Disconnect

The Case for a Smartphone Ban in Schools

Iain Mansfield, Dr Sean Phillips and Niamh Webb

Foreword by Professor Jonathan Haidt

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Endorsements

"This fascinating report by Policy Exchange makes essential reading for all school leaders. By examining the global and UK evidence for the impact of different mobile phone policies in schools, it shows there is growing evidence that effectively controlling phone use in schools can have a wide range of benefits, from improving academic performance and mental health to reducing bullying."

Rt Hon Ruth Kelly, Former Secretary of State for Education and Skills

"The consensus on teenage mobile phone use is changing, and Policy Exchange are at the forefront of that change. The data collected in this report delivers a stark message to policymakers: mobile phones disrupt education and worsen educational outcomes. This is therefore a significant piece of work and I congratulate Policy Exchange for it."

Dame Caroline Dinenage MP, Chair of the Culture, Media & Sport Select Committee; Member of Parliament for Gosport

"This new Policy Exchange report is an important contribution to the debate around smartphones, social media and mental health. It comprehensively demonstrates that effective bans on phones in school can have a positive impact on attainment and mental health and the report's findings on related school performance are stark - I urge school leaders and relevant Ministers to carefully consider this piece of work."

Lord Clement-Jones CBE, Liberal Democrat Lords Spokesperson for Science, Innovation and Technology

"The proliferation of the mobile device amongst ever younger children is surely one of the biggest influences on childhood today – and too often not in a good way. Not to have the latest smart phone is almost seen as a form of deprivation and some young people are almost surgically attached to them and it has taken over as the main form of communication and leisure so that people do not actually talk properly to their peers anymore and physical activity – which is not battery powered – is increasingly shunned. The distraction that this provides to children at the most developmental and crucial stage in their lives has become a great concern. Nowhere more so than the impact it has in schools and on young people's ability to learn and socialise with other real human beings.

This study by Policy Exchange is a crucial piece of work to ascertain the extent of the damage being done to young people's learning capacity in schools based on real time data. It should come as no surprise that schools that already implement measures to restrict phones and focus pupils on the reason they turn up for school in the first place achieve better. It is important that these important findings are shared more widely and that Government takes a strong lead to disseminate best practice based on clear evidence before the reliance by young people on mobiles has an irreversible impact on their social mobility and resilience in an increasingly challenging time to grow up."

Tim Loughton MP, former Education Minister and former Shadow Minister for Children; Member of Parliament for East Worthing and Shoreham

"It's increasingly impossible to deny that smartphones are doing irreversible damage to children and childhood, and this important new report shows that extends to educational attainment too. Having been a secondary school teacher myself I know how difficult it can be to keep pupils engaged without the constant distraction of the addictive impulses that smartphones feed. Smartphones have no place in schools, and the only way to tackle this is a combined effort by teachers, parents, and government. Schools need society's collective backing to implement strict bans, and the Government should be doing everything necessary to support them through guidance and the law. I commend this Policy Exchange report to school leaders and to ministers."

Miriam Cates MP, former teacher and former member of the Education Select Committee

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Foreword

Professor Jonathan Haidt

Imagine that you are a 12-year-old sitting in a history class in 1993, just before the internet entered our lives. You are trying to listen to your teacher, but sometimes you get bored, you daydream, you occasionally pass notes to friends. You take in about 60% of what your teacher says.

Next imagine being that same child except one day your school announces a new policy: students may bring in their television sets from home, along with their video cassette recorders, record players, walkie-talkies, and any other communication or entertainment device they choose. (The school buys extra-large desks for all students so that they may install their many devices and plug them in to high amperage power strips, mounted on the side of each desk.) All students take advantage of the new policy, which they quite enjoy because it allows them to talk with their friends, listen to music, watch porn videos …. whatever they want! Now how much do you think you'll take in from your teacher's lesson? Probably a lot less than 60% – and quite possibly zero. Imagine how dispiriting it is to be a teacher in such a school.

This is essentially what we did to students, to teachers, and to education all over the world when we allowed students to bring their new smartphones into class in the early 2010s. Because we had allowed students to bring in their flip phones (basic phones with no internet access) since the 1990s, we didn't see that we were crossing a bright line in the 2010s as students traded in their flip phones for smartphones. We didn't notice that we were now allowing thousands of companies to call out to our children with push notifications in their desperate competition to attract and hold our children's attention, even during class time. But when students pay far less attention to teachers, there will be far less learning.

The evidence of learning loss since 2012 is stunning. In the USA, it was big news in 2023 when the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed a recent decline in educational outcomes, clearly linked to the school closures that were part of America's COVID response.[1] But when you look closely at the graphs of scores over time, you see something else: after 40 years of slow but steady progress, educational outcomes peaked in 2012 and began declining after that – not just after COVID arrived. It's not just America; the latest PISA data shows similar declines since 2012, from all regions of the world that participate.[2]

It's not just learning loss that is harming students. As Jean Twenge and I reported in our analysis of PISA data, students across the western world began reporting feeling increasingly lonely *in school*, and that happened between the 2012 and 2015 surveys.[3] Of course they are more lonely!

