



Introduction to Digital Youth Work

Guidance for youth workers

Hello!

So, you're here to learn about the exciting and evolving world of digital youth work?
Let's dive in....

For some, digital youth work is an exciting opportunity to engage with young people in innovative new ways. For others, it may feel unfamiliar or challenging. Wherever you are on that journey, this resource is here to support you with practical guidance, fresh ideas, and tools to help you feel confident in your digital youth work practice.

Digital Youth Work is really quite simple:

It is the use of digital technologies and the exploration of digital topics in youth work. It's about using a games console instead of a football or talking about misinformation and online safety instead of healthy eating. But most importantly it's about responding to young people's digital lives and needs -and you've likely already done it.

Ever sent an email or WhatsApp to a young person? Hosted an activity on Zoom?
Discussed online safety with a group? Used a games console in your setting?

If yes, then guess what? you've delivered digital youth work!

It's no different from any other form or method of youth work. It's just another approach, another setting where we can engage and support young people. From football pitches to parks, secure estates to school settings, youth work has always evolved to meet young people where they are and digital is just another strand of that evolution.

BUT we know it's not always that simple and that digital technologies can cause anxiety, especially with the speed of evolution.

But here's the reality:

- Digital youth work is about creating **safer digital spaces and opportunities** for young people.
- It's about discussing technology and supporting young people to **navigate** it- not encouraging negative behaviours or increasing risk.
- It's about embracing technology and using it to **enhance** our work, not using it to replace existing in-person youth work provision.
- It's about providing a **digital front door** for young people to connect and engage with others, and most importantly give them **access** to vital youth work support.

In this guide we will introduce you to digital youth work and take you through the necessary steps to develop digital services and support, ensuring they are adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of young people.

Reflective prompts

- How do you feel about technology? Reflect on your feelings today vs 10 years ago
- How have you benefitted from technology and what positive experiences have you had? Have you built meaningful relationships with colleagues, family or friends digitally?
- How do your personal thoughts and experiences of technology influence your approach to using it in youth work?

So, what is Digital Youth Work?

Digital youth work involves the use of digital technologies and spaces to connect with, engage, and support young people. It is the process of actively incorporating digital activities, tools and topics into youth work services.

- Digital youth work is not limited to online interactions and may mean incorporating the use of digital tools in face-to-face environments such as a centre-based gaming club or developing a VR project through detached youth work
- Digital youth work is informed by the lived digital experiences of young people, responding to the digital technology and spaces they use. Young people should lead it and have access to support and resources in digital wellbeing, online safety and digital literacy
- Digital youth work is not about replacing face-to-face youth work but instead offers opportunities for young people to engage with youth workers and youth work services using digital platforms and spaces to increase the accessibility of youth work support
- Digital youth work widens reach, creating pathways to youth work for more young people, considering their individual needs and digital lives

What is a digital tool? The technology itself

What is a digital activity? Doing something with the technology

What is a digital topic? About technology and how to use and navigate it safely

What does digital youth work look like?

- Hosting a young carers group through the online game Roblox
- Using VR technology during detached youth work to discuss healthy relationships
- Discussing online safety during a centre-based sports activity
- Hosting an LGBTQ+ youth group through the chat server Discord¹

So, what's the hype?

The digital age isn't something that's still coming- it's here- we are actively living in it and have been for many years. And beyond that it is evolving now at a pace like we've never seen before. From hardware and smartphones to software and apps- digital technologies are deeply embedded in the lives of young people and they will continue to be so, especially with advancements in AI.

So, whilst we need to take cautious, well thought steps into this area of work, we must be mindful that young people's digital and physical lives are intertwined, and we have a responsibility to understand their lives and respond to their needs.

Did you know digital and young people fact: [Children's Media Lives 2025 Summary Report](#)

Digital youth work offers us endless possibilities in ways which we can support young people, but we know for many it can be overwhelming and fear inducing- mainly sponsored by the fear of risk- or the pressure to be technologically advanced.

