

SOCIAL ISSUES BULLETIN

affinity
gospel churches in partnership

SUMMER 2026



**THE VALUE OF
YOUNG LIFE**

ISSN 2755-5615

The Social Issues Bulletin is copyrighted by Affinity. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission (any print use requires further written permission), but they must acknowledge the source and, of course, not change the content.



SOCIAL ISSUES BULLETIN

News, Articles and Reports from the Social Issues Team

ISSUE 61 – JUNE 2026
The Value of Young Life

CONTENTS

Editorial		2
Responding to the reality of abortion	James Mildred	5
The value of children	Fran Kirby	11
Parenting in a disposable age: confusion, concern and a Christian response	Lizzie Harewood	15
Children and AI	Jeremy Peckham	21
Recent Bioethics Issues – November 2025-February 2026	Dr Calum MacKellar	28

The Social Issues Bulletin is published by the Social Issues Team of Affinity

Editor: Fran Kirby, fran@affinity.org.uk

Editorial: The Value of Young Life

In this issue of the *Social Issues Bulletin*, we present four articles that explore issues connected with how we value children.

James Mildred's article (p. 5) details why and how abortion happens, as well as its consequences for those immediately involved and for society as a whole. He reflects on the biblical value for all human life and the importance of both recognising abortion as a deeply serious sin and ensuring that we engage with the topic with gospel grace. James also suggests ways in which we, as individuals and the church, should respond.

Fran Kirby's article (p. 11) on the value of children introduces the topic by exploring how the Bible portrays God's kingdom as one in which children play an intrinsic part. She then presents 22 children's responses to the question 'What do you think it means that children (0-18s) have value?' and reflects on what we can learn from their reflections.

Lizzie Harewood's article (p. 15) explores the UK's declining birth rates and the worsening wellbeing (psychologically, developmentally and behaviourally) of the UK's children. She considers the different ways in which British culture sees parenting in contrast to how the Bible understands it – and how the church can and should respond.

Jeremy Peckham's article (p. 21) reflects on the consequences when technology is overused by children, particularly in relation to education. He reflects on the rise of ChatGPT and how it and its competitors are designed to affirm their users' beliefs and behaviours, which has led to increasing demand for companion chatbots in order to avoid the messiness of real relationships. Jeremy goes on to explore how we decide whether technology can truly be neutral – and how Christians (and particularly parents, pastors and teachers) model an appropriate engagement with AI.

Alongside these four articles, we also include Dr Calum MacKellar's latest review of current bioethics issues (covering November 2025 – February 2026). This includes the UK clinical trial into puberty blockers being put on hold; eugenic selection of embryos taking place in the UK; a Danish sperm bank requiring donors to have a certain IQ as well as police clearance; a UK petition to inform patients if a vaccine was developed from aborted human foetus cell lines; and abortion numbers reaching a record high of 299,614 across the UK.

Responding to the reality of abortion

By James Mildred

The last time there was even a small, slightly modest, ‘pro-life’ law change was in 1990 when the time limit was lowered from 28 weeks to 24. And even then, at the same time as the time limit was reduced, Parliament approved an amendment to legalise abortion to birth in cases of ‘serious handicap’. This has been used to justify abortion on the basis of club foot, cleft lip and other treatable disabilities.

In other words, it has been more than 35 years since there was any positive legislative movement on this issue. And this year, the situation has only become more extreme. MPs and then Peers have approved an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to partially decriminalise abortion in England and Wales and this has officially become law. A woman who procures abortion pills and takes them at home will not be guilty of an offence, even if she terminates her baby right up to the point of birth.

In light of these tragic and disturbing realities, it is right that we ask ourselves: what must we do?

Abortion: its reality and its impact

Before answering that question, I think it would be helpful at this point to clarify what abortion actually is. As with so many things, it is surrounded by euphemisms (healthcare) and so let’s clarify.

- Medical abortion (85% of UK abortions): medical abortions use drugs to kill unborn babies.
- Early medical abortions: the mum is given a drug called Mifepristone and the result is the lining of the womb begins to deteriorate and the growing child is starved of oxygen and nutrients. A second drug called Misoprostol is taken and this is to induce contractions to push the unborn child out the uterus.
- After 21 weeks and 5 days, Potassium chloride is injected into the baby’s heart and they suffer a heart attack. Surgical abortion uses metal instruments to kill and extract the unborn baby.

We also need to recognise both the scale of abortion and its ramifications for the whole of society.

Back in 1996, CARE organised an event in the Royal Albert Hall. As part of the service of commemoration, rose petals were dropped from the ceiling of this immense venue. 1 million in total, to mark each of the 1 million abortions that had taken place since 1967. Writing about CARE's history in *Turning the Tide*, Celia Bowring said this: “I felt the tears come streaming down my face. There was something so beautiful and yet so awful about each of those petals. How could we treat the unborn in this way?”

Tragically, if you were to attempt to do the same thing today, you would need not 2 million, or three. Not five or six. Not even eight or nine. No, you would need more than 11 million petals to mark the lives lost. And that is just in the UK.

Yet it is at this point that we must acknowledge something. It is one thing to point out the numbers, it is another to remember that behind each one there is a story and stories of different kinds as well.

When you start looking at the reasons why women choose an abortion, it is simply not the case that every one of them makes it as some sort of 'political statement' asserting their rights. It is one of the desperate ironies that, on the one hand, you have an abortion lobby desperate to celebrate abortion and see it as the highest good. And on the other, you have stories of women going through a crisis pregnancy, who deep down don't want to have an abortion but feel like they have no other option.

All sorts of factors push women towards an abortion, including poverty and the dad's failure to stick around. We must also account for the fact it has been culturally normalized and so some women will choose it because they think it is normal and even 'empowering'.

Yet when a woman has to decide whether to have an abortion, she is often at the point of crisis. The pregnancy may be unexpected, unplanned, or complicated for medical reasons. A colleague of mine who is involved in post-abortion counselling said: "Her hormones are all over the place and she is facing an uncertain, possibly frightening future."

Abortion harms the baby and it also harms women as well. One of the most pernicious lies the abortion lobbies tries to sell is the notion that you can have an abortion and it solves your problem. Do they honestly believe that you can act against nature in such a way and not experience any consequences?

Here is my colleague again on what many women experience and feel after an abortion: "Many will feel deep sadness, isolation, guilt and shame but also depression. Many self-harm, either physically or through other means such as emotional eating or sabotaging relationships. Some become suicidal, some abuse drugs or alcohol to numb the feelings or deny that the abortion happened or that they have any pain."

And even more broadly, it harms wider society. One example of this is the collapse in the birthrate which means we are storing up huge problems over the coming decades as the number of people dying is greater than the number being born.

Abortion is a serious sin

The reality of what happens during an abortion, the truth about its scale and its consequences across society lead us to another conclusion. Abortion is a serious sin. Today it is common to avoid this sort of language, even in the church. But I don't think we serve anyone by playing this down.

Every sin is worthy of condemnation and must meet the justice of God. But throughout the Bible, there are some acts and sins that are more severe than others. This is taught very clearly in the various penalties attached to different crimes in the law of Moses. For example, the crime of intentional murder carries a stronger penalty than some forms of stealing. In other words, taking another human being's life is a more serious sin than stealing a chocolate bar from the shop.

Abortion involves the taking of human life and it is therefore a more serious sin than others. If we turn to the book of Psalms, we find another element we must consider.

Consider Psalm 106:34-39: "They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded then, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshipped their idols which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to false gods. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did by their deeds they prostituted themselves."

Do you notice the condemnation that Israel, by sacrificing children to a false god, had “shed innocent blood”? This is a key biblical category when it comes to abortion. It does not deny biblical teaching on original sin, or the doctrine of total depravity. Rather, the category of the innocent simply reflects reality that an individual can be innocent of any crime, yet receive a punishment as if they were guilty of a capital offence.

This obviously applies to abortion. Aborted babies have done nothing deserving anything remotely close to what is done to them. Biblically, therefore, abortion involves taking innocent lives.

The seriousness of this becomes even clearer when we consider how the Bible is crystal clear about the value of human life. If any of us has any doubt about this at all, I would start by pointing us to the incarnation of our Lord Jesus.

