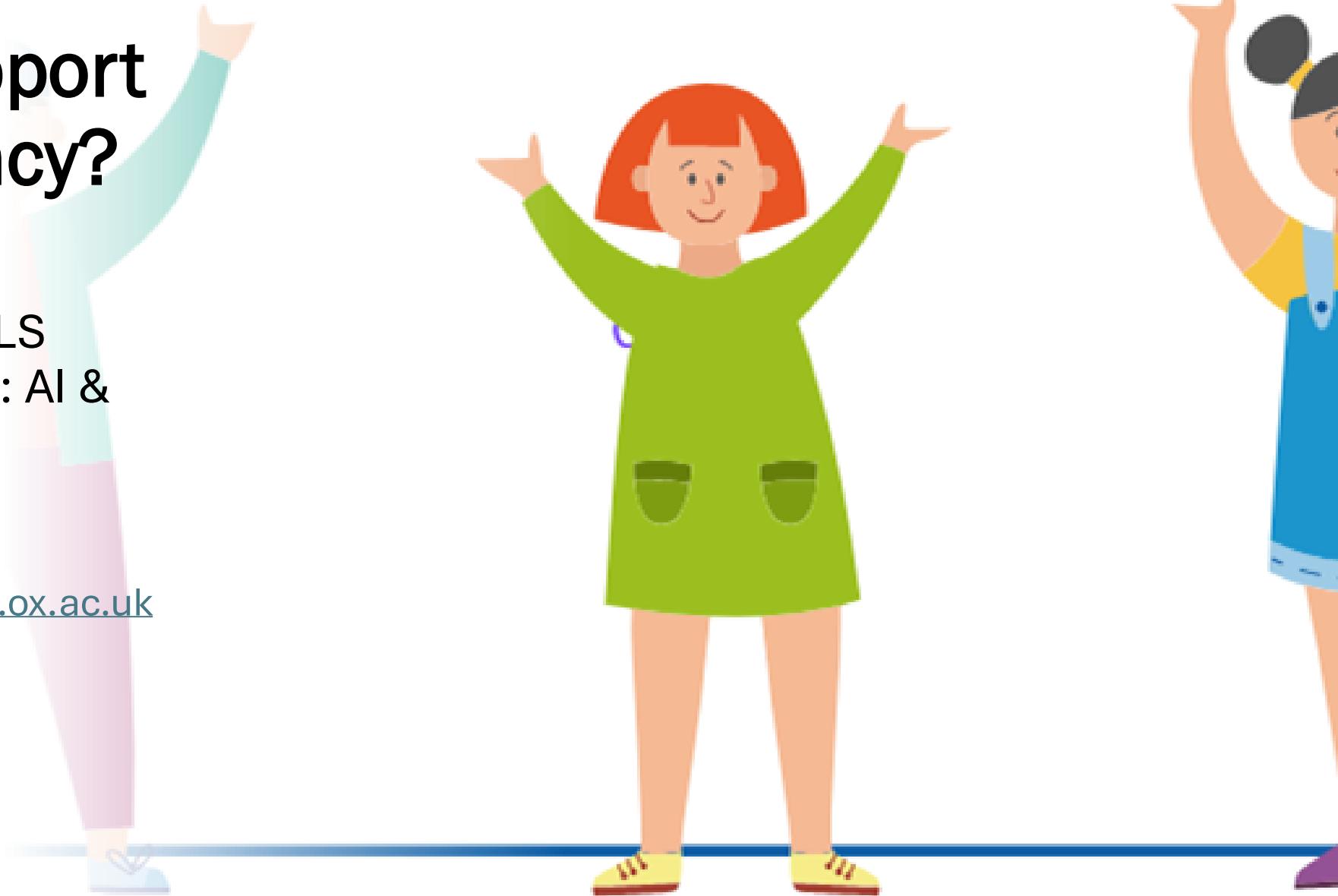


How can AI support children's agency?

Presentation for the MPLS
Researcher Conference: AI &
Ethics 15 January 2026

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CHAILD Project

Children's Agency in the Age of AI: Leveraging Interdisciplinarity



Project partners

Co-investigators:

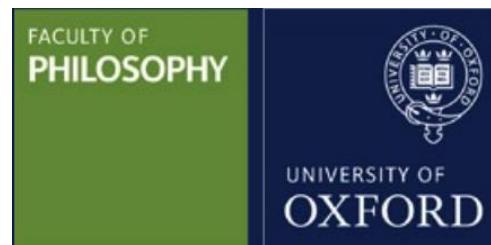
- Professor Sir Nigel Shadbolt, University of Oxford
- Dr Jun Zhao, University of Oxford
- Professor Manolis Mavrikis, University College London
- Dr Carina Prunkl, Inria & University of Oxford
- Professor Kaśka Porayska-Pomsta, University College London
- Professor Wayne Holmes, University College London
- Baroness Beeban Kidron, 5Rights Foundation

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Associated researchers:

- Dr Sarah Turner, University College London



Why is studying agency in children important?

