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JANUARY

France following suit with social media ban

France plans to ban children under 15 from social media from September 2026, following Australia's lead. A draft bill would bar major platforms from offering accounts to under-15s and strengthen restrictions on mobile phone use in schools. Backed by President Emmanuel Macron, the proposal aims to **protect mental health, curb online bullying and boost academic performance,** with **tougher age-verification** responding to weak enforcement of parental-consent rules.

The law will be reviewed by France's legal council before parliamentary debate next year and would align France with wider EU efforts to protect children online.

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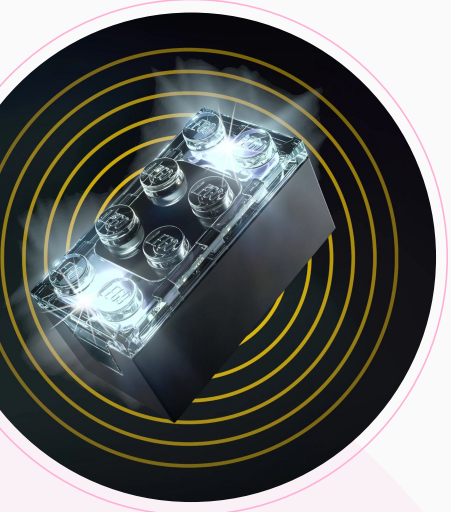
Other European countries, including Denmark, Norway and Spain, are also considering tougher limits on children's social media use, signalling a shift that challenges industry norms and pressures tech platforms to prioritise child safety over engagement.

LEGO announces the Smart Brick

LEGO has unveiled the Smart Brick, described as **the most significant evolution of the LEGO system in 50 years.** The design is a classic 2x4 brick **containing a tiny computer** with lights, sound, motion sensors, and Bluetooth connectivity, allowing **physical builds to react in real time through play.**

The Smart Brick is set to launch in March 2026. Crucially, the **innovation doesn't include cameras or AI,** positioning smart play as an extension of hands on ir



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With AI fatigue on the rise for many, we may start to see an increase of brands using a rejection of AI as part of their promise to authenticity, creativity, luxury to an extent, and ultimately - human nature.

Roblox now requires facial age checks to use the chat feature

Between November and December 2025, it was announced that facial age checks will be needed to use chat in New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands. This has **now rolled out as a requirement in all regions where chat is available.**

The company's **facial scan age check will set the user's age.** Once set, they can **chat with other users in similar age groups** - users younger than nine will need parental consent to use chat.

