



**SMARTPHONE  
FREE CHILDHOOD**

**The problem with  
smartphones,  
and what we can do  
about it.**



# OUR STORY

## 'It went nuts': Thousands join UK parents calling for smartphone-free childhood

Local WhatsApp group started by two mothers concerned about online safety attracts more than 4,000 members





# **WE'RE NOT ANTI-TECH, WE'RE PRO-CHILDHOOD**

Technology has immense benefits, and young people should be able to enjoy the opportunities it creates – when they're ready and when it's safe to do so.

But childhood is precious and fleeting. All children should have the opportunity to learn, develop and grow free from the addictive-by-design algorithms and age-inappropriate content of social media and smartphones.



**We're all trying  
to do the best  
for our kids**



# WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

**Navigating the fast changing world of smartphones and social media is complex.**

This stuff's tricky, the evidence is evolving fast, and every family is different.

Wherever you sit on the spectrum, or whatever decisions you've made for your children, we respect your position.

Every family will come to their own conclusions; we just want to open up a conversation about these issues.

It's a new frontier of parenting, and we're all in it together.



# SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM



**89%**

of 12 year-olds  
in the UK own their  
own smartphone

**27 hours**

is the average time  
a British 12 year old  
spends on a  
smartphone per  
week





# SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM

**11 years**

Over a lifetime





# THEY'RE NOT REALLY 'PHONES' AT ALL



## MOBILE PHONE

Make calls, send texts, play Snake



## POCKET SUPERCOMPUTER

24/7 internet in your pocket



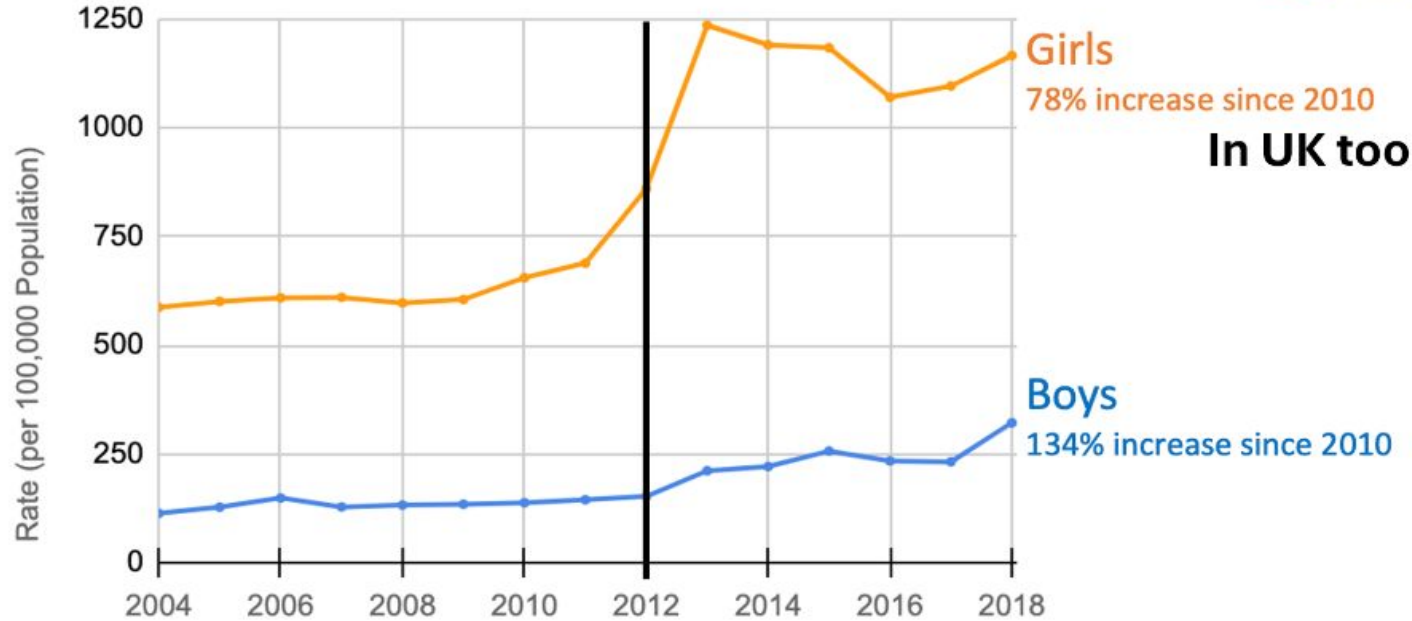
**When children first started getting smartphones in the early 2010s we didn't understand their impact.**

