

I believe the issues addressed in *Left to Their Own Devices?* are some of the most important for today's parents – whether our children are toddlers or teens. I urge you to read it.

ROB PARSONS, OBE  
*FOUNDER OF CARE FOR THE FAMILY*

A brilliant, evidence-based, and insightful resource to help parents take an informed and proactive approach to their family's use of screens. Offering a non-judgmental approach and practical solutions, this is a must-read for parents tackling the challenges of raising children in the digital world.

DR SUSIE DAVIES  
*GP AND FOUNDER OF PAPAYA*

In an age where we all carry a powerful mini computer in our pockets, or often in our hands, Katharine's book offers some sound advice on how to use it wisely. Surely it can't be a coincidence that this innovation has happened at the same time that we see such a growth in anxiety, insecurity and attention problems. The book has a good balance on how we can respect and use this technology whilst protecting young brains as they develop. It is a great resource for any family navigating these issues.

DR JIM HACKING  
*NHS GENERAL PRACTITIONER AND MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSIONER*

In a season when so many issue instruction, pressure or advice originating from an agenda or marketing motivation, Katharine's gentle, wise book gives guidance and genuine wisdom for parents realizing they are raising children not just in the 'real' world but also in an increasingly vibrant and enticing online one. She helps parents to appreciate the concerns and challenges without creating panic, and to consider their response with appropriate care, recognizing that phones and the online world bring positives as well as perils. This is such a helpful book to read, I would strongly recommend it.

REVD DR KATE MIDDLETON  
*MIND & SOUL FOUNDATION*

This book isn't about putting the clocks back on new technologies, but rather helping parents to exploit the benefits whilst resisting the harms. Katharine Hill combines up to date research with real-world wisdom to offer parents strategies that will empower healthy digital habits without alienating their kids. A hugely practical resource for raising confident, resilient and relational kids in a fast-changing digital landscape.

GLYNN HARRISON  
*EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF PSYCHIATRY, BRISTOL UNIVERSITY*

A much needed and accessible book! The anecdotes, suggestions and insights are at once equally enlightening and terrifying. This is going to help and empower a generation of parents. I will be bulk buying it to pass out to fellow parent friends who are fully engaged in this battle ourselves and alongside our children – with the screen addiction we are quick to condemn but also guiltily give in to. On this journey we need all the help we can get.

GEMMA HUNT  
TV PRESENTER, CBEEBIES

Technology is a crucial part of all our lives. There are huge advantages and some pitfalls we should avoid. Katharine Hill addresses these in a very readable way. Using stories from her own family, anecdotes she has been told and drawing on research evidence, she takes parents through the maze of today's technology and the devices our children encounter daily. The cartoons support some of the humorous stories Katharine relates and most chapters have practical suggestions which many people will find invaluable.

This is a subject every parent will need to address, will be addressing or will have addressed. It would be a great book to read as a family or with other parents. Parents can be reassured by this book not to deny opportunities to their children, but to embrace technology with an awareness of the negative aspects which can lie in wait. This is a first-class read, and one which should be on parents' wish lists.

DAVE LUMSDON  
*PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC TUTOR, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY; PRINCIPAL PSYCHOLOGIST FOR DBL PSYCHOLOGY*

Katharine Hill has skilfully and sensitively tackled a terribly thorny subject that can provoke stress-factor-fifty levels of fruitless angst, with razor-sharp insight and unremitting authenticity. This book is a much-needed resource full of solutions, but it is far more than that. It is a true friend who constantly shouts encouragement at you from the sidelines of the parenting marathon.

DR SAMANTHA CALLAN  
*FAMILY POLICY EXPERT AND PARLIAMENTARY ADVISOR TO LORD FARMER*

*Left to Their Own Devices?* offers invaluable help to any parent wanting to protect and guide their child in the complexities of today's digital world. We cannot leave our children to work it out for themselves. Parents need Katharine Hill's important advice from the word go.

