of how the child is socialised within concentric circles of social influence, from the family (closest) to society (widest). This has been influential in offering a way of combining individual and psychological factors and also social and cultural ones within a single analysis.

 **Buckingham, D. (ed.) (2007). Youth, Identity, and Digital Media. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning.**

Contributors discuss how growing up in a world saturated with digital media affects the development of young people's individual and social identities.

Cook, D.T. (2020). The Moral Project of Childhood. NYU Press.

The author points to the role of the market in creating the subject role of the child, the social politics of motherhood, historical anxieties about childhood and early children's consumer culture. The book discusses child rearing as a moral project involving mothers' management of taste, discipline and punishment, play and toys, and social expectations.

 Cowan, K. (2020). *A Panorama of Play – A Literature Review*. Digital Futures Commission, 5Rights Foundation.

This report considers different theories and insights about the nature of play and its importance for children, focusing in particular on free play, where children have a high degree of choice and control.

Cunningham, H. (2006). *The Invention of Childhood*. BBC Books.

This book explains the social history of childhood in the West in carefully researched yet accessible terms. It offers a socio-cultural rather than an essentialist account to position current explorations of digital childhood in historical terms.

Gittlins, D. (1998). *The Child in Question*. Macmillan Press.

This book discusses important tensions and contradictions implicit in notions of children and childhood. It examines how children can at once represent innocence, beauty and hope, while at the same time they are neglected, disenfranchised and abused. It provides a provocative exploration of what 'the child' means, and has meant, to adults.

Hammersley, M. (2017). *Childhood studies: A sustainable paradigm?* *Childhood*, 24(1), 113–127.

This is a somewhat provocative article that addresses the persistent and major bifurcations of the field of childhood studies (child development vs. socio-cultural approaches, qualitative vs. quantitative, deficit vs. agency), and challenges the field to live up to its aspirations.

Hockey, J. & James, A. (1993). *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course*. SAGE Publications.

This book theorizes issues related to dependency, personhood and power in Western societies, paying attention to language and social practices, and noting how childhood is a key concept for other 'life stages'.

Holloway, S. & Valentine, G. (2000). *Children's Geographies and the New Social Studies of Childhood*. In S. Holloway & G. Valentine (eds) *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning* (pp. 1–26). Routledge.

From a pre-mobile media time, this is a contribution from human geography for considering children's relations with place and space. It explains the importance of material and also symbolic contexts for everyday life, including the child's perspective on meaningful places as they see it. It offers many possibilities for analysing spaces and places in the digital environment.

James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Polity Press.

This is a classic, and impassioned, exposition of the new sociology of childhood that rejects Piagetian-inspired accounts of child development as progressive, individual and primarily cognitive. Although, arguably, it overstates its case, this book marked out a new way of thinking about children as social, cultural and with agency, within a broadly structuralist, critical and social constructivist framework.

 Littleton, K. & Kucirkova, N. (2020). [The distance between the 'self' and the 'other' in children's digital books](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 589281.

Littleton and Kucirkova bring together a wide array of literature related to children's reading, and propose a model that explicates understanding of the underlying mechanisms of a child's cognitive understanding of 'self' in relation to 'other'.

Messenger Davies, M. (2010). [Children, Media and Culture](#). Open University Press.

This book examines the view that technology has dramatically changed modern children's lives and the concerns round the media effects (of internet, computer games, digital television, mobile phones) on childhood. It draws on different disciplines, including historical, sociological, psychological and political approaches, and examples such as fairy tales, films, books, art and games.

Oswell, D. (2013). [The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights](#). Cambridge University Press.

The book re-evaluates how children's agency is conceptualised in childhood studies. Drawing on notions of assemblage from post-structuralism, the book examines the spatial, temporal and material complex of children's agency in a world of networked technologies and globalisation.

 Parcel, T. (2018). [Children](#). Oxford Bibliographies.

A summary of sociological approaches to children and childhood.

 Rosen, R. & Faircloth, C. (2020). [Adult-child relations in neoliberal times: Insights from a dialogue across childhood and parenting culture studies](#). *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 9(1), 7–22.

This is an introductory article for the Special Issue 'Childhood, Parenting Culture and Adult-Child Relations in Global Perspectives'. It provides an overview of childhood studies and parenting culture studies, and suggests a move towards more relational approaches in the social sciences. The authors argue that there are both new and existing inequities underpinning childhood and parenting cultures and a changing relationship between state, family and capital.

Shapiro, J. (2018). [The New Childhood: Raising Kids to Thrive in a Connected World](#). Little, Brown & Company.

Although it is written more as a public scholarship book, each chapter is very well documented and referenced. It has a non-moral panic approach, inviting educators and parents to embrace new technologies for connecting with children, and rethinking together the cultural norms of the future.

Trotter, S. (2018). [The child in European Human Rights Law](#). *The Modern Law Review*, 81, 452–479.

This article examines the category of 'the child' in European Human Rights Law and points to its (mutual) dependency on 'the self' and a self-understanding narrative.

Wyn, J. & White, R. (1997). [Rethinking Youth](#). Allen & Unwin.

This book challenges the conventional wisdom surrounding the position and opportunities of young people today, and provides a systematic overview of the major perspectives in youth studies.

 **UNICEF (2017).** [*The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*](#). New York.

UNICEF's global environmental scan has been important in setting an international agenda for better understanding and better policy for children in the digital environment. It frames a wide range of evidence on children online within a child rights approach, drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and highlighting the problems of digital inequality, especially between the Global North and Global South.

Zaman, B. & Vanden Abeele, V. (2010). [Laddering with Young Children in User eXperience Evaluations: Theoretical Groundings and a Practical Case](#). In IDC '10, Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Interaction Design and Children (pp. 156–165). June. Barcelona.

This paper reviews the developmental literature suggesting that young children have the cognitive capabilities to perform as laddering interviewees, and applies and assesses this in practice.