

AUGUST 2020

DEEP DIVE **WHO ARE GEN ALPHAS?**

CANVAS8



INTRODUCTION

While the world waits for a new normal, Generation Alpha is growing up not knowing any different...

The first members of this cohort were born in 2010 – when Apple launched the iPad, swine flu spread around the world, and WikiLeaks became a household name – while the newest members have arrived during the highly disruptive COVID-19 pandemic.

This decade has seen vast digital expansion, an increase in health consciousness, widespread political anxiety, and the rise of call-out culture.

So, what has it been like growing up during these changes, and what effect will these events have on Alphas? How will attending BLM and global climate strikes as toddlers shape their relationship with society? And will the pro-social behaviours witnessed during the pandemic inspire them to be fairer citizens?

As they're more diverse than any other generation – from their ethnicity to their family arrangements – members of this cohort are likely to be even more socially conscious.

They are also expected to be the wealthiest, most highly-educated, and tech-connected generation to date. This Deep Dive report will look into how these factors will influence Gen Alphas' ability to navigate an uncertain world.

We spoke to three experts in sociology, kids' media, and child development, who contributed to our understanding of Gen Alpha and the impact 2020 might have on them growing up.

The experts were:



Helenor Gilmour

Director of insight at Beano Studios



Dr. Laura Zimmermann

Child development and media researcher



Elwood Carlson

Demographer and professor of sociology at Florida State University

2020 IMPACT

Although we don't know exactly how 2020 will affect Gen Alphas, looking back at wars and depressions of the past, we can see that children growing up around major disruption develop a sense of resilience, fortitude, and an ability to adapt and respond.

However, this year hasn't just been defined by one major event. Other crises have arisen alongside COVID-19, which will have varied and disproportionate effects on this diverse generation.

Helenor Gilmour, the director of insight at Beano Studios, has noted some anxiety among the Gen Alphas she has researched due to the scale and breadth of societal changes in 2020.

“If you think about it, their whole world has been completely reframed,” she says. “From major bushfires, Brexit, a general election, a new Prime Minister, a global pandemic, and then Black Lives Matter – and that’s all just in the space of nine months.”

This year has highlighted major gaps in society, including the digital divide that limits some children's access to media and educational content due to a lack of web connectivity. Meanwhile, the gap between those who have safe access to outside spaces and those who don't could polarise ideas of play and hinder opportunities to socialise from a young age. We'll look at the impact this tumultuous year will have on Gen Alphas as they grow up.



GEN ALPHAS ARE...

01 DIVERGENT ACTIVISTS

As members of a highly diverse cohort, Gen Alphas are already switched on to the big topics of climate change, equality, and inclusivity. As globalised citizens, they want everyone to be accepted for who they are and see little relevance in someone's race, gender, or sexuality. With role models their own age having direct, wide-reaching impacts on society, **they're not holding back in showing support for those who need it most.**

02 DIGITALLY INSTINCTIVE

Gen Alphas' digital and physical lives are deeply entwined. Raised on baby tech and subjected to sharenting on social media, their online identities are being established from day dot, rendering privacy concerns almost obsolete. Having had play dates on Roblox and smart speakers as pets, **tech is not only shaping their recreational lives but also playing a key role in their behavioural development, influencing their speech and social skills.**

03 MULTIPURPOSE PLAYERS

Amid rising unemployment and economic instability, securing the futures of their Gen Alpha kids is a top priority for Gen Y parents. Many are re-envisioning playtime as a productive and purposeful affair, aiming to teach their children STEM skills that will be essential for their future careers. **Yet while tech helps them understand the world around them, unstructured and screen-free play is still crucial for Alphas' development.**

04 SENSITIVE SHOPPERS

With fewer peers to compete with, Alphas are set to be the wealthiest generation so far, but the 2008 and 2020 recessions will mould their financial habits, giving them a value-driven understanding of money. Already exposed to 'kidfluencers' on YouTube, **they know what they like but are growing up realising that over-consumption has a direct impact on the planet. Purchasing decisions in the future are likely to be well-thought-out.**