NICKY AND SILA LEE  
*FOUNDERS OF THE MARRIAGE AND PARENTING COURSES*

The iPhone and my daughter were birthed in the same year. As parents, we are raising her in an exciting but often overwhelming digital landscape, which is why I'm so glad Katharine has written this book. Bringing wisdom and hope in equal measure, Katharine gives parents and guardians clarity and advice to navigate this new 'swipe and like' culture.

IAN HENDERSON  
*FOUNDER OF THE NAKED TRUTH PROJECT*

Katharine gives practical parenting advice on the trickiest topics and it's the kind of wisdom you only gain from experience. You'll hear stories from parents who have faced the same challenges you do, and have come out the other side. Buy this book and enjoy the careful balance of thorough research, refreshing honesty, and the brilliant humour of the illustrations. Every parent needs to know this stuff, and thanks to Katharine and Care for the Family they can!

JASON ROYCE  
*YOUTH EDUCATOR AND CAMPAIGNER*

We might find ourselves feeling fearful, uncomfortable and unprepared for parenting in this digital age, but what we cannot do is remain silent and uninvolved. Years of youth work has shown me how most young people feel oppressed, in some way, by perceived sex pressures that are amplified by technology. We may feel powerless, but the key message of this book is that we're not! What our children need is for us to acknowledge the reality of the pressures in all young people's lives, define our messages and initiate conversations with our children that are factual, sensitive and effective. I'm grateful to Katharine for writing the book that all of us involved with raising children in the digital age need to read.

RACHEL GARDNER  
*PRESIDENT OF THE GIRLS BRIGADE ENGLAND AND WALES;  
DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIP AT YOUTHSCAPE*

Katharine Hill is a fount of knowledge on every issue family life throws at you, dispensing advice with compassion, humour and a healthy dose of realism.

ALEX BORTHWICK  
*PRODUCT MAGAZINE*

This book is a must-read for any parent – full of practical wisdom and helpful tips. It is a much-needed guide for navigating the uncharted waters of parenting in this digital age.

SARAH ABELL  
*AUTHOR; RELATIONSHIPS COACH; FORMER AGONY AUNT FOR  
THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*

*Left to Their Own Devices?* is a really good book. I don't say that very often! It's also a very sane book. My children are in their thirties. When they were young, the internet hardly existed and a screen, such as they were, was primarily the television. So this book is such an important title, especially for families who are struggling with their children's time on screen.

EDDIE OLLIFFE  
*FORMER CONSULTING EDITOR OF TOGETHER MAGAZINE*

LEFT TO  
THEIR OWN  
DEVICES?

KATHARINE HILL



# LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES?

CONFIDENT PARENTING  
IN A DIGITAL WORLD

KATHARINE HILL

FOREWORD BY ROB PARSONS OBE



Kilfinan  
Press

Published in 2025 by  
Kilfinan Press, Edinburgh, Scotland.  
kilfinanpress.com  
books@kilfinanpress.com  
Kilfinan Press is an imprint of Muddy Pearl Ltd.

First published in 2017 by Muddy Pearl.  
Reprinted 2018 (twice).

Second Edition 2019.

Third edition 2021, reprinted 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Fourth edition 2025.

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Cartoons © David McNeill 2017, 2019, 2021, 2025.

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-914553-31-8

Typeset in Minion by Revo Creative Ltd, Lancaster  
Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow  
Cover design by Faceout Studio, Molly von Borstel

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*To our dear friends Silas and Annie, with thanks for your love and wisdom through the joys and challenges, digital and otherwise, over thirty-plus years of parenting ... and now grandparenting together!*



## FOREWORD

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Somewhat to my surprise, I find that I am the grandfather of five children! Surely that can't be possible? Wasn't it only yesterday that I took Katie (my daughter) to her ballet lesson? I'm certain it can't have been more than a few Christmases ago that I saw Lloyd (my son) put on a sterling performance as the innkeeper in the school nativity play? But, no! The reality is that it was over thirty years ago, and in that time, a revolution has happened: a digital revolution.