So, we've collated a list of top tips to break things down and support you on your digital journey - starting with our first tip:

Tip 1: Pause and follow their lead

The reality is- technology is advancing faster than we can control. While humanity technically guides its development, the sheer number of systems, tools, and people involved makes it impossible to stop or slow down as a whole.

¹ [1768-NYA-Digital-Youth-Work-Standards---DIGITAL.pdf](#)

But as much as we are limited in controlling the speed of change- what we can do is PAUSE and LISTEN to young people so we can respond to their needs and understand **their** experiences of technology.

The first stage in any youth work development is to be led by young people- and that's exactly what we need to do.

- Do they want to talk about their relationship with tech and work out ways to develop healthier digital behaviours? If yes, then let's develop a digital citizenship programme
- Do they enjoy connecting with people in gaming spaces and enjoy experiencing new virtual worlds? If yes, then let's look into gaming or VR.
- Are they currently unable to access in person settings due to lack of provision, confidence or disability? If yes, then let's see how we can adapt a programme to deliver online using zoom to build relationships**

(*Big point: We shouldn't be developing digital programmes solely for the purpose of getting young people into youth centres, but instead to **reach communities** and build **relationships with young people** in a way that works *for them*. This may result in eventual face to face opportunities if that is an outcome the young person wants to achieve.)

Ever developed a relationship with a colleague online before meeting them in person? Then found the in-person meeting easier to navigate having built the foundations? Yep- that's what we're aiming to do (just it's in the young person's hands should they wish to meet in person).

All forms of youth work should be shaped by the voices, experiences, and needs of young people, ensuring that they are active participants in decisions that affect them and digital youth work is no exception- particularly as digital technology is an integral part of young people's daily lives, influencing how they communicate, learn, and engage with the world around them.

[Guidelines - digitalyouthwork.eu](https://digitalyouthwork.eu)

[Free Mobile Data For Digital Inclusion | Good Things Foundation](#)

[Devices For Digital Inclusion | Good Things Foundation](#)

Action: Create a survey or host a focus group with young people making sure to reach young people beyond your direct provision.

Tip 2: Explore, Explore, Explore and more

Don't feel you need to learn every new app, platform or gadget that comes along. Youth work can't and shouldn't try to be in every digital space or using every digital tool, but it

is vital we take the time to connect with and understand the technologies young people are using and have an adaptable, forward-thinking approach.

Explore different tools, try out new platforms and spend time getting comfortable with tech at your own pace through a trial and test approach. This is about confidence, not being a tech expert.

This includes spending time on social media, understanding how it works and why it may be appealing to young people alongside understanding the risks. It also includes giving a games console a go or exploring coding with young people: be digitally curious and digital ready.

- [Less social media. More Snapchat.](#)
- [Roblox](#)
- [Welcome to the Minecraft Official Site | Minecraft](#)
- [Meta Horizon](#)
- [HADO](#)

Action: Using a platform approved by your organisation try out a game such as Roblox or download a social media app such as TikTok or Snapchat.

Beyond exploration, commit to continuous learning through training and CPD and nominate a **digital lead** in your organisation to keep pace with digital trends and advancements.

According to the European Guidelines for Digital Youth Work², some top tips for Professional Development include:

- Seek out training opportunities to incrementally build new knowledge and skills
- Challenge mindsets and contribute to a digitally agile culture in the youth work setting
- Engage in peer learning, knowledge sharing and international collaboration
- Having an interest towards digital technologies and an agile mindset are more important than being a technical expert

Also check out the [National standards for essential digital skills](#) to help guide your learning and use tools such as [Learn My Way](#) and [Essential Digital Skills](#) to develop your digital skills.

Here are some great organisations for a range of digital training and expertise:

[The British Esports Federation, changing the game for esports in the UK](#)

[Hologen • Tech Consultancy • Supporting Schools, Youth Work, and Staff](#)

² [european-guidelines-for-digital-youth-work-web.pdf](#)

[Home | Ygam](#)

[Home - Virtual Decisions](#)

Action: Understand the digital skillset of your team, run a short survey to capture digital knowledge and confidence- or measure your own.

Tip 3: Safeguarding and Risk in a Digital Settings

At the centre of all youth work planning and delivery must be the safeguarding and wellbeing of young people. This fundamental principle remains unchanged, regardless of whether engagement takes place in a physical or online environment [Safeguarding standards for the youth sector](#) must be applied.

However, the online space presents different challenges and considerations that must be addressed to ensure that young people are protected while benefiting from digital youth work opportunities.

Some basic starting steps to developing digital youth work include:

- Know your tools
- Understand your setting
- Assess risk including data protection
- Manage consent
- Establish a verification process
- Review

Specific training on managing risk in online settings will be available soon.

Recommended tools and reading:

[Online safety training | NSPCC Learning](#)

[Risk assessing digital youth work - Digital Youth Work](#)

[How to create safe online spaces for digital youth work - Digital Youth Work](#)

[DigiSafe |](#)

[360 Degree Safe - Online Safety Review Tool | SWGfL](#)

Action: Follow our [Digital youth work in an online setting](#) for step-by-step guidance on setting up a digital youth work project.

Tip 4: Digital Wellbeing at the core

Whatever tool, platform or space you are using, young people's digital wellbeing has to be at the heart of it. Today, there is no clear divide between online and offline in young people's lives so our work has to reflect that. We need to support young people in navigating both worlds safely and **digital skills need to be integrated and understood as a life skill.**

Digital wellbeing, safety and citizenship should be core to our conversations, helping young people to become healthy, happy digital citizens. This means exploring topics like mis- and disinformation, content consumption, online safety, privacy and managing screen time.

Pop out: What is mis and disinformation?

Misinformation is false or misleading information shared without intent to deceive, while disinformation is false information deliberately spread to mislead. Social media contributes to the spreading of both misinformation and disinformation very quickly because people can share content instantly with large audiences, often without checking if it's true.

When developing any youth work programmes, digital wellbeing should be integrated into your delivery and curriculum plans. This may look like for example specific sessions delivered on gaming and screen time. [The National Centre for Gaming Disorders](#) and [Ygam](#) provide several resources on this topic. It may also look like an end of session check-in, ensuring young people have a screen break post-session if the delivery method is online. Digital youth work must always provide a balance between supporting young people in places and ways in which they would like to engage- and ensuring they have and are supported to develop healthy digital habits.

There are lots of resources and tools available on the topic of digital wellbeing: here are just a few to get you started

- [Safety and Security Online | SWGfL](#)
- [Keep Children Safe Online: Information, advice, support - Internet Matters](#)
- [Be Internet Citizens](#)

HOT TOPIC: AI Companions

AI has dominated headlines since the rise of Generative AI, but a new and growing risk is emerging in the form of AI companions. While these tools can provide comfort and personalised support, there are currently very few restrictions on how they may operate and regulation lags far behind. Without proper safeguards, AI companions could contribute to disinformation, create overreliance and expose young people to harmful

content. This makes AI literacy essential when working with young people to ensure they can navigate these technologies safely.

Read: [Me-Myself-AI-Report.pdf](#) and include AI literacy in your delivery.

What are AI companions?

According to the [Ada Lovelace Institute](#):

AI companion services are for-profit enterprises and maximise user engagement by offering appealing features like indefinite attention, patience and empathy. Their product strategy is similar to that of social media companies, which feed off users' attention and usually offer consumers what they can't resist more than what they need³

AI companion examples and articles:

- [Replika](#)
- [Character.ai](#)
- [I tried Grok's new companion feature — and I've never felt so uncomfortable | Tom's Guide](#)

Action: Explore the resources and develop a session plan on digital wellbeing (top tip: you can use AI to support the development of your session plan, refer to your organisations guidance on the use of AI)

Tip 5: Horizon scan: A Digital-Ready Youth Workforce

You don't have to know everything, but staying connected to future tech developments is crucial.

AI felt like it dropped out of the sky when ChatGPT launched but it has been quietly shaping our lives for years, built into everything from smartphones to cars.

Being ready for change puts us in a stronger position to respond to young people's needs as they evolve. That could mean keeping an eye out yourself or having a dedicated colleague take on that role. Either way, someone in the team should be horizon-scanning.

And to help with that horizon scanning- get onto LinkedIn, engage with social media and check out interactive tools such as the digital youth index that offer insight into the digital lives of young people:

[The Digital Youth Index - Understand the Impact of Technology on Young People](#)

Action: Sign up to some tech newsletters to keep in touch with tech trends and developments.

³ [Friends for sale: the rise and risks of AI companions | Ada Lovelace Institute](#)

[Tech Decoded: The latest technology news direct to your inbox - BBC News](#)

[Gartner Newsletter Signup](#)

[Newsletters | WIRED](#)

[All Articles | Bernard Marr](#)

Tip 6: Learn from the best

There are some incredible digital youth work projects across the country. Have a look at some of the case studies below for inspiration

Case Study: Essex Youth Service Video Gaming Club

[Join Us Online!](#)

Since 2020 Essex Youth Service have been running their Video Gaming clubs developing a Virtual Youth Centre on the gaming platform Roblox.

- **Targeted and open-access to meet need** – there are two different clubs on offer for young people, one for ages 13-19 and one for 11–19-year-old young carers. This allows for the young carers to more easily access respite they might struggle to due to their caring responsibilities.
- **Complementary online and offline models** – After the pandemic, the clubs began to meet in-person. The online model engages young people where they are comfortable and spend much of their time and helps them build healthy online habits. In-person groups help develop their social skills outside virtual environments, though digital technology is used at these sessions, such as Virtual Reality headsets. In-person sessions also help Essex Youth Service to encourage participants to engage in other youth provision in the area.
- **A pathway of involvement** – Young people are heavily involved in the planning and delivery of sessions, including co-design of the curriculum and risk assessments. This engenders a sense of ownership and has led to participants becoming volunteers and leading sessions themselves.
- **Skills development** – In addition to developing young people’s social and soft skills, some participating young people go on to pursue careers in the gaming industry. Their engagement with the club furthers their interest in gaming but also gives them valuable experience for their CV and puts them directly in touch with industry figures, who have delivered sessions.

Case Study: Cystic Fibrosis Trust Digital Youth Work Programme

[CF Youth programme | Cystic Fibrosis Trust](#)

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust's youth programme is a pioneering example of how digital youth work can overcome physical barriers to connection. Designed specifically for children, young people, and families affected by cystic fibrosis (CF) a condition that prevents in-person contact due to the risk of cross-infection; the programme offers a fully online, vibrant community built around three core strands. In 2024/25, the programme supported 185 participants, with engagement continuing to grow year on year.

For children aged 6 to 14, *Building Brighter Futures* offers skill-building workshops and fun, interactive events that help reduce loneliness and build confidence. Young people aged 14 to 25 can join the *Youth Advisory Group (YAG)*, where they take on leadership roles, shape CF-related projects, and lead social action initiatives. Meanwhile, *Strong Beginnings* provides vital peer support to parents of children under two, helping them build resilience and optimism for the future.

Broad Impact: The programme's impact is wide-reaching. Young people describe feeling less isolated and more connected, often referring to the programme as a club they're proud to be part of. YAG members have redefined their relationship with CF, seeing it as a source of strength and community. One of their standout achievements includes co-creating an internationally recognised medical dictionary for children. Parents, too, report significant improvements in mental wellbeing, with many describing the support as life-changing.

Focus on the Person: The Trust's approach focuses on the whole young person- not just their condition. Using play, creativity, and peer connection to support long-term positive relationships with medical care the cystic fibrosis trust sessions are often co-facilitated by adults living with CF, offering relatable role models and a sense of community. This model not only supports wellbeing but also demonstrates how digital youth work can create meaningful, inclusive communities where in-person interaction isn't possible.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust's youth programme is a transformative model of digital inclusion. It empowers children, young people, and families to feel confident, connected, and resilient- proving that with the right tools and approach, digital spaces can be just as powerful as physical ones.

