



## **A submission from Waldorf UK to Growing Up in the Online World: A National Consultation**

In response to: [Growing up in the online world: a national consultation](#)

### **Background**

**Waldorf UK is the national representative body for Steiner Waldorf schools in the UK.**

- There are 15 independent Steiner Waldorf schools and one state funded academy – The Steiner Academy Hereford.
- The names 'Steiner,' 'Waldorf' or 'Steiner Waldorf' are used interchangeably.
- Most are all-through schools catering for children aged 3 years to either 16 or 18. Years.
- Steiner Waldorf education first came to the UK for 100 years and we are part of a worldwide movement of schools with more 1200 schools across 90 countries.
- Steiner Waldorf education is inspired by the educational ideas of Austrian philosopher - Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925).
- Waldorf UK represents the UK schools internationally through membership of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) and International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE).
- Waldorf schools are screen free until secondary education and have never allowed children to have phones in the classroom. Parents sign up to this approach and agree to keep access to computers and other digital devices to a minimum at home until their children reach secondary education.

### **Introduction.**

Waldorf UK welcomes this consultation and the Government's willingness to engage seriously with the growing concerns of parents, teachers and young people regarding the impact of digital technologies and social media on childhood and adolescence.

We believe this is an important and timely national conversation. Across education and wider society there is increasing recognition that many children are struggling with anxiety, poor concentration, reduced sleep, social pressures, compulsive device use and declining opportunities for imaginative play, creativity and direct human interaction. These concerns are not abstract. They are being experienced daily by schools and families.

Waldorf education has, for many decades, taken a cautious and developmentally-informed approach to children's engagement with digital technology. In our schools, there is no access to screens and digital devices throughout the early years and primary school phase, with technology introduced more deliberately and critically during secondary education. This is not because we are opposed to technology. Rather, we believe there is clear evidence that children first need strong foundations in physical, emotional, social and cognitive development before engaging extensively with highly stimulating digital environments.

We strongly urge the Government to take into account the evidence supporting this view when framing further protections for children online beyond the existing framework of the Online Safety Act and in the use of digital media in schools.

## **1. The developmental needs of children must come first**

In our experience, young children learn best through:

- direct human relationships;
- movement and physical activity;
- imaginative play;
- storytelling and conversation;
- artistic and practical activities;
- sustained concentration;
- real-world exploration and collaboration.

Excessive exposure to screens and algorithmically driven platforms can undermine these developmental processes, particularly when introduced too early or used without meaningful limits.

Teachers and parents are increasingly concerned by the evidence that access to screens when young influence:

- reduced attention spans;
- compulsive scrolling behaviours;
- sleep disruption;
- social comparison and anxiety;
- reduced resilience and emotional regulation;
- diminished opportunities for imaginative play and creativity;
- exposure to harmful and age-inappropriate material;
- the commercialisation of childhood attention through persuasive design.

The consultation rightly recognises that concerns extend beyond content itself to the design features of platforms that encourage prolonged and compulsive use.

## **2. Restricting addictive design features**

Waldorf UK strongly supports measures to restrict or prohibit addictive and manipulative design features aimed at children, including:

- infinite scrolling;
- autoplay;
- algorithmic recommendation systems designed to maximise engagement;
- variable reward mechanisms;
- push notifications targeted at children;
- persuasive design techniques that intentionally exploit psychological vulnerabilities.

Children should not be expected to exercise adult levels of self-regulation against technologies intentionally engineered to maximise attention and engagement. At all times the stages of child development should be taken into account so that access to these technologies is introduced when the young person has the developmental capacity to manage that access safely and effectively.

We believe platforms and technology companies carry primary responsibility for creating safer environments for children, rather than placing the burden solely on parents.

### **3. Minimum age limits and social media access**

We support the principle of stronger age-based protections for social media access and believe there is a strong case for raising the minimum age for unrestricted social media use to 16.

