**Submission in response to a call from the Committee on the Rights of the Child which seeks to draft a General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment**

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Each author is a senior academic at one of six Australian universities: Curtin University, Perth (Curtin), Deakin University, Geelong (Deakin), Edith Cowan University, Perth (ECU), Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane (QUT), University of Wollongong, Wollongong (UOW), and The University of Queensland, Brisbane (UQ).

The context of our submission reflects almost two years of cross-institutional and interdisciplinary academic research collaboration that takes place predominantly within Australia informed by our close relationships with key national stakeholders (including families, not-for-profits, government, technology, industry) and our international networks. As a group of researchers and investigators active in research and engaged in policy debates in the fields of children and digital technologies, we are currently working towards the establishment of a national centre focused on young children and digital technologies. Reflecting this aspiration, the current submission strongly asserts the value of robust research undertaken in transdisciplinary contexts by teams of investigators with complementary skills, knowledge and expertise.

Arising from their expertise, past collaboration and future plans, and acknowledging the importance of robust research, the authors of this submission first respond briefly to the General Comment, and next offer several perspectives that might inform the future work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to children and the digital environment.

*Response to General Comment*

This submission affirms the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s (CRC’s) perspective that children’s rights in digital environments are a fundamental aspect of human rights. The submission warmly endorses the purpose and scope of the General Comment and the proposed structure of the General Comment. Our submission supports the General Comment position that State parties should be offered guidance in terms of measures that can chart children’s improving access and use of digital technologies in order to monitor and progress children’s and young people’s rights to provision, participation and protection in relation to the digital environment. The Concept Note offers a possible structure for the General Comment that is centred on key groups of rights, and both the structure and list of rights are endorsed. At the same time, the prompt questions raise new possibilities for future directions in seeking to realise the potential offered by digital technologies to children of all ages across the world.

*Our Submission Perspectives*

First, this submissionseeks recognition of very young children from birth through to 8 years of age, and proposes that they be accorded special attention. This is the age at which the physical, social, emotional and intellectual foundations are laid and the pattern for the development of an individual’s entire life initiated.

There is a serious gap in understanding the digital lives of very young children. To date, investigations of children’s digital worlds have focussed mostly from school age onwards, with less known about the digital worlds of infants and young children in the preschool years. Where there is a coherent body of work on children and digital technology, the focus has been predominantly on the teen years and with an international agenda, with some exceptions being made to the early years of life (e.g., Marsh, Hannon, Lewis & Ritchie, 2017; Zabatiero, Mantilla, Edwards, Danby & Straker, 2018). Yet, the 2018 OECD report calls for extensive research of the effects of new and emerging technologies on young children (Hooft Graafland, 2018). With children using digital technologies at earlier and earlier ages, the OECD identifies a number of urgent research agendas: major digital trends and young children, children’s digital opportunities and risks in online settings, the health effects of screen time, social networking and wellbeing, and the roles of different stakeholders (Hooft Graafland, 2018). Our submission strongly supports a General Comment that recognises that children are immersed in digital worlds from birth and that their early experiences have a life-long trajectory.

Second, this submission argues for the importance of a holistic vision of the complete child in terms of their health, their education, their sociability, and their sense of connectedness and engagement with others, with their culture, and with the world.

Currently available evidence concerning the interaction of young children and their digital environment is typically focused on a single issue or viewed from a specific discipline perspective. Given the close bi-directional interactions of physical, mental and social aspects of children’s development it is essential that robust evidence be developed from a transdisciplinary basis. The research agendas require moving beyond a characteristically discipline-specific focus, often restrained within the field of education, health or information technology. Research agendas thus need to be developed and implemented by transdisciplinary research teams with deep specialist knowledge connecting across theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, and informed through stakeholder consultation.

Third, the submission encourages the CRC to emphasise the importance of parents and caregivers. Given the foundation for the General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, the role of parents and caregivers in balancing a number of imperatives when mediating their children’s access to digital technologies should be acknowledged. Given the strong recommendation that significant attention should be paid to children in their earliest years, the role of parents and other caregivers becomes crucial in terms of recruiting the adults in children’s lives as educators and as citizen participants in a global project that focusses on delivering children’s rights across all aspects of young lives, and especially in digital contexts.

In relation to the final question posed by the CRC, as to whether the realisation of children’s rights in the digital environment is a necessary concomitant to realising children’s rights in other environments, our submission supports the position that the construction of children’s rights is one that integrates and informs every environment in which children are active. The digital environment has created new challenges (especially in relationship to dimensions of privacy) that pose particular threats to contemporary childhood as well as for the citizens that these children will become. Protecting children from the full effects of datafication requires an explicit acknowledgement of rights in the digital age. Further, as with all other aspects of socialisation, a developmental trajectory that ultimately delivers an adult with a strong sense of civic engagement and digital citizenship starts with children engaging appropriately with these concepts from their early years. The best interests of children are served by constructing children as reflective of, and acting upon, their social environments and capable of having a positive impact on the world.