05 SWITCHED-ON HEALTH

As they grow up amid widespread anxiety, understanding emotional wellbeing will be at the core of this generation's cultural discourse and will shape their society to be more 'feeling-focused'. With health-tech adoption on the rise – alongside an uptick in public messages about hygiene and immunity – **they will be masters at understanding what is necessary on a personal level to keep both mentally and physically healthy.**

01 DIVERGENT ACTIVISTS

/ Gen Alphas will look to challenge antiquated norms and binaries like never before. The most diverse generation will be starting early on building a truly inclusive and diverse society.

Gen Alphas are growing up at a time when efforts to move beyond intolerance, injustice, and discrimination play out on a global stage.

Although they are yet to reach adolescence, calls for equality and inclusivity are already profoundly shaping their world-views. There will be no one ethnic group accounting for more than half of the US population by 2045, with the 2020 census expected to reveal that only **50% of children under 18** are non-Hispanic White. And as climate change is set to prompt the migration of up to **200 million people by 2050**, multicultural integration is likely to become the norm.

96% of 7- to 9-year-olds believe that all people should be treated fairly no matter what they look like and 93% think it's important to be accepted for who you are.

Gen Alphas also have a diverse set of role models to aspire to, such as Greta Thunberg and Desmond Napoles, all rising to prominence long before the legal voting age. They are prompting kids to attend protests and work towards building a better world for the future.

One in five children aged 5-9 have attended their first march or protest, and about half of their parents actively encourage their children to speak out as activists.

Income inequality and a broadening range of family structures will also factor heavily into the life experiences of this generation.

“‘Mother’ and ‘father’... have increasingly less meaning today when so many children have two moms or two dads, single parents, blended families, or even three legal parents,” writes **Nicole Sussner Rodgers**, the founder and executive director of thinktank Family Story. Her words may seem extreme, but they highlight the diversification of households on both sides of the Atlantic.

Same-sex couple families in the UK grew **by 40% between 2015 and 2019**.

In the US, it's estimated that there are now **more than a million** same-sex couple households nationwide, with 191,000 children living with same-sex parents.



96%

of 7- to 9-year-olds believe that all people should be treated fairly no matter what they look like and 93% think it's important to be accepted for who you are

32%

of parents feel their child's gender doesn't matter, compared to 58% of Alphas themselves

01 DIVERGENT ACTIVISTS



CASE STUDY

During COVID-19 lockdown, children across the UK participated in the 'Rainbows for the NHS' initiative, where they displayed pictures of rainbows outside their homes as a symbol of gratitude for the healthcare system.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Everything is global to Gen Alphas and they will know nothing but diversity in their world. Guided by a strong moral compass and savvy with tech from a young age, they will be empowered to demand change.

This generation will have more power and influence than any previous cohort, but what we're yet to find out is whether their inherent diversity will lead them to be more accepting of wider diversity, or whether they will use their influence to create bubbles and echo chambers featuring those they relate to most.

“

This is by far the most diverse generation in the last century! They display unprecedented diversity in almost every dimension one can examine – ethnicity, nativity, income, family arrangements, you name it.”

Elwood Carlson, demographer and professor of sociology at Florida State University

02

DIGITALLY INSTINCTIVE

/ Born to digital native parents, who learnt to use tech as a tool, Gen Alphas have been immersed in the digital world from birth, making it more of a way of life.