To my mind, this is the most powerful argument for the dignity of life in the womb that you can find. The eternal Word – the one by whom and for all whom all things were made – the Son of God himself – willingly took on flesh and exchanged the glory and light of heaven for the darkness and vulnerability of the womb.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, we do not need to choose an arbitrary point in his development when he ‘became’ incarnate. The idea that Jesus only became a human person at week 12, or 24, or at birth is foreign and alien to Hebrew thought and to biblical teaching. Psalm 139 reminds us that God knits us together in our mother’s womb and we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (v. 15). Multiple people in the Old and New Testament are set apart for the Lord’s purposes while they are still in the womb (e.g. Genesis 25:23; Judges 13:5; Isaiah 49:1; Luke 1:15; Galatians 1:15). Moreover, Luke uses the Greek word ‘*brepheos*’ to describe both John the Baptist in the womb (Luke 1:41) and the newborn Lord Jesus (Luke 2:16). This Gentile physician clearly saw personhood in both. From the very moment of conception, all human beings are made in God’s image – and it is deeply evil to intentionally desecrate the work of God by destroying what he has made.

Yes, a human embryo in the womb just after fertilisation is desperately vulnerable. But is that any different from humanity at other stages of life? A newborn baby is vulnerable. A toddler is vulnerable. A teenager is vulnerable. As our bodies age, our vulnerability only increases.

In fact, this is the biblical paradox of being human. We are, on the one hand, frail and fragile masterpieces. David says in Psalm 8:4, “what is man, that you are mindful of him?” Here he acknowledges our smallness compared to God. But in the very next verse he expresses wonder at our dignity: “yet you made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour.”

An embryo in the womb is desperately vulnerable, but no less human and worthy of protection than anyone outside the womb. The Bible does not force us to classify human beings in this way, whereby we say some have dignity and some don’t.

Life, biblically speaking, is sacred from conception through to its natural end.

So how is abortion justified? Especially when advocates today, by and large, agree that life begins at conception.

The answer lies in an especially pernicious philosophy called personhood theory. Our secular world has abandoned God and in doing so, has fundamentally destroyed the notion that humans are embodied souls. Instead, we are simply evolved animals, bags of chemicals who have no real purpose or meaning in this world.

One of the results of this pernicious lie is it creates a false dichotomy between our physical selves and our 'real selves'. In other words, in the womb, we are just a physical fetus and most personhood theory believers say you are really only human when you are born.

This is what Professor Nancy Pearcey says in her brilliant book, *Love Thy Body*:

The assumption at the heart of abortion, then, is personhood theory, with its two-tiered view of the human being – one that sees no value in a living human body but places all our worth in the mind or consciousness.

Personhood thus presumes a very low view of the human body, which ultimately dehumanizes all of us. For if our bodies do not have inherent value, then a key part of our identity is devalued. What we will discover is that this same body/person dichotomy, with its denigration of the body, is the unspoken assumption driving secular views on euthanasia, sexuality, homosexuality, transgenderism, and a host of related ethical issues.¹

You can see why, under this analysis, abortion is possible. Yes, they say, life begins at conception, but not human life. That only begins when you're born, or in the case of ethicist Peter Singer, much later in life when you're two or three years old.

Personhood theory is deeply wicked. It forces apart what God, the Creator, has joined together. We should recognise it, call it out and point people to God's better story.

We should seek a total end to abortion

So here we are.

More than eleven million abortions since 1967, when parliament passed the Abortion Act. Hundreds of thousands now each year. Countless lives lost and many more broken by our permissive abortion laws. And so the question is: what next?

Politically, the answer seems obvious: make abortion ever more available. Even the recent move to partially decriminalise abortion still means a woman can be criminalised and a doctor too if she procure an abortion for a healthy baby outside of her home. It won't be long before campaigners argue this is an unsatisfactory arrangement and push for full decriminalisation.

If you were to ask me what signs of hope are there politically, I would say: relatively few. The best I can think of is that our ever more extreme abortion laws are at least out of step with the general public. Polling has demonstrated that whilst the British public support abortion, they do not think it should be available on demand for any reason. There are also some signs that younger voters, Gen Z, are more likely to be pro-life.

The truth is that politically, at the moment, the best you could hope for is to nudge things in a better direction. For example, pursuing a reduction in the time limit from 24 weeks to 22, on the same rationale and basis as the limit was reduced in 1990 is one area that might yield progress.

In my time at CARE, I've been involved in attempts to outlaw abortion on the basis of Down syndrome, or disabilities that are treatable, of sex-selective abortion and a reduction in the abortion time limit. And all have failed. Even in Northern Ireland, nominally the most pro-life part of the UK, a private members bill to outlaw abortion to birth for fetal abnormality failed to progress.

¹ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body* (Baker Books, 2018), p. 20.

Pursuing these incremental laws does not change our end goal. We want an end to abortion.

The church has a vital role to play

In pursuing this goal, the church has a vital role to play. Yet perhaps too often, fear of what people might think overrides our commitment to biblical truth.

The more I've worked on this issue, the more convinced I am that the Devil has blinded us with fear of man. We tip-toe around it too much, if we even mention it at all. We are more concerned with not causing offence than we are with proclaiming the truth.

Yet we must be wary of the other extreme. There is a danger we talk about abortion in such a totally insensitive, tactless and cruel way that might be filled with truth, but has no grace in it at all.

As ever, he is our example. Our Lord Jesus Christ, we are told by the Apostle John, came from the Father, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). I think this means acknowledging the pain and hurt of past abortions, as well as its sinful character as we hold out Christ as the great Saviour from sin. It means being compassionate as we recognise the complexity of emotions involved in a crisis pregnancy and seek to persuade others. And we must be patient in explaining the Bible's better story when it comes to abortion.

So, what can churches do?

The first part of the action we must take is to pray about this issue in our churches. This should be done both in our pastoral prayers and also in our prayer meetings. If your church has small groups, then it should be included within that.

There are multiple ways of doing this. For example, you can highlight one key piece of legislation to help your church pray through that. Or you can lead your church in lament for the lives that have been lost.

This does seem to be a practice that we have lost – the art of lamenting. And what topic, apart from the sheer number of lost souls out there, should call forth lament from us other than the number of abortions happening each year and the way this horrendous practice has been normalised?

Pray for all endeavours to persuade women not to have abortions. Pray for groups like Options and Pregnancy Centres Network that they will be helped to speak the truth in love. Another idea is to use key anniversaries to pray about this issue. You'll need to get creative and you'll need to be intentional but please pray!

Beyond praying, there are so many different ways to get involved in pro-life action. Here is an excellent section from a sermon preached by John Piper:

Let me begin by saying this morning that in the diversity of the body of Christ some Christians should be focusing pro-life energy on the enactment of legislation that will protect the unborn. Other Christians should focus pro-life energy on educational strategies that promote the wisdom of sexual chastity before marriage and heterosexual faithfulness in marriage. Other Christians should focus pro-life energy on crisis pregnancy ministries—counselling, housing, health care. Other Christians should focus pro-life energies on adoption services—counselling, foster care, new parent connections. Other Christians should focus their pro-life energy on post-abortion ministries of counselling and care. Other Christians should focus their pro-life energy on sidewalk counselling or other forms of peaceful, public demonstration. Some

Christians should specialize in extraordinary prayer, some should specialize in thinking and writing, and some should specialize in public action.²

In terms of public action, can I commend March for Life? It is an opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with some evangelicals, but also with Catholics and those who support the pro-life position.

For any preachers and elders reading this, you could follow the example of John Piper and devote at least one sermon a year specifically to the issue of abortion, in recognition of the seriousness of the issue.

Secondly, you could provide a series of seminars, perhaps reflecting different perspectives: from a doctor, from a campaigner, from a woman who has had an abortion in her past.

Thirdly, you could teach on abortion in a wider series on what it means to be human.

Conclusion

There is much in this article I have not said. For example, I've said little about the reality of home abortions and the damage done by this policy. I've said nothing really about the new national buffer zone law and the fact that some campaigners like Isabelle Vaughan-Spruce have been arrested for silent praying. Nor have I unpacked in full detail what decriminalisation of abortion really means.

But what I hope you have heard is a passionate plea to take this issue seriously and to preach, teach, pray and where you can, take political action. Surely the overwhelming scale of this evil, combined with its multidimensional impact on society means that as pastors and leaders in Christ's church, we have a duty to speak out?