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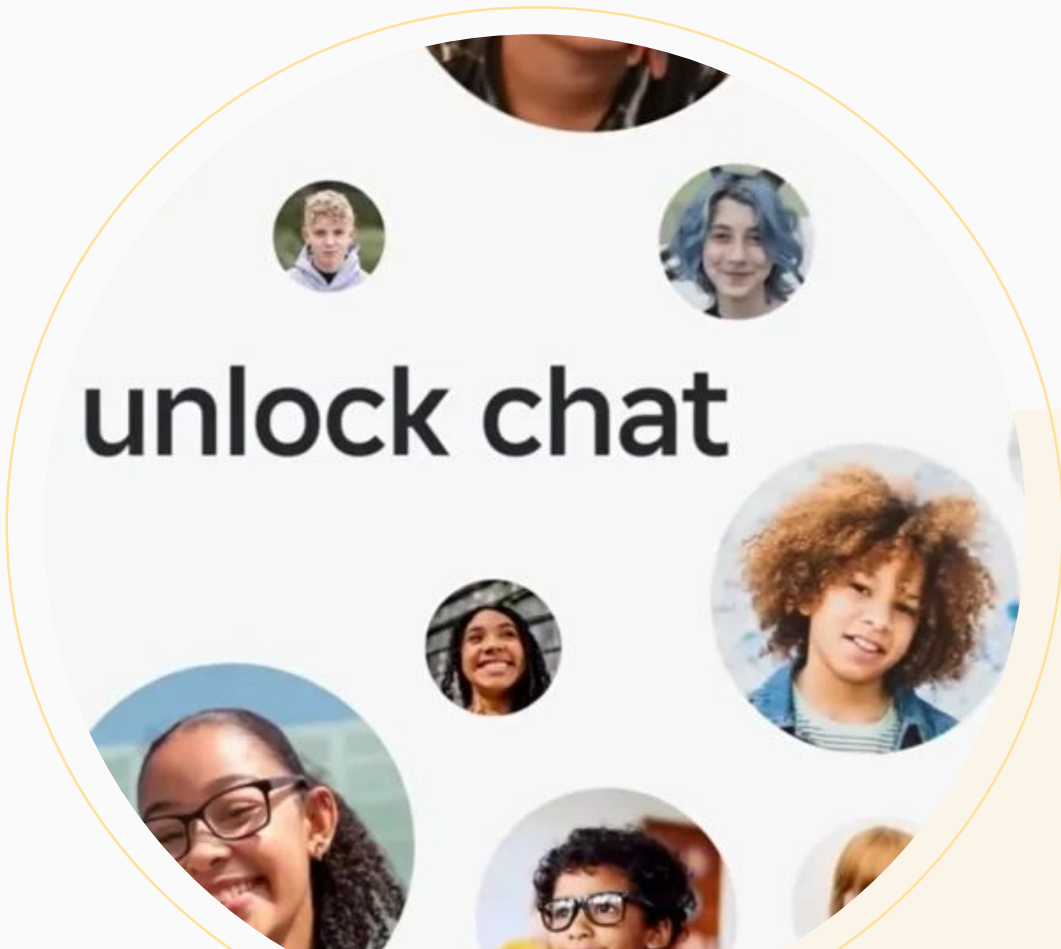
Facial age checks mark a step toward more age appropriate play spaces. The opportunity lies in how platforms build on this foundation to better reflect the social realities of children's online worlds.



Crayola launches global McDonald's Happy Meal experience

Crayola has partnered with McDonald’s to launch a **global, space-themed** Happy Meal experience across **60+ countries**. The limited-edition meals include co-branded **creative kits, toys and an interactive digital feature** where kids bring creations to life. The campaign blends hands-on and digital play, showcases children’s artwork, integrates Crayola IP across marketing, and supports **family creativity**. The experience **runs through March 2026**, while supplies last.

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Kids and families are moving beyond passive consumption, expecting brands to offer interactive, co-creative experiences that blend physical and digital play.

Google Classroom turns lessons into podcasts with Gemini

Google Classroom has launched a Gemini-powered feature that converts standard lesson materials into engaging, podcast-style audio episodes. **Teachers can customise these sessions** by grade level, topic, and format, such as interviews or roundtables, to better suit their students.

This tool aims to **boost engagement and accessibility**, offering a **flexible, screen-free** way for students to review content and learn on the go.

This signals a major shift toward multimodal learning that meets Gen Z habits; "homework" can now be consumed passively during commutes or chores.

Sony patents AI that plays games for you

Sony has patented an **AI "Ghost Player"** that can take over controls when a gamer gets stuck. The system offers two modes: a **"Guide Mode"** that demonstrates the solution and a **"Complete Mode"** that actively plays through difficult sections on the user's behalf.

While accessible for some, it **sparks debate about the definition of play** and whether automating challenges removes the sense of achievement central to gaming.

SONY

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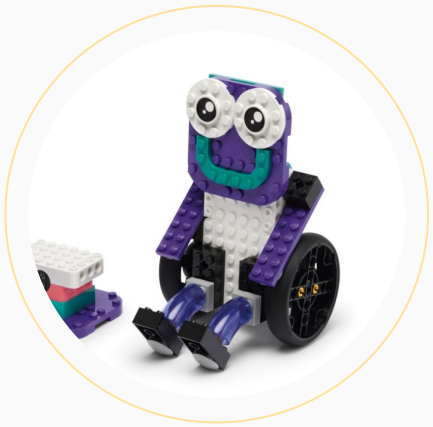
If AI removes the struggle from skill-building, does it also remove the satisfaction of mastery?

