



**SMARTPHONE  
FREE CHILDHOOD**

# **Smartphone Free Schools Guide *for primary school leaders***

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As a school leader, you will likely have dealt with negative situations involving the use of smartphones and social media amongst your student population. These will have arisen in spite of your efforts to educate pupils around the use of smartphones; ban them in your classrooms and the playground; and provide ongoing support to the growing number of pupils impacted. You are not alone.

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## Who are we?

Smartphone Free Childhood is a grassroots movement aiming to change the norm around when parents buy smartphones for their children. In Britain today, [24% of 5-7 year olds](#) now own a smartphone, by 12, 97% do. When parents first started giving smartphones to their children, we didn't know the impact they would have. Now, the evidence is clear and we need to act. Research has shown that the younger a child gets a smartphone, the worse their mental health will be. We are calling for parents, schools, government and tech companies to come together and change the norm around when children receive smartphones. We believe smartphones with unrestricted internet access and social media are not suitable for children under 16 - a simple 'brick phone' does everything a child needs.

We are working closely with government to push for an outright ban on smartphones in schools, plus stronger regulation of both hardware and software. But new legislation will take time and children need protection now. That's why we're calling for parents and schools to come together and act now.

## What can you do?

School leaders have the ability to move faster than the government to effect change in their schools immediately. Most children spend more time in school than any other place outside their home. Our movement has shown us that parents – and many young people themselves – want schools to help them minimise the impact of smartphones in their children's lives.



# Harms —

## *Evidence for educators*

Teachers will have their own anecdotes about the negative impact of smartphones on children today. Students are bringing their phone-based behaviour patterns into schools, which is causing classroom conflict, cyberbullying and distraction.

There is high quality evidence for a range of harms attributed to smartphone usage ([Obesity](#); [Body Image](#); [Eye Damage](#); [Tics / Tourettes](#); [Sleep](#); [Friendship](#); [Addiction](#)) but these three harms are most pertinent to your job running a school.

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## 01. Smartphones are linked to anxiety and depression

**There has been an explosion of mental illness in Gen Z, the generation that grew up with smartphones. Multiple studies from across the world have found a correlation between teen depression, anxiety and suicide, and excessive smartphone use.**

### **Key evidence:**

- (US) The younger someone gets a mobile phone, the worse their mental health in later life ([Sapien Labs](#)).
- (UK) The Millennium Cohort Study [states](#) that ‘greater social media use relates to poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image’
- (Intl) The world-renowned PISA study has documented the [rise of loneliness amongst school children](#) which doubled between 2012-2018. Analysis of the data demonstrates that school loneliness was high when smartphone access and internet use were high.
- (Switzerland) Excessive smartphone use is associated with [psychiatric, cognitive, emotional, medical and brain changes](#) in adolescents that should be considered by health and education professionals.
- (Norway) After smartphone bans in [400+ middle schools](#), girls had fewer mental health issues, better grades, and both girls and boys were less likely to be bullied.



- (US) Mental health researchers Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge have [observed](#) that symptoms of depression and suicide rates among teens increased sharply in 2012, coinciding with the acceleration of smartphone ownership particularly among those younger generations. For a digestible run down of Haidt's data and evidence on the mental health crisis in adolescents, watch the Smartphone Free Childhood [webinar](#) with him.
- (UK) In the last three years, the likelihood of a young person having a mental health issue [has increased by 50%](#) and emergency referrals to youth mental healthcare services have risen [by 53%](#). This has been strongly correlated with smartphone use.

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## 02. Smartphones expose children to extreme safeguarding risks

**Through their smartphones, UK children are exposed to: violent and sexual imagery; grooming via sexual predators; cyberbullying and sexting.**

### **Key evidence:**

- (UK) In recent [studies](#), 55% of UK teens reported seeing real life acts of violence on social media in the last 12 months. 24% had seen children carrying, promoting, or using weapons.
- (UK) Children's Commissioner [report](#), Rachel De Souza: "In a room of 15 and 16-year-olds, three quarters had been sent a video of a beheading. I conducted a nationally representative survey of 2,005 children and their parents to understand families' perspectives on online safety. My survey found that children are frequently exposed to a wide range of inappropriate and harmful content online, included sexualised and violent imagery, anonymous trolling, and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders."
- (UK) Social media algorithms [amplify](#) misogynistic content.
- (UK) Social media has been [proven](#) to increase self-harm and suicidal tendencies amongst adolescents. [ONS report](#): 1 in 5 children between the ages of 10 and 15 had experienced some form of cyberbullying within the last year.