Finally, as we look ahead, our hope rests not ultimately in politics, but in the LORD Almighty. For he is sovereign over all things. He has revealed his heart for those who are on the margins of society, for the most vulnerable. With his help, let us do likewise, speaking up for those without a voice.

James Mildred is CARE's Director of Communications and Engagement. He started working in politics in 2014. He moved to London to work for CARE that same year and also completed a two year church-based training programme.

² John Piper, 'Kingdom Compassion and the Killing of Children', Desiring God, 21 January 1990, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/kingdom-compassion-and-the-killing-of-children>.

The value of children

By Fran Kirby

A vision of God's kingdom

Streets of gold. Walls of precious stones. The divinely lit city with its parade of kings. A vast multiethnic and multilingual crowd standing before the throne. The crystal-clear river flowing from the throne with the tree of life on both sides. If you ask me to picture the new creation, my mental image is likely to be full of these huge vistas from Revelation. But as I was researching this article, my attention was hooked by the more intimate vision in Zechariah 8.

Like Revelation, the vision in Zechariah 8 focuses on the New Jerusalem and in particular on its streets. But the description of Revelation's main street – its Piccadilly Circus, if you like – focuses on its transparent gold paving (Rev. 21:21) and its function as a conduit for the river of the water of life (Rev. 22:1). By contrast, Zechariah takes in all of the city's public spaces – and his focus is on the people who inhabit them. He takes in the old men and the old women, sitting in these streets with their walking sticks in their hands (Zech. 8:4). And he sees the mass of boys and girls playing in those same streets (Zech. 8:5).

The idyll of Zechariah 8 involves such complete security that its most vulnerable citizens are able to relax completely in its public spaces without any reference to human means of defence.¹ There are no soldiers and there are no swords. There are neither strong towers nor fortified gates. Nor is the focus on productivity – a stark contrast to most cultures throughout history, even for the very young and very old.² In this city, the old may sit and the young may play. It's probably quite noisy! But you're hearing neither the screams of war nor the churn of the daily grind. It's the sound of security – of rest and joy. In the idyll of Zechariah 8, children are completely at home. They belong. And it's a beautiful portrait of the Bible's famous statement about children: "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matt. 19:14; par. Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16) God's kingdom is where children should be. How can that be the case if they are not infinitely valued by our God now?

Letting children speak

So there you have a brief introduction to the topic from a biblical studies angle, since that's my particular field of study and I wanted to share the joy! But I'd like to spend the majority of this piece allowing children to express their own views and reflecting on what they have said.³ Because as I read about the theology of children, the observation that struck me the most was this: children are rarely given a platform to speak for themselves about themselves.⁴

1 Yair Zakovitch, 'A Garden of Eden in the Squares of Jerusalem: Zachariah 8:4-6', *Gregorianum* 87, no. 2 (2006): 303, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23581589>.

2 Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Abingdon Press, 2004), 176–78, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=5014602>.

3 For the sake of brevity and to avoid confusion about the age group under discussion, this article will not refer to teenagers, youth or young people but will instead consistently use 'child' or 'children' when referring to anyone in the whole 0-18 age range.

4 Jessica Bratt Carle, *Children, Theology, and Bioethics: Beyond Autonomy* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2024), 3.

With that in mind, Graham Nicholls and I contacted various parents we know and requested that they ask their children the following question: “What do you think it means that children (0-18s) have value?” I am extremely thankful for the willingness of those families to discuss my question and particularly to the 22 children for sharing their thoughts with me. I should add (particularly given the relatively small sample size) that this article is not intended to be a comprehensive report about what UK children in Christian households believe about the value of those aged 0-18. Instead, I hope that these children’s insights provide us with a helpful starting point for reflecting further on our own assumptions about the value of children – and an encouragement to find out what your own children think.

I have divided the children’s responses into general categories on the basis of what they have chosen to focus on (which means that some responses will appear twice). Let me encourage you to read the children’s responses prayerfully, slowly and reflectively. There may well be things with which you reasonably disagree. But they also have plenty to teach us – and, as Boaz, Theo, Isaac and Phoebe particularly emphasise, perhaps the most important lesson for us to learn is the importance of making time to listen. After all, the Lord often uses children to reveal divine truths that the adults around them miss (1 Sam. 2:27-3:18; 1 Sam. 19-37; Ps. 8:2; Matt. 21:15-16; Luke 2:41-50).

Children have value because... of their future impact

- *“Because they can study and give knowledge to others.” (Sahith, aged 9)*
- *“I believe we carry potential and represent the future. I can have an impact in people's lives.” (Emmanuel, aged 10)*
- *“Because they are growing and developing.” (Grace, aged 11)*
- *“Children have value because they are the next generation, and they carry our culture.” (Akshith, aged 13)*
- *“I think children have value because they are basically the future of society – because society does not function without babies.” (Natalia, aged 13)*
- *“Children have value because they are the opportunity of the next generation to thrive and succeed in the things the past ones couldn't. Children should be educated and cared for to allow them to grow and achieve great things and do the same for their children.” (Lucas, aged 15)*

Children have value because... they are like adults

- *“I think children have value because they can copy from grown ups.” (Frank, aged 9)*
- *“I think it means that children can show the same values that an adult shows, such as responsibility, honesty and maturity.” (Miguel, aged 12)*
- *“When adults really listen to us and don't just think we always want to break the rules. And sometimes letting kids be kids and not always expecting children to be perfect. But I always feel valued when adults want to talk to me and know about me, and include us in conversations or events.” (Phoebe, aged 15)*

Children have value because... of their intrinsic worth

- *“Because they do.” (Ada, aged 4)*
- *“Children have value because they matter, deserve love, and should be listened to and cared for.” (Tadisa, aged 11)*

Children have value because... adults give it to them

- *“Because they have human rights.” (Josie, aged 7)*
- *“Children have value because their mummy and daddy love them. But some mummies don't love their children. We are special because God made us and loves us and will forgive us even when we make the wrong choices.” (Tabitha, aged 8)*

Children have value because... God made them

- *“Because they are all God's children.” (Boaz, aged 6)*
- *“Children have value because their mummy and daddy love them. But some mummies don't love their children. We are special because God made us and loves us and will forgive us even when we make the wrong choices.” (Tabitha, aged 8)*
- *“We're special because God made us. He made us by saying one word.” (Barney, aged 10)*
- *“It means God made everyone and loves everyone. That the God of the universe took time even to make children in his image shows they have value and worth. When I compare myself with others and feel worthless then it is good to remind myself that we're both made in the same image by the same God.” (Charlotte, aged 16)*

Children have value because... of what they currently have and experience

- *“Because they have bodies and houses and gardens.” (Lucia, aged 4)*
- *“Because I try my best.” (Simeon, aged 6)*
- *“I think children matter because they have different experiences and different things that have happened to them in their life.” (Lois, aged 8)*

Children have value and so...

- *“I feel valued when I am with my family and we're all together and playing a game or spending time together. I do not feel valued when people don't seem to care about me.” (Boaz, aged 10)*
- *“Not always saying 'no' to children's ideas, they could have some importance.” (Theo, aged 11)*
- *“Not making assumptions about children, like whether they are going to break things or mess things up. Not being condescending. If adults are engaging in conversation with you and they want to talk to you, and understand you. That's good.” (Isaac, aged 14)*
- *“When adults really listen to us and don't just think we always want to break the rules. And sometimes letting kids be kids and not always expecting children to be perfect. But I always feel valued when adults want to talk to me and know about me, and include us in conversations or events.” (Phoebe, aged 15)*

Reflecting on the children's contributions

What struck you as you read those 22 responses? Which responses particularly resonated with you? What did you find encouraging? Were there any responses with which you disagreed? Which responses challenged you? And which responses made you smile?

There are so many things I could say in response to any one of those questions. A few rapid-fire reflections. Lucia's answer made me smile. Natalia's point is eminently practical. Tabitha's contribution is heartbreaking – both because we know she is right and because, at eight, she's seen enough of this world's brokenness to be right. I was struck by how profound the youngest children's responses are.

I was humbled by how seriously Sahith, Emmanuel, Akshith and Lucas take their cultural and social responsibilities. I thought six-year-old Boaz, Barney and Charlotte really helpfully articulate biblical explanations for where children get their value from.