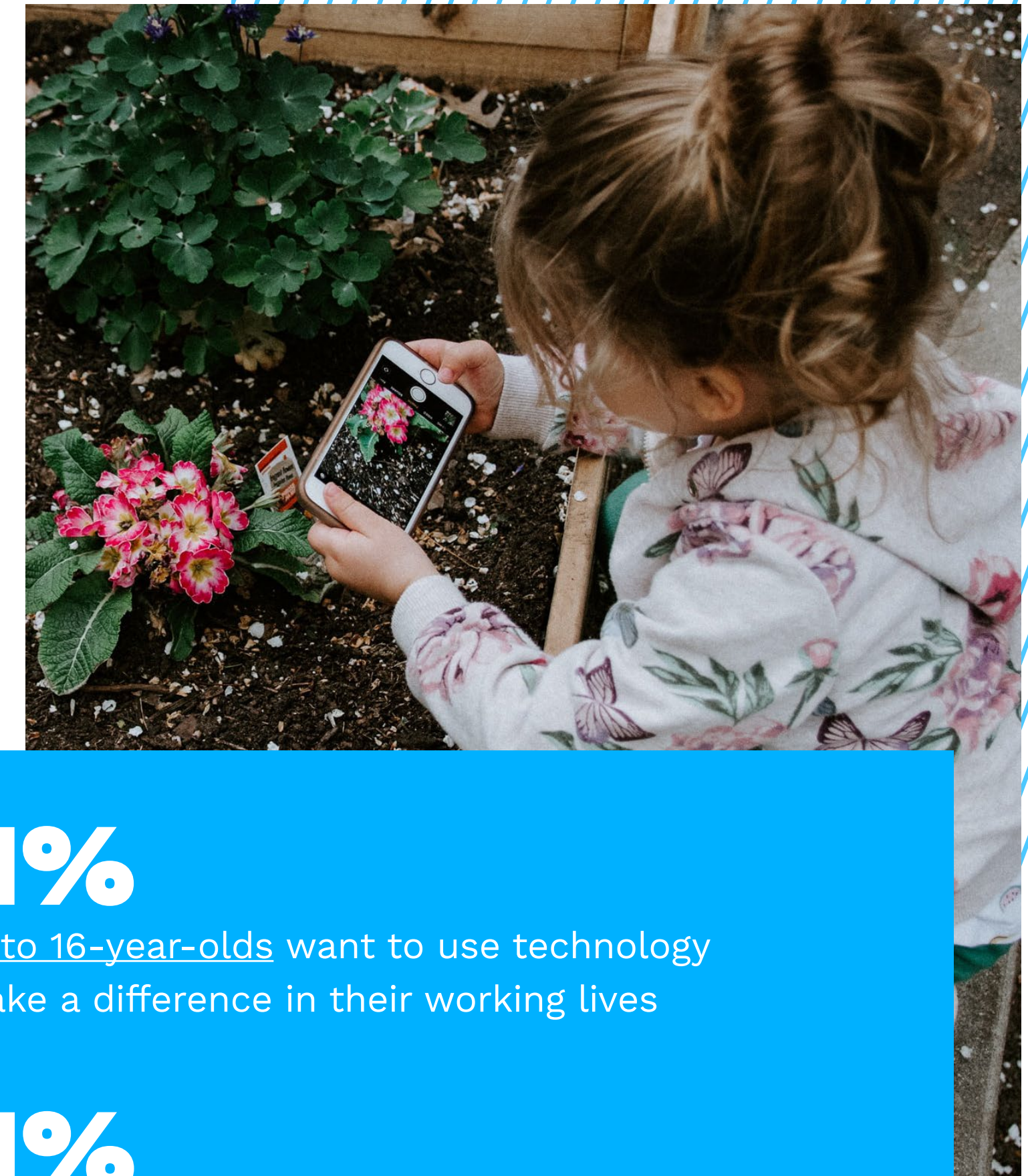
Gen Alphas have been around for as long as Instagram and the iPad, with the majority now knowing how to navigate a touchscreen long before they can read. Their Gen Z brothers and sisters may be renowned for their expressiveness online, but Alphas will be the first children who will be comfortable with tech from birth and will explore more ways of using it to help others.

While smart gadgets, like clothes that track a baby's vitals and childcare robots, take some weight off of parents' shoulders, these devices capture information about children without their awareness or consent. 'Sharenting' on social media similarly builds up a child's digital profile; in the UK, the average parent reportedly **posts 1,500 images** of their kid online before their fifth birthday.

With little say over how they appear online or who collects their data, the concept of privacy isn't likely to feel so relevant to Alphas. They will, however, seek greater independence from tech-enabled parental surveillance as they age. New social platforms and anonymous messaging apps like YOLO, Tellonym, and Curious Cat are likely to appeal as kids begin to take control of their digital identities.

While digital devices can help distract and educate Alphas, the majority of parents feel far from comfortable with tech's role in their children's lives. Screen time is a major source of anxiety for many mums and dads, and as parents encourage their little ones to forge healthier relationships with tech, they'll be looking to incorporate offline and online elements into play.

Concerns around excessive screen time will also drive the adoption of more natural, human ways of interacting with tech, such as speech and physical gestures. Voice assistants have become a staple of many American households, belonging to roughly **a quarter of adults**. While they may be a source of hands-free convenience for some grown-ups, their ability to impart information, tell jokes, and even read bedtime stories transforms them into friends or even pets in the eyes of Gen Alpha users, and they're already impacting children's speech development, conversation skills, and trust in technology.



51%

of 6- to 16-year-olds want to use technology to make a difference in their working lives

61%

of American parents with a child aged 11 or younger have received advice about screen time from a doctor or medical professional

02 DIGITALLY INSTINCTIVE



CASE STUDY

Biba's AR-enhanced playgrounds

Video gaming and outdoor play are often perceived as separate and conflicting pursuits, but by upgrading more than 3,600 playgrounds across the world with augmented reality features, Biba is encouraging kids to take screen-based entertainment outdoors. Rather than fuelling inactivity, its playgrounds show the potential for tech to prompt active play.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Accelerated by COVID-19, there has been a radical shift in how we use tech and a decoupling of physical space from learning, working, socialising, and shopping. As a result, digital devices will be more integrated into the everyday lives of Gen Alphas than for any other cohort. They'll expect to access almost any information they need in a few clicks and will want all interactions with brands to be simple and on-demand. **They will develop the skills to bend tech in ways that suit them, customising their interactions to fulfil individual needs.**

“

We talk about them as being digital masters – they will hack technology to suit what they want it to do. The challenge for brands from Gen Alpha is that it's unlikely they will use your product in the way you think they might. They also... are not completely enamoured with the 'new' – just because something is new, that isn't a driver for them. It's more what it can do for them.”

Helenor Gilmour, director of insight at Beano Studios

03 MULTIPURPOSE PLAYERS

/ Play, particularly tech-led play, will be fundamental in developing Gen Alpha's social, creative, and adaptive skills – which they will need for an uncertain future.

Parenting is anxiety-inducing at the best of times, but with the pandemic to contend with and the looming threat of climate change, Gen Yers are concerned about the world their kids will inherit. Having had their own life chances blighted by the legacy of the 2008 financial crash, many are determined to derive some success from how they raise their children.

With an estimated 73 million jobs set to be lost to automation by 2030, preparing Gen Alphas for the future of the workplace is crucial. As part of this, their playtime is being reconceived as an opportunity to develop key digital and STEM skills that will prove advantageous later in life. For future-conscious parents, games that blur the line between education and entertainment are seen as positive uses of screen time.

However, unstructured and independent play remains essential for children's development, and this has been somewhat jeopardised during COVID-19 lockdowns. School closures in many parts of the world have isolated Gen Alphas from their classrooms and friends for months, potentially inhibiting the development of soft skills. With

pandemic-imposed restrictions likely to extend into the future, parents will need to think carefully about how to best strike a balance between purposeful play outdoors and free time on screens.