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## 03. Smartphones impair attainment

**Smartphones have a negative impact on learning, academic achievement and the kind of cognitive functioning needed for success at school. They are designed to distract children's attention and increase dependency on them. Schools which ban mobile phones have higher exam results.**

### Key evidence:

- (UK) Children from schools that have an outright ban on smartphones achieve GCSE results [one to two grades higher](#) compared with those at schools with laxer policies. Those schools are also twice as likely to be rated Outstanding by Ofsted.
- (UK) BMJ / University of Birmingham [evidence paper](#) on the impact of school policies restricting daytime smartphone use. Evidence suggests that whole school policies related to health and well-being can: (1) reduce overall screen time; (2) positively influence mental well-being; and (3) improve physical activity, sleep, educational attainment and reduce disruptive classroom behaviour.
- (US) [Research paper](#) - smartphone addiction has negative impacts on student learning and overall academic performance.
- (Intl) [Multiple studies](#) have identified evidence of comorbidities between excessive smartphone use and psychiatric diagnoses including ADHD and OCD.
- (Intl) [‘Put learners first’: Unesco calls for global ban on smartphones in schools](#)
- (US) Smartphones are leading to decline in test scores. [It Sure Looks Like Phones Are Making Students Dumber](#)



# School policy changes

Given that, on average, children receive 237 notifications a day, it's no wonder they are twitching to check TikTok in the toilet or sneaking a few minutes on Snapchat, regardless of sanctions. The UK government found that 57% of secondary school pupils reported mobile phones being used when they weren't supposed to be.

The [government issued new school guidance](#) on smartphones in February but stopped short of issuing an outright ban meaning that only [11% of schools](#) currently have one in place. Many schools are increasingly aware of the problem, however, and have been searching for effective ways to counter the use and impact of smartphones on their pupils. A catalogue of different policies, from bans to brick phone rental schemes, is emerging.

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## Effective strategies being employed in UK schools:

- 01.** Write to parents directly about the negative impacts of smartphones, encouraging them to buy a brick phone instead, via the schools newsletter. Hold a brick phone fair in school to educate parents about alternatives to smartphones, or send them our [comprehensive list](#). [[Woodcroft](#); [Emanuel](#); Copleston, King Alfred School]
- 02.** Send out your own parent agreement for the whole school to sign, actively asking all parents to delay getting their children smartphones, with stringent guidelines for home usage for those who do have them. Follow-up directly with parents who do not respond to ensure high coverage. [[Coten End](#)]
- 03.** Link up with other local schools to create smartphone policies that span local areas and age ranges. Two towns in Ireland have successfully clubbed together to enforce smartphone bans across all primary schools. [[County Wicklow](#); [Waterford](#);)
- 04.** List smartphones as a banned item in the behaviour policy so that they can be picked up via a school's searching policy. Review sanctions for breaching school smartphone policies. In the words of one headteacher, "have a really unpopular and tough sanction. Confiscating for a term is very harsh but it has to be a tough sanction because the rule is so counter-cultural... Allowing a non-smart phone has been a very useful concession to allay parental concerns around safety on the way to/from school." Consider how confiscations for smartphones might be different from those for a brick phone, recognising the importance of safe travel to and from school. [[Oratory](#)]
- 05.** In recognition that many parents give their child an old smartphone, remove financial barriers by offering a rental scheme for brick phones for the duration of a school year. [[Blandford](#)]



**06.** Ban smartphones from school premises entirely, except in special circumstances and with written permission. [[Woodcroft](#)]

**07.** Direct parents to their local [Smartphone Free Childhood WhatsApp group](#), where they can take collective action not to get smartphones, e.g by getting together with other parents in the school to make a [parent pact](#).

**08.** Review transport policies to make it as easy as possible to travel to/from school without a smartphone, e.g. providing non-digital bus passes; showing parents how they can tell when their child has arrived at school without tracking their smartphone, for example by using an air tag.

### **Other policies of interest**

Heritage School has created a distinctive whole school philosophy with respect to screens. Its [Acceptable Use of Screens Policy](#) lays out the school's approach – one which strongly prioritises real world activities and relationships and intentionally limits screen use by encouraging an effective partnership between home and school and a common approach between families.

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## **Case Studies**

These schools have implemented stronger smartphone policies and report on what they have learnt:

- (UK) [How banning mobile phones has boosted 'good old-fashioned human interaction' at Kilgraston School in Perthshire](#)
- (UK) [Mobiles in schools: Accrington students embrace phone-free days - BBC News](#)
- (UK) [The school offering a 12-hour day to break phone addiction](#)
- (UK) [Conwy secondary school's 'phone-free' policy sees success | North Wales Pioneer](#)
- (UK) [The extraordinary results of one school's ban on smartphones](#)
- (US) [This School Took Away Smartphones. The Kids Don't Mind. - WSJ](#)

**Thank you for reading and your support**  
[smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk](http://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk)