



**PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE:**

*Understanding how families with babies and young children can nurture early relationships by reducing technoference.*

**Call for proposals**

**November 2025**

## Summary

At The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, we are committed to improving the social and emotional development of babies and young children in order to lay the foundations for a healthy, happy, and connected society in the future. The science is clear that nurturing relationships between babies, young children, and the adults in their lives are critical to the development of social and emotional skills. We also know that in today's world, digital devices can support connection across great distances, they can also disrupt these vital relationships – a phenomenon known as technofence.

We are looking for proposals for a participatory research project with parents of babies and young children across the UK, which will:

- Deepen understanding of the factors that lead to digital devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, and wearable devices) causing unwanted disruptions in meaningful parent-child interactions and relationships, and
- Identify and test strategies that enable families to enjoy more positive parent-child interactions and deeper moments of connection by reducing unwanted technofence.

Parents of babies and young children should act as genuine co-researchers in this project, with small groups of families representing the diversity of UK society being supported to better understand the impact of digital device use in their family lives, generate ideas, and trial solutions. Researchers should play a facilitative rather than directive role.

The research will help The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, and other organisations working with families, to develop advice and practical solutions for parents and the practitioners who work with them, grounded in the real lives, challenges, and needs of families around the UK today.

Proposals should be submitted by 5pm on 8 January 2026. We expect the project to kick off in February 2026 and run for twelve months. The total budget for the project is £100,000 including VAT.

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# 1. Background

## 1.1 About Us

The Royal Foundation of The Prince and Princess of Wales lead with the belief that change is always possible and are committed to building innovative, collaborative and optimistic solutions that deliver positive impact where it matters most. We bring together experts, communities and organisations to pilot and scale solutions – including building coalitions to tackle homelessness, laying societal foundations through our early childhood work, advancing mental health support and championing conservation. By turning insight into action, we help create stronger communities and a healthier future for people and the planet.

In June 2021, Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales set up The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, recognising the importance of early child development as the foundation for a healthy, happy, and connected society.

The Centre's priority area of focus is ensuring that babies and young children have the environments and experiences, and particularly warm, nurturing relationships with the people around them to develop social and emotional skills. These skills, described in the [Centre's Shaping Us Framework](#), enable children to make friends, play, and learn as they start school, and are the skills they need as the foundations for a happy, healthy life.

The science clearly shows that social and emotional skills are shaped in early childhood when children receive sensitive, responsive, and consistent care from their parents and other caring adults. Therefore, the Centre is working to raise awareness of the importance of early relationships, and to build understanding and actions that will increase the positive interactions and meaningful connection that babies and young children have with their parents and other adults in their lives. Earlier this summer, we published our Explainer Series, a range of [films and resources](#) that support practitioners working with families to understand and communicate how early interactions support social and emotional development.

## 1.2 Our new focus on technoference

The ever-evolving forms of technology that are available to us have many benefits. Technological advances such as instant messaging and video calling has helped families stay connected across the world. Yet as The Princess of Wales noted in a recently published essay, [The Power of Human Connection in a Distracted World](#), the phones and digital devices that can connect us with others also affect our ability to give others the undivided attention that warm, meaningful relationships require. Recent polling<sup>1</sup> commissioned by the Centre illustrates this challenge, with

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<sup>1</sup> Savanta interviewed 2,105 UK Adults via an online poll between 1st and 4th August 2025. Data was weighted to be representative of all UK adults. Data tables can be accessed here: <https://savanta.com/knowledge-centre/press-and-polls/technoference-in-families-poll-the-royal-foundation-24-october-2025/>

62% of people reporting being always, often or sometimes distracted by their phone or other digital devices whilst spending time with family.

The impact of digital and mobile devices on everyday interactions - commonly called technoferece - is increasingly well-documented, including in relation to parent-child interactions. Research over the past fifteen years has examined the effects of smartphones, tablets, and wearable devices on parent-child interaction and on child development (e.g., Liskai-Peres et al., 2024; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018; Poulain et al., 2019).

Whilst we understand the risks of technoferece, far less is known about the factors that lead to devices being used in ways that cause unwanted disruptions in family life, or the strategies families can use to reduce this technoferece. The Centre is keen to address these gaps in research in order to find solutions which can make a real difference to families' lives.

We are, therefore, looking for a research partner to work with the Centre to undertake participatory action research to explore these understudied aspects of technoferece. We wish to fund a study, working closely with groups of parents of babies and children under five around the UK, to develop a deep and rich shared understanding of how technology is shaping relationships and families' lives, and how families feel about this, and then to support these families to identify and test strategies that enable them to achieve their goals to reduce technoferece, find a healthier tech-life balance, and enjoy more positive parent-child interactions and deeper moments of connection.

The research will help the Centre and other organisations working with families to advice and practical solutions for parents and the practitioners who work with them, grounded in the real lives, challenges, and needs of families around the UK today.

## 2. This Project

### 2.1 Aim and objectives

The aim of this project is to strengthen positive parent-child interaction and relationships by exploring the factors driving families' use of digital devices that disrupt moments of connection, and to co-design and test solutions that help parents of babies and young children to support more meaningful parent-child interactions by reducing unwanted technoferece. This should identify strategies that help families to reduce technoferece, which can then be shared more widely.

This project should involve working with a diverse range of small groups of parents from different communities and backgrounds around the UK in order to:

1. Develop a deeper and richer understanding of the factors that influence digital device use in families with babies and young children, and where this causes interference in parent-child interactions.

2. Understand how families – both mothers, fathers (and other primary caregivers) and young children – see technofence as a challenge for them and what their goals are for reducing technofence.
3. Facilitate families to share ideas and to identify and test practical strategies and solutions that help to achieve their goals for reducing technofence and support positive parent–child interactions and connection.
4. Identify strategies that families find acceptable, helpful, and sustainable, and the context in which these strategies work. Recognise any ongoing contextual and environmental barriers and challenges for families trying to reduce technofence.
5. Synthesise findings to capture research findings, insights into families’ lives, and actionable strategies that reduce technofence, recognising the varied experiences and needs of different families.
6. Capture and disseminate learning in a way that enables organisations around the UK to develop evidence-based advice and practical solutions for parents and the practitioners who work with them.

Suggested key lines of enquiry can be found in Annex A. The research should cover these key lines of enquiry.

Additional or alternative lines of enquiry may be proposed with a rationale for why.

## **2.2 Parent Participation**

This project should involve a range of parents (mothers, fathers, and other people who are the primary caregiver to a child under 5) who are interested in learning more about the use of technology in their families, and potentially changing their use of digital devices in order to improving parent-child relationships.

Our goal is to develop new insights and solutions which can support families across the UK. To do this, research should involve families with a diverse range of experiences including, but not limited to, those from communities which are often marginalised and minoritised, people who are neurodivergent, who have a physical or mental health condition that affects their day-to-day life, and/or those who do not speak English as their first language. The research should also have broad geographical spread, including representation from all four nations in the UK. Researchers should capture key information about participants’ characteristics and backgrounds so that reach findings can be contextualised to understand similarities and differences in the experiences of different families.

Due to the participative nature of this research, there is likely to be value in working with groups of families who already have established relationships with each other and therefore might be more comfortable in discussing family life together and supporting each other to find and embed new solutions. Researchers may therefore wish to work with public services or voluntary sector organisations to access existing parent groups who might join this research, building on existing relationships and structures.

All families taking part should be appropriately recognised for their contribution, with some reimbursement for their time and full reimbursement for any direct costs (such as travel, childcare, or other participation-related expenses). Please outline your proposed approach to participant compensation in your application.

## **2.3 Methodology**

Our preferred methodological approach for this project is participatory action research, in which parents act as genuine co-researchers. Researchers should begin with sharing the science of technofence and early relationships with parents in an accessible and engaging way. Researchers should work with parents to select methodologies that enable parents to gain new insights into their own personal technology use and its impact on parent-child interactions. These might include observational techniques, video-based reflection, or ethnographic approaches. Researchers should be alert to how research methodologies themselves might introduce digital devices and interference in families life and have strategies to manage this. Building on these insights, and through collaborative problem-solving, groups of parents should be supported to design and trial solutions to technofence, with professionals taking a facilitative rather than directive role. Approaches such as design thinking, rapid-cycle design and testing, and journalling might be used to help families to identify, test, and refine strategies, and to understand how these changes affect their lives. We are open to a wide range of methodologies that can achieve the objectives outlined above.

We are also keen that parents are involved in shaping the reports, and other outputs from this research, that tell the stories of their lives, experiences, and the solutions that have worked for them.

## **2.4 Project management**

The successful research partner appointed to carry out this research for the Centre will be required to work with the Centre team and with an External Advisory Group which we will establish to support this and other work that the Centre will carry out on technofence.

The successful research partner appointed to carry out this research for the Centre will be required to liaise regularly with the Senior Research and Impact Manager at the Centre. You will be required to provide monthly written updates throughout the project and to have regular contract management meetings with the Centre team. All project plans should also include sufficient time for the final outputs to be signed off by all stakeholders.

The Centre will establish an External Advisory Group to support this and other work that the Centre will carry out on technofence. This group will consist of academics with backgrounds in both technology and child development, and people with experience working with parents and young children. There should be at least three Advisory Group

meetings during the course of the project, and additional 1:1 consultation with group members where appropriate. In your proposal, we would like to see your ideas for how you will have meaningful engagement with this group.

## **2.5 Outputs**

The following outputs are required for the project. Additional or alternative reporting approaches may be proposed with a rationale for why.

- A final designed report of no more than 40 pages summarising the background, telling the story of the research, and pulling out key insights. The report should include an executive summary, the background, methodology, findings, implications, and all references.
- A PowerPoint slide-deck summarising the final report, particularly drawing out the key findings and implications.
- Other outputs generated by co-designing the research dissemination approach with parents.
- Ideas and content for additional creative assets that bring families' voices to the fore to tell the story of the research to our partners in the early years sector as well as the general public (such resources would be created with the Centre for Early Childhood and might be funded separately if required).

All outputs should be quality assured by someone of sufficient seniority.

We hope that this research might also lead to papers published in peer-reviewed academic journals and presented at academic conferences after this project is complete. The research partner would be responsible for writing these papers and securing their publication.

All research outputs and any other public communications about this project will be subject to Royal Foundation internal approvals prior to publication.

## **3. Requirements of our research partner**

It is crucial that this research is robust and stands up to scrutiny, so we will be looking for an organisation, or partnership of organisations, with a proven track record of working meaningfully, safely, and respectfully with families and communities; and delivering high-quality, robust, and impactful research.

We are looking for a research team that is passionate about positive change and solutions-focussed – who is able to support families to find successful and sustainable strategies to reduce digital distractions and strengthen those vitally important moments of parent-child interaction.

We are open to receiving proposals from individual research organisations or collaborations.

Your proposal should include a summary of the project team's experience, skills, and capabilities in relation to:

- understanding early childhood, in particular understanding parent-child relationships and how they support development;
- undertaking participatory and/or action research, including working with marginalised and minoritised communities;
- generating real change and impact for families and communities; and
- communicating research findings in accessible and impactful ways, including presenting data to the general public and to senior stakeholders.

#### 4. Ownership and publication

Please note that The Royal Foundation will own the intellectual property rights of any and all intermediate products, including the research materials, final deliverables, and in particular presentation slide packs, reports, and data.

