

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live induction event for child and youth studies. This session is about children's digital lives, and I'm joined by Mimi Tatlow-Golden.

Mimi, are children these days living on their mobile phones? I mean, do you think that as parents, we should be looking at their childhoods, and shouldn't they just get off these and start living in the real world like we used to?

Mimi Tatlow-Golden: We get that all the time, don't we? And I think it's one of the constant refrains from parents and the media, everywhere. People are saying, oh, they're just on their phones, they're not talking to me, they're not talking to each other. They're not looking at anyone. They're not socialising. They're in their bedrooms. And it's become sort of a blanket refrain, I think, about what I call "the kids these days" phenomenon.

And I think a lot of what I might be about to say is going to be yes and no, all right? And I think it is really important for us, all of us, if we're working in the field, if we're working with young children, if we are their parents, their grandparents, whoever it is, not to sort of fall right back into that lazy stereotype of kids these days, and maybe just to sort of take a little pause and think, what is actually going on here?

And not just what are the big risks and the dangers and the great big moral panics about childhood that have been going on for centuries? I mean, the Greeks were talking about teens these days are so badly behaved, and you can't get them to discuss anything. And then when we invent writing, then that's disastrous because nobody remembers anything. And now that we've got digital media, it's considered disastrous because kids aren't learning how to write.

And there's this refrain that echoes through the centuries.

KAREN FOLEY: So is it always like this hyphen in terms of these technologies are sort of spiking, I guess, a panic about how something is going to shift something?

Mimi Tatlow-Golden: I think it's partly because we don't entirely know what's going on. And if, as sort of an adult population, we look at way children are behaving or interacting with each other, and we think, well, I'm not really familiar with that, so maybe it's a bad thing and I need to be concerned.

And it's certainly generated, almost always, from a good place where we're thinking we want

them to have a good and healthy life. I sometimes think, though, if we take a step back and look not just at what are the risks- and there are some risks and there are things that people need to be worried about.

But I think we need to do a few things. One of them is we need to think about how does this stuff affecting the adult world as well as children's worlds?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, because this is something that never comes in. I mean, my daughter, actually, sometimes says "No phones at the table, Mommy." And sometimes if I'm on my own- because we have a no phones at the table rule- but when everyone else is away and it's just me and her, sometimes I have my phone at the table because she doesn't want to talk to me, and then she's like, no phones at the table, and I think, actually, that's fair enough, because I shouldn't be modelling that sort of behaviour there.

Mimi Tatlow-Golden: No, you absolutely shouldn't.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

Mimi Tatlow-Golden: But we're all human. And I would say that all of us, because this is an entirely new way of being human, that's what we've created. I mean, it's only 10 years since the smartphone was invented, right? Well, one particular version of it. And in that time, something has happened in how we read, how we search for information, how we connect with one another, how we interact with each other, how we perform all kinds of behaviours that is utterly, utterly different from what went before, even though ways in which we interpret it are characterised by the same terms.

So there's a few things I think we need to think about. One of them is, well, what are we all doing? So I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be prepared to give up my mobile. And I get a lot of things, when I talk about digital advertising-- and we'll probably come to that in a moment-- I get a lot of people saying, well, if it's so bad, take the phones away from the kids. And I'm like, well, that ship has sailed.

So it's really now about finding a way to build a world in which children can be- I don't want to go into the thing of saying being children- but in which children can live a childhood that's interactive, that's creative, that's positive for their development, and that avoids the pitfalls that some of our psychological or childhood studies research knows do happen, and can occur in

these digital media, but also allows them to flourish, as some of the other research shows us can also happen.

So just to give you a few examples around that, I mean, if we take video games is probably the one that has been the alarm bells ringing for the longest. And if you look at the terrible phenomenon in the United States, predominantly of people- young people- going into schools and shooting people. And constantly, every time one of those episodes happens, its comes back to games because there are first person shooter video games, which are, incidentally, 18 and up, but anyway.

And so the whole genre of video games gets attached to this activity with no evidence that it's linked to it and no evidence that there may be good kinds of video games that are actually positive. And there is actually evidence that suggests that if you're not looking at first person shooter games, but actually really complex worlds and project-based building-type games, there's a lot of potential in them for creativity, for linking in with other people, and so on and so forth.

So it's important for us- as I think it's incumbent on us in the adult world- to help children to engage with things positively rather than necessarily in the more negative ways. So that would be one thing. And the other thing is we do need to model behaviours that we think will be good. So you don't take your phone to bed. Or do you?

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I do. I do, but often because I'm using it as an alarm. And if my husband's away, I want to be able to know that he can connect with me if there's an emergency. Like I say, I set my alarm on there. It's the first thing I look at in the morning. But you see, the way I justify it- and I'm sure we'll have a discussion about this as well- is that I think, well, I'm working on my phone. So I want to know when I've got an email. I know when I've got a text.

But equally, that really stresses me out, because when I get it, I think, I've got it. I could just reply quickly. And I feel incredibly connected to this world that seems to demand on my time and resource. I know when someone's phoned. It used to be so much easier when I could turn my computer off and shut it down and that would be that. Now we have this connection.