LEGO Education launches AI & coding programme

LEGO Education has unveiled a new **"Computer Science & AI"** package for students from kindergarten through eighth grade. By combining physical LEGO bricks with digital lessons, the program **turns abstract tech concepts into tactile, collaborative group activities.**

Set to launch in April 2026, it aims to replace passive screen time with hands-on learning to build foundational digital literacy and problem-solving skills.



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Teaching tools must evolve alongside changing markets to ensure students develop the adaptable skills they need.

Mattel reveals it's first-ever Autistic Barbie

Mattel has launched its first autistic Barbie, developed with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network to reflect autistic experiences more authentically. The doll features **sensory-friendly details such as noise cancelling headphones, a fidget toy, flexible joints for stimming,** and comfortable clothing, reinforcing Mattel's push for **inclusive representation in play.**

By normalising autism-related supports, Barbie aims to foster understanding and help more children feel seen.

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This is a meaningful step toward visibility and acceptance, particularly for autistic girls who are three times less likely than boys to gain a diagnosis.

Disney+ is launching short-form videos this year

Disney+ are introducing vertical videos in order to **increase daily engagement** and match how **younger audiences consume content.**

The feature will include a **mix of original short-form content, repurposed clips, and adapted scenes** from longer titles. Disney will use vertical videos as a **habit-building layer,** as opposed to teasing content.

Following Netflix's suit, Disney is adapting to expectations from Gen Z & A when it comes to content consumption – shifting Disney+ from a sit-down destination to a platform designed for everyday habitual engagement.

New Roblox game shows that brainrot doesn't always work

In the recent Max Power Gaming newsletter, Ken Bryan spotlights 'The Forge' as a rare Roblox breakout that **pushes against the "brainrot" trends of 2025.**

Instead of simple, low effort loops, 'The Forge' offers a **deep action RPG and visual polish** with layered progression systems and skill-based mini-games. The game **demands focus and time,** rewarding mastery.

In **under two weeks, 'The Forge' passed 1M concurrent players,** making it one of Roblox's biggest launches ever.

While the game's design limits mass appeal and caps its ceiling, its recent success proves there is still strong demand on Roblox for complexity, depth and sustained engagement, not just meme-led simplicity.

YouTube expands support for teens & families

YouTube is rolling out **new tools to help parents manage their teens' digital lives.**

Key updates include the **ability to limit or completely block "Shorts"** scrolling to encourage mindful viewing and custom **"Bedtime" and "Take a Break" reminders.**

Additionally, a new creator guide and updated recommendation **algorithms will prioritise high quality, enriching content** for teens while suppressing "low quality" material.

