



**SMARTPHONE
FREE CHILDHOOD**

**Why is everyone talking
about smartphones and
children?**

PARENT TALK – Dr. Erin Carroll - 2026



In two decades, everything's changed

2005



2026



2005

Nokias ruled...
texts, calls & snake

2007

The first
iPhone launches
"A computer in our
pocket"

2012

4G UK launch, internet
always available,
everywhere

2020s

Explosion of short-form
content & AI powered
algorithms

2025

Smartphones have
transformed society...
and childhood



Smartphones have become 'normal' for kids



Age
6-7

1 in 3

children have a
smartphone



Age
9

Average age

a child gets a
smartphone in the
UK



Age
12

90%

of children have a
smartphone



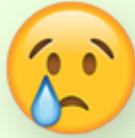
Nobody is happy with the status quo



94%

of **primary school parents** think smartphones are harmful

PARENTKIND POLL
2024



33%

of **parents of children with smartphones** have cried over their child's phone obsession

HMD POLL
2024



87%

of **teachers** agree for teens the negatives of smartphones outweigh the benefits

TEACHER TAPP SURVEY
2025



67%

of **16-18 year olds** think smartphones are harmful

PARENTKIND POLL
2024



Doctors are speaking up too

“I believe this is the most **urgent public health issue** of our time.”



Dr Rangan Chatterjee

NHS GP, AUTHOR, BROADCASTER

“Every day doctors see the **damage** smartphones are doing to children’s mental health and wellbeing.”



Dr Susie Davies

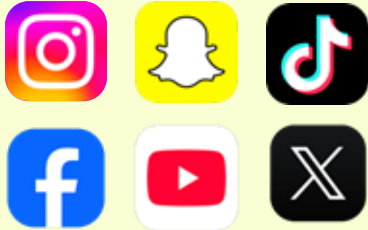
NHS GP AND CAMPAIGNER;
FOUNDER OF PAPAYA PARENTS



The only winners are the tech companies

The Attention Economy

We don't pay them.
The more **time** we spend, the more **money** they make.



 Attention = Profit 

The business model of social media giants is based on **addiction**

Tech companies make

\$40B+

per year from under 18s*

The attention economy profits from lost childhoods

* Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health study, 2023 - \$11B of revenue for US; \$43B is extrapolated to a global figure for 2025



It can feel like an impossible position

Either we...

Give our children an addictive product



Or we...

Risk alienating them from their
peers



It's a lose-lose: for parents, young people & society



SFC isn't anti-tech, it's pro-childhood

Delay smartphones
until at least 14

Delay social
media until at
least 16

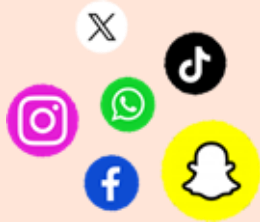
A simple
phone to stay
in contact

Shared access
to a family
computer

Alternative
trackers
(or go without)



SMARTPHONE



SOCIAL MEDIA



SIMPLE PHONE



FAMILY
COMPUTER



TAGS OR GPS



**Let's dig into
the issue**





We all want the same for our children



**Happy
today**

*Enjoy a happy,
healthy childhood*



**Thriving
tomorrow**

*Grow into confident, capable
adults*



**Safe
always**

*Stay safe as they
explore the world*



We all want the same for our children



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**Safe
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*Stay safe as they
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Smartphones make this all harder – and the data shows it



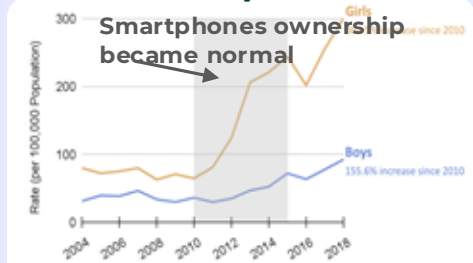
Happy
today

We're facing a teen mental health crisis

477%

Increase in the number of children in contact with NHS mental health services in England between 2016 - 2024