Case Study: Esports Youth Club [Esports Youth Club | London Gaming Sessions](#)

Esports Youth Club: Making Gaming Accessible for All

Esports Youth Club (EYC) is a not-for-profit organisation transforming how young people engage with gaming and esports across South London.

Creating an inclusive environment:

In 2024 alone, EYC delivered over 200 free sessions, reaching more than 2,000 young people. These sessions focus on building teamwork, community, and gaming skills, while also offering pathways into the UK's largest creative sector. Whether young people are discovering a new passion or refining their competitive edge, EYC provides a welcoming space where young people can form teams, enter tournaments, win prizes, and enjoy a free meal- all in an environment designed to be inclusive and fun.

Recognising barriers:

Recognising the barriers many young people face in accessing gaming- such as the high cost of consoles, games, and reliable internet- EYC has made it its mission to remove these obstacles. With a fully equipped set-up including PS5s, Xbox Series X consoles, gaming PCs, high-spec monitors, headsets, and streaming gear, the club brings professional-grade equipment directly to youth hubs and community spaces.

Accessibility at the core:

By offering free, structured sessions and high-quality equipment, EYC opens doors for young people who might otherwise be left out of traditional youth work activities. The club's relaxed and open atmosphere provides a safe space for young gamers to connect, escape, and thrive whether they're casually playing or dreaming of a future in esports.

Case Study: Fenland Youth Tribe: TikTok Digital Youth Engagement in Action

Fenland Youth Tribe is a dynamic digital youth work initiative led by Cambridgeshire County Council in partnership with the Fenland Youth Work Network. Launched in November 2024 and now entering its second year thanks to continued support from funders, the project is designed to amplify youth voices, reduce risk, and build stronger communities across Fenland.

Working with young people aged 11–18, the programme uses TikTok (@fenlandyouthtribe) and Facebook to connect with young people in their own spaces. Weekly filming sessions delivered through detached youth work capture authentic stories, concerns, and celebrations from young people themselves with a recent video reaching 47,000 views.

Empowering young people through social media:

At its core, Fenland Youth Tribe is about empowerment. Young people are supported to lead campaigns, influence local decisions, and advocate for safer, more inclusive communities. The relaxed, informal style of engagement builds trust, especially with those at risk of violence, exploitation, poverty, or school exclusion. Through consistent presence and creative content, youth workers have developed meaningful relationships that enable timely intervention and support.

Digital impact:

Young people who were previously disengaged are now actively involved in community life, leading to reduced anti-social behaviour and increased social mobility. Emotional wellbeing has improved, with young people reporting a stronger sense of belonging, new friendships, and re-engagement in education and training. The initiative has also facilitated access to mental health support and helped develop life skills through involvement in video creation and editing.

Feedback from young people highlights the value of being seen and heard: “No one ever does this sort of thing for us, no one keeps coming back,” shared one young person. Another said, “It helped me to join the rugby club,” while others spoke of escaping isolation and finding new purpose.

Fenland Youth Tribe is a powerful example of how digital youth work can be both responsive and transformative. By placing young people at the heart of the process, and embracing new ways of working, the project has created a sustainable model for long-term community change one TikTok at a time.

Case Study: Routes to Community Success- Young Digital Directors leading opportunities and innovation in digital youth work

[Digital Youth Work - National Youth Agency](#)

We hope this resource has supported you or inspired you to begin your digital youth work journey.

Connect with us!

Did you know: The NYA runs a digital youth workers network, a space for practitioners to connect, share best practice and discuss a number of themes from AI and Deepfakes to the new Nintendo Switch 2. [Click here to sign up and join our mailing list:](#)

<https://forms.office.com/e/m1LLAEdCW1>

For further information and to access our resources on digital youth work visit [Digital Youth Work - National Youth Agency](#)

All links are correct and live at time of publication.