Since time began, the role of parents has been to prepare our children to live independent lives. We attend to their physical needs for food, sleep and clothing; we give them boundaries to keep them safe, and we seek to instil in them values that will guide them in the choices they will have to make, both big and small, throughout their lives. But parents today also have another task in addition to those I had forty years ago. As far as I was concerned, issues to do with screen time were confined to whether or not *Doctor Who* was too scary for a 5-year-old who was absolutely desperate to see it! But the world of screens that we live in today presents us with far greater challenges. As parents, we must help our children make full use of all the advantages of digital technology, as well as safeguarding them from the potential dangers.

In this book, Katharine Hill has tackled all the important issues head-on and has given parents a brilliant tool that is full of practical wisdom and advice. Read it now ... and above all, don't leave *your* children to their own devices.

**Rob Parsons, OBE**

Founder, Care for the Family



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This book and the subsequent editions could not have been written without the help and support of so many people. Thank you to Rob Parsons for his encouragement to tackle this subject in the first place; to Sheron Rice, former senior editor at Care for the Family, who added incredible value, and to my brilliant PA Jody Jones.

Big thanks to Samantha Callan and Vicky Lavy for keeping me supplied with up-to-date research, and especially to Nick Philps for editing the copy and adding much value to the new editions. Thank you also to the team at Care for the Family, and in particular, Sarah Rowlands, Jess Hills, Beth Stevenson and Grace Ball for their input to this latest edition.

I am grateful to Stephanie Heald and the team at Muddy Pearl – it's great working with you – and to David McNeill for the wonderful cartoons.

Thank you to journalist and author Andy Robertson, Reuben Bradley, and Livy and Felix Yeats-Brown for sharing their ideas from the world of gaming.

And as ever thanks to Team Hill – Richard, George, Ellie, Eva and Arabella, Charlotte, Will, Ezra, Tabitha and Noah Caldwell, Ed, Catriona, Finn and Theo, and Henry and Claire, for fun, laughter, and for providing the raw material for many of the stories and examples. And now for the opportunity to pass wisdom and good screen habits to our grandchildren.

I am grateful to you all!



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## PROLOGUE

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The rain is hammering against Alice's bedroom window as she throws her schoolbag onto her bed. She can hear her little brothers squabbling downstairs. It's 7.15pm and already dark, so she draws the curtains. She has a school science project to complete and turns on her laptop. Before getting going, she looks at her phone and notices that Karl is online. He is 15. Karl speaks first:

Hi Alice. I've seen you on the bus. You're in the year below me, aren't you?

**Yes.**

You're very pretty.

**Thank you.**

Alice, undo the top three buttons on your shirt. [Long pause]

**Like this?**

And so it begins.

Before we dismiss this exchange as far removed from our family's everyday experience of digital technology, we may be wise just to pause and do a reality check. If current statistics are to be believed, online conversations of this nature will be taking place right now in children and young people's bedrooms across the country. And many parents are concerned not just about the online dangers of sexting and pornography, but also the possibilities of bullying, addiction, gaming, gambling, grooming, the impact of social media and simply the increasing number of hours children and young people are spending glued to a screen.

The digital world can be overwhelming. Gone are the days of a home computer that lives in our sitting room, waiting for us to turn it on and 'go online'; today, our culture lives online. All traditional lines are blurring: 'digital' is no longer a distinct entity from reality;

social media is not something children ‘use’ – it’s become their filter for experiencing the world. AI is part of our everyday lives. Our devices talk to each other and even predict our actions and desires.