UK 10-12 year olds, self-harm episodes





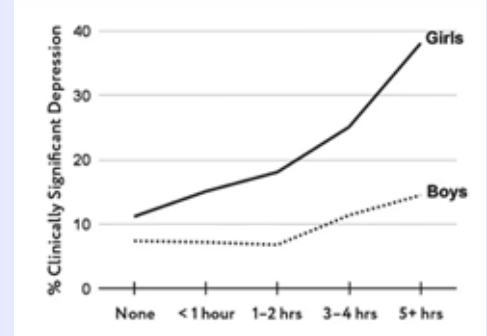
Happy
today

Smartphones increase the likelihood of mental illness

3x

Depression risk
& 2x anxiety
risk

Among teens with
problematic smartphone
use





**Happy
today**

**Smartphones are designed
to be addictive**

4-6 hours

**Average daily time
teens spend on
smartphones**

Among UK 12-15 year olds; nearly a
full-time job



Happy
today

Evidence of a causal relationship is building...

Prospective Associations Between Early Adolescent Problematic Screen Use, Mental Health, Sleep, and Substance Use
Nagata et al. (2026) *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*

OBJECTIVE
To examine prospective associations of **problematic screen use** and **mental and behavioral health outcomes** one year later

METHODS
11-12 years old
8,119 early adolescents

RESULTS

Problematic mobile phone and social media use were associated with higher depressive, somatic, attention-deficit, oppositional defiant, conduct problems

suicidal behaviors
sleep disturbance
substance initiation one year later

Problematic video game use was associated with higher depressive, attention-deficit, oppositional defiant problems

suicidal behaviors
sleep disturbance one year later

Clinicians should screen for and provide anticipatory guidance on problematic screen use to mitigate its risks and promote well-being

Poster credit:
Health
Professionals
for Safer
Screens



Children are particularly susceptible to addictive products...

- Children and Adolescents are not able to self-regulate yet
- They have under-developed prefrontal cortex (not fully mature until 25)
- They want to take risks and are super sensitive to dopamine hits





**Happy
today**

**Smartphones expose kids
to things they can't unsee**

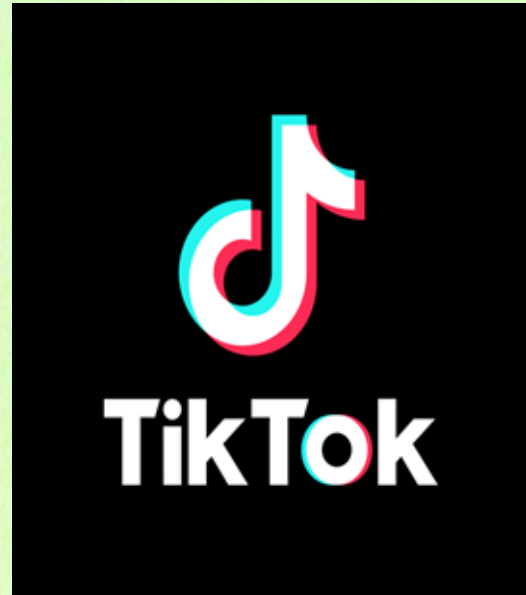
51%

**of 13 year olds have
seen violent, hardcore
porn**

The TikTok experiment

Centre for
Countering Digital
Hate, 2022

- Dummy accounts were set up for **13-year-old girls**.
- Content about suicide was shown **within 3 minutes**.
- Eating disorder material was shown **within 8 minutes**.
- Accounts which identified themselves as “vulnerable” were shown **12 times as much** suicide content.