**Now we do, and the evidence is overwhelming.**

**We need to act.**



## UK Teens, Self-harm (Ages 13-16)

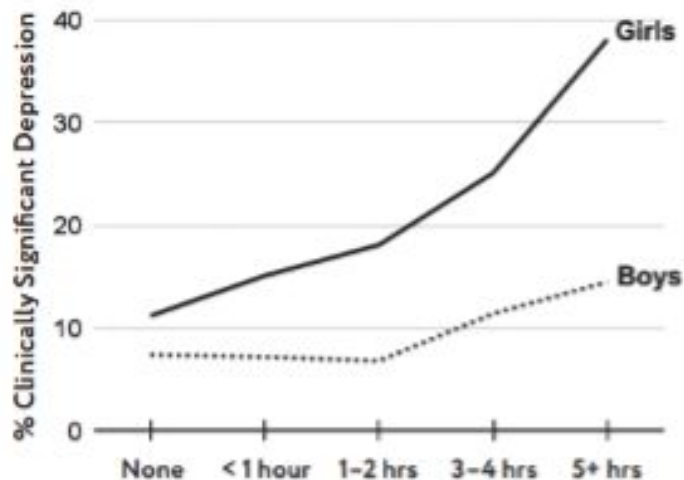


Cybulski et al. BMC Psychiatry (2021)





## Depression by Level of Social Media Use, U.K.



**Figure 6.2.** Percent of U.K. teens depressed as a function of hours per weekday on social media. Teens who are heavy users of social media are more depressed than light users and nonusers, and this is especially true for girls. (Source: Millennium Cohort Study.)<sup>11</sup>

Source: The Anxious Generation by Jonathan Haidt



**We have overprotected our children in the real world, while underprotecting them online.**

**Jonathan Haidt**



# HAIDT'S 5 FOUNDATIONAL HARMS

- 1. Opportunity Cost:** 9 hours a day (avg).
- 2. Social deprivation** (Time with friends down 65% since 2010)
- 3. Sleep deprivation** (up sharply **since 2013**)
- 4. Attention fragmentation** (inability to stay on task)
- 5. Behavioral Addiction** (25%)

King's College London, 2024

Parentkind Poll, 2024

UCL, 2025



# SMARTPHONES ARE FUELLING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

## 1 in 5

UK 16 to 18 years olds say that their social media has made them feel that 'life is not worth living'

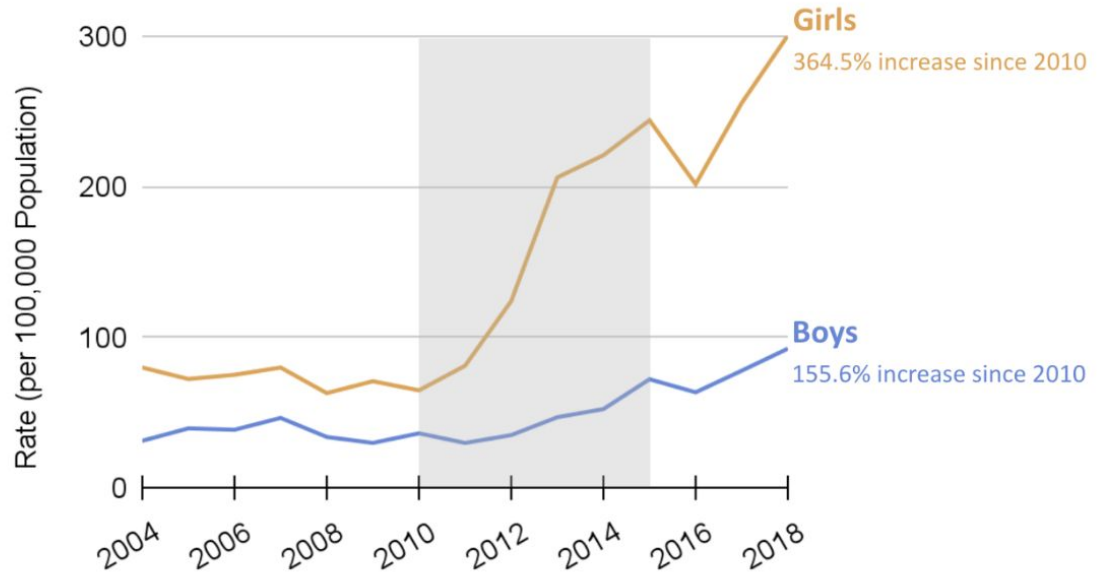
## 3x

Teens with problematic smartphone-use are twice as likely to have anxiety and three times as likely to have depression

## 500%

Increase in eating disorders in last decade.

### UK Teens, Self-harm Episodes (Ages 10 – 12)



Cybulski et al. BMC Psychiatry (2021)



**The younger a child is given a smartphone, the worse their mental health is today.**

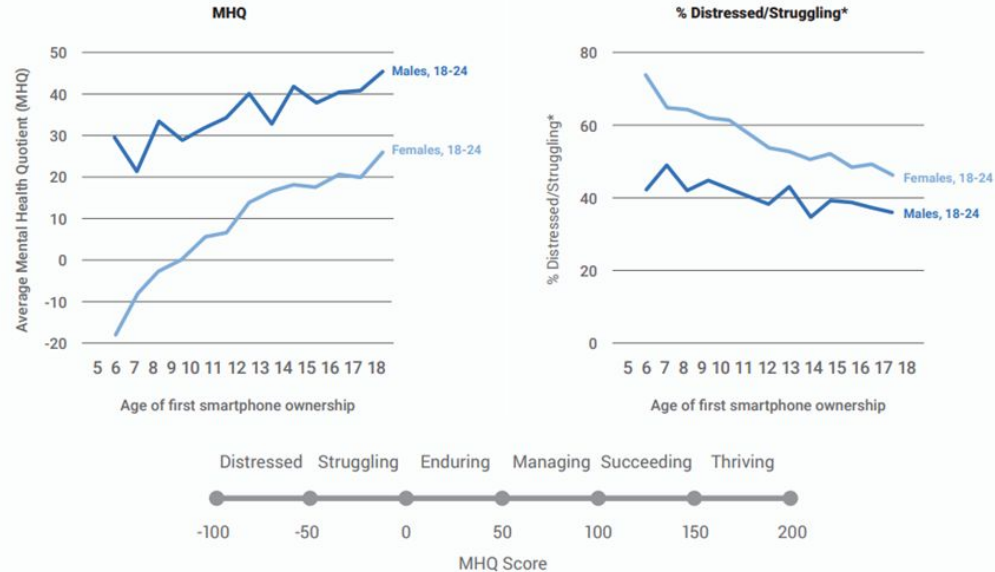
**Source: Sapien Lab, 2023**



# MENTAL HEALTH

**Figure 1: Mental wellbeing in young adulthood (ages 18-24) improves with older age of first smartphone**

Mental wellbeing measured by the Mental Health Quotient or MHQ increases with older age of first smartphone ownership. Correspondingly the percentage that are distressed or struggling decreases.



A 2023 global study of 27,969 young adults showed that the younger their first smartphone, the worse their mental health today.



# LONELINESS

16-24 year olds are the loneliest group in society and the more friends you had on Facebook the more likely you were to feel lonely.

BBC Loneliness Survey, 2018





## SLEEP

- Pre-teens lose the equivalent of a night's sleep per week to social media.
- 73% of teens take their phones to bed with them.



**The most dangerous age for  
girls to access social media is  
11-13.  
For boys it's 14-15.**

Orben, Przybylski et al, 2022



## SMARTPHONES ARE A SAFEGUARDING RISK

**51%**

of UK 11-13 year-olds  
have seen hardcore  
pornography online.  
By 14, it's **94%**.