I think my biggest lesson came from the many responses that touch on the connection between children's value and how they should therefore be treated by others. These children rightly expect that those who value them would demonstrate it by welcoming their presence, passing on wisdom, rejoicing in their godliness, showing grace when they make mistakes and encouraging their contributions. The children want to see that adults' beliefs are matched by our attitudes and practices. James would have cheered them on with gusto (Jas. 2:14-26).

And so I'm not going to wrap up this article by reflecting on Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13-15, Matthew 19:14, 1 Timothy 4:12 and other relevant passages. I imagine we're all familiar with them and their significance for this topic. I assume that we're all on board with the truth that children are young image-bearers who are loved and valued by God to the extent that he sent his Son to die for them in order to call them into an eternal relationship with him – a relationship that is built on faith and displayed in Christ-like living.

Instead, I want to challenge all of us to reflect on how we put that doctrine into practice.

Let's prayerfully consider whether our belief in the value of children matches up with how we perceive them. When we look at a child (whether related to us or not), who exactly do we see? Do we consistently see a dearly loved image-bearer? Do we always see someone for whom Jesus willingly went to the cross? If the child is not a Christian themselves, do we remember that Jesus is lovingly and continually calling them to be in a relationship with him? If the child is a Christian, do we consider that Jesus has joyfully assigned them tasks of their own to do for him – even today? Either way, do we appreciate how much the Lord wants us to learn from children? Do we appreciate that children are growing people and are we expecting that they will have both high points and low points as they learn new skills? And are we ready to extend grace (as well, yes, as age-appropriate consequences) when they remind us that they're sinners just like we are?

Let's also consider how our attitude, words and actions can either validate or put the lie to our beliefs. To bring this home in one particular sphere, does what we say – both in words and body language – convey to children that we're glad they're present in our churches? Are we evidently thankful for them? Do we regularly pray for them and for their families, leaders and teachers? Do we make space for children to serve the church family in age-appropriate ways? Do we put in the effort to understand them, both as individuals and as a generation? Do we make the time to hear their hopes and regrets, their fears and ideas?

This last section – this whole article, really – is really me challenging myself as I think about the children in my life: my nieces and nephews, my next-door neighbours and my church's children. But I hope that it also spurs you to consider how you perceive and relate to the children in your life. My prayer, for you and for me, is that this is an area in which we would grow by leaps and bounds as we work at emulating our God – the One who made and values all children – by consistently holding out his love to them. After all, this is the God who has (as Zechariah and Jesus remind us) designed his kingdom specifically to include them. Let's model that kingdom now.

Fran Kirby works part-time for Affinity managing their publications and is a part-time MTh student at Edinburgh Theological Seminary. She's married to Tom and they live in Manchester.

Parenting in a disposable age: confusion, concern and a Christian response

By Lizzie Harewood

When I observe the attitudes towards parenting and having children among my peers and in wider society, I am increasingly confused. And I don't think I'm alone.

It seems our culture no longer has a clear understanding of what to make of the role of parents or how to view children. Questions rage over whether the earth is overpopulated and having children is draining its resources. Other corners warn of the catastrophic collapse in birth rates and the economic and social disaster it will create.

Laws are passed that make it possible for a mother to end the life of her unborn child at any stage (in effect, a DIY abortion) with no legal ramifications, yet in England, bereaved parents who lose a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy can now receive a certificate acknowledging their loss and the painful experience of miscarriage.

The contradictions are not confined to policy or debates in the public square. There are more podcasts on raising children and books offering parenting advice than we know what to do with. Parents, particularly in the middle classes, are often overwhelmed with guidance on feeding, sleep routines, discipline strategies, and approaches to emotional regulation. Extracurricular activities demand increasing amounts of time and money, while many parents are adopting a more 'helicopter' approach or what some are calling a 'culture of safetyism': tracking their children's location, closely monitoring their lives, and being nervous of letting their kids play and explore outdoors without supervision.

Yet despite this concern for safety and wellbeing, it will come as no surprise to anyone keeping tabs on what's going on with young people that children in our nation are not happy.

In fact, they seem to be at crisis point.

A generation in crisis

In 2025, the UK ranked 21st out of 36 countries for child wellbeing. It fell into the bottom third for mental health (27th). Teenage life satisfaction was particularly concerning, with the UK ranking joint second lowest. Between 2020/21 and 2022/23, mental health referrals for children and young people rose by over 50%, and among those aged 10–24, mental health conditions now make up around 45% of the total disease burden, with suicide sadly the second leading cause of death.¹

Not only this, but children's health and development seem to have taken a backwards turn. School readiness is in sharp decline. In late 2025, nearly half of teachers surveyed by charity Kindred Square felt the problem was worsening, with particular worries around toileting, deteriorating social skills, and excessive screen use among preschoolers. Many teachers reported children arriving at school without the basic life skills needed to engage with learning, such as being unable to use books properly, even

¹ 'Children's wellbeing in world's wealthiest countries took sharp turn for the worse in wake of COVID-19 pandemic', Unicef, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/uk-joint-second-to-last-for-teenage-life-satisfaction/>.

trying to swipe pages like a screen! Over a quarter of children start primary school still in nappies.² This is something I have sadly had corroborated by primary colleagues across the UK.

You can see why I'm perplexed. Parenting and raising children appear to be analysed to death and idolised in some quarters, yet strangely ineffective or undervalued in others.

Be fruitful and 'increase in number'?

One outworking of this strange contradiction is that fewer couples are actually having children, and those who do are having less of them. The UK faces a 'shortage' of children, with the average birth rate having fallen to around 1.4 children per woman,³ well below the 2.1 needed to sustain the population.

Political commentators on both the left and right often seem at a loss, not wanting to mention cultural and political shifts as a cause. In particular they steer away from discussing the impact of the feminist movement on delaying or rejecting parenthood. Instead, most point to current financial pressures and the cost of living as a key reason couples feel less able to start a family.

As legitimate as economic factors may be, it can become an easy 'get-out clause'. When we make historical comparisons of disposable income and real living standards, it doesn't seem to fully address the issue – especially when we think of birth rates in the 1950s and 60s. And when we compare this to less wealthy nations with significantly higher birth rates, the explanation does not fully stand up to scrutiny.

Having and raising children is central to God's design for human flourishing. Yet, for the first time in history, birth rates are falling to the point where societies are no longer replacing themselves.

So fewer children are being born, and when they are, they are less happy, developmentally needier, demonstrating poorer behaviour at school and at home, and less likely to flourish as they enter adulthood.

And I don't think this crisis our culture is experiencing with regard to children is simply an education issue, nor just the lingering impact of Covid on a generation born at the 'wrong time'. It is not even primarily a crisis of parenting or cost of living. At its root, I believe this is something much deeper: it is a spiritual issue.

There is a lack of biblical framing for the way our culture views children, and for the role and responsibility that parents have. That may seem an obvious observation about the world "out there". But is it also, at times, true within our churches?

Ultimately, we need to ask: what value do children have, who do they belong to, and who is responsible for them? Are they simply part of a cost-benefit calculation, or are they to be received as a gift from God?

2 'School Readiness Survey: February 2024', Kindred, <https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report-Infographic-February-2024.pdf>.

3 'Births in England and Wales: 2024', Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024>.

The commodification of children

We should not be surprised that children are often viewed in terms of the value they bring to their parents' lives – if, of course, they are born at the 'right time' and into the 'right circumstances'. A highly individualistic culture will inevitably commodify children.

Even where we would refrain from endorsing the evils of abortion, Christians are not immune from this framing of children as 'adding or removing value' from their lives, even if unconsciously.

I remember worrying about 'the right time' to have children. Would I be able to pick up my career again? Would we have enough income to maintain our lifestyle? When could we go on our first holiday abroad? What if my baby didn't sleep through the night? How would I work a feeding schedule to ensure my plans for the day would run smoothly? Would I have to give up my evening commitments like choir practice and running club?

You see, I had unconsciously bought into the assumptions of society: that being a parent was first and foremost about my needs, my desires, and my lifestyle; that having a baby was a good thing to do if it enriched my life and didn't impinge too much on my freedoms.

This is in stark contrast to what the Bible teaches. The Bible repeatedly speaks of children as inherent blessings. One of the first commands given to men and women is to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). Later, in the book of Psalms, we are told that "children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him" (Ps. 127:3).

Scripture never says that children are a blessing only if you have good childcare or can afford multiple holidays each year. Nor does it say they are a gift only if they enjoy perfect health or won't place excessive demands on their caregivers.

The posture society encourages us to take flies in the face of the Bible's instruction to deny ourselves (Luke 9:23), to lose our life (Matt. 16:25), to look to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4), and to take up our cross (Matt. 16:24).

What's more, Jesus beautifully affirms the inherent dignity of children when he welcomes them, takes them in his arms, lays his hands on them, and blesses them.

God's view of children is high. Society treats them as a commodity.

Children as 'units of the state'?

'Units of the state' may sound alarmist, but the increasing outsourcing of parenting, particularly to state institutions, is something that should give us pause. A biblical understanding of parental responsibility does not include an ever-widening role for the state. While government has a legitimate function in protecting the most vulnerable, the vast majority of children are best cared for under the authority of their own parents. Nowhere is this tension more clearly seen than in education.

The concept of *in loco parentis* is something that every teacher will be familiar with. Under the Children Act 1989, schools have a duty of care towards pupils, traditionally described in these terms. Teachers are expected to act as a reasonable parent would in safeguarding a child's welfare and safety. The idea dates back to the 19th century, when case law first established that a teacher should act "as a prudent father."

It is a good principle, and one that Christian parents, along with the rest of society, should give thanks for. Many teachers have been on the frontline of meeting genuine unmet needs – feeding children who have not eaten breakfast for the fifth day in a row, washing clothes, and caring for pupils who arrive unkempt. I saw this profound need in one of the schools I taught in, where certain students would be quietly given clean uniform each week and have their hair combed for lice on a regular basis.

But let's not forget that the need itself is tragic. It means something has gone wrong. And it leads to state intervention that is not simply benign or protective of the most vulnerable, but can begin to erode the relationship between every parent and child.

Whole-class mental health initiatives, teachers changing nappies, and schools supervising toothbrushing all point to a widening remit for schools. This raises an important question, particularly for us as Christians: does national policy begin to view children primarily as wards of the state? If so, it risks undermining the family's God-given role.

One example is the government's introduction of free universal breakfast clubs, which are part of a broader shift towards channelling support for children and families through schools. We must not be naive about the realities many families face. A total of 1.9 million children were found to be in deep material poverty, meaning their families cannot afford the essentials they need to live like food and heating.⁴ And over a quarter of primary teachers report personally buying food for hungry pupils. Yet the wider move towards universal provision is telling. The gradual erosion of something as simple as the family breakfast, alongside policies framed around 'saving parents time' (though in reality enabling more hours in work), points to what I think is a troubling shift in priorities.

Alongside this, the expansion of free childcare for working parents of children as young as nine months raises further questions. Even those strongly committed to workplace equality may ask whether such policies are primarily shaped by the needs of such a young baby, or by national economic imperatives.

These things may feel like the thin end of the wedge, but God's word reminds us that children are entrusted to parents, who are called to nurture, instruct, and guide them (Ps. 127:3). While many children in state schools will not come from Christian homes, the principle still stands: parents have the primary responsibility for raising the next generation, and schools, and the state, should support, not seek to replace or redefine that role.

Grace for a complex reality

Perhaps the state stepping in where parents have stepped back is less the root problem and more symptomatic of a deeper disorder. This is not an isolated issue. Rising family breakdown, a weakening sense of community, shifting attitudes towards motherhood, and the economic pressures that often require both parents to work all contribute to the context in which schools and the state are now operating. These trends reflect a society that has, in many ways, moved away from God's good design.

I am also aware of the temptation to speak from something of an ivory tower. I am blessed beyond measure. My husband is godly and wise, a great father, and our children are, by God's kindness, generally easy. I was fortunate to spend much of my time at home with them when they were young. Our wider family and church family is also supportive and generous, and we enjoy strong relationships all round. This is a blessing. I know it is easy to appear detached from the complexity and pain that

⁴ 'Nearly two children in every classroom relying on food banks: "A national emergency"', Big Issue, <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/child-poverty-new-dwp-statistics-food-banks/>.

many families face, and to draw overly simple conclusions. Much grace is needed as we handle these issues.

But when we look at the realities surrounding educational outcomes, wellbeing, and opportunity, it becomes increasingly clear that the context in which a child is raised matters profoundly. Instability in the home is consistently linked with poorer outcomes in education, mental health, and long-term life chances. This is where the ‘rubber hits the road’ in understanding the impact of diverging from God’s good design for family life.

The church’s calling

The church has a responsibility to show the world that children are an inherent blessing. They are not a ‘burden’ or something to be ‘managed’, but gifts from God, even when it isn’t easy. We need to be ‘talking up’ this blessing: extolling the riches of family life in the day-to-day bustle and messiness. That doesn’t mean minimising the work involved in parenting (or pretending we don’t need a good dose of humour to help us through!), but it does mean viewing children as blessings from God to be nurtured and valued. It also means inviting others in the church to share in the blessing of family life, particularly those who may not naturally be able to experience it.

Is this attitude reflected in the way we speak about children in our churches? Do we encourage those who have adult children or no children to come alongside our younger members through formal and informal teaching, friendship, and discipleship? Do we make clear connections between our theology of personhood, the *imago Dei*, and our approach to abortion and adoption? Do we actively support mothers facing unplanned pregnancies? Do we receive those with challenging home lives in our churches with an extra measure of grace? Do we rejoice when babies are born – or do we quietly roll our eyes when larger families announce another pregnancy?

Perhaps one of the greatest temptations for middle-class Christians is inadvertently adopting the idea that children are a project – that their output and achievements must be maximised, their hobbies curated, their academic success prioritised, as though successful outcomes are what really make parenting ‘worthwhile’.

The church’s task, then, is to teach clearly what it means to be parents: that children are entrusted to them yet ultimately belong to God; that the family is a God-given institution which cannot be replaced by the state; and that parenting is an act of stewardship, not simply a lifestyle choice.

Churches must also resist language or practices that sideline parents from the discipleship of their own children. There is a real danger that even effective youth work and children’s ministries begin to replace parents, rather than support and serve them, in their role of teaching and discipling.

Nurturing a Biblical vision

Parenting deserves honour; it is a high calling. But at the same time, it is something that, with the right support, is an immense joy and something we are well equipped to do. As Christians, we must reaffirm the goodness and weight of motherhood and fatherhood. We must advocate against the commodification of children. We must actively work to show the value of each tiny life. If we don’t, who will? Schools and the state can never compensate for the erosion of family life. Engineering circumstances to ensure the ‘perfect’ environment for raising ‘perfect’ children will never succeed – we will always be disappointed. But the Bible’s teaching – that children are a blessing not a burden – frees us to accept his gift to us, however imperfect it may be.

Christians can be confident that God's good design for families not only helps society to flourish and function (though it does), but also communicates something of his loving, relational nature. Family is a key part of his gracious plan for humanity, and the reminder that every child is known, valued, and lovingly formed by God reveals something of his tender heart for every child.

Lizzie Harewood is the Executive Officer of the Association of Christian Teachers. She previously spent 12 years as a secondary school English teacher. Her passion is to equip Christians to be salt and light in the nation's schools. Outside of work, Lizzie supports her husband as he pastors an evangelical church in Yorkshire.

Children and AI

By Jeremy Peckham

In a landmark ruling in a Los Angeles court, a jury found against Instagram and YouTube, concluding that both companies deliberately designed addictive products to hook young users. The courts also found against Meta in a separate set of 38 class action lawsuits, relating to the harms to young people from social media and AI chatbots, concluding that “its products led to child sexual exploitation amongst other harms”.

We have known for some time that social media platforms are designed using insights from casinos and gambling to provide variable intermittent rewards, what the experts call “variable rate reinforcement”, to generate dopamine hits to the brain. Habitual usage, constantly checking our smartphone, responding to notifications and infinite scrolling, where a page or feed has no end, clicking on links that send us down endless rabbit holes, leads to addiction as the brain seeks another dopamine hit. For some, the absence of a phone can result in “phantom” notifications when the body is demanding another dopamine hit.