Current approaches to children's digital experiences are largely dominated by restrictive and protective measures...



The Independent news website features a prominent article titled 'IN FOCUS' with the headline: 'Make schools screen free again: The bipartisan push to digitally detox American students'. The article discusses the push by educators and state legislators to ban smartphones in schools. The author is Io Dodds. The date is Saturday 10 January 2026 15:44 GMT.



UNICEF Australia website header with navigation links: Support us, What we do, About us, Stories & news, and a search icon.

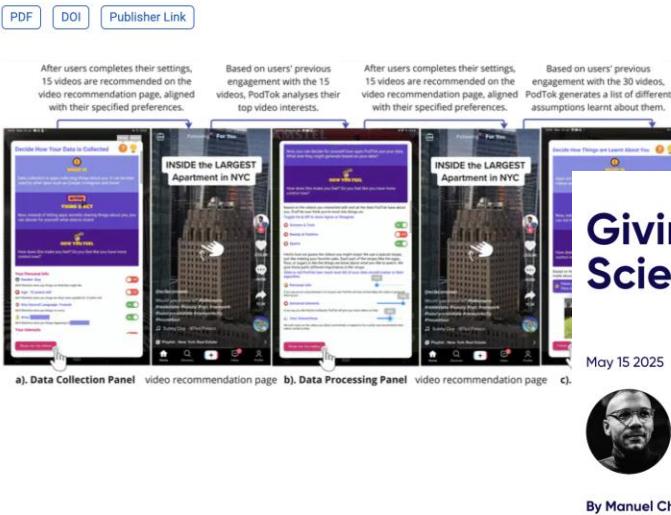
Social media ban



Why is studying agency in children important?

CHAITok: A Proof-of-Concept System
Supporting Children's Sense of Data
Autonomy on Social Media

Ge Wang, Jun Zhao, Samantha-Kaye Johnston, Zhilin Zhang, Max Van Kleek, Nigel Shadbolt
May 12 2020



...they neglect considering the children's potential to exercise control and make age-appropriate, informed choices.

Giving Children Agency: Co-Designing Science Projects with Schools



Our aim



Operationalize the concept of children's agency into a practical and measurable framework for its evaluation. We are interested in offering both practical outcomes (design guidelines and policy recommendations), and address normative concerns, including responsibility and accountability allocation, effective human rights protection, and the promotion of human flourishing.



How do we get there?

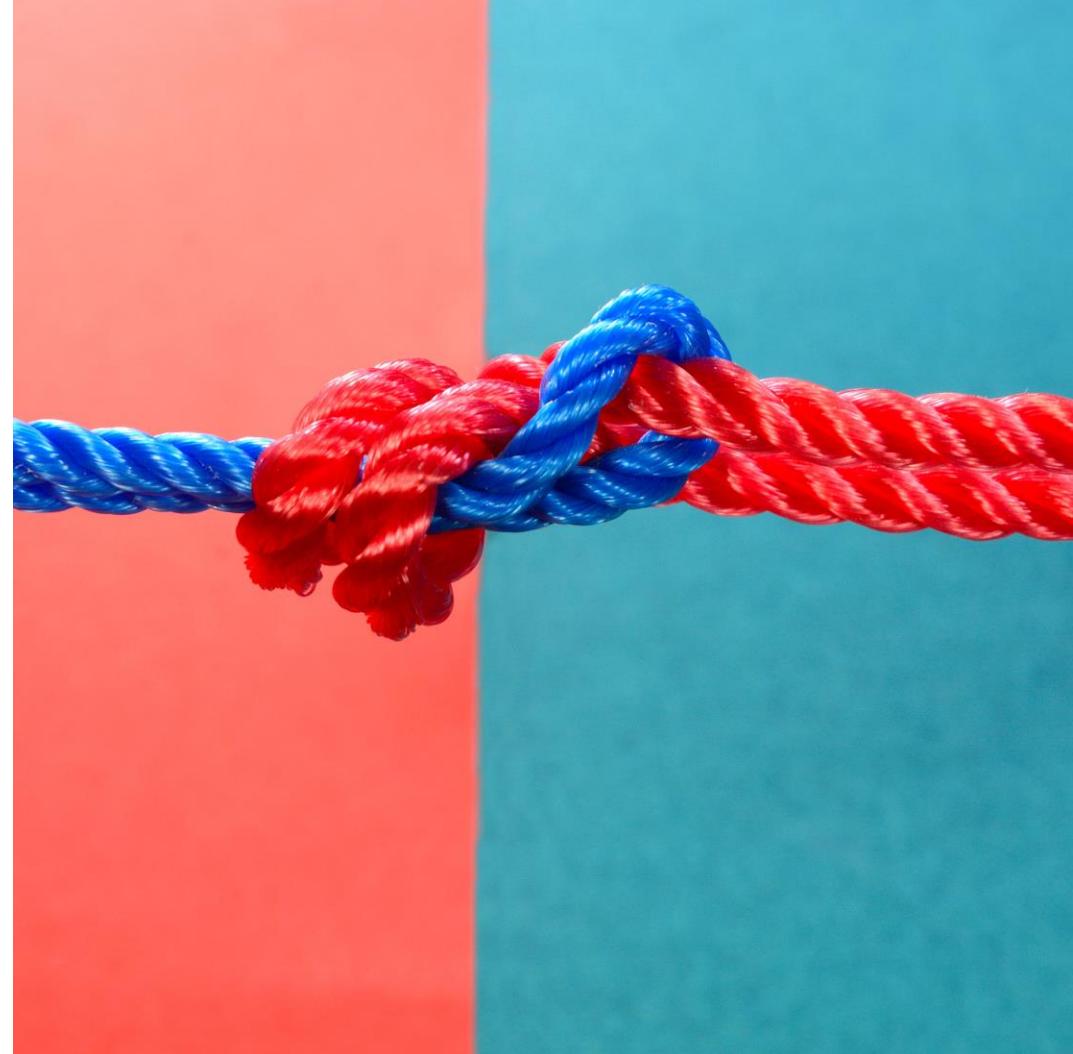
Our approach: leveraging interdisciplinarity