#### 5. Key timings for the research

The table below sets out the overall indicative timeline for this research project. The research should be concluded by November 2026, with outputs ready to publish in January 2027. The Royal Foundation reserves the right to vary the timetable.

| Activity                    | Date (time)            |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Specification issued        | 23 November 2025       |
| Proposal deadline           | 8 January 2026 (5pm)   |
| Grant awarded               | w/c 9 February 2026    |
| Kick off meeting            | w/c 23 February 2026   |
| Conduct research activities | March to November 2026 |
| Initial findings shared     | w/c 21 December 2026   |
| Final report shared         | 29 January 2027        |

#### 6. Procurement timetable

The table below sets out more detailed timing for the grantmaking process. The Royal Foundation reserves the right to vary the timetable.

| Activity                                                              | Date (time)           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Specification issued                                                  | 23 November 2025      |
| Notice of interest submitted/Closing date for clarification questions | 5 December 2025 (5pm) |
| Response to clarification questions issued                            | 12 December 2025      |
| Proposal deadline                                                     | 8 January 2026 (5pm)  |
| Invitations to interview issued                                       | 16 January 2026       |
| Interviews with shortlisted applicants                                | 4/5 February 2026     |
| Grant awarded                                                         | w/c 9 February 2026   |
| Kick-off meeting                                                      | w/c 23 February 2026  |

## 7. Proposal requirements

If you wish to apply for this funding, please send us an outline of your proposed approach as a word or PDF document (maximum 15 pages) by **5pm on Thursday, 8 January 2026** to Jennifer Holly, Senior Research and Impact Manager, by email at [centreforearlychildhood@royalfoundation.com](mailto:centreforearlychildhood@royalfoundation.com)).

Please structure the proposal under the following headings and contain the information set out below.

- **Executive Summary:** Brief overview of the proposed research, including objectives, methods, and expected outcomes.
- **Context and Objectives:** Your understanding of the brief, the objectives and the context. An appraisal of the relevant literature on technofence and its impact on early childhood development. An outline of how this research will add value.
- **Methodology:** Details of your suggested approach to delivering on all the research objectives set out in 2.1 of this document and rationale for your approach. Please include details of:
  - Your chosen participatory approach and values – how parents and their families will be given a central role at each stage of the research cycle.
  - Your proposed sampling size, strategy, and rationale, with details of how you will recruit, engage, and compensate parents who take part.
  - How you will approach data collection and analysis.
  - Your approach to stakeholder engagement.

- Planned research outputs and dissemination strategy, with details of how you will ensure the findings have influence and impact beyond the end of the project.
- **Project and risk management:** Details of how you will deliver the project to time and in budget, including managing risks. Please include:
  - A Gantt chart setting out project phases with milestones and deliverables.
  - A summary of top-level risks and mitigation strategies.
  - Your approach to project management and reporting, and how you propose to work effectively with Centre team and External Advisory Group, as described in section 2.4.
- **Data governance, ethics, and safeguarding:** Your proposed approach to conducting ethically sound research and how you will manage ethics, safeguarding, and data protection at every stage of the research process. Please explain any ethical approvals needed and timelines for obtaining them.
- **Team and Organisational Capacity:** Information about the full research team, including roles and responsibilities, biographies, and detail of all relevant experience (see section 3 for more details on requirements in the team).
- **Budget:** A detailed breakdown of the proposed budget, broken down by individual tasks, with rationale for the proposed costs. The budget should include proposed number of days each member of the team will be working on the project and their cost. Our maximum budget for this contract is £100,000.00 including VAT. Proposals can include a menu of options in terms of methods, sampling, etc., that come in at different price points. Quotes should represent value for money.

## Scoring criteria

Proposals will be assessed by a panel consisting of members of The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, the Centre’s Advisory Group and The Royal Foundation’s Research and Impact Team.