And I think, whilst you're saying, OK, is it fair to take children's phones away, is it fair to take adults' phones away? They're used for different things, and I think sometimes we justify those because of those different functionalities. But are they different, and are children then feeding the sense of connection and demand from this external world? Because we see them

connecting on various social media. For example, they might not get the work emails, but there is this sense of, well, I have spoken to you. I've seen you. Fredes.

Mimi Tatlow-Golden:

Yeah. And I mean, I know from speaking with clinical psychologists who work with kids who are having mental health difficulties- and we know those are on the rise in the UK-- that there is a problem with children. And this is even before smartphones came in, they were talking about how mobiles, and kids sending texts, were changing the way that they were communicating with each other, and that there was no longer a place at home where it was over, the school day was over.

And the old days of the home phone in the hallway, where you sat, you might run home from school, chat for two hours to your friends from school who you'd just said goodbye to, but still had to end at some point. And then if they had friends who are having mental health difficulties, they're getting texts at 2:00 in the morning saying I feel suicidal or I feel so terrible about myself. And they're feeling sucked into this world and compelled to respond and support their friends, not necessarily share that with the adult world.

So those are things that the adult world needs to be talking to and with children about for sure. And in terms of the alarm, I've got to say I've lately started using my phone as an alarm. And I've come to the conclusion I need to get down to the pawn shop and buy a cheap little old school alarm and leave my phone out, because every time it pings with an email- and I don't know about you, but I'm a news junkie.

And so the way the world has gone now, between news from the states and stuff that's happening elsewhere around the world, I find you could be checking the news and the updating the headlines any time of the day or night. So you can be there at 2:00 in the morning doing unhealthy habits, anxiety-provoking habits. What is happening between North Korea and goodness knows what? That's not good for my mental health, either.

So I think we need to think about the entire world, actually, and not just about children, although we always need to bear in mind that they're developing. They have certain vulnerabilities. And we're charged, as adults, in actually minding them, taking good care of them, and not trying to push them into little boxes and saying, you can't do this and you can't do that, but more thinking about, how can we divert their phenomenal ways of being creative, connecting with each other, into positive routes? Because there are- so we've talked about a lot of the negative stuff now- there are ways in which the internet affords young people with

amazing stuff.

And I know sometimes one hears teachers say, you know, kids are losing the ability to write and they're no longer able to be as creative because they're absorbing content and all of that. Actually, on the internet, there's phenomenal abilities to create content. And you don't have to be quite techie and uploading videos to YouTube. You might be. Lots of young people are.

But you could be, for example, writing fan fiction, and that's an area in which young people are incredibly active, and creating really new and just amazing creative stuff, connecting with one another in this really creative activity that, actually, most adults, if I talk to them about it, don't even know what that is or what's going on. So it's basically where it's like a sort of system of blogs online where people are writing about their favourite characters from novels or films or whatever it might be, and imagining different outcomes or different pathways for them.

And there's a whole vocabulary associated with it, there's different ways of thinking about it. And it creates really powerful communities of creativity. So that's just one example of ways in which the internet facilitates creativity, connection, self-development, all kinds of things. So I think it is important to think about both sides of the equation.

KAREN FOLEY: No, absolutely. My 7-year-old the other day comes in and says, I've made this, and I said, oh, how did you do that? And she said, I've been watching this vlog about it. And I was like, well, how have you been finding that? And isn't it amazing, actually, that she's able to create something? And it's probably being produced by a young person, again, who has had these ideas. And it's giving her something very useful to do with her time.

I just want to go to the Hot Desk quickly because I know there's been an awful lot of chat, and I just want to include everybody at home.

HJ: I think everyone's really engaged with this conversation. There seems to be a bit of a divide because some people- it's been pointed out that most of our study is very digital these days. So it's building up skills for young people to get to the point where we are, perhaps, and Becca points out about children not staying focused, and about perhaps technology has an impact there. And Sam says, I've got to admit TV is keeping the gremlins busy while I watch this.

And we've had good comments about how exploring the natural and digital world seems to be quite different, and what effect that has on children as well.

CLAUDIA:

Yes, and I've also had a few comments from Angela, who said that when she was younger, she had to endure boring piano lessons. And now her daughter has lessons, plus a really fun app, so is that making it better? But also, Rebecca will say that she'd only get grunts from the kids if they're on the phone and they can't get focused.

And there's a few other comments from people saying that if they got some sporty daughter, so therefore her screen time is used to relax because it balances out all the time spent outside.

KAREN FOLEY:

No, absolutely. We asked you at home what you thought about whether screen time was good for children. 83% of you, at the last count, said that you agreed that it was good, or it could be good, even, for children.

Mimi, I want to draw the conversation back to this whole idea about access to stuff because you mentioned bullying, and you mentioned some of the sorts of things that can go on for children by having this digital input in. But equally, you were saying that there is this way of getting information. We were talking about the news.

But is there a case that being able to access the internet can give children support for things so they've got access to ways of maybe dealing with things that they wouldn't have been able to maybe talk to before? Things like gender identity, for example.

