



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

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



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## HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The concept of wellbeing is increasingly used to theorise children's life outcomes, including in relation to the digital environment, in preference to happiness or quality of life or life satisfaction, and it relates to ideas of agency, resilience and flourishing. It is also closely related to its opposite – mental ill health, stress, anxiety and depression.

In a digital world, many concerns regarding risks relating to technology use, over-use or exclusion from use are seen as undermining a child's wellbeing. Wellbeing is often conceptualised in terms of linked but independent dimensions – physical, emotional, psychological, social, and possibly also economic.

**Best, P., Manktelow, R. & Taylor, B. (2014).** [Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 41, 27–36.

This article makes connections between social media and wellbeing, pointing to mixed effects on children. The benefits of using online technologies were reported as increased self-esteem, perceived social support, increased social capital, safe identity experimentation and increased opportunity for self-disclosure. Harmful effects were reported as increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression and cyberbullying.

**Bickham, D.S., Kavanaugh, J.R. & Rich, M. (2016).** [Media effects as health research: How pediatricians have changed the study of media and child development](#). *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(2), 191–199.

This article will help readers to better think of how the field of children and media has increasingly become more 'polyphonic', and to evaluate what other disciplines, especially health sciences, focus on when studying – broadly, children's media use.

 **Council of Europe (no date).** [About Digital Citizenship](#). Council of Europe's Digital Citizenship Education Project.

This project drew on expert insights and deliberation to generate a definition of digital citizenship that incorporates the three key elements of digital engagement, digital responsibility and digital participation brought about through the critical analysis and competent use of digital technology, underpinned by a concept of citizenship founded on respect for human rights and democratic culture.

 **d'Haenens, L., Vandoninck, S. & Donoso, V. (2013).** [How to Cope and Build Online Resilience?](#) EU Kids Online.

This book looks at the different coping strategies European children employ when bothered by an online experience (resilience is defined as 'the ability to deal with negative experiences online or offline'). The authors also discuss coping strategies adopted by children when going through negative online experiences.

**Freeman, J.L., Caldwell, P.H., Bennett, P.A. & Scott, K.M. (2018).** [How adolescents search for and appraise online health information: A systematic review](#). *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 195, 244–255.

This article reports on a systematic review on adolescents' health-related information seeking and assessment of the sources they find. It argues that adolescents are aware of the varying quality of online health information, and strategies used for searching and appraising online health information differ in their sophistication.

 Kalmus, V., Siibak, A. and Blinka, L. (2014). **Internet and Child Well-being**. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes & J.E. Korbin (eds) [\*Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective\*](#) (pp. 2093–2133). Springer.

This chapter employs classical conceptualisations of the quality of life to define and structure the aspects of child wellbeing as related to the internet. In treating 'wellbeing' as a multidimensional construct, the authors combine Allardt's (1993) classification of individual human needs ('having', 'loving' and 'being') with categorisations from a psychological approach and the UNICEF Index of Children's Well-Being, as well as the societal aspect. The chapter discusses six components of wellbeing as related to the internet: material, physical, psychological, social, developmental and societal.

 Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G. & Staksrud, E. (2018). [\*\*European research on children's internet use: Assessing the past, anticipating the future\*\*](#). *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1103–1122.

This article offers an explanation of the evolution of the EU Kids Online model, to show how, building on theory, evidence and policy developments over the past decade, the different factors that shape children's wellbeing in a digital world interrelate and influence outcomes.

 Lundy, L. (2014). [\*\*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child Well-Being\*\*](#). In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes & J.E. Korbin (eds) *Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective* (pp. 2439–2462). Springer.

Lundy considers the concept of child wellbeing through the disciplinary lens of human rights, with a particular focus on children's rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

 Orben, A., Dienlin, T. & Przybylski, A.K. (2019). [\*\*Social media's enduring effect on adolescent life satisfaction\*\*](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(21), 10226–10228.

This article looks at social media and adolescent life satisfaction. Based on large-scale representative panel data, social media use is not a strong predictor of life satisfaction across the adolescent population. Rather, social media effects were found to be nuanced, small at best, reciprocal over time, gender-specific, and contingent on analytic methods.

 Rozgonjuk, D., Saal, K. & Täht, K. (2018). [\*\*Problematic smartphone use, deep and surface approaches to learning, and social media use in lectures\*\*](#). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(1), 92.

This article considers problematic smartphone use (PSU), contributing to the ongoing debate on excessive engagement in smartphone use, and proposes and operationalises the concept of PSU. The study demonstrates the relationship between PSU, as well as the frequency of social media use and different approaches to learning.

 Street, M. (2021). [Theorising child well-being: Towards a framework for analysing early childhood education policy in England.](#) *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 19(2), 211–224.

Street proposes a theoretical framework for children’s wellbeing, and further elucidates its application as an analytic tool.

Swist, T. & Collin, P. (2017). [Platforms, data and children’s rights: Introducing a ‘networked capability approach’.](#) *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 671–685.

Swist and Collin develop an approach to children’s wellbeing that builds on Sen’s capability approach, and take it into the digital age. On the one hand, this means that wellbeing is conceptualised not as an individual property but in terms of the perspective and needs of individuals in context, and as part of a community. On the other hand, now that contexts and communities extend into digital networks, this has implications for how we understand wellbeing and its influences.

 Sziron, M. & Hildt, E. (2018). [Digital media, the right to an open future, and children 0–5.](#) *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2137.

There is a need to develop an adequate framework for digital media use and investigate the benefits, risks and implications of digital media use in very young children. This article contributes to this development, focusing on the social and ethical implications of digital media technology relating to children aged 0–5.

 Thapar, A., Stewart-Brown, S. and Harold, G.T. (2021). [What has happened to children’s wellbeing in the UK?](#) *Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(1), 5–6.

This article explores the positive effects of green space on the wellbeing of children aged 4 from different ethnic groups. The findings suggest that satisfaction with green space, rather than the amount of space, has a positive effect on wellbeing. There are differences based on ethnicity.

Twigg, L., Duncan, C. & Weich, S. (2020). [Is social media use associated with children’s well-being? Results from the UK Household Longitudinal Study.](#) *Journal of Adolescence*, 80, 73–83.

To explore social media and children’s wellbeing, children aged 10–15 from 7 waves of the UK Household Longitudinal Study were examined (n = 7596). It was found that moderate use of social media does not play an important role in shaping children’s life satisfaction. Higher levels of use is associated with lower levels of happiness, especially for girls, but more research is needed.

 Vallerand, R.J., Blanchard, C., Mageau, G., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C., Léonard, M., Gagné, M. & Marsolais, J. (2003). [Les passions de l’âme: On obsessive and harmonious passion.](#) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 756–767.

This article discusses internet addiction/dysfunctional use of the internet – an obsessive passion that is perceived as being out of control. This concept should be more clearly communicated because it is more often a symptom of a mental health or family problems and less often a centre of the problems.

 Weinstein, E. (2018). [The social media see-saw: Positive and negative influences on adolescents’ affective well-being.](#) *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3597–3623.

This article discusses social media and effects in US teens. The relationship between social technology usage and wellbeing was not found to be confined to an 'either/or' framework. Rather, the emotional see-saw of social media use appears to be weighted by both positive and negative influences.

 Widyanto, L. & Griffiths, M. (2006). ['Internet addiction': A critical review.](#) *International Journal of Mental Health Addiction*, 4, 31–51.

Widyanto and Griffiths explore excessive internet and smartphone use, mapping five main areas that are presented in empirical research on excessive use. They discuss the existence of 'internet addiction'.