Proposals will be scored between 1 and 5 on each of the areas in the table below, depending on the quality of the proposal and the extent to which it meets the requirements of the brief. Scores will then be weighted as follows.

| Criteria | Title                                                                | Weighting |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1        | Understanding of context and objectives                              | 10%       |
| 2        | Clarity, suitability, feasibility and rigour of proposed methodology | 30%       |
| 3        | Quality of project and risk management plan                          | 15%       |

|   |                                                                                                      |     |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4 | Strength, feasibility and appropriateness of proposed data governance, ethics and safeguarding plans | 15% |
| 5 | Team and organisational capacity                                                                     | 15% |
| 6 | Value for money                                                                                      | 15% |

## 8. Next steps

To aid the application process, we ask all interested parties to submit a notice of interest by 5pm on 5 December 2025. This should take the form of an email to Jennifer Holly, Senior Research and Impact Manager at [centreforearlychildhood@royalfoundation.com](mailto:centreforearlychildhood@royalfoundation.com)) stating that you are interested in receiving a response to any clarification questions that are submitted.

All clarification questions should also be submitted by 5pm on 5 December. Responses to all questions will be drafted and emailed to any individual who has submitted a notice of interest. Please note all questions must be submitted in writing and will be shared with all interested parties. We cannot speak individually to any interested parties. This is to ensure fair access to information about the project.

The deadline for proposals is 5pm on 8 January 2026. We will review all received proposals the week commencing 12 January 2026 and shortlisted applicants will be invited to an in-person panel interview at our office in central London on 4/5 February 2026. We intend to appoint a contractor by 13 February 2026. All applicants will be informed of the outcome on or shortly after this date.

## 9. References

Liszkai-Peres, K., Budai, Z., Kocsis, A., Jurányi, Z., Pogány, Á., Kampis, G., Miklósi, Á., & Konok, V. (2024). Association between the use of mobile touchscreen devices and the quality of parent-child interaction in preschoolers. *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 3, 1330243.

McDaniel BT, & Radesky JS (2018). Technoference: Parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems. *Child Development*, 89(1), pp.100–109.

Poulain, T., Ludwig, J., Hiemisch, A., Hilbert, A., & Kiess, W. (2019). Media Use of Mothers, Media Use of Children, and Parent-Child Interaction Are Related to Behavioral Difficulties and Strengths of Children. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(23), 4651.

## **Annex A: Suggested key lines of enquiry**

The research should cover these key lines of enquiry. Additional or alternative lines of enquiry may be proposed with a rationale for why.

### **1. Digital device use in family life**

- When and how are devices used during daily family life?
- What purposes do these devices serve for families? (e.g., work, information, connection, leisure, escape)
- What internal and external factors drive device use?
- How do parents and children feel about current technology use in their lives?

### **2. Technoference**

- How do parents understand the impact of digital device use on their interaction and connection with their baby or child? What positive and disruptive effects do parents notice?
- How do babies and children respond to their parents' use of digital devices?
- When supported to observe and reflect on family life, do families' understandings of technoference change, and if so, how? What do they learn about when and how digital device use is impacting family life?
- Does knowing about the impact of technoference on parent-child interaction and/or child development affect how parents think about digital device use?

### **3. Strategies to manage device use**

- How are parents already trying to manage their, and their children's use of digital devices?
- Which strategies have they found to be useful or sustainable and why? What barriers prevent families from using these strategies consistently?
- What strategies have parents seen recommended by influencers, organisations or practitioners to manage use of digital devices? How do families assess the effectiveness and feasibility of these approaches?
- What do parents view as facilitators of greater tech-life balance?
- When supported to understand more about digital device use in family lives, what new insights do families gain? Does this change their understanding, beliefs or motivations?

### **4. Strategies to reduce technoference**

- Through group discussion, reflection and co-design activities, what strategies can parents identify to reduce technoference and increase positive interactions and meaningful connection in their family lives?
- What ideas emerge when parents come together to address shared challenges?
- Which of these ideas are attractive to families and seem feasible, sustainable, and impactful?
- Which strategies work well when tested in real family life?
- How do families adapt or improve strategies over time based on real-world experience?
- What do families learn about digital device use when testing new strategies to reduce technoference?
- What wider contextual and environmental factors make it harder for families to address technoference in their own families' lives?
- What are the impacts on groups of families or parents coming together to discuss technoference and work together to find solutions? How does this influence parent understanding, behaviour, and motivation – both relating to device use and more widely?