“ *Play is a key aspect of children's wellbeing from their perspectives. The closure of playgrounds, schools and the fear and worry associated with being in public spaces has likely had significant impacts on children during this time.* **”**

Jennifer Fane, early childhood researcher



91%

of Gen Y parents say they value raising successful children more than living up to their own potential

26%

of parents in the UK admit that their child's lack of independent play skills has become even more apparent during lockdown, with 63% citing electronic devices as the biggest barrier to their kids playing alone

03 MULTIPURPOSE PLAYERS



CASE STUDY

Roblox

Gaming platform Roblox is one of the leading social channels among 10- to 12 year-olds in the UK, ranking ahead of TikTok and Snapchat. By hosting thousands of player-generated games, it encourages the development of skills ranging from game design to digital civility, blurring the line between education and entertainment, and appealing to parents' desire for productive uses of screen time.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Even before the pandemic, many parents were seeking educational ways to supplement playtime. As engagement with digital media increases, it's important for content to be beneficial for children, nurturing their sense of creativity and helping to build key skills. **But play should also still be play, and outdoor activities remain as important as ever for children to learn how to work with others, adapt to their surroundings, and make informed decisions.**

“

Young children don't see a distinction between digital play and play with physical toys. Adults perceive a difference but, for kids, it's just play. They still want to be outside, riding bikes, blowing bubbles, and experiencing play for play's sake. However, in under-resourced areas, having safe access to outside space is a challenge.”

Dr. Laura Zimmermann, child development and media researcher

04 SENSITIVE SHOPPERS

/ They're not spending directly yet, but Alphas are influencing their parents. And when they are old enough, they'll look to bend brands to their needs and not to be defined by them.

Gen Alpha may well turn out to be the wealthiest and most educated cohort to date, but as they grow up, they'll likely be influenced by the financial caution displayed by their parents. They will be encouraged to make good use of the many digital money management solutions available as they develop financial autonomy, and fintech brands such as Gohenry and RoosterMoney are already preparing Alphas for a cash-free future by providing a digital-first way to access pocket money.

More than three in four Gen Yers believe finance classes should be mandatory in high school

Social media is having a profound influence on Gen Alpha's attitudes to spending. Having been exposed to pervasive digital advertising more or less since birth, it's no wonder that 'kidfluencers' and online stars hold such sway over this generation's purchasing decisions.

As consumers, they are likely to be defined by their appetite for instant gratification and a strong sense of individualism. "Gen

Alpha will expect companies to treat them as a market segment of one," **says Joe Nellis**, a professor of global economy at Cranfield School of Management. "They'll be saying, 'I am not one of a million people, I am me, so I expect a customised service and I expect you to understand me.'"

In addition to wanting personalised service, Alphas will come to expect instant access. **A third of 6- to 16-year-olds** say that if they can't get something immediately, they will lose interest. Meeting the expectations of this demanding consumer group will mean incorporating online and offline elements to establish seamless shopping journeys, as well as creating multiple cross-platform touchpoints to capture (and re-capture) their limited attention.



57%

of American parents with children aged 2 or under say their kids watch YouTube, rising to 89% among those with kids aged 5-11

2/3

of Gen Alphas say they want to buy from brands that have a positive impact on the world

04 SENSITIVE SHOPPERS



CASE STUDY

Ryan's World

Ryan's World is a YouTube channel hosted by a 9-year-old boy from Texas. His videos, which are a blend of toy unboxings and childhood activities, are followed by 25 million subscribers and have garnered over 30 billion views. A line of toys from the child sensation sold out in ten minutes at Walmart on Black Friday 2018, demonstrating the powerful potential of influencer-brand collabs in driving Gen Alpha's spending habits.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Gen Alphas will be fully aware of social inequalities and have incredible opportunities to change things in their world. In the context of a global recession instigated by COVID-19 and the alarming impact of the climate crisis, they're likely to tread carefully to safeguard their finances and use their spending power as an instrument for activism. **For example, they're more likely to think about the economic and ethical impact of purchasing a car, and consider just paying for the service of mobility instead.**

“

It's interesting to see what effect unboxing videos and YouTube advertising will have on their purchasing behaviour. The advent of YouTube has allowed for more direct-to-Gen Alpha advertising, a move away from more traditional ads, which I don't think they know are actual advertisements, they are just another play experience. It's a very different way that's very captivating for them.”

Dr. Laura Zimmermann, child development and media researcher

05 SWITCHED-ON HEALTH

/ Gen Alphas won't approach self-care and wellbeing as something to squeeze into their busy schedule. They'll instead view it as a core element of life to maintain.

This generation is growing up with yoga and meditation in the classroom, as well as more open attitudes around mental health in society. The physical threat of COVID-19 may not seem so real to children in retrospect, but its psychological impact is likely to define their attitudes to wellbeing. From hand-washing routines to wearing face masks, *The New York Times* reports that children have been incorporating motifs of the pandemic into their play scenarios, underscoring the omnipresence of the coronavirus in Gen Alphas' childhoods.

With health, hygiene, and immunity being key societal concerns, Gen Alphas are likely to take a closer interest in their own health. They'll embrace health-tech to micro-manage aspects of their wellbeing, from physical activity to mental fitness, and many parents will lean on wearables for kids, such as FitBit's Ace 2, to help instil healthy habits from a young age. Meanwhile, the increased adoption of telehealth services will cater to Gen Alpha's desire for personalisation across various parts of life, helping them access tailored and culturally relevant advice and treatment.

As Alphas grow up online, parents may be powerless to control the information their kids have access to. Instead of shying away from difficult truths, many mums and dads are using digital media to help address important issues. The *A Kids Book About series*, for example, is helping parents broach topics such as racism, sexism, and mental illness with their children. Such discussions will be all the more important in the wake of COVID-19 as the psychological impact of growing up in a pandemic is likely to have a strong bearing on Alphas' mental health.

They may have been dubbed 'the Snowflake Generation', but many Gen Yers are training their children to confront harsh realities from a young age. By addressing these matters head-on, they could help Alphas build resilience before they encounter the true nature of the world around them.



83%

of children in the UK with existing mental health conditions say the coronavirus outbreak has made their mental health worse

92%

of parents around the world believe that kids need to understand the world and that they can't be shielded from everything

05 SWITCHED-ON HEALTH

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Having grown up at a time of great anxiety, emotional wellbeing will be at the core of this generation's cultural discourse, shaping their society to be more 'feeling-focused'. As such, matters of health will be approached holistically – Alphas will monitor their mental wellbeing as closely as their physical wellbeing. **But it remains to be seen how this increased emphasis on self-care will stack up against the psychological impact of their digital lives. Will tech generate a deeper understanding of mental and physical health, or will it contribute to more sedentary and distracted lifestyles?**

CASE STUDY

Sesame Street in Communities

Covering everything from maths and eating well to family homelessness and substance abuse, Sesame Street in Communities is a platform that offers free multimedia resources to help educate kids on real-world issues. By encouraging open conversations on sensitive topics from an early age, it promotes understanding and acceptance among children.

“

Society has flipped. Usually, we all gather and nurture the young, and now it's the other way round. We're protecting the elders and I think what's being put on their shoulders is that responsibility. And whether that plays out as a positive or a negative, we don't know.”

Helenor Gilmour, director of insight at Beano Studios

Want to know more?



How is growing up solo shaping Generation Alpha?

Single-child families are on the rise in the US as a lack of savings and lofty career goals have led Gen Yers to delay parenthood. But how are smaller households impacting the values, goals, and social lives of the next generation? And how might Gen Alphas start to shape the world around them?



What long-term effects will COVID-19 have on Gen Alphas?

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the closure of schools and parks, and put an end to playdates and family gatherings. With implications for Gen Alphas expected to run far deeper than changes to daily routines, Canvas8 spoke to three experts to explore the effects of the crisis on children.



Kids look to influencers for reading inspiration

As a digital-first generation, Gen Alphas are finding everything from career aspirations to brand preferences online. And according to a UK survey, nearly half turn to social media influencers and YouTube for reading inspiration instead of seeking guidance from parents, teachers, or friends.

Explore the Library

The Canvas8 Library is an unrivalled resource of 27,000+ articles on global consumer behaviour and is available exclusively to members at www.canvas8.com

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