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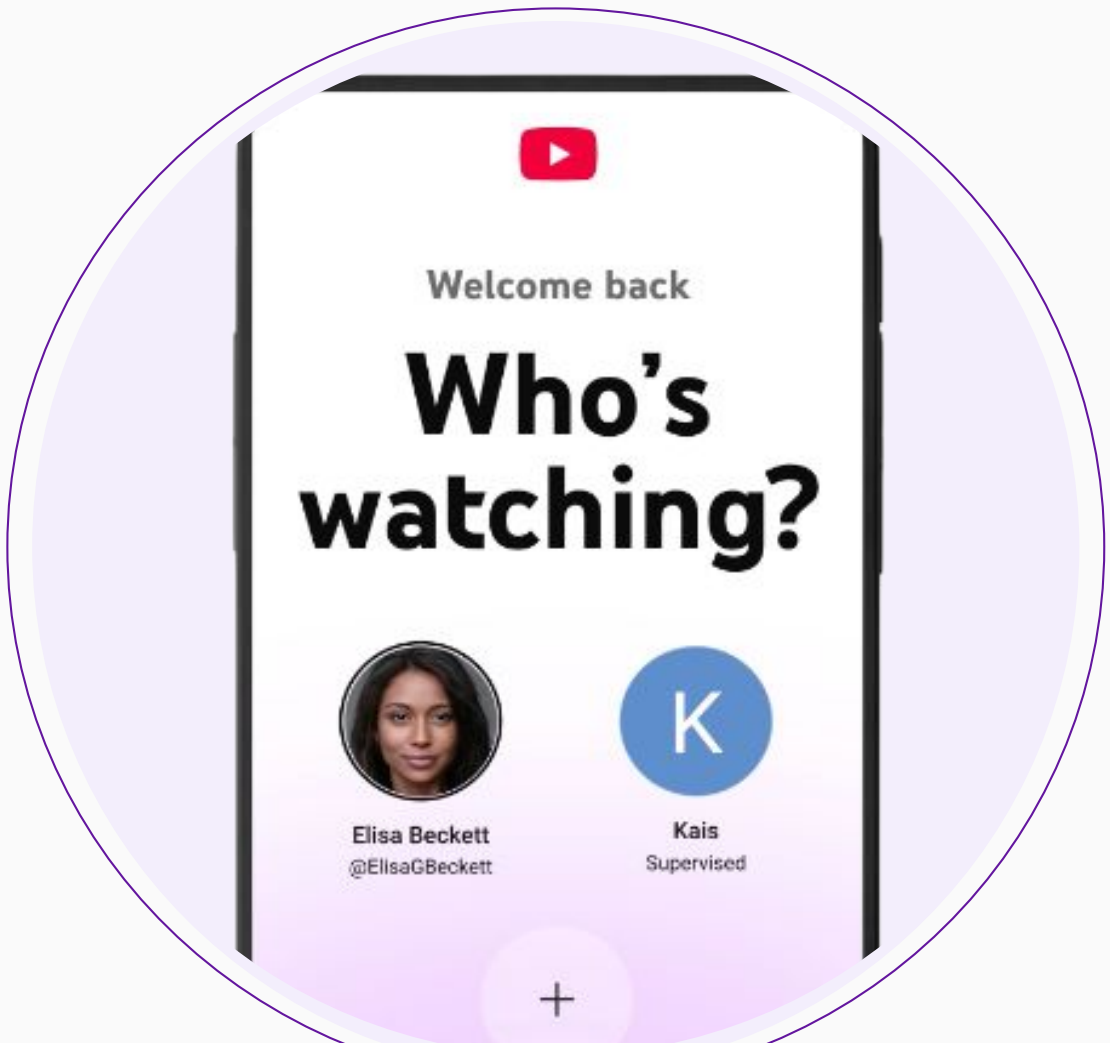
Digital independence requires scaffolding, not just restriction. Platforms must offer flexible tools that empower families to co-create healthy boundaries and gradually build long-term digital resilience.



DK & LEGO team up for new LEGO 'Bluey' book series

DK has partnered with LEGO and BBC Studios to launch a new Bluey book series, **starting with LEGO DUPLO Bluey: Flat Pack in September 2026.** This collaboration combines **reading with hands-on play,** as the book includes a LEGO DUPLO Bluey figure.

The move aims to expand the beloved show's presence beyond the screen, **merging storytelling with physical building** to engage preschool audiences in a fresh, interactive way.