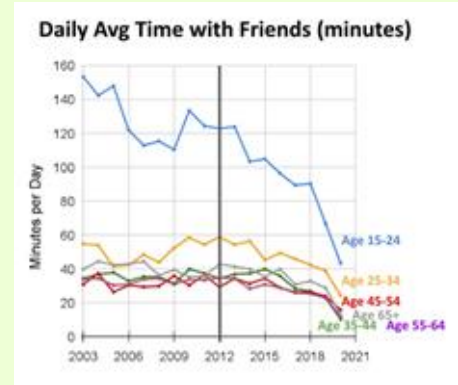


**Thriving
tomorrow**

Smartphones displace real world activities & connection

↓ 65%

**Reduction in time
spent in real life
with friends**



Since smartphones became common in the 2010s



**Thriving
tomorrow**

Smartphones fragment children's attention

237

**notifications a day
on average**

Median average, Common Sense Media, 2023



Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones disrupt sleep - critical to healthy development

**1 night /
week**
heavy social-media
users lose one night's
sleep each week

UK Millennium Cohort Study, 2019
(11,872 adolescents, age 13–15)

“Our teenagers are truly addicted...
The vast majority of teenagers tell
me they are **awake until the small
hours on their phones.**”

“In 20 years of teaching I **have never
before experienced so many
instances of children falling asleep in
lessons as now.**”

Teacher testimonies
shared with SFC, 2025



**Thriving
tomorrow**

**Smartphones lower
educational attainment**

1-2 grades higher

**GCSE grades among
schools with an effective
smartphone ban**



**Safe
always**

Smartphones make bullying harder to escape

24/7

Bullying in children's pockets

Issues no longer stop at the school gate; they can amplify and exacerbate overnight



**Safe
always**

**The sharing of under-age
nudes is an everyday reality**

**90% of girls
50% of boys**
have been sent an
unwanted explicit image



**Safe
always**

Smartphones have increased the risk of online grooming

A child is

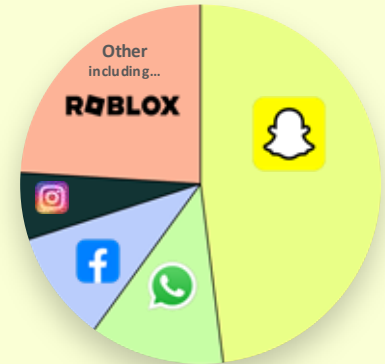
60x

more likely to be
groomed online than
abducted from the
street

NSPCC 2024

Groomers go where kids are

% of reported incidents



NSPCC FOI, 2023/4
(7,062 reported online grooming cases);
Home Office / PACT / CEOP
(116 estimated stranger child abductions 2024/5)



Smartphone-free kids have more chance to



Have happier childhoods

*Better mental health
More time for play
More presence*



Thrive in the future

*Stronger social skills
Better concentration
Improved school results*

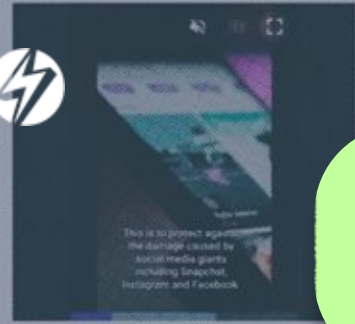


Be safe as they grow up

*Less exposure to harm
Less exposure to predators
Lower likelihood of bullying*

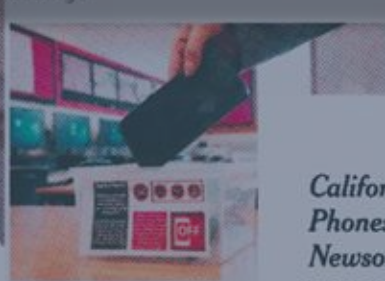


There's a lot of talk about the law needing to change



'Enough is enough': Fed up PM confirms nationwide social media ban - and reveals how it will work

Anthony Albanese has revealed how a nationwide age-based ban on social media accounts, including Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, will work.



The Minister for Education is planning phones from all second-level schools research, which links use of devices to stress, anxiety and cyberbullying. *Philly.com*

Carl O'Brien
...ve that is intended to ...d children's mental

ire schools in the ...ones by July 1, 2026, ...e by children in

California Schools Must Restrict Phones Under New Law Signed by Newsom

Calls for crackdowns have mounted with reports of cyberbullying and studies indicating that smartphones are harmful to children's mental health.