British Board of Film Classification  
Report, March 2019

**75%**

of UK 15-year-olds  
have been sent  
beheading videos.

Digital Childhoods, Children's  
Commissioner report, 2022

**90%**

of girls and 50% of  
boys say they are  
sent unwanted  
explicit content.

Ofsted review of sexual  
abuse in schools, 2021



## THE TIK TOK EXPERIMENT

- Dummy accounts set up for 13-year-old girls
- Content about suicide shown within 3 minutes.
- Content about self-harm shown within 8 minutes.
- “Vulnerable” profiles received 12 times as much explicit content.





# TIKTOK

## **TikTok's own research finds that:**

“Compulsive usage correlates with a slew of negative mental health effects like loss of analytical skills, memory formation, contextual thinking, conversational depth, empathy, and increased anxiety.”



**“We’ll look back in 20 years  
and be horrified by what our  
children were exposed to.”**



**Dame Rachel de Souza**

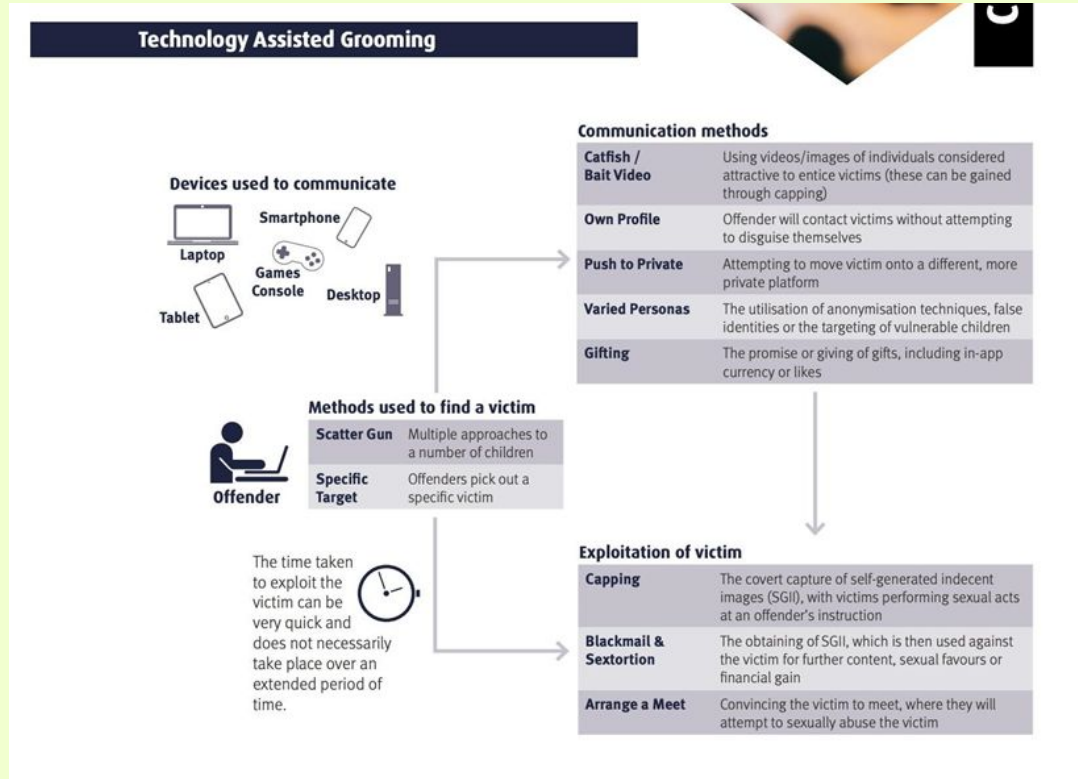
Children’s Commissioner for England, 2022



# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

# 280%

Increase in incidents of CSA with self generated material (selfies)





# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

In 2018, he messaged 12-year-old Cimarron Thomas in West Virginia, USA. After complimenting her and getting a picture, he began his campaign of abuse.