- **Philosophy**

Develop the conceptual foundations
for agency in children

- **Computer Science**

Develop an agency-by-design
approach



Agency dimension explored	Agency definition
Multi-dimensional agency	<p>Children and youths</p> <p>Agency as the ability to exercise control over one's life, connected with notions like autonomy, nonconformity, internal locus of control, resistance to persuasion by parents or peers, self-determination and competence. (Beyers et al., 2003)</p> <p>Agency as a global belief in one's ability to make and attain goals in general (Berhane et al., 2019; Poteat et al., 2018)</p> <p>Agency as individuals' capacity to gain control over their lives (Burger & Walk, 2016)</p> <p>Agency is conceptualized as individuals' control over their environment (Krauss et al., 2014)</p> <p>Agency as the ability to act independently from others and the ability to choose from different opportunities (Steckermeier, 2019)</p> <p>Agency refers to the sense of having the capacity for meaningful and successful action, something related but of equivalent, to the perception of having structural opportunities to exercise such capacities" "is the self-reflective belief about one's capacity to achieve life course goals, influencing perseverance across difficult life course situations (Hitlin & Elder, 2007)</p> <p>Agency is more than independence or autonomy: it refers to a person's capacity, willingness and ability to actively construct their life course (Williams & Merten, 2014)</p> <p>Agency as the capacity to make purposeful choices as well as external factors, or opportunity structures that create the enabling environment within which individuals pursue their interest (Zimmerman et al., 2019)</p> <p>Agency as the capacity to act positively across space and time with respect to oppressive structure in one's environment (Veronese et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b)</p>

Cavazzoni, F., Fiorini, A. & Veronese, G. How Do We Assess How Agentic We Are? A Literature Review of Existing Instruments to Evaluate and Measure Individuals' Agency. *Soc Indic Res* **159**, 1125–1153 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-021-02791-8>