Education
Mobile phones set to be banned across all



...at scho...
5
...that there is a mental health crisis among young...
...Believe social media is partly to blame
...ould follow Australia in...
...g social media for...
...teenagers
...ers are considering ways to stop children...
...accessing harmful content online, citing the...
...impact on mental health
...Oliver Wright, Rachel Sylvester
...Friday September 13 2024, 5:50pm, The Times

The New York Times

are open to a...
g social media...
r warned that...
was likely to be

Children's exposure to harmful online content a 'public health crisis', says Minister

onger laws may...
eguard young p...
phen Donnelly,

Education
Children's exposure to harmful online content a 'public health crisis', says Minister

Stronger laws may be needed to safeguard young people, according to Stephen Donnelly



France
France to trial ban on mobile phones at school for children under 15

'Digital pause' experiment at 200 secondary schools could be extended nationwide in January

Kim Willsher in Paris

Follow Kim Willsher



There's a lot of talk about the law needing to change

Some countries are making progress





There's a lot of talk about the law needing to change

Some countries are making progress



But the radical change we need might not happen in time for our kids



**The solution is
to work together**



If enough of us agree to delay giving our children smartphones the **peer pressure reduces.**

Acting alone can feel impossible, but **together we're powerful.**



SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD

PARENT PACT

185,320

UK children signed up

15,386

UK schools covered

The
PARENT PACT
makes acting
together
simple



The more of us who sign, the more powerful it becomes

STEP 01

Search for your child's school

SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD
PARENT PACT

Select your school ▾

Select your school year ▾

Name

STEP 02

Sign the Pact to delay until at least 14

SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD
PARENT PACT

Sign the PARENT PACT

Sign now >

STEP 03

View results for your region, school & class

SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD
PARENT PACT

National (UK)

158,630
CHILDREN

SCHOOLS

13,750

Sort by:
Leaderboard
Region name

REGION	FACTS
Bedfordshire ↗	937
Berkshire ↗	3286
Bristol ↗	2510
Buckinghamshire ↗	2911
Cambridgeshire ↗	2936



It's happening in St James

6343

Parent Pacts have been signed in Kent

214

Parent Pacts have been signed in St James school

25% of a class =
BREAKTHROUGH POINT

School

Pacts

St John's Church of England Primary School ↗	228
Claremont Primary School ↗	218
St James' Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School ↗	214
Sandgate Primary School ↗	186
Sussex Road Community Primary School ↗	165
Southborough CofE Primary School ↗	162



Lets hear from local parents who have delayed getting their child a smartphone into secondary school





Mum of boy in Yr 7

“My son is a typical 11 year old boy, who gravitates to screens, but he is actually happiest when he is independent, outside, active and playing with his friends. We decided that all he needs is a phone capable of directly contacting his family and friends to arrange to get together and to play some music on the bus. I put an Apple tag in his bag mostly to track the bag if he loses it!

By delaying giving a “smartphone” you’re more in control of the narrative at a time when they are growing up fast! Parenting is the hardest job there is - attempting to equip our kids with the emotional intelligence and life-skills they need to be able to navigate the world (eek!). Delaying access to apps / internet / online-world on a smartphone is giving me, the school and my son more time to (try to) achieve this!

This year my son has benefitted from starting at a senior school with a strict “no phones on in school” policy. Thanks to SFC, ~8 classmates have basic phones and this is increasing year-on-year. It means he has learnt about sexting and cyberbullying not first hand, but in PSHE lessons where they cover healthy online relationships in a broad social curriculum.

He has often asked for more features, camera, WhatsApp etc but I’ve always explained my reasons and “The Amazing Generation” is a great resource to help them understand the attention economy, big tech motives, Gen Z regrets etc. He’s said that he doesn’t want social media after reading that! Gradually, I’ll give him access to more features, but only when he is ready. For now, he’s happy using his phone to call friends. Last weekend, he organised a mountain biking afternoon and often invites boys round to play games/football. Where I have taken away “online interactions”, I have encouraged as much in-person, real-life fun as possible!”