DALE THOMAS

| Cimarron Thomas was 12 years old when McCartney began sexually abusing her online

He demanded more pictures of her and threatened to put her pictures online and expose her if she did not do what he said.

Scared, she did not tell anyone what was happening to her.

McCartney kept pursuing her and coming back for more photos and told her she had to include her little sister.

She refused to do so and said she would kill herself. He put up a countdown clock.



# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Alexander McCartney abused  
3500 children.

**Only 4 ever told anyone.**



# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

- “Pronounced rise” in child sexual abuse
- 52% of all perpetrators are between the ages of 10-17.
- 41% relate to indecent images.
- 17% are rape offences.

Source: NAPAC



## SMARTPHONE APPS ARE ADDICTIVE BY DESIGN

**46%**

of teens say they use their phones “almost constantly.”

Pew Research Centre,  
Aug 2022

**25%**

Of children show signs of behavioural addiction to their phones

Education Committee Report, July  
2024



# TIKTOK

TikTok determined the precise amount of viewing it takes for someone to form a habit: **260 videos**. After that, according to state investigators, a user “is likely to become addicted to the platform.”

**That’s an average of 35 minutes.**



**“Behind every screen on your phone, a thousand engineers have worked to make it maximally addicting. Children are particularly susceptible to this kind of manipulative design.”**



**Aza Raskin**

Co-inventor of ‘infinite scroll’, turned campaigner



## **SMARTPHONES ARE HIJACKING OUR DOPAMINE REWARD PATHWAYS**

- Dopamine is released during a reward which provides a learning signal to the brain.
- The greater the 'unexpected' reward the greater the learning signal.
- The motivational aspect of dopamine means that it can motivate us to do things that are good for us as well as those that are not.

**Companies have tapped into this, constantly hijacking our dopamine reward pathways, and changing our brain chemistry.**



## NEURODIVERSITY

- Problematic smartphone use **mimicking symptoms** of ND
- Neurodiverse children **drawn and more susceptible** to dopamine hit of social media
- Smartphones **amplify neurodiverse behaviours**
- Smartphones **interfere with social development**





**“When kids are on their phones all day, it’s not just what they're doing on the phone that matters — it’s what they’re not doing. They’re missing out on crucial experiences that help them grow into healthy adults.”**



**Dr Jonathan Haidt**

Professor of Social Psychology, NYU



## THE OPPORTUNITY COST

Children spend **twice as long** on screens as playing outside.

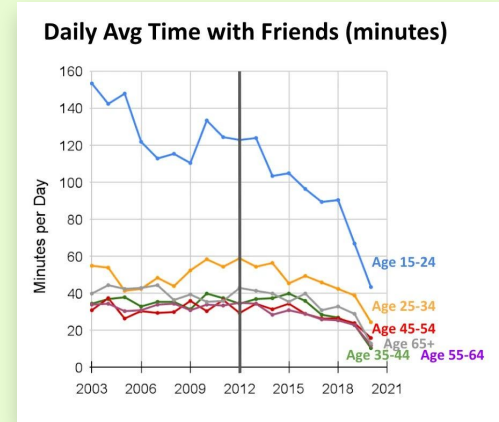
**3/4 of children** spend less time outdoors than prison inmates.





# SMARTPHONES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING CHILDHOOD

Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world activities and connections that are crucial to healthy childhood development.



The average child spends less time outside than a prison inmate.

Dirt is Good campaign (Persil)

**30%**

Since 1975, the daily average time children spend playing outdoors has fallen by 30%

Zach Rausch - Mullan 2019

**65%**

The daily average time that teenagers spend with friends has plummeted by 65% since 2010

American Time Use Study



We have made childhood smaller, lonelier, and sadder— wrapped up in the glow of a screen. It's time to unplug our children from a system that was never designed to protect them and give them back the gift of a real childhood.

**Jonathan Haidt**



"We are stealing childhood from our kids, one swipe at a time. The screens we hand them are not just distractions—they are robbing them of the chance to grow, to learn, and to be free from the relentless pressure of online life."