The habitual use of digital devices by children isn’t just dangerous when it leads to the tragic consequences that have led to many of the lawsuits against Meta and other AI companies, it is also damaging during their formative years and modifies their learning experience. A Principal of a school in Buenos Aires recently commented to me that, despite the school having a smartphone ban, it’s hard to engage the children and to have them answer questions. She went on to say that when the bell goes at the end of school they rush to pick up their rucksacks to retrieve their smartphones. In conversation we concluded that the problem that these children are facing in school is that they are suffering withdrawal symptoms. They are not getting the dopamine hits they are used to from their habitual smart phone usage. The challenge to children’s learning goes deeper than the use of smartphones and goes back to the impact of the digital age, keyboards and computers.

My dentist told me recently that a few years ago, his sister’s child was required to do her homework on an iPad, when she protested and asked for it to be done with pen and paper, they relented but the following year stated that they would no longer support handwritten homework. What can be wrong with that we might think?

Research into the role of handwriting in learning has however demonstrated superior outcomes when compared to keyboarding. It is thought that this is due to the role that the additional cognitive, sensory and motor neurone effort plays in writing when committing ideas or what you hear to paper. We are taking our perceptual understanding of something and using our sensory motor skills (handwriting) to create it. Audrey L. H. Van der Meer, professor of neuropsychology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology put it this way: “It’s very tempting to type down everything that the lecturer is saying. It kind of goes in through your ears and comes out through your fingertips, but you don’t process the incoming information.”¹ There are also more subtle impacts when children who have learned to read and write by tapping on a digital tablet “often have difficulty distinguishing letters that

¹ Quoted in Scientific American regarding the paper - Handwriting but not typewriting leads to widespread brain connectivity: a high-density EEG study with implications for the classroom, *Front. Psychol.*, 26 January 2024, Sec. Educational Psychology, Volume 14 - 2023 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1219945>.

look a lot like each other or that are mirror images of each other, like the b and the d.”² Another study concluded that, “The present findings suggest that the intricate and precisely controlled handwriting movements have a beneficial impact on the brain’s connectivity patterns related to learning and remembering. The present study did not find evidence of such positive activation patterns when using a keyboard.”³

The example of handwriting versus keyboards illustrates a wider problem, the gradual slide in unquestioning adoption of digital technology, the idea that technology is progress and progress is always positive and good for us, even in education and in raising our children. Of course one of the problems with smartphones, social media and AI Chatbots is their design, as I have already pointed out.

When ChatGPT was launched in 2022 it achieved 100m users in just 2 months, a level that it took Facebook 4.5 years to reach. Surveying the take up of ChatGPT in 2025, Menlo Ventures, a prominent venture capitalist firm which is heavily invested in this area commented, “This is no longer experimentation; it’s habit formation at an unprecedented scale.”⁴ Menlo went on to comment that, “The broad appeal of AI is striking: millions of people, across all demographics, applying it to nearly every aspect of daily life. Beneath this diversity is a remarkably consistent behavior pattern, making AI the most broadly utilitarian new technology we’ve seen in years.”⁵ These remarks bring into sharp focus that those developing and invested in this technology are motivated by market share, finding the 'killer app' that will keep people engaged and using the service.

A survey carried out by the LSE, published in February 2026, found that 97% of 8-17 year olds were now using AI tools with 58% saying that it made their life better.⁶ Many are using it for schoolwork work. Vodafone, in a similar survey, found that children turned to AI because it was always available and had a consistently friendly tone, yet more than half felt that AI chatbots blur the line between what’s real and what’s not. A significant number turn to AI chatbots because it feels safer than talking to a person, with a third of the 11-16 year olds surveyed admitting to having shared something with a chatbot that they wouldn’t tell their parents, teachers nor friends.

Not unlike Social Media platform design and other smartphone apps, AI Chatbots are also designed with the goal of keeping people engaged and the survey data suggests this is being achieved. Habitual use across all demographics is the goal of Big Tech, yet little heed is paid to the damage that has already been caused to children from seductive applications and platforms that have resulted in the lawsuits described earlier. Other lawsuits have been filed in the USA for damages against OpenAI, the developer of ChatGPT and other companies offering 'Companion Bots', claiming that use of these Chatbots resulted in the suicide of their children.

Whilst Chatbots utilise a Large Language Model that has been trained on most of the internet, data that would take us 5000 years to read, they undergo a second stage of training where developers provide

2 Ibid.

3 F. R. (Ruud) Van der Weel, Audrey L. H. Van der Meer, 'Handwriting but not typewriting leads to widespread brain connectivity: a high-density EEG study with implications for the classroom', *Front. Psychol.*, 26 January 2024, *Sec. Educational Psychology*, Volume 14 - 2023 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1219945>.

4 Shawn Carolan, Amy Wu Martin, C.C. Gong, Sam Borja with Claude Sonnet 4, '2025: The State of Consumer AI', Menlo Ventures, 26 June 2025, <https://menlovc.com/perspective/2025-the-state-of-consumer-ai/>

5 Ibid.

6 Staksrud, Elisabeth, Mascheroni, Giovanna, Milosevic, Tijana, Ni Bhroin, Niamh, Olafsson, Kjartan, Şengül-İnal, Gülbin, Stoilova, Mariya (2026), 'European children's use and understanding of generative AI: EU Kids Online 2026.' Technical Report. EU Kids Online, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

prompts to the Chatbot and then select their preferred output. This may be on the basis of what seems to them more engaging, helpful or even reflecting what they think is a better answer to a question. The companies determine the goals and behaviour of their products grounded in their own values and corporate goals. This process introduces a further bias into the outputs that AI Chatbots produce, a typical one being sycophancy, where the output is chosen based on what is most likely to please or be helpful to the user, such as being encouraging by responding with words like, 'that's a very smart idea', or 'I'm sure you are right'. Batista and Griffiths note that, "Unlike hallucinations, which introduce falsehoods, sycophancy is a bias in the selection of the data people see. When AI systems are trained to be helpful, they may inadvertently prioritise data that validates the user's narrative over data that gets them closer to the truth."⁷

During a question time after a talk I gave at Reading School recently, one young schoolboy asked, "Does AI have a personality because it always happy to see me?" This is, of course, an illusion. We are wired to respond to natural language interactions as if they were from another human being. If they are programmed to appear helpful, make amusing comments or just simply appear happy to see us, then we tend to wonder, just like the young schoolboy, if they have a personality.

A recent study of this phenomenon across 11 state-of-the-art AI models found that, "models are highly sycophantic: they affirm users' actions 50% more than humans do, and they do so even in cases where user queries mention manipulation, deception, or other relational harms."⁸ The study further found that, "interaction with sycophantic AI models significantly reduced participants' willingness to take actions to repair interpersonal conflict, while increasing their conviction of being in the right."⁹ One of the consequences of designing AI Chatbots with sycophantic responses was that users rated them as higher quality, trusted the Chatbot more making them more willing to use it again. The authors conclude that, "This suggests that people are drawn to AI that unquestioningly validate, even as that validation risks eroding their judgment and reducing their inclination toward prosocial behavior. These preferences create perverse incentives both for people to increasingly rely on sycophantic AI models and for AI model training to favor sycophancy."¹⁰

A consequence of this type of design and behaviour of AI Chatbots is that people can become addicted to them, they are affirming, easy to use and uncritical. Some have been drawn to Companion Bots, artefacts that are designed to be a companion for the user, whether friend or romantic partner with some now preferring an AI boyfriend or girlfriend because they can be tuned to their preferences and avoid the messiness of real human relationships. As one study notes, "higher daily usage—across all modalities and conversation types—correlated with higher loneliness, dependence, and problematic use, and lower socialization."¹¹

These design goals along with the seemingly endless and authoritative outputs that AI Chatbots can provide with simple input prompts are already having a profound impact on children's education. Even if smartphones are banned in schools, most children have one, and access to other devices such as a table or computer at home. This creates a blurring of the role of AI as it's used for learning, entertainment and in communication. A recent Brookings Institute survey on the use and impact of AI

7 Rafael M. Batista & Thomas L. Griffiths, 'A Rational Analysis of the Effects of Sycophantic AI', <https://arxiv.org/abs/2602.14270>

8 Myra Cheng, Cino Lee, Pranav Khadpe, Sunny Yu, Dyllan Han, Dan Jurafsky, 'Sycophantic AI Decreases Prosocial Intentions and Promotes Dependence', arXiv:2510.01395v1 [cs.CY] 1 Oct 2025

9 Ibid.

10 Cheng, 'Sycophantic AI'.

11 Cathy Mengying Fang, et al., 'How AI and human behaviors shape psychosocial effects of chatbot use: a longitudinal randomized controlled study', <https://arxiv.org/html/2503.17473v1>, 2025.

in schools across 50 countries provides an unsettling conclusion, “Used liberally, AI is not a cognitive partner; it is a cognitive surrogate. It does not accelerate children’s cognitive development—it diminishes it.”¹²

Another conclusion of the study was the importance of learning in a social context, something that digital education technology can isolate us from if not used thoughtfully and carefully. Even when AI is not used in the school or is used in more limited ways, children have access to it outside school and are using it for assignments, entertainment and even at times to produce fake images and videos of their school mates, particularly when they want to be nasty to them. One of the Brookings study participants sums up well the challenge that AI Chatbots present, in learning as well as in relationship development, “Young people may gravitate toward AI precisely because it is undemanding, frictionless, and always available. But relationships, at their core, are not about ease. They require negotiation, patience, and the ability to sit with discomfort. We learn empathy not when we are perfectly understood, but when we misunderstand and recover.”¹³

Parents, educators, pastors, church leaders and the public generally should be concerned about the impact of the current craze for AI that is pervading our schools, workplaces, the home and even some churches. Despite our knowledge of the potential harms from this technology, the U.K. government is slow and reluctant to regulate, fearing it will hinder innovation. What they really mean is market adoption! What regulation is passed is often too late and inadequate to solve the problems it seeks to address. Although many schools have banned smartphones in school, as the Buenos Aires school illustrates, unless parents support the motivation behind their ban in the home environment they will simply suffer withdrawal symptoms when deprived of their smartphone at school.

The challenge for parents and other adults is, how can we expect children to not get addicted to smartphones if we are also habitual users? We need to role model and help children understand the dangers of habitual use that can lead to addiction, we need to help children to use digital technology responsibly and intentionally for things that will assist them rather than addict them. The LSE report co-author Dr Mariya Stoilova commented: “Children are not meeting artificial intelligence in the future – they are growing up with it now. They are curious and pragmatic about AI, and what they are asking for is not bans, but guidance, skills and safeguards that let them benefit without being put at risk.”

Many of us are unfortunately in denial about the impact of digital technology citing the well worn meme that “technology is neutral, its how we use it that matters”. This is in part attributable to our acceptance of the idea that technology is progress and that, in itself, is a good thing for humanity. Neil Postman in his book, *Technopoly*, published well before the smartphone and AI craze describes it this way:

It is a world in which the idea of human progress, as Bacon expressed it, has been replaced by the idea of technological progress. The aim is not to reduce ignorance, superstition, and suffering but to accommodate ourselves to the requirements of new technologies. We tell ourselves, of course, that such accommodations will lead to a better life, but that is only the rhetorical residue of a vanishing technocracy. We are a culture consuming itself with information, and many of us do not even wonder how to control the process. We proceed under the assumption that information is our friend, believing that cultures may suffer grievously from a lack of information, which, of course, they do. It is only now beginning to

12 Mary Burns et al., 'A new direction for students in an AI world: Prosper, prepare, protect', Brookings Institute, January 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-direction-for-students-in-an-ai-world-prosper-prepare-protect/>, p. 57.

13 Ibid, p. 72.

*be understood that cultures may also suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms.*¹⁴

Philosophers of technology have studied the impact of technology on societies since the early invention of agricultural tools through the industrial revolution up to the modern digital age. Professor Melvin Kranzberg, a pioneer in the the history of technology, suggests, "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."¹⁵ Expanding on this notion, American academic, Langdon Winner, who has long critiqued technology and its impact on society, claims that "If the experience of modern society shows us anything, however, it is that technologies are not merely aids to human activity but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning."¹⁶

The widespread adoption and eventual normalisation of the use of technology shapes whole societies determined by the design, values and politics surrounding it's development and deployment. Put simply, Postman suggest in a 1998 lecture that, "all technological change is a trade-off. I like to call it a Faustian bargain. Technology giveth and technology taketh away. This means that for every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage. The disadvantage may exceed in importance the advantage, or the advantage may well be worth the cost."¹⁷ Whilst viewed by some as overly pessimistic about the influence of technology on society, he nonetheless concludes that we need to develop a "loving resistance" to its influence.

Putting it another way, I suggest that we need to ask ourselves when we engage with AI Chatbots and tools, "what does it do for us?" and "what is gained?" and to balance these answers by asking, "what is lost in using AI?" and "what does it's use do to us?". We might also ask, "why AI and not our own brain or another human being". The benefits are usually easy to answer, as we have already explored, AI tools provide a fast, easy, frictionless and convenient way to accomplish a wide variety of tasks from creating shopping lists and seeking medical advice to writing an essay or report.

There will usually be a trade off, as Postman suggests, and in children's development we need to question whether convenience and ease of use justifies the potential damage to children's cognitive and emotional development along with the loss suffered in learning outcomes and human relationships that many studies demonstrate. These are tough questions when the alternatives to digital technology, whether games, social media or full blown AI Chatbots, require full on engagement with children from stretched parents and teachers as well as input from other adults involved in children's development.

Will we as Christians model the way forward? We of all people should understand what it means to be made in God's image – *imago Dei* – and to live holy lives which imitate God (Eph. 5:1). Although nowhere defined in the Bible, *imago Dei* nonetheless gives us many examples of what God is like and of course we see in Christ's life on earth how that divine nature was worked out. As the fully divine Son of God and the last Adam, he is the exact representation of God (Heb. 1:3).

The Bible calls Christians to "put off the old self" (Col. 3:9) and to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14) with the implication that this means increasingly reflecting God's image by "supplement[ing] your faith with virtue" (2 Pet. 1:5) – literally, 'excellence of character'. These characteristics align with

14 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1992, p70.

15 Kranzberg, Melvin (July 1986). 'Technology and History: "Kranzberg's Laws"'. *Technology and Culture*. 27 (3): 544–560.

16 Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

17 Neil Postman, Lecture given at the conference, 'The New Technologies and the Human Person: Communicating the Faith in the New Millennium', Denver, 1998, available at <https://student.cs.uwaterloo.ca/~cs492/papers/neil-postman--five-things.html>.

the fruit of the Spirit and produce outcomes such as wisdom, knowledge, discernment, love, kindness and self-control, all of which we should desire to see develop in children, as they too reflect something of God's nature, albeit tarnished by sin.

The intentional design of AI Chatbots to promote habitual use and addiction pushes us in the opposite direction to developing 'excellence of character' because their use will tend to appeal to our vices, by design. We are naturally lazy, wanting easy answers, as a student in the Brooking study commented, "it's easy, you don't have to use your brain".¹⁸ It can be tempting to use AI tools that appeal to other vices like avarice, envy and vainglory and produce more content that will boost our 'likes' and make us look successful and more productive. As James Smith puts it, "Every space is a kind of visual echo chamber. We are no longer seen doing something; we're doing something to be seen."¹⁹

How then do we move forward? I suggest that parents, teachers, church leaders and all those who work with or have relationships with children, whether youth group leaders or grandparents, need firstly to be better informed about what this technology really is and the potential impact that it can have on all of us, especially children, if not engaged with carefully and intentionally. From that understanding must come a plan of action, firstly for adults to review their own usage of digital technology, especially smartphones of which AI is now an integral part, to determine if we have developed or are developing unhealthy habits that are not only bad for us, but are a hinderance to children's development and to our being present.

I am certainly not advocating that we give up technology, but rather that we rediscover our humanness and our calling, to be attentive to our children and others rather than having our attention stolen by our smartphones and other digital technology. In short, we need to ensure that we become masters of our technology, using it thoughtfully and intentionally in ways that assist us to accomplish tasks, instead of letting it take over our cognitive and creative activities. Being conscious of how this technology can so easily grab our attention and distract us from engaging in real embodied relationships is a starting point to reclaiming our attention that is being stolen by Big Tech, and re-focussing on what matters, being present and able to engage with each other and our children. That means that parents, teachers and all of us need to have thought this through and are able to not offer the safeguards and guidance that the LSE report co-author describes, but role model it too.

For those that are habitual users of digital technology, the process of recovery is not easy. Even for those of us who would regard ourselves as careful users the challenge of recovering our children's emotional, cognitive and behavioural development will not be easy amidst the AI obsession. We are faced with political agendas and a too cosy relationship between government and the Big Tech AI companies who exert immense influence and control over how and where AI is used. Some have already formed relationships with 60 countries to provide AI tools in education, despite evidence that it is not necessarily going to be helpful to children and young adults. We are told that it will democratise education and provide personalised learning plans and content. Yet used without thoughtfulness and with a firm grasp of the negative impacts on child development, we will end up with a two tier educational system where the elite will have access to the best in person teachers and teaching environment, whilst the rest are pushed towards education technology solutions with their attendant limitations.

18 Burns et al., 'A new direction for student', Brookings Institute, p. 55.

19 James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. p146.

What we can do as God's people, the church of Christ, is to show the world a better way by becoming masters of this technology in our homes and church communities, rather than following the social norms of the world around us that have been shaped, perhaps unwittingly, by the hype of the technologists and the commercial agendas of big tech. It's time to engage, for the future of our children and the next generation. It is time to be human!

Jeremy Peckham is a technology entrepreneur and author of the book Masters or Slaves? AI and the Future of Humanity (IVP, 2021). He spent much of his career in the field of artificial intelligence and he was project director of a €20m pan-European research project on Speech Understanding and Dialogue (SUNDIAL) that broke new ground in AI.

Bioethics News: November 2025 – February 2026¹

By Dr Calum MacKellar

UK clinical trial into puberty blockers on children put on hold

A clinical study examining the use of puberty blockers in children has been put on hold after the UK's medicines regulator advised that participants should be at least 14 years old, citing an 'unquantified risk' of potential long-term biological harm. Because of this, discussions between the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the trial's sponsor, King's College London, are continuing. Recruitment for the trial will not proceed until the issues raised by the regulator have been resolved. The study was initiated following recommendations from the Cass Review, which found that existing evidence supporting the benefits of puberty blockers for young people with gender dysphoria was of poor quality.²

Eugenic selection of embryos in the UK

Some UK couples undertaking IVF are reportedly using a legal loophole to obtain genetic predictions of IQ, height, and health for their embryos. Although UK clinics are prohibited from offering this type of embryo selection using polygenic scores (which is a numerical aggregate of the effects of many genetic variants for a specific biological trait), patients can legally request their embryos' raw genetic data under data protection rules. A number of them have then forwarded this information to overseas companies for analysis in order to attempt to select the embryos resulting from IVF based on what they believe are positive traits, which is a form of eugenic selection.³

However, critics warn that the use of polygenic scores lacks scientific reliability and raises ethical concerns because their predictive value for individual health outcomes is limited. For complex traits, polygenic scores generally account for only a small fraction of heritability (the proportion of trait variation within a population that can be attributed to genetic differences) which itself typically represents only part of the total causal landscape. Consequently, polygenic scores estimates cannot provide the same level of certainty as tests for a condition that is caused by a high-impact gene variant.⁴

Danish sperm bank requires donors to have a certain IQ and police clearance

A sperm bank called Donor Network, in Denmark, now demands that men be above a specific IQ level and have a police clearance certificate demonstrating no criminal record before becoming sperm donors. This means that all donors undergo a standardised test to measure abstract and logical

1 This article was originally published on the Affinity website in March 2026. We are including it in this edition of The Bulletin to ensure it gets the widest possible reading.

2 Nadeem Badshah, 'UK clinical trial into puberty blockers on hold after medicines regulator steps in', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2026.

3 Hannah Devlin, 'UK IVF couples use legal loophole to rank embryos based on potential IQ, height and health', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2025; Calum MacKellar, *Christianity and the New Eugenics*, London: IVP, 2020.

4 Angus Clarke, 'The clinical applicability of polygenic scores in PGT', *BioNews* 1318, 8 December 2025.

thinking abilities, which does not rely on acquired knowledge or language skills. The results are then added to the donor's profile, alongside other health information, to give more transparency to individuals selecting a donor.

The CEO of Donor Network, Jakub Knudsen, indicated that: 'IQ is a strong predictor of, not just academic success and income, but also mortality, risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, etc and has a high heritability of 50-80 percent'.⁵ However, such testing can again be considered as a form of eugenic selection.⁶ Beyond cognitive testing, Danish regulations require all potential donors to undergo genetic screening and medical evaluations, and each donor is legally limited to assisting in creating no more than 12 families.⁷

Petition to inform patients if vaccine was developed from aborted human foetus cell lines

A Westminster Parliament petition, spearheaded by the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics, is calling on the UK Government to ensure that vaccine information leaflets for patients disclose whether cells originating from an aborted child were used to produce or develop the vaccine. This would then enable patients to make an informed decision, based on their conscience, whether or not to accept the treatment.

The aim of the petition is to encourage the UK government to take seriously the conflicts of conscience of many in the UK towards abortion. It is concerning that the UK Government is not making any effort to develop alternative vaccines which were not derived from cells originating from aborted fetuses. It is just seeking to continue with its present arrangements. The petition can be accessed [here](#).

Abortion numbers record high of 299,614 across UK

Abortion statistics released by the UK Department of Health and Social Care show the highest number of abortions ever recorded in England and Wales, with 278,740 taking place in 2023, an increase of 26,618 (10.6%) from 2022. When added to the record 18,242 abortions that took place in Scotland in 2023 and the record 2,632 estimated number of abortions that took place in Northern Ireland in 2023, this takes the estimated total number of abortions across the United Kingdom for 2023 to a record 299,614. The statistics for 2023 also show a rise in repeat abortions for residents of England and Wales from 102,689 in 2022 up to 117,165 in 2023. This is a 14.1% increase from 2022.

In England and Wales, there were 3,205 disability-selective abortions in 2023. This represents a 2.6% increase in disability-selective abortions. There were 300 late-term abortions for babies with disabilities at 24 weeks and over, an increase of 44 from 2022, when there were 256 disability-selective abortions. There were also 5 late-term abortions at 24 weeks and over where a baby had a cleft lip or cleft palate.

Dr. Calum MacKellar is the Director of Research of a medical ethics charity in Scotland, Fellow with the Centre for Bioethics & Human Dignity at Trinity International University in Chicago, USA and, since 2010, has been a Visiting Lecturer and Visiting Professor in Bioethics at St Mary's University in London.

5 Quoted in Barbara Kramarz, 'One Danish sperm bank is screening candidates with IQ tests', *BioNews* 1318, 8 December 2025.

6 Calum MacKellar, *Christianity and the New Eugenics*, London: IVP, 2020.

7 Barbara Kramarz, 'One Danish sperm bank is screening candidates with IQ tests', *BioNews* 1318, 8 December 2025.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE OF *THE BULLETIN*

Lizzie Harewood is the Executive Officer of the Association of Christian Teachers. She previously spent 12 years as a secondary school English teacher. Her passion is to equip Christians to be salt and light in the nation's schools. Outside of work, Lizzie supports her husband as he pastors an evangelical church in Yorkshire.

Fran Kirby works part-time for Affinity managing their publications and is a part-time MTh student at Edinburgh Theological Seminary. She's married to Tom and they live in Manchester.

Dr. Calum MacKellar is the Director of Research of a medical ethics charity in Scotland, Fellow with the Centre for Bioethics & Human Dignity at Trinity International University in Chicago, USA and, since 2010, has been a Visiting Lecturer and Visiting Professor in Bioethics at St Mary's University in London.

James Mildred is CARE's Director of Communications and Engagement. He started working in politics in 2014. He moved to London to work for CARE that same year and also completed a two year church-based training programme.

Jeremy Peckham is a technology entrepreneur and author of the book *Masters or Slaves? AI and the Future of Humanity* (IVP, 2021). He spent much of his career in the field of artificial intelligence and he was project director of a €20m pan-European research project on Speech Understanding and Dialogue (SUNDIAL) that broke new ground in AI.

The Social Issues Bulletin is published by the Social Issues Team of Affinity

Editor: Fran Kirby | fran@affinity.org.uk

*Affinity is a partnership of gospel churches, evangelical agencies
and individual Christians committed to working together to
advance the work of the gospel in the UK and Ireland and
around the world.*

ISSN 2755-5615

affinity.org.uk

f X @affinitytalks

office@affinity.org.uk

PO Box 905

Haywards Heath

RH16 9TJ

07936 048259

Registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales
with registered charity number 1192455