Fourth, aligned with the recognition of children’s rights in a digital environment, our submission strongly supports a view that the General Comment engage with matters of diversity and equity for children in digital worlds.

While it is not impossible to overcome deprivation in children’s early years, disadvantaged childhoods may leave a legacy that lasts a lifetime. This was recently indicated in an Australian government select committee report on intergenerational welfare dependency that particularly highlighted, and assigned importance to, interventions that engage with young children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). Our submission calls for recognition of the international contexts and circumstances of children globally and recognition of the intention to identify equity solutions for all children.

**Contributors**

**The contributors are a team of interdisciplinary researchers with expertise across the whole child** – physical, mental and social - and from diverse perspectives including rights, privacy, commercialisation, relationships, health and well-being and education. The team has been collaborating since 2017 to develop a critical mass of broad expertise able to provide a substantial body of high quality research to inform policy and practice related to young children and their digital environment. Below, we briefly outline our expertise while the accompanying brief sample of recent publications demonstrates the team’s high quality, productivity and interdisciplinary expertise.

**The team is led by:**

*Professor Susan Danby* (Queensland University of Technology) investigates how children and young people include digital technologies into the flow of everyday family and school lives to show their social and interactional practices, across a range of contexts, including preschool and school, family, helplines, and clinical settings.

**Danby, S. J.**, Fleer M, Davidson, C., Hatzigianni M. (Eds.). (2018). *Digital Childhoods: Technologies and children’s everyday lives.* Singapore: Springer.

**Danby, S. J.**, Evaldsson, A.-C., Melander, H., & Aarsand, P. (2018). Situated Collaboration and Problem Solving in Young Children’s Digital Gameplay. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 49*(5), 957-972.

**The nine other core members in alphabetical order are:**

*Professor Sue Bennett* (University of Wollongong) has expertise in the field of technology in education and society. Her research examines how individuals experience technologies across their lives to build holistic understandings of learning and living with technology.

**Bennett, S.**, & Corrin, L. (2018). From digital natives to student experiences with technology. In M. Khosrow-Pour (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology* (pp. 2512-2520). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-2255-3.ch219

Beckman, K., Apps, T., **Bennett, S.**, & Lockyer, L. (2018). Conceptualising technology practice in education through a Bourdieusian sociology. *Learning, Media and Technology, 43*(2), 197-210.

*Professor Lelia Green* (Edith Cowan University) is an expert in policy analyses and the use of a ‘children’s rights framework’ to inform ethnographic research. A founder collaborator and International Advisory Panel member of the EU Kids Online network, and lead Chief Investigator on over $2.3million (AUD) projects, Lelia has a global network of research partners.

**Green, L.,** Holloway, D., Stevenson, K., & Jaunzems, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Digitising Early Childhood*, Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Vandebosch, H., & **Green, L.** (Eds.). (2019). *Narrative approaches in research and interventions addressing cyberbullying among young people*, Dordrecht, NL: Springer

*Professor Lisa Kervin* (University of Wollongong) is internationally recognized in language and literacy. Her research focuses on literacy in connection with digital technologies, play and pedagogy. She draws on sociocultural theories and innovative methodologies to understand children’s perspectives of digital technology use.

**Kervin, L.**, Verenikina, I. & Rivera, C. (2018). Digital Play and Learning in the Home: Families Perspectives. In S. Danby, M. Fleer, C. Davidson & M. Hatzigianni (Eds.), *Digital Childhoods: Technologies and Children’s Everyday Lives* (pp. 117-130). Singapore: Springer.

**Kervin, L.**, Comber, B. & Woods, A. (2017). Toward a Sociomaterial Understanding of Writing Experiences Incorporating Digital Technology in an Early Childhood Classroom. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 1-15.

*Professor Julian Sefton-Green* (Deakin) has advised and led projects working with young people, government and NGOs. His research expertise is in ethnographic studies of young people’s digital culture and learning and experience of policy.

Livingstone, S. & **Sefton-Green, J.** (2016). *The class: Living and learning in the digital age.* New York University Press.

Luke, A., **Sefton-Green, J.**, Graham, P., Kellner, D. & Ladwig, J. (2018). Digital ethics, political economy and the curriculum: This changes everything. In K. Mills, A. Stornaiuolo & J. Z. Pandya (Eds.), *Handbook of writing, literacies and education in digital culture* (pp. 251-263)*.* New York: Routledge.

*Associate Professor Simon Smith* (The University of Queensland) is a psychologist with expertise in screen use and children’s sleep and the developing brain, and screen use and activity measured through the use of wearable sensors in prospective, naturalistic, and experimental studies.

Thorpe, K., Pattinson, C., **Smith, S.,** & Staton, S. (2018). Mandatory Naptimes in Childcare do not Reduce Children’s Cortisol Levels. *Scientific Reports*, 8(1).

Ludwig, B, **Smith, S., &** Heussler, H. (2018). A Review of the Neuropsychological, Neurobehavioural and Emotional Functioning in Narcolepsy and Idiopathic Hypersomnia in Children and Adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine.*

*Professor Leon Straker* (Curtin University) is world leader in the physical health implications of children’s digital technology interactions. His research explores the musculoskeletal, neuromuscular, cardiometabolic and psychological impacts of technology use on young people using epidemiological, laboratory, qualitative and randomised control trial intervention methods.

**Straker, L.**, Zabatiero, J., Danby, S., Thorpe, K., & Edwards, S. (2018). Conflicting guidelines on young children’s screen time and use of digital technology create policy and practice dilemmas. *Journal of Pediatrics, 202*, 300-303.

Edwards, S., **Straker, L.**, & Oakey, H. (2018). *Statement on Young Children and Digital Technologies*. Early Childhood Australia, Canberra

*Professor Karen Thorpe* (The University of Queensland)is a developmental scientist focussed on the early years of life and on research translation into legislation, policy and practice. She has several decades of experience in design, development and conduct of large-scale longitudinal cohort studies including the WHO initiated *European* and *Avon Longitudinal Studies of Parents and Children*.

**Thorpe, K.**, Hansen, J., Danby, S., Mohamed Zaki, F., Grant, S., Houen, S., et al. (2015) [Digital access to knowledge in the preschool classroom: Reports from Australia.](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/92445/)*Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 32, 174-182.

Okely, A. D., Ghersi, D., Hesketh, K.D., Santos, R., Loughran, S. P., . . . **Thorpe, K.**, . . . Tremblay, M. S. (2017). A collaborative approach to adopting/adapting guidelines-The Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the early years (Birth to 5 years): an integration of physical activity, sedentary behavior, and sleep. *BMC Public Health*, *17*(5), 1-24.

*Associate Professor Sonia White* (Queensland University of Technology) has a distinctive transdisciplinary profile that combines expertise in education and cognitive neuroscience to design early diagnostic and effective intervention programs for children and brings this expertise to children’s digital experiences. Her research using eye trackers is important for understanding children’s engagement with digital technologies.

Berthelsen, D., Hayes, N.M., **White, S.L.**, & Williams, K.E. (2017). Executive function in adolescence: Associations with child and family risk factors and self-regulation in early childhood. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1-14. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00903.

Garcia Moreno-Esteva, E., **White, S.L.,** Wood, J., & Black, A. (2017, February). Identifying key visual-cognitive processes in students’ interpretation of graph representations using eye-tracking data and math/machine learning based data analysis. In T. Dooley & G. Gueudet (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Congress of the European Society for Research in Mathematics Education* (pp. 3928-3935). Dublin, Ireland: DCU Institute of Education and ERME.

*Professor Peta Wyeth* (Queensland University of Technology) undertakes research that focuses on the application of techniques from Human-Computer Interaction for the design, development and evaluation of children’s technology. At the forefront of research on technology design for children, her research is translational, and she has significant success in the commercialisation of technology.

Ekberg, S., Danby, S., Theobald, M., Fisher, B., & **Wyeth, P.** (2018). Using physical objects with young children in ‘face-to-face’ and telehealth speech and language therapy. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 1-12.

Sweetser, P., Johnson, D., **Wyeth, P.**, Anwar, A., Meng, Y., & Ozdowska, A. (2017). GameFlow in different game genres and platforms. *Computers in Entertainment, 15*(3).

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Hooft Graafland, J. (2018). New technologies and 21st century children: Recent trends and outcomes. *OECD Education Working Papers, No. 179*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1787/e071a505-en>

Marsh, J., Hannon, P., Lewis, M., & Ritchie, L. (2017). Young Children's Initiation into Family Literacy Practices in the Digital Age. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 15*(1), 47-60.

Zabatiero, J., Mantilla, A., Danby, S., Straker, L., & Edwards, S. (2018). Young children and digital technology: Australian early childhood education and care sector adults’ perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 43*(2), 15-22.

Submission Ends