**Jean Twenge, Psychologist**

# It's little wonder that many of the people who created this technology give their own kids smartphone-free childhoods

STEVE JOBS

“We don't allow the iPad in the home. We think it's too dangerous for them”



EVAN SPIEGEL

Grew up without a TV and credits his own success on that tech restriction. Limits his kid to 1.5 hours screen time per week



BILL GATES

Didn't allow his 4 children smartphones or their own computers until they were 14





# WHY PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T ENOUGH

**58%**

of teens say they've never had controls put on their phone by parents

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

**47%**

of teens with controls in place say they have bypassed them

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

And teens find multiple ways to bypass controls:

Performing a factory reset

Using VPN software

Hacking the WiFi router

Memorising your passcode



# **This situation is benefiting no one but the tech companies**

Tech companies spend billions on making apps and devices as addictive as possible because 'maximising engagement' is the fundamental objective of their business model.

They want our children online for as much time as possible because it makes them money.

**As parents and educators, we need to protect them from this predatory business model.**



# PARENTS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

**94%**

of parents think  
smartphones  
are harmful

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496  
people, April 24

**77%**

Of parents want  
smartphones  
banned in school for  
under 16s

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496  
people, April 24

**33%**

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

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24



# TEACHERS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

**83%**

of teachers favour  
banning devices  
throughout the  
entire school day

National Education Association poll,  
2024

**75%**

of teachers say the  
majority of or all  
their lessons are  
interrupted by  
mobile phones

Scottish Secondary Teachers'  
Association poll 2024

**87%**

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

Teacher Tapp survey, 2025



# YOUNG PEOPLE WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

**67%**

of 16-18 year olds  
think smartphones  
are harmful

Parentkind poll, 2024

**50%**

of teens say they are  
“addicted” to social  
media

Millennium Cohort Study, 2024



# EVERYONE'S GOT ONE BECAUSE EVERYONE'S GOT ONE

*The powerful network effects of smartphones and social media mean parents and young people feel like they have no choice*



Most parents believe smartphones are harmful, yet almost all children have them by Year 7



Because resisting peer pressure becomes almost impossible when children's social lives migrate online



**Your child is only as safe as the  
least safe phone in school**



**The solution is to  
work together**






**If we all agree to delay giving our children smartphones, and instead gave them brick phones until at least the end of Year 9, the peer pressure instantly reduces.**

**Saying no can feel impossible when you're acting alone. Acting collectively makes it infinitely easier.**

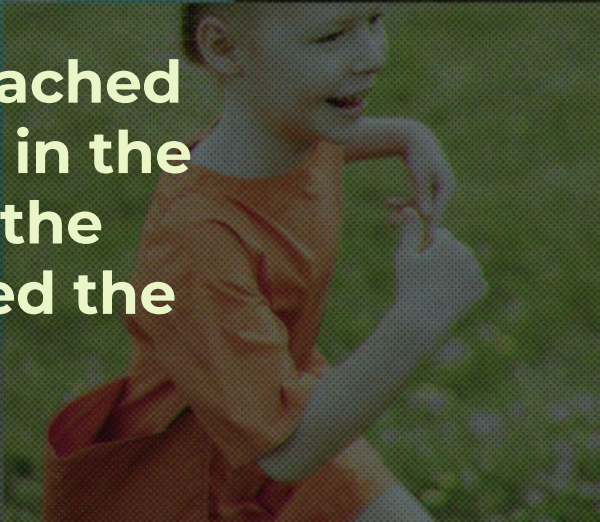


## **PARENT POWER**

**When a minority group pushing change was below 25% of the total group, its efforts failed.**



**When the committed minority reached 25%, there was an abrupt change in the group dynamic, and very quickly the majority of the population adopted the new norm.**





# OUR RECOMMENDED APPROACH

- Simple phone until at least the end of Year 9
- Delay social media until 16
- Internet & WhatsApp access via a shared family computer
- Track with an Airtag if you want to know where they are



**SMARTPHONE**



**SOCIAL MEDIA**



**SIMPLE PHONE**



**FAMILY COMPUTER**



# PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T THE SOLUTION

- Even the most tech-savvy parents struggle to manage parental controls
- Some apps require updates to hundreds of settings to make them age appropriate
- Even if your child's phone has parental controls, their friends may not so they may be sent inappropriate content regardless

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of teens say they've never had controls put on their phone by parents

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

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# THE PARENT PACT

makes collective  
action simple



The Parent Pact is an online tool that helps parents agree to delay with others in your community. The more of us who sign, the more powerful it becomes.

Step 01.

Select your region & child's school



Select your region



Select school



Select school year



Name

Step 02.

Sign the Pact to delay until the end of Year 9



Sign the pact >

Step 03.

View results for your region, school & class



National (UK)

71,077

CHILDREN

9,453

SCHOOLS



# THE MOVEMENT IS GROWING ACROSS THE UK

**150,000**

Parent Pacts have been signed since launching in September





# IT'S HAPPENING IN HAMPSHIRE

# 6763

Parent Pacts have been  
signed in Hampshire.



## WHAT CAN I DO?

- Talk to your child and other parents.
- Delay the smartphone - ideally until 16.
- Join your school's SFC Whatsapp group
- Sign the parent pact
- Model good habits - technoference is real!



## WHAT CAN I DO?

Basic phones allow your child to connect with others via text and calls.

**A brick is all they need until 16.**





## WHAT IF THEY ALREADY HAVE A PHONE?

### **Set up parental controls.**

- Qustidio app is highly regarded.
- Block private browser mode.

### **Set screentime limits.**

- Create screen free spaces.
- No tech in bedrooms.



## WHAT IF THEY ALREADY HAVE A PHONE?

### **Delay social media**

- Try and delay social media until the age limit (as a minimum). Check out apps before downloading.

### **Graded exposure**

- Test the water and see how your child responds. review regularly and don't be afraid to delete! You don't need to be popular.

**Remember, you're in charge!**



# WHAT ABOUT WHATSAPP?



- Whatsapp allows personalised feeds - it is social media
- No way of turning off the ChatBot
- Locked chats are a safeguarding risk
- Developed by Meta



## WHAT IF THEY ALREADY HAVE WHATSAPP?

1. Use it on a computer. Not a smartphone or tablet. Keep the smartphone/tablet that "controls" the WhatsApp account out of the child's reach with FaceID or a passcode the child does not know.
2. Disable or remove the computer's camera to minimise the risk of sextortion.



**The current status quo is serving no one but the Tech companies.**

**In the absence of government action, it's down us - parents and schools.**



## **MOST COMMON CONCERNS**

- My child needs a smartphone for the journey to/from school.
- I need to be able to contact my child during the school day.
- I want/need to track my child.
- We need to equip our children to live in the digital world.
- My child's phone is safe - it's got parental controls...
- My child has diabetes and needs a phone to monitor their blood sugar levels.
- My child has special educational needs and needs a phone.



**80 percent of Gen Z say they would delay social media for their children for as long as possible.**





# UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD

Every child has the right to a healthy start in life, an education and a safe, secure childhood.



Children have the right to get information from the Internet, radio, television, newspapers, books and other sources. Adults should make sure the information they are getting is not harmful. Governments should encourage the media to share information from lots of different sources, in languages that all children can understand.



# UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD



Every child has the right to privacy. The law must protect children's privacy, family, home, communications

and reputation (or good name) from any attack.



The government should protect children from sexual exploitation (being taken advantage of) and sexual abuse, including by people forcing children to have sex for money, or making sexual pictures or films of them.



Children have the right to be protected from all other kinds of exploitation (being taken advantage of), even if these are not specifically mentioned in this Convention.



## PARENT POWER

The more of you that decide something, whether that's delaying or which apps to allow, the easier it becomes.

When a minority group pushing change was below 25% of the total group, its efforts failed. **But when the committed minority reached 25%**, there was an abrupt change in the group dynamic, and very quickly the majority of the population adopted the new norm.

**In one trial, a single person accounted for the difference between success and failure.**



**Sign the pact.**

[www.smartphonefreechildhood.org](http://www.smartphonefreechildhood.org)

Join your local Whatsapp group.

Join the Hampshire SFC community.



# **SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD**

[www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk](http://www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk)

@smartphonefreechildhood