

# Editorial

The early years of a child's life are a period of rich brain development. It is when they rapidly develop cognitive, social and emotional skills that are fundamental to their later achievements as adults. In an evolving world of smartphones, computers and other digital technologies, it is therefore vital for positive early experiences with digital tech.

Early childhood education and care, which focuses on infancy to primary school entry, has immense potential to shape young children's development and well-being. While the impact of technology on young children is inconclusive, it is important they are protected from harmful effects and equipped with knowledge to thrive in digitally enhanced societies. Unfortunately, up until now early education policies have struggled to find a balance between the risks and opportunities of digitalisation. This only adds to the challenges of the sector.

The new OECD report *Empowering Young Children in the Digital Age* sets out five key challenges facing creches, nurseries, kindergartens and preschools, and options for dealing with the risks that children face. As some countries aim to hold tech companies accountable for inappropriate practices and poorly protecting minors online, the report makes clear that it is crucial for young children to learn about the dangers and benefits of digital technology in early education and care settings. In many of these establishments, this will require a step change in the way they approach learning and care, and how they use technology to organise themselves.

The report outlines how young children are increasingly interacting with digital technologies, and how digital tools can be used to enrich learning activities. For example, interactive features can help young kids build up their expressive skills in the use of audio, graphics, photos, text and video. The use of digital content in learning environments can also expose children to quality content they do not necessarily receive at home.

By getting an early understanding of digital technology, children can also be exposed to new ideas and concepts. This empowers children and can potentially lead to the development of skills that help them in later life, as well as sensitise them to pursue careers in tech fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), programming and engineering. This does not necessarily involve direct exposure to computers. There are numerous 'unplugged' approaches that can be used, for example a child can learn how to code through puzzles or by creating a game. Careful use of new technologies can, in effect, support children by establishing engaging and effective learning practices.

That said, the risks must not be ignored. The report raises a range of issues including the impact of extended screen time on young children, the potential for children to have fewer in-person interactions, and the exposure to inappropriate content or misuse of personal data. The OECD is already active in this area, with recommendations on how children should be protected in digital environments.

Regarding screen time, it is well known the importance of preventing children from spending long hours unsupervised watching screens. Passive and excessive use of digital technology can be harmful to a young child's development, particularly if not balanced by stimulating in-person interactions, including back-and-forth conversations, play and exercise. Slow-paced, educational and age-appropriate activities should be

encouraged. The focus should be on quality engagement with digital technologies, under the guidance of an adult and integrated in a broader set of learning experiences.

It is imperative for teachers, carers and parents to understand the benefits of using technology in an active and educational way. At the same time, they must also ensure that time-constraints are routinely enforced. Young children need to learn early on to disconnect from screens and reconnect with the offline world. We should also be wary of uses of technology that disrupt interactions between adults and children, which are crucial for cognitive, social and emotional development at this age.

All of these issues may prompt some to suggest that 'turning off all screens' is the solution. But the realities of the modern world make a blanket ban on technology impractical and ineffective in most instances, as children need to be prepared to face the challenges raised by digitalisation.

The potential for technology to reinforce inequalities is another concern. Globally, a digital skills divide is growing, with girls and disadvantaged children being left behind. The report highlights that disadvantaged children and girls are currently less likely to pursue careers in technology-intensive fields compared to most boys. This risks some being effectively shut out from opportunities in an increasingly fast-changing and technology-rich world.

In order to tackle these issues, the focus should be on effective education strategies that mitigate the risks of digital technology by preparing all young children to engage with it in safe and creative ways. A central part of this requires the training of professionals to understand the impact of technology on children and how digital tools can be used to further educational goals. Technology can also contribute to the professionalisation of the workforce through the development of tools to assess and improve the quality of care, share best practices and engage with families. It is important to monitor these developments and make sure they result in positive outcomes.

There is a lot to consider and not much agreement among, or even within, countries on how best to develop quality early childhood education and care. But this report makes it clear that harnessing technology to improve its quality will help children have a stronger start in life. It will also enable them to gradually become masters, not subjects, to technology.

A considered and balanced approach to these matters can open new channels to early education, creativity and social interaction, while guarding children from new types of risks, including cyberbullying and privacy threats.

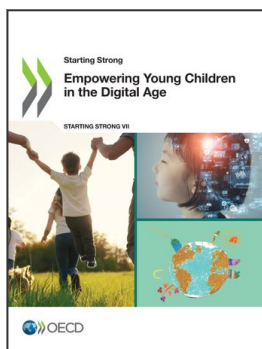
While this may be a low priority area for many policymakers, governments should heed the advice in the report: by empowering young children in the digital age, it will help lay the foundations for social-emotional development, improved learning and educational success for years to come.



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