And our experience of technology in the home during the Covid-19 pandemic heightened our concerns. London School of Economics’ Professor Sonia Livingstone comments:

We’ve moved, I’d suggest, from seeing technology as a valued addition to our lives, to seeing technology as vital infrastructure ... For young people especially, life is digital by default.<sup>1</sup>

When we meet parents at our Care for the Family events, questions surrounding how to help their children navigate the world of technology and the impact on their emotional wellbeing leave all other topics in the shade. Many parents feel anxious and bemused. Not only do they have no idea what to do, but they don’t know where to go to find the answers. A mum responding to a recent Care for the Family survey said, ‘It’s a minefield. I wish we’d never invented smartphones. It’s just made parenting so much harder. Help!’

When my children were growing up, I was often so terrified they might make bad choices that it felt easier and safer to try to eliminate as many options as possible: no Wi-Fi, no screens, no going to that friend’s house, no going to that party. But the truth is that although it’s essential to put appropriate boundaries in place (and sometimes that means saying ‘no’), just taking the default position of limiting their options only makes their world a smaller place.

Parenting isn’t really about raising children or even teenagers – it’s about raising adults. From their earliest days, we are preparing them for independence: the two-hour session at playschool, their first sleepover, the half-term stay with their cousins, the geography field trip, the language exchange visit to France, the Saturday job, university. Each step leads up to the day when we will no longer be

<sup>1</sup> Elena Martellozzo, ‘Life is digital by default – so what’s the impact on young people’s mental health?’, *London School of Economics*, 21 December 2020, [blogs.lse.ac.uk](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk) (accessed 8 August 2024).



*“Try to ignore the drone. It’s just my dad.  
He’s a bit overprotective.”*

at their side; the day they leave our home and our protection. And for that reason, we must take every opportunity we can to build strong foundations. As parents, it's our job to sow into our children's lives the values that will equip them to make good choices in this digital world. It's a sobering thought, but unless we do that, our child will only be as safe as the least protected child they know.

This book is written in response to the plaintive cry of 'Help!' from the mum who took part in our survey and the thousands of parents who feel exactly the same. Help is at hand! Whether you are new parents with little ones or riding the rollercoaster of the teenage years, it is for mums and dads who not only want to 'cope' with bringing up children in the world of digital technology, but to be on the front foot.

*Left to Their Own Devices? Confident Parenting in a Digital World* will not only give you an overview of parenting in the digital age, but most of all help you take the initiative and give you confidence in it. With strategies and tips that will equip you to protect your children from the dangers, you'll also be able to help them to embrace the wonderful opportunities of growing up in an online world.

## CHAPTER 1

# LIVING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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She has been my trusted companion now for a number of years. Always by my side, she is loyal and attentive, bringing me what I want at any time of the day or night, and sometimes even helping me discover things I didn't know I needed in the first place. Colourful and interesting, she is great company. It's so easy to spend time with her; in fact the hours slip by without me realizing it. She helps me connect with old acquaintances, introduces me to new friends – and gives me a window into the highlights of their lives. Dressed for this season in a fashionable neutral shade, she reminds me of my appointments, pays for my coffee, recommends music to listen to and even helps me keep track of my children's whereabouts.

Let me introduce you to my smartphone. Since I bought my first iPhone, she has revolutionized my life, so much so that I can no longer imagine life without her.

History tells us that each generation greets new technological advance with caution, and it can take a while for us to overcome the challenges and embrace the change. One scientist said that information overload is 'confusing and harmful' to the mind. We would be forgiven for thinking that this comment was made recently, perhaps in an article about our 24-7 always-on culture, but nothing could be further from the truth. It was said by Conrad Gessner (1516-65) a Swiss polymath who disapproved of the influence of the printing press on society, believing that ordinary people could not handle so much knowledge.

It was ever thus. Socrates warned against the practice of writing, saying that it would 'create forgetfulness in the learners' souls because they will not use their memories'. In the eighteenth century, the French statesman Malesherbes campaigned against newspapers, arguing that printed media would socially isolate readers. And the introduction of radio and television sparked widespread fear

that children would stop reading and their exam results would be affected.

Each generation rails against the disruptive effect of new technology on society, while ignoring the fact that similar concerns were voiced with the very technology it is replacing. But the difference with today's technological advances is the sheer pace at which they are developing. In fact, British journalist Robert Colvile has called the time we're living in 'the Great Acceleration'.<sup>2</sup>

It has been argued that different generations are distinguished not only by the events that children experience, but also by the changes in technologies they used (radio, television, personal computers, the internet, and now the iPhone).<sup>3</sup> In his best-selling book, *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt builds on this to address the impact of technology on Gen Z – those born after 1995 who were teenagers when owning a device became the norm.<sup>4</sup> He seeks to demonstrate a correlation between the arrival of the smartphone and the deterioration in this generation's mental health, with the 'tipping point' being the introduction of the front-facing camera and Instagram. Contrasting a 'play-based childhood' (which is on the decline) with a 'phone-based childhood' (on the rise), Haidt argues that the wellbeing of girls has been dramatically impacted by social media, while gaming and pornography have had the biggest impact on boys. In summary, he argues that we have overprotected our children in the real world and underprotected them in the virtual world, damaging their wellbeing and disrupting their development. While some psychologists and social scientists urge caution about these claims, his argument is compelling.

Not so long ago, received wisdom for parents was to station the family computer in the living room so they could keep an eye on their children's screen use. Enter Steve Jobs and the smartphone, and this advice was rendered obsolete. It is difficult now to imagine

2 Robert Colvile, *The Great Acceleration: How the World is Getting Faster, Faster* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

3 Jean M Twenge, *Generations* (Blackstone, 2023), p23.

4 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).



*'I'm telling you, this invention will change the world.  
In a few years we'll be sharing cat photos on a scale  
you wouldn't believe.'*

life without a supercomputer in our pockets enabling us at any time of the day or night to check the weather, track a run, order a takeaway, message a friend – and a million other tasks besides. Digital technology is advancing at such speed that it is taking time for society to adapt to the changes, but adapt it will. As parents, though, time is a luxury we don't have. Our children need our help and guidance *now*, not in five, ten or fifteen years' time, when it will be too late.

Previously our children were ahead of the game with technology, leaving many parents feeling disempowered and struggling to keep up with the pace of change. However, the 2020 pandemic was a threshold moment. It brought about irreversible structural shifts in our online behaviour: the digital world became fully integrated into our daily lives.

While once our children were termed 'digital residents' and we were only 'visitors',<sup>5</sup> now we all live online. But whatever digital habits distinguish the generations, as parents we remain concerned about what our children are doing in the unseen world of technology, and it can be hard to keep up with the fast pace of change.

And this is not just teenagers but all our children. My 2-year-old granddaughter is growing up on an organic farm which, by any stretch of the imagination, is a low-tech environment. She had recently committed some heinous crime that necessitated her being relegated to the 'thinking step' for two minutes – one minute for every year of her life. My daughter gave her a phone with a visual timer so she could see when 'time out' was up. In that two-minute interval my lawyer husband was at work and was surprised to receive a call from his granddaughter. It seemed even at two, her tech skills enabled her to outwit her mother!

In my work with the charity Care for the Family, I have the privilege of speaking to thousands of parents. And as well as the everyday concerns that are part and parcel of family life, there has been an exponential rise in the number of parents saying that the

5 Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', in *On the Horizon* 9(5), Emerald Publishing Group, October 2001, pp1–6.



*'Unbelievable! Eight weeks and 300 miles on foot through the planet's harshest environment and they still have a signal!'*

impact of the digital world on their children is the issue that keeps them up at night.

As well as concerns about the sheer number of hours their children spend on screens, the issues parents worry about cluster around three areas:

1. Content: what children see online
2. Contact: who they talk to online
3. Conduct: how they behave online

The issues are wide-ranging and include access to pornography, sexting, online bullying, gaming, grooming, gambling, addiction, sites encouraging self-harm and eating disorders, having no time just to 'be', lack of exercise, no face-to-face communication, the insidious effect of image-heavy platforms and the continuous scroll of social media – and the cumulative impact of all of this on their emotional wellbeing.

Recent research on children's digital use found that:

- 11- to 14-year-olds spend as many as nine hours a day on screens, and 84% of 3- to 4-year-olds now go online.<sup>6</sup>
- UK children spend an average of 127 minutes per day on TikTok.<sup>7</sup>
- Two-thirds of children report harmful experiences online, including contact from strangers; 24% report being bullied online.<sup>8</sup>
- 63% of parents believe that time online negatively impacts

<sup>6</sup> Rob Binns, 'Screen time statistics 2024: Global increases/decreases, mobile vs desktop, and screen time's effects on children', *The Independent*, 5 September 2023, independent.co.uk; Ofcom, 'Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report, 2024', *Ofcom*, 19 April 2024, ofcom.org.uk (accessed 8 August 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Qoria, 'Born Connected: The Rise of the AI Generation', *Qustodio*, 24 January 2024, qustodio.com (accessed 8 August 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Internet Matters, 'Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Three Index Report, 2024', *BMG Research*, 2024, internetmatters.org (accessed 8 August 2024); POST, 'Screen use and health in young people', *UK Parliament*, 4 December 2020, post.parliament.uk (accessed 8 August 2024).

their child's physical health. Some studies make a link between screentime and obesity.<sup>9</sup>

- 57% are concerned that it affects their child's sleep. Evidence suggests that increased screentime can result in shortened or disturbed sleep.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting on these issues might cause many parents to overlook the benefits of the digital age and run for cover, battening down the hatches, banning all devices forever and insulating their children in an internet-free cocoon in Outer Mongolia. But even if it were possible, this would not be a good plan. It is too easy to make the internet the scapegoat for the pressures on our children today, and we need to realize that the problem doesn't primarily lie in the internet itself but in the choices we make in using it.

Although, of course, we need to protect our children from danger, our ultimate goal is not to eliminate all risk from their lives (and therefore all opportunity), but to enable them to embrace the opportunities and manage the risks well. In a world of unlimited choices, our role is to equip them to make good ones.

From their earliest days, our job as parents is to teach our children life skills, particularly those that will keep them safe. We teach them how to tie their shoelaces, do up buttons, spell, read, and cross the road. Hours spent running behind a bike teaches them to cycle. Even more hours spent waist-deep in the chilly and over-chlorinated water of the local swimming pool results in them being able to swim. We feel we know how to help them develop skills and manage 'real world' risks because we have personal experience and understanding of them. However, the online world is different. Even though the pandemic meant more time online for parents, our children's experience and understanding of the digital world will always be two steps ahead of us.

For those less at home in the digital world, the terminology

<sup>9</sup> Internet Matters, 'Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Three Index Report, 2024'; *POST*, 'Screen use and health in young people'.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

alone can be confusing. What is the difference between an ISP and an iOS? Is a troll a creature from Norse mythology or something quite different? Are *console* and *monitor* nouns or verbs? Help! Of course, tech-savvy parents generally have less ground to make up, but for all there is a challenge. As parents, we can try to keep up with the texting shorthand and discover what acronyms such as *omw* (on my way), *smh* (shaking my head), or *irl* (in real life) mean. But we don't need to be 'experts', and we certainly don't need to be 'cool' and au fait with every type of digital slang (the last thing a teenager wants is a 'cool' parent anyway).

Despite the pace at which digital technology is changing, as parents we shouldn't feel overwhelmed or ill-equipped to guide our children in this area. The internet is not a tsunami about to engulf us while we stand helplessly looking on. However, there are some things well within our reach that we *do* need to know, including some important parenting principles that will equip us to navigate our children through the online world with wisdom.