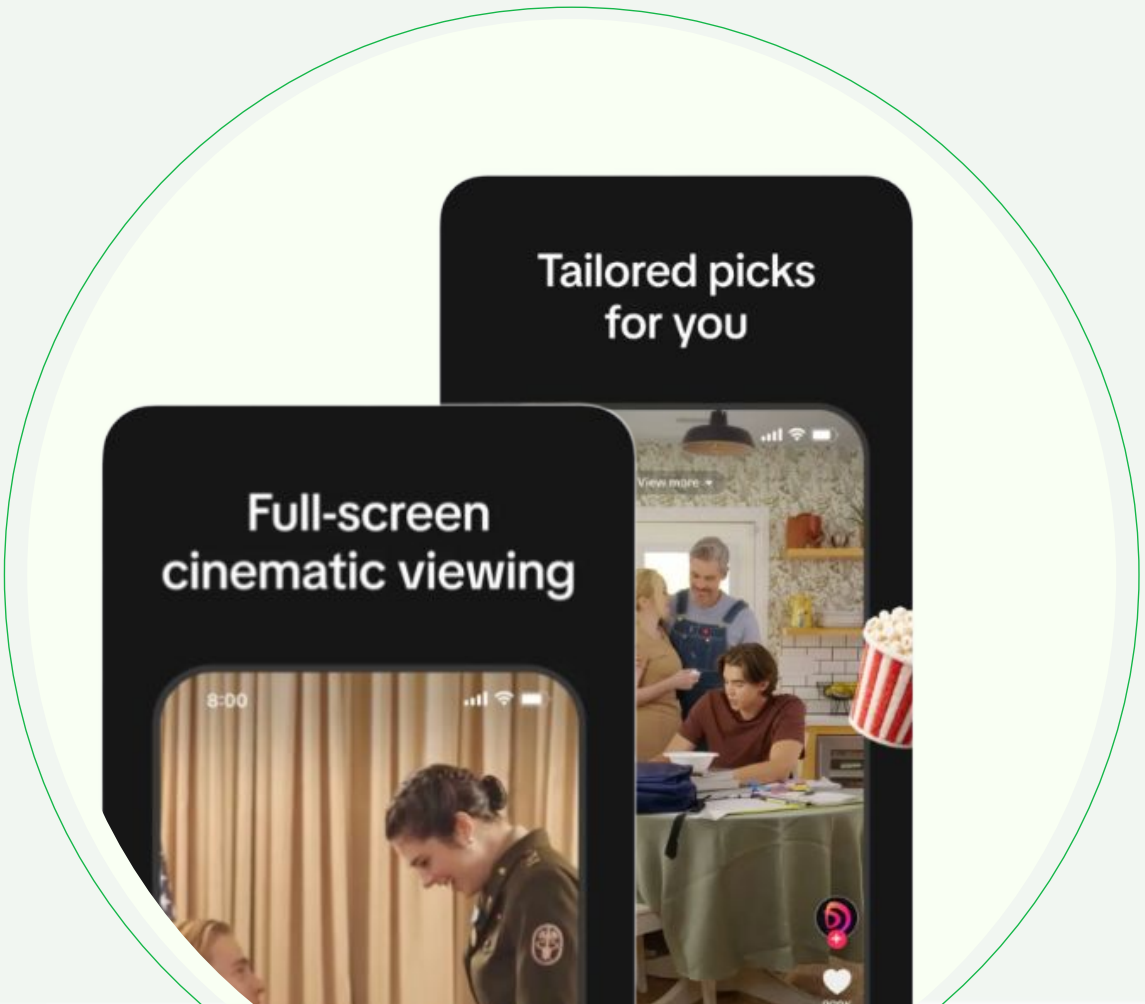
Sustaining modern fandoms requires complexity: colliding universes and blending physical, digital, and emotional worlds to stay engaging.

TikTok quietly launches ‘PineDrama’

TikTok has launched "PineDrama", a standalone app **dedicated to "micro-dramas"**, serialised, minute-long shows filmed vertically.

Available in the **US and Brazil**, the app features **ad-free,** binge-ready content in genres like **romance and thrillers.**

It taps into the **booming "vertical entertainment"** trend, offering high-production **scripted narratives** designed specifically for mobile consumption and short attention spans.



While long-form stories remain appreciated, entertainment is fragmenting into "snackable" formats. Brands must adapt to the changing needs of upcoming generations to stay relevant.

Levi's launches the “Wear Longer” Project

To **bridge the gap between Gen Z’s eco-values and their practical capabilities,** Levi’s has launched the "Wear Longer Project".

Developed with Discovery Education, this free curriculum offers **digital guides, classroom lessons, and in-store workshops** to teach **sewing, patching, and hemming.**

Research showed **35% of Gen Z would keep clothes longer if they knew how to fix them**, so Levi's is stepping in as an educator to turn passive consumers into skilled makers.

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Sustainability is shifting from "buying green" to building skills. Empowering youth with the tools to repair and create fosters true agency and lasting brand loyalty.