Mum of girl Yr 7

“My daughter started feeling the pressure to have a smartphone in Yr 5, and it really ramped up in Yr 6. All her best friends have iPhones, so the comparison was always there. I set expectations early that she wouldn’t get a smartphone, and was always honest about why – its not necessary, she can use the home laptop, and the internet is not safe for a child her age. I’m not saying never, but not yet. In September Yr 7, she got The Phone+ (the French simple phone), and was unimpressed! But I loved it. All she can do is call and message. I don’t have the constant pressure of and arguments about “Can I download this?” or “Can you extend my time on that?”. With this phone, you can’t...simple. Would she still prefer a smartphone? Absolutely. But she is managing just fine. She messages her friends, has made new friendships, and has maintained her old ones. There are moments where she feels left out of certain conversations, but that is not the same as being left out of the group. I make more of an effort for her to see friends in person. More playdates, more sleepovers, more chances for them to hang out and have fun together. I won’t pretend it was all easy. The first half-term was pretty horrendous - starting a new school, making new friends, and learning how to use the phone appropriately. There was plenty of miscommunication and arguments over messages. In those moments, I felt such relief that she didn’t also have the extra complexity of the internet, a camera, WhatsApp groups, and everything else that comes with a smartphone. For me, it really reinforced that she is only 11 years old. She barely managed with a ‘brick phone’. She may want more, but she doesn’t need more. She has enough to navigate. At home, she still has access to what she needs on a family laptop. It just feels like a healthier balance for her right now.”



Mum of boy in Yr 7

“My son started secondary school in September 2025. The majority of his friends, of course, have a smart phone.

He has the most simple Nokia phone and I use air tags to track his location when I need it. Overall, it has been relatively easily to explain to him why this is the right approach. I got him to listen to a couple of SFC talks which are appropriate for kids. Since I have managed his expectations and explained my approach to him early in year 5 and 6, there was no expectation that he would get a smart phone. He very rarely raises this as an issue. Sometimes I get a plea from him to get him a better Nokia phone, or a smart phone in like 3-4 years time. I can usually deal with the conversation easily.

The more children that are smart phone free, the easier it would be to have this conversation and manage our children’s expectations!”



Mum of boy Yr 8

“My eldest son is almost 13 year old, in Yr 8. When he was in Yr 6, instinctively I thought why does he need a smartphone? so I started researching the alternatives. We went with Nokia simple brick phone in summer of Yr 6, and he was fine with that – I was proud of him. Fortunately a few of his friends in Yr 6 also had Nokias so that helped the situation. He went entirely through Yr 7 with that phone, and there is no way of getting addicted to that phone because he can only make calls and send texts. In fact the texting was so clunky that he would just pick up the phone and make a call to a friend to make arrangements.

The Nokia was perfect as an initial introduction to independence, going up to secondary. I fully expect him to have this one for a few years yet, and delay him having a smartphone for as long as we can. Its worked really well and I plan to do the same for my middle boy who is currently in Yr 5. Hopefully there will be more children in his year group with simple phones which makes the journey a lot easier. We haven't had too many challenges along the road because there has always been a friend or two without smartphones which has really helped so if you can get some support from other friends that will really help your journey. Good luck!”



Mum of boy in Yr 8

“Our son is in Year 8 at secondary school. He's one of only a handful of boys in his year without a smartphone (he has a Nokia for texts and calls) and it's been mostly fine. I know that he would prefer to have a smartphone but he does agree that if he had one, he'd probably spend too much time on it. He also knows that we are not technophobes. My husband works for a well-known technology company that is based in San Francisco and interestingly, none of the senior leadership team there, most of whom have children aged between 8 and 16 years, allow their children to have smartphones.

The only issues with being smartphone-free that we've had have been at school. The no phones policy is usually quite strictly enforced but sometimes teachers do make exceptions (e.g. completing a survey in class, using phones on the minibus to sports matches), which obviously sends a very confusing message to the boys, and makes things difficult for our son. But it's great that the new strengthened guidance on mobile phones in schools has been issued and that Ofsted will now be checking that schools are following it. And I'm hopeful that this will create the change that's needed. I certainly feel that things are slowly improving. Two years ago there was no School SFC Whatsapp group but now there are lots of us on it. It's not easy to swim against the tide but it will get better - we just need strength in numbers”



Tunbridge Wells schools are changing their policies to be TRULY smartphone free from Sept 2026

MOST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS WILL BE SMARTPHONE FREE

ALL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS WILL BE SMARTPHONE FREE with Brick only policies

The schools have stated that they do not want smartphones on the premises. Any child caught with one will have it confiscated for 7 days. A smartphone is defined as any phone allowing internet access.

