



Silicon Practice
DIGITAL HEALTH SOLUTIONS

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE DIGITALLY

A practical guide for Children and
Young People Services

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Introduction



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“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.”

Pete Drucker

Across Children and Young People Services, there is a growing awareness that engagement is not simply about access, it is about connection.

Services are reaching more young people than ever before. Information is available, pathways are defined, and care teams are working hard to provide support. And yet, something does not always translate.

Appointments are missed. Information is overlooked. Important questions go unasked.

This is often described as disengagement. But in many cases, it reflects a mismatch between how services communicate and how young people actually engage.

Young people are used to digital experiences that are immediate, interactive and tailored to them. They expect to explore information in their own time, in spaces that feel private and safe.

When healthcare communication feels overly formal or static, it can create just enough distance to make engagement harder.

This becomes especially important during transition from paediatric to adult services, where continuity depends not only on clinical pathways, but on whether young people feel confident and supported enough to stay involved.

At the same time, services must balance this with safeguarding, appropriate communication and practical constraints.

So the challenge is not simply to provide more information, but to create experiences that feel relevant, safe and accessible.

This guide explores what that might look like in practice.

Why adult style content fails young people

Much of healthcare communication is still designed with adults in mind. Long paragraphs, formal tone, static leaflets and one way messaging.

For young people, this often does not land. Research from Ofcom shows that **99% of children aged 12 to 15 are online**, with the majority accessing content through mobile devices.

At the same time, attention patterns differ.

Content is expected to be:

- Quick to access
- Visually engaging
- Interactive
- Relevant to real life situations

When information feels too formal or distant, disengagement is almost immediate.

This is not about attention span. It is about relatability.



The psychology of youth engagement

Engagement for young people is shaped by a few key factors:

Autonomy

Young people want to feel in control of how and when they access information.

Privacy

There are questions they may not feel comfortable asking in person.

Relevance

Content needs to reflect their stage of life, not a generic patient journey.

Trust

Digital spaces must feel safe, consistent and non judgemental.

According to NHS Digital, around **1 in 6 children aged 7 to 16 had a probable mental health disorder in 2023**, increasing the need for accessible, low barrier communication channels.

When services align with these psychological drivers, engagement tends to shift from passive to active.

Supporting 14 to 25 transition pathways



Transition from paediatric to adult services remains one of the most fragile points in the care journey.

Young people often describe this period as unclear, unsupported and fragmented.

Data from Care Quality Commission highlights that **many young people experience gaps in care during transition**, particularly where communication between services is inconsistent.

Digital tools can help by:

- Providing structured milestones from age 14 onwards
- Offering consistent information across services
- Allowing young people to track their own progress
- Creating continuity beyond individual appointments

The aim is not to replace clinical care, but to create a clearer, more connected experience around it.

Confidential digital communication

There are questions young people often do not ask.

Not because they are unimportant, but because the setting does not feel right.

Confidential digital communication creates an alternative space. One that is:

- Private
- Accessible outside clinic hours
- Less intimidating than face to face conversations

Research from YoungMinds shows that **many young people prefer digital channels when discussing sensitive issues**, particularly around mental health and wellbeing.

When these channels are in place, services often see:

- Earlier questions
- Reduced risk escalation
- Greater trust in the service

Safeguarding considerations in digital spaces

Digital engagement introduces new opportunities, but also new responsibilities.

Safeguarding must remain central.

This includes:

- Clear escalation pathways for concerning messages
- Defined roles and responsibilities for monitoring
- Age appropriate communication boundaries
- Secure, compliant platforms



Guidance from NHS England emphasises the importance of **safe digital communication channels that support, rather than bypass, safeguarding processes.**

In practice, this often involves aligning digital tools with existing safeguarding workflows, rather than creating parallel systems. For example:

- Ensuring messages can be reviewed and escalated within established clinical governance structures
- Recording interactions appropriately to support continuity and accountability
- Integrating with wider safeguarding policies and reporting processes

When designed carefully, digital tools can actually strengthen safeguarding by:

- Making concerns more visible, particularly those that may not surface in face to face settings
- Capturing patterns over time, helping teams identify emerging risks
- Enabling earlier intervention, before issues escalate
- Creating safer spaces for young people to share concerns they may not otherwise raise

Digital engagement does not replace professional judgement. But it can extend visibility, support earlier conversations, and provide additional opportunities to recognise when a young person may need help.