Adolescence is already a period of heightened emotional and neurological vulnerability. Exposure during this period to highly addictive and socially pressurised online environments appears increasingly associated with anxiety, poor sleep, social comparison and mental health difficulties.

At the same time, we recognise that young people need gradually to develop digital literacy and technological competence. We therefore encourage a nuanced approach such as that provided by the Erasmus [HERMMES project](#) (Holistic Education Resilience and Media Maturity in Education Settings) which provides a framework to develop media maturity in children and young people, allowing access incrementally in stages.

The question is not whether young people should eventually learn to use technology, but how and when this should happen in a developmentally healthy way.

### **4. Mobile phones in schools**

Our schools have never allowed phone use in schools and parents sign up to our schools understanding this is our approach. We therefore support government action to place stronger guidance on mobile phone use in schools on a statutory footing.

In our experience, reduced phone use during the school day significantly improves:

- attention and concentration;
- social interaction;
- emotional wellbeing;
- participation in lessons;
- opportunities for creativity and active play.

Schools should remain spaces where children can experience sustained attention, direct communication and meaningful engagement with the physical and social world.

## **5. AI chatbots and emerging technologies**

We welcome the inclusion of AI chatbots within this consultation.

Children and young people are increasingly engaging with systems designed to simulate human interaction without fully understanding their limitations, biases or commercial motivations.

We believe significant caution is required regarding unrestricted access by children to AI companions and conversational systems, particularly where:

- emotional dependency may develop;
- misinformation may be presented confidently;
- safeguarding risks exist;
- children substitute AI interaction for human relationships;
- children disclose personal or emotionally sensitive information.

Clear safeguards, transparency requirements and age restrictions should therefore be considered alongside an approach that prepares young people and provides them with the skills needed to make use of the technology as a tool to help them and not to be dominated by it. We urge the government to look at ways to develop digital skills through the use of analogue experiences and technologies.

## **6. Supporting parents and families**

Parents are often navigating these challenges with very limited support while facing immense pressure from wider social norms and commercial technologies. We are able to support the parents in our schools through having a clear culture and defined approach to how and when digital media is introduced. Our schools run parent talks and provide information to support parents understand the reasoning behind our digital policies.

We therefore support:

- clearer national guidance on healthy childhood technology use;
- public education campaigns;
- easier-to-use parental controls;
- guidance tailored to different developmental stages;
- support for screen-free and low-screen childhood activities;

- increased public awareness of the importance of sleep, play, movement, creativity and face-to-face relationships.

Many parents report feeling trapped between what they believe is healthy for their child and fears of social exclusion if limits are imposed. Providing clear information and developing and clearer, safer norms would help many families maintain healthy boundaries for their children.

## **7. A broader vision of childhood**

We would encourage the Government not only to think in terms of restricting harms, but also positively about the kind of childhood we wish to protect and cultivate.

Children need opportunities for:

- play;
- creativity;
- imagination;
- practical activity;
- meaningful relationships;
- outdoor experience;
- artistic expression;
- boredom and reflection;
- sustained attention.

A healthy digital future will not be created solely through technical safeguards. It also requires strengthening the human, relational and creative aspects of childhood that excessive digital immersion can displace.

The Government's consultation rightly recognises that children deserve online spaces that "strengthen their wellbeing and support their growth." We strongly support that principle when it is introduced at the right time and encourage the government to commission extensive research to identify when that time might be and how best to prepare children and young people for that access.

## **Conclusion**

Waldorf UK welcomes this consultation and the opportunity to contribute to this important national discussion.

We believe there is substantial evidence and sufficient growing public concern that stronger protections for children online are necessary. We support a precautionary, developmentally-informed approach that places children's wellbeing at the centre of policy and focuses on an approach that prepares and develops young people's understanding of the technology as a tool to be used by them and thereby protect young people from being overwhelmed and themselves feel controlled by the media.

At the same time, we encourage a balanced approach that does not frame technology itself as the enemy but instead asks how society can ensure that children encounter technology in ways that support, rather than undermine, healthy human development and healthy use of the technology.

26 May 2026.