Views of agency

Capacity to act

Making meaningful choices

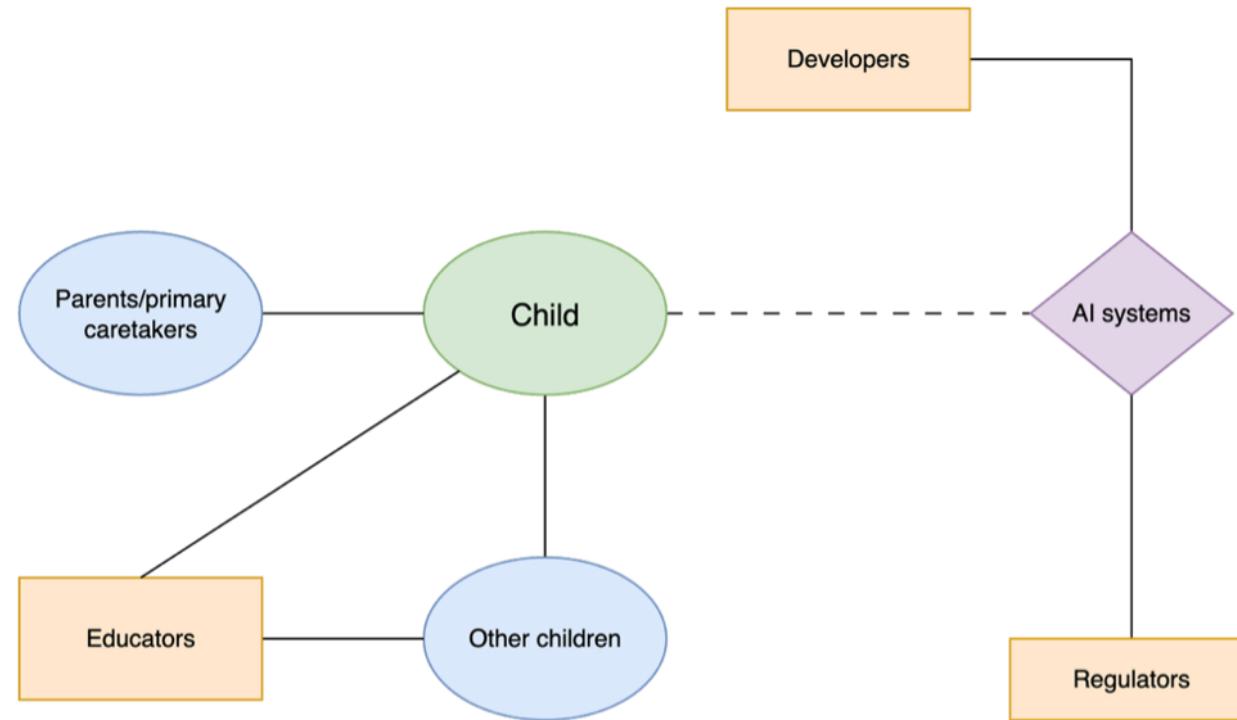
Influencing / not being influenced

Having power/control over own life



[“in the driver's seat” by Leonard J Matthews, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

A relational lens



Have a conversation with an AI language model and tell us what you think!

1 examples created [?](#)

Now start the conversation with your question, request or statement.

What could be some Christmas gifts that I can make at home for my family?

Rate the model responses. There are no right or wrong answers. Use your subjective judgement.

Homemade Christmas gifts can be heartwarming and personal. Consider:

1. **Infused Oils or Vinegar**: A thoughtful kitchen addition.
2. **Handmade Candles**: Perfect for cozy winter nights.
3. **DIY Bath Bombs**: A relaxing treat.
4. **Photography Books**: Collect family memories in a keepsake.
5. **Custom Jewelry**: A unique and personal piece.
6. **Knitted or Crocheted Items**: Warm scarves, hats, or blankets.

You could make personalized photo albums, homemade candles, baked goods like cookies or fudge, knitted scarves, or custom ornaments.

Handwritten letters, framed family recipes, or a DIY coupon book for chores or fun activities also make thoughtful, heartfelt gifts.

Option #1 [Top Answer](#)

Option #2 [Top Answer](#)

It's a tie

All are bad

[Send Rating](#)

CHAILD Youth PRISM study (unreleased)

1. Think of something you want AI to help with

BUT think about...

How to ask AI questions [+](#)

Some risks to think about [+](#)

Here's an example. What are the issues here? [+](#)

2. Write your message.

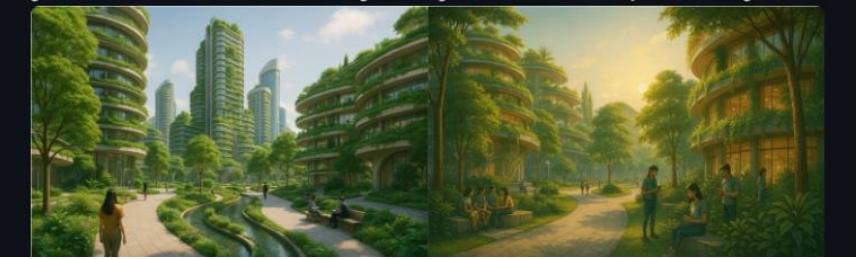
Add your text here, it could be something like summarising text e.g. a news article, research paper, essay etc. or asking it for some information on a topic you are interested in.

[Go](#)

<https://www.realchatai.org/>

StoryBot Adventure

Welcome to Verdancia - a near-future city built by the United Nations Environment Programme to lower global emissions. Verdancia is known for its green living and bold innovations in youth wellbeing.



<https://design-fiction-study.streamlit.app/>

Training Data [+](#) Write [Upload](#) [Search](#) 0 Samples

Training [Data](#) 00:00 Min Sec Remaining 0 Sec

Model [Create](#) [Upload](#) [Search](#) 0 Samples Remaining

Generation Type an optional prompt here... [Generate](#)

Evaluation 0% Quality

Little Language Machine (unreleased)

How do children perceive generative AI or Large Language Models (LLMs)?



<https://forms.office.com/e/4CBKeYPxcW>

Challenges and questions for discussion

- In what ways do you see AI systems challenge human agency?
- Operationalise and measure agency - What metrics could help measure effects on/perception of agency?