Mimi Tatlow-Golden:

Absolutely. So there are communities of support and information for all kinds of mental health or difficulties or life challenges that you might imagine. So people who have questions about their sexuality, about their gender identity, and all kinds of things like that, nowadays, likely you'll be the only kid in your class who's experiencing that. You might be the only kid in your school who's experiencing that. And anyway, it's probably not something that you want to explore with people because it's quite a delicate subject.

And so being able to do so online can be a really, really useful way for people to find information and to feel that there's a community that they might one day belong to, even if they don't physically live in one right now. And like with everything, there's the darker side of that as well. So for example, there are communities online in which people who have, say, anorexia or bulimia share tips on how to engage in the behaviours that maintain their very unhealthy low weight.

And so that's a huge worry for people who are working in the clinical professions. So it's about

us understanding what is the nature of this thing that we have allowed to be created and allowed to permeate our worlds.

I think, just to pick up on what one of the people was saying, bearing in mind that isn't everything about balance, right? So it's not about the internet is brilliant, and everybody should be on the internet all the time, nor is it about the internet is terrible for children, and it's killing their attention spans, and they should get off it.

Some kids I know have an attention span when they're engaged in certain kinds of activities, whether it's digital or other, that they would never have in a conversation with one another. So it's about understanding what is the nature of the activity? What is the kind of thing that they're doing? And where are they going online? And what is happening to them when they're there? Those are the really important things.

I think the other thing I would like to say is that there is a huge challenge that we face as a society. And I think it's starting to permeate into how people are thinking about the internet now. And this is, again, for kids and adults. And that is what is happening to information about us that is taken from us when we engage with anything online.

So whether you use Facebook or Instagram or any other social networking medium, of which there are some- but not that many others let's be honest- whether you're on websites, or wherever you go online, what you do, what you like, what you click on, what you share, who you share with, where you go, everything is being recorded.

And what's happening is that all that information is being hoovered up and it's being stored by people and shared primarily as a tool to deliver advertising in order for people to make money from you. But alongside that, people are building up huge banks of knowledge about each and every one of us, including children.

And that's an area that I have pretty much an unqualified concern about, I have to say, where banks of information are being built up that allow- so for example, there was a study on Facebook where they looked just at Facebook likes and were able to predict all kinds of personal information about people.

So they weren't looking at the actual things that people said about themselves online. They were just looking at what they liked in terms of- so when you click on a Like on Facebook, right? So in terms of what music do you like, what food do you like, what activities, what

groups, what this, that, or the other. From that information alone, they were able to predict to 80% and above on people's gender identity and all kinds of very sensitive kinds of information about them.

And what's happening now is that that information is being taken and used about us in order to choose what we see online. So it's no longer the internet is one big space that we all go into. We're all being offered these really segmented things. It's been creating these little mini silos, what they're calling the echo chambers, politically.

The current talk is that this is what facilitated the election of Donald Trump in the United States, however you feel about that, because Americans and Russians were able to buy advertising on Facebook and direct particular kinds of ads. They could see this particular person is worried about immigration, so I'm going to deliver this kind of an ad. This person is worried about race so I'm going to deliver this kind of an ad. It's creating an entire new world for us and for our kids that we haven't got to grips with at all.

KAREN FOLEY: So I need to end this session now, Mimi. But we were talking the other day about the extent to which some of these social network providers have responsibility. And we were talking about Mark Zuckerberg and about how he is bettering the world and how he has this vision. But I sort of said to you at the time, well, OK- you said, we need to put something back. We need to do something, because if people are being connected in these silos, what can we as providers do for people to enable them to have that space to think about things, if indeed they're being marketed to in such a way that seems very seamless?

So what would your suggestion be about how we might sort of shift from this, apart from turning our phones off? And I will put that phone when I'm at the table. So apart from the modelling and this sort of thing. What could the solution be?

Mimi Tatlow-Golden: I've got to be honest with you. I don't have a straightforward solution to that particular one. It would be foolish of me to claim to have one because nobody in the world does at the moment. What's happened is there's an entire of backstage network of activity taking place that is creating literally billions for lots of companies, and which isn't accountable at the moment.

So on a big scale, I think governments and supranational actors like the European Union need to get active and get involved, and start asking really hard questions. I know this doesn't directly relate to kids, but transport for London's knock for Uber that happened this week for that taxi riding app that said, well, actually, you're not behaving well enough, so we are closing

your licence down. That kind of activity needs to take place much more, without saying the internet is over.

It's about finding ways to build worlds to live in that are good and creative rather than that strip information and money and empowerment away from people. That's how I see it, anyway.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, you've given us a lot to think about, Mimi. So thank you very much for coming along and talking to us about so many complex issues.

I'm sure that you are raring to go with your studies after listening to Mimi and even Naomi talking about these two issues. We're going to have a short break now. We're going to play one of these other videos, which is "Five Things Junk Food Marketers Know About Your Child." And then join me to talk to John Oates about creative media. So we'll see in a few minutes.

[MUSIC PLAYING]