Designing interactive patient journeys

Engagement is rarely about a single interaction. It is about the journey.

Interactive digital journeys allow services to move beyond static information and towards ongoing support.



Examples include:

- Step by step condition education
- Short videos or visual explainers
- Self reporting check ins
- Personalised content based on age or stage
- Progress tracking for transition

According to NHS England, **improving digital access and engagement is a key part of the wider move towards a more patient centred NHS.**

When journeys feel continuous and responsive, young people are more likely to stay engaged over time.

Examples of youth friendly features

While every service is different, there are some common features that tend to resonate:

- Mobile first design
- Short, visual content rather than long text
- Anonymous or confidential question submission
- Interactive tools such as quizzes or trackers
- Notifications or prompts to maintain engagement
- Clear signposting to support services

These are not complex ideas. But their impact can be significant when applied consistently.

A simple framework for designing a digital journey

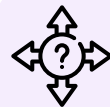
If your team is thinking, “Where do we start?”, a helpful place is the young person’s journey itself, and the points where uncertainty or disengagement are most likely to happen.



Step 1: Map the journey into clear phases

Break the pathway into stages that reflect real experiences, for example:

- Referral and first contact
- Assessment and ongoing care
- Transition planning (from around age 14)
- Transfer to adult services
- Ongoing support and self management



Step 2: Identify key moments of uncertainty or disengagement

Common points include:

- Waiting for appointments or results
- First interactions with services
- Being asked to attend independently
- Unclear next steps
- Transition discussions
- Feeling unsure whether to ask questions



Step 3: Define what good support looks like

At each moment, consider:

- Common questions, including unspoken ones
- Likely concerns or anxieties
- Actions you want young people to take
- Formats and channels that feel accessible



Step 4: Design content around real moments

Focus on timely, relevant support such as:

- What to expect at appointments
- Questions you might want to ask
- When to seek help
- What happens during transition

Use simple, visual or interactive formats where possible.



Step 5: Make it easy to respond

Include simple prompts like:

- Was this helpful?
- Do you still have questions?

This helps improve content and creates space for concerns to surface earlier.



A useful design principle

Make the right thing easy. If users have to hunt, they will default to Google. Given how widespread misinformation exposure is, that is a risk you can reduce with better design.

Getting started without adding burden

It can be easy to assume that digital engagement requires large scale content, complex governance and ongoing admin. In reality, you can start much smaller.

A realistic “start small” approach

Week 1 to 2: Define your focus

- Choose one area, for example transition support or first appointments
- Identify common questions and points where young people disengage
- Agree clear, age appropriate wording and safeguarding guidance



Week 3 to 6: Build a minimum starting point

- 10 to 20 short, youth friendly FAQs
- Simple content such as “what to expect” or “is this normal?”
- Clear guidance on when and how to reach out for support
- A small wellbeing or self support section

Week 7 to 12: Launch, learn and adapt

- Track what young people are actually using
- Add content based on real questions
- Introduce simple feedback options
- Refine tone and format over time

How to demonstrate value

Even without complex measurement, digital engagement can support:

- Reduced anxiety through clearer, accessible information
- Earlier questions and safer escalation of concerns
- Fewer repeat contacts for basic information
- Better prepared and more confident young people

It can also contribute to wider system priorities, including reducing missed appointments and improving continuity during transition.

Bringing it together

Engaging young people digitally is not about adding more content. It is about changing how that content is experienced.

It means:

- Meeting young people where they already are
- Creating spaces that feel safe and relevant
- Supporting continuity through key life transitions
- Making it easier to ask questions, earlier

Perhaps most importantly, it is about recognising that engagement is not a one off interaction. It is something that builds over time.



Want to continue the conversation?



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