Brick phones will be permitted on site but must be turned off while on the premises. These are sometimes called simple phones or dumb phones.



**We're all trying to do
the best for our kids...
some common concerns
about delaying**



What if my child already has a smartphone?



**Take an interest
& have open
conversations**



Set clear boundaries

- No phones overnight
- Screen-free meals
- App time limits
- Delay social media



**Review your own
smartphone
behaviours**



**Invest in parental
controls & monitor
constantly**



Parental Controls are important but not the solution

Most kids don't have parental controls

58%

of teens say they have never had parental controls

Parentkind Poll,
May 2024

If you have them, invest time understanding how kids get around them

47%

of teens with controls have bi-passed them

Parentkind Poll,
May 2024

Performing a factory reset

Using VPN software

Hacking the router

Memorising your passcode

Using a proxy





To track or not to track...?

- You can purchase a variety of trackers now, for those of you who would miss this feature of a smartphone.
- There is no evidence that tracking keeps children safer
- They are helping to manage your anxiety in the immediate term, but by using them you never learn that they are safe by themselves.
- You will only feel more confident that your child is safe if you have direct experience of your child managing out in the world without you, or your surveillance. You will learn to TRUST them, and trust makes us feel safer.



What phone can I get for my child that's safe?



<https://www.smartphonefreechildhood.org/alternatives>



If you still have questions...



Find answers
to common questions



Explore 'Child-
friendly' phone
options



Learn how to talk to
kids about
smartphones

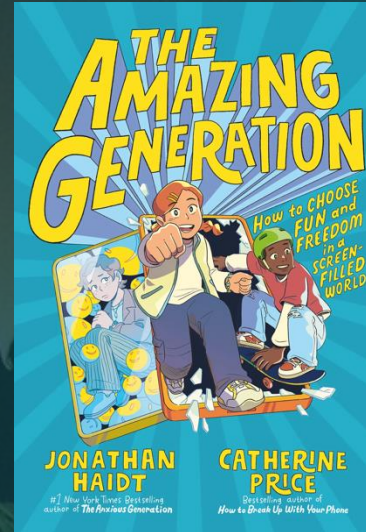
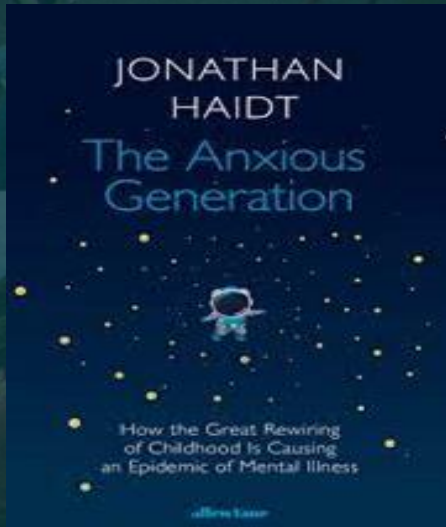


View the latest data
and research

SMARTPHONEFREECHILDHOOD.ORG



Let's get informed and help our kids understand too





What next?

Join the conversation in St
James School

Join the SFC school Whatsapp group





Suggested videos for parents...

- Lost Generation: UK youth led documentary about social media.
<https://youtu.be/yVc4YZpxOZU?si=OzyGFLu8bQfUYNWH>
- Hard hitting (and slightly sensationalist) Australian video, but based on sound scientific research from US about the neurological effects screen time in young kids
https://youtu.be/EPqItSmEaFE?si=2bStGr2nG_dWN62x
- A Stolen Childhood: a summary of the harms and children's voices
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zhfd0jW7iY>
- Online harm – real case studies of child grooming and sextortion from Thames Valley Police
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pRqyWUbGdw&t=2s>