Home Chef drops the “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Meal Kit”

Home Chef has partnered with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise to launch a limited-edition meal kit series. The **four-week program features pizza-inspired recipes** themed after Leonardo, Raphael, Donatello, and Michelangelo, **designed to make dinner preparation a nostalgic, fun event for families.**

The kits also include **weekly collectibles,** turning a standard meal delivery into **an interactive fandom experience** that appeals to both kids and parents who grew up with the turtles.

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Nostalgia is a powerful bridge. By tapping into IP with cross-generational appeal, brands can unite parents and kids, extending fandom to the entire family.

Can ‘bookstreaming’ save the literacy crisis?

Creators like **Kai Cenat** are turning livestreams into book reading sessions, **broadcasting themselves reading books aloud** and working through unfamiliar words. His **honest, imperfect approach** to reading has resonated with his young audience, **sparking similar streams from other creators.**

Fans report being **inspired to read alongside** streamers, making reading feel **more social and accessible.** At a time when **traditional book reading is in decline,** these streams **may normalise and reinvigorate** the habit for young people.

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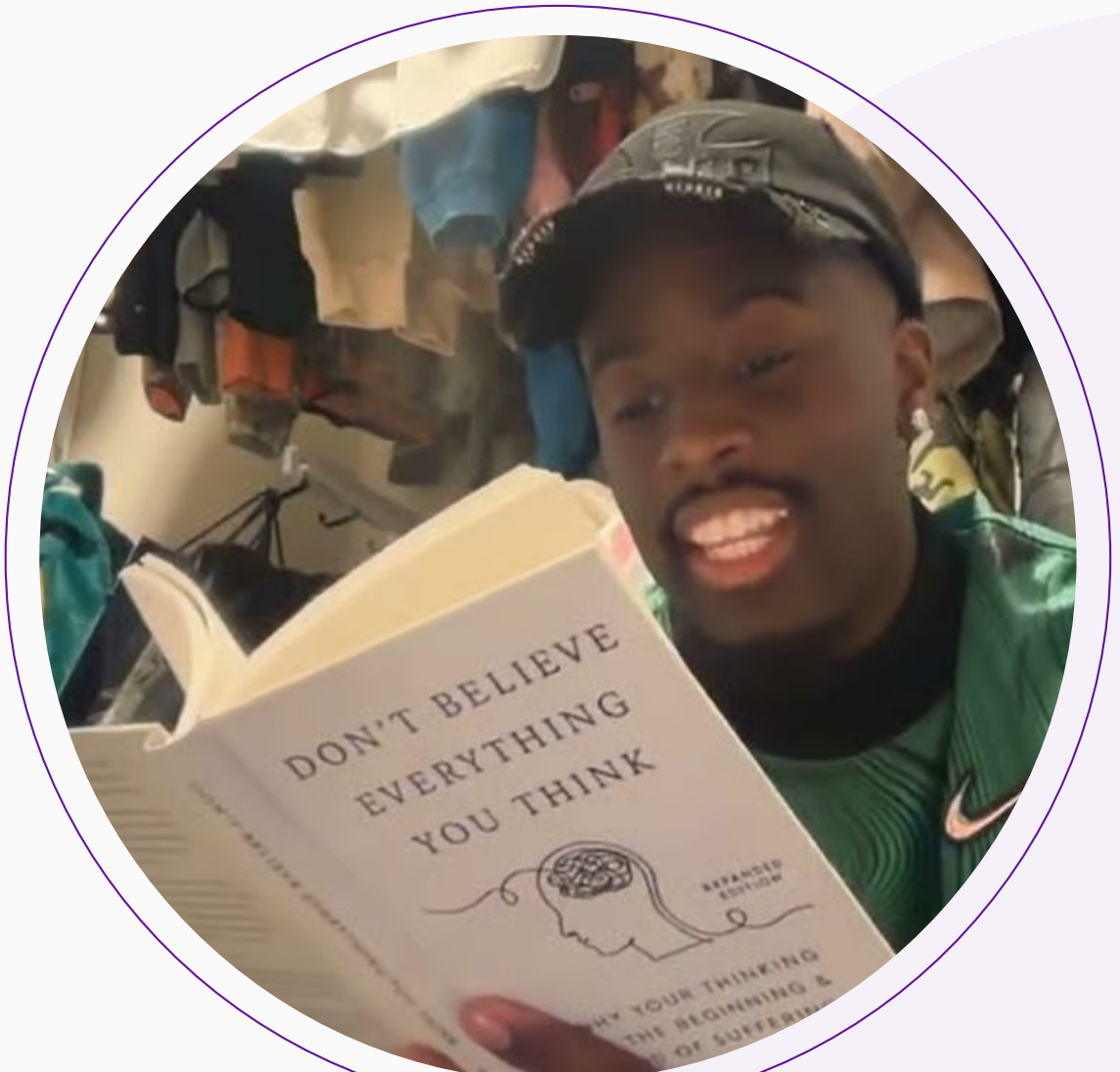
As children (boys particularly) disengage from reading, ‘bookstreaming’ reframes it as entertainment rather than homework. Watching role models read in a similar way to them makes it feel more social, lightweight, and achievable.



Childline's new game show reflects the realities of digital anxiety

Childline's ***Race to a Milli*** campaign, tackles the issue of **digital anxiety** among young people. It features a social media "game" starring creators Makai MK Fray and Joe Leggett, where the **scoreboard is secretly manipulated to simulate the pressures of online life**, including chasing likes, navigating toxic content, relying on AI for advice, and fearing judgment for being authentic.

With **input from youth panels,** the campaign uses humor, **relatable** references, and an authentic tone to resonate with its audience.

By immersing young people in this experience, Childline aims to spark conversations about online stress while promoting its broader mental health resources on social platforms.

YouTube TV's multiview is getting a huge upgrade

YouTube TV is upgrading its **multiview feature to be fully customisable,** allowing viewers to **mix and match any live channels on a single screen.** Previously, this was limited to preselected sports and news feeds.

Now, the update will let users create personalised layouts across **sports, entertainment, and family programming.** The feature is positioned as particularly useful for **families and shared households** with different viewing preferences.

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Multiview supports a new kind of family co-viewing, where being together matters more than watching the same thing; sharing space and time while still honouring individual interests. It may also be a gentle avenue for both parents & children to introduce fandoms to each other.

Is 2026 the year of analogue?

Emily Maskell writes for Dazed about the growing trend framing 2026 as the “year of analogue”, promoting offline swaps like **journalling, vinyl, digital cameras, and screen free hobbies.** The movement reflects **growing digital exhaustion,** especially among young adults spending hours a day on screens and reporting **declining mental wellbeing online.**

Rather than rejecting technology entirely, advocates describe analogue living as a **push for balance, intentionality, and slower rhythms.** While some critics warn it risks becoming a privileged, over-consumptive wellness trend, supporters argue it can also be **low cost, sustainable,** and rooted in using what you already have.

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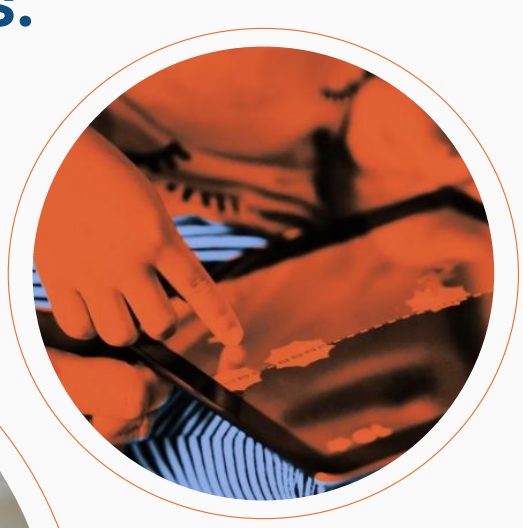
For kids and family brands, value may shift toward ‘real’ products and experiences that promise focus, intentionality, and togetherness, not stimulation or optimisation.

Students swipe books like screens, survey finds

A new **survey of UK primary school staff by charity Kindred Squared** reveals a startling trend: **nearly a third of children starting school don't know how to use a book,** with many trying to **"swipe" pages like a smartphone.**

The findings also highlight wider school-readiness issues, including a lack of toilet training, attributed to the **"iPad baby" phenomenon,** where excessive **screen time impedes basic developmental milestones.**



When physical literacy is lost, fundamental development stalls. In this time, it can be more important than ever to reinforce tactile learning before a “swipe” reflex rewires the upcoming generation.

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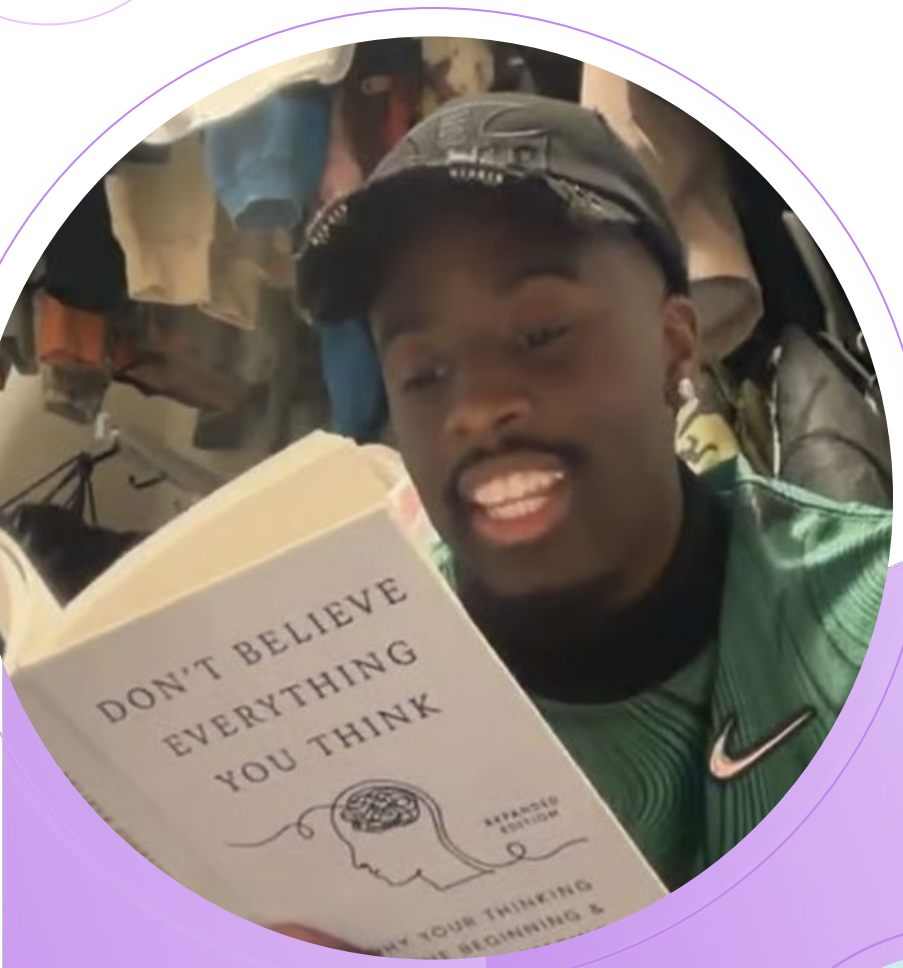

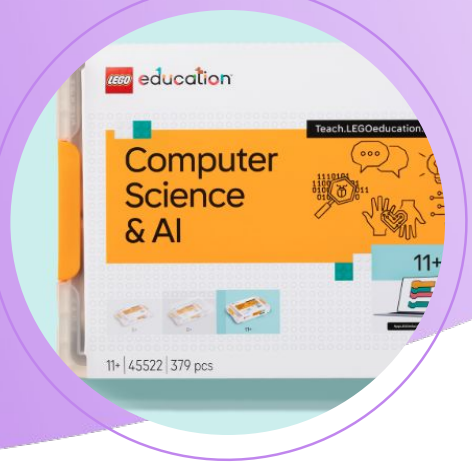

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