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress: Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics, *"Reading and mathematics scores decline during COVID-19 pandemic"*, link
2. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data is accessible via the OECD website, link
3. Twenge J.M, Haidt J. et al., *'Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness'*, Journal of Adolescence, Volume 93 (December 2021), 257-269, link

Before 2012, the school day included time for talking, joking, playing, teasing, and flirting in the hallways between classes, during lunch or recess, and on the school bus to and from school. Once everyone got a smartphone, however, those times became more quiet, more subdued, as students turned to their own devices. Young people are now under so much pressure to keep up with their shallow network connections and the latest TikTok videos that they have far less time to deeply connect, in a human way, with the children sitting right beside them (who are also hunched over their phones).

What on earth have we done to our students? And should we maybe stop doing it?

This urgently needed report from Policy Exchange answers those questions. In the following pages you'll find a brief and clear summary of what is known about the decline in teen mental health in the UK and the reasons for suspecting that the arrival of the smartphone-based childhood is a major cause.

The report's greatest contribution, I believe, is the presentation of original research demonstrating *what is actually happening in UK schools*. Most secondary schools say that they have some sort of ban in place on the use of mobile phones, but, as this report shows, *only 13% of schools in England and Wales* actually separate students from their phones for the duration of the school day. In the rest of the schools, students keep their phones in their pockets or their bags, which means that they must hide their phones in their laps or behind a book if they want to use them during class time. (That is the norm in the New York City public schools that my children attend.) In all of these schools, students are using their smartphones between classes and at lunch too, whether or not the school's policy allows such usage.

In other words, across the UK (and around the world), most students in secondary school have with them, at all times, a supercomputer that offers far more entertainment and distraction than would have been faced by that child in 1993, sitting at a desk piled high with electronics.

This is utter madness. We all know it. We must stop doing it.

In my book, *The Anxious Generation*, I called for four new norms to break us all free from a set of collective action traps. Adapted to the UK's educational system, they are:

- No smartphones before the end of secondary school (roughly age 16)
- No social media accounts until age 16.
- Phone Free Schools
- Far more independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world.

This report from Policy Exchange is a gift to educators and policy makers all over the world. It makes a strong case that the third norm—phone-free

schools—will work, but only when *effective* bans are imposed. Phones must be locked up at the start of each school day in phone lockers or locked pouches, from which they are retrieved at the end of the day. If we want our students to spend their time in school attending to their teachers and to each other, we must tell them to leave their televisions, video cassette recorders, walkie-talkies, and all the rest at home. Or better yet, we can give them six or seven hours each school day in which they can be fully present to learn, connect, and flourish.

Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business.

***He is author of four books, including two best-sellers about education: The Coddling of the American Mind*, and, more recently, *The Anxious Generation*.**

Executive Summary

Across the globe, societies are grappling with the dramatic decline in mental health amongst young people – particularly young women. The phenomenon has been particularly notable since the early 2010s and cannot be attributed simply to greater awareness or reduced stigma because of measurable increases in the prevalence of emotional disorders, such as depression and anxiety, or of loneliness, as well as growth in serious mental illness, self-harm and suicide. One important element of the debate is the link between smart phones, social media and mental health – and, accordingly, whether or not mobile phones should be banned in schools.

Policy Exchange submitted Freedom of Information requests to 800 primary and secondary schools across the UK to ascertain both the true state of phone bans in UK schools, and whether there was a link between school performance and a school's mobile phone policy. We found that while the vast majority of primary schools had effective bans, only 11% of secondary schools had effective bans – with others allowing phones to be used in break or lunch, or permitting pupils to keep phones present on them.

By examining the results for secondary schools in England, we found that schools with an effective ban were more than twice as likely to be rated Outstanding as the national average. We also found that children at schools with an effective ban achieved GCSE results that were 1 – 2 grades higher (equivalent to a Progress 8 differential of 0.13 – 0.25) compared to children at schools with laxer policies. This was despite the fact that schools with effective bans had a higher proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals than schools with less restrictive policies.

Smartphones, Mental Health and Schools

A range of factors have been suggested as catalysing or hastening the decline in the mental health of children and young people in recent years. Perhaps the most significant hypothesis examined in recent years has been the link between smartphone ownership, social media use and a greater prevalence of mental and behavioural disorders. The most recent work by influential scholars including Professors Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge however now suggests smartphones represent a causative factor in declining children and adolescent mental health, necessitating a review of our underlying policy assumptions. As Haidt wrote last year, "skepticism was justified in 2019 but is not justified in 2023."

The case for banning smart phones in schools has similarly been developing. UNESCO has found that 1 in 7 countries globally have policies which ban smart phones in schools. In the UK, the decision on

whether or not to ban phones is left to the individual school, although the Department for Education earlier this year issued non-statutory guidance that encouraged schools to implement a ban. Research globally has found correlations between bans and a range of positive outcomes, including reduced bullying, an overall reduction in social media usage, increased healthy play, reduced distraction and improved academic attainment. One former study carried out at schools in four English cities found improved student performance in high stakes exams following phone bans – with the impact particularly strong for the lowest achieving pupils. Overall, the academic evidence of the positive impact of school bans is increasingly suggestive, though not yet conclusive – and it is clear that how effectively a ban is enforced, rather than just the existence of a policy, is critical in whether or not a ban will lead to effective results.

It is sometimes said that almost all schools in England have policies banning smart phones. This is correct; however, the Government's most recent National Behaviour Survey found that 38% of teachers and 57% of pupils said that some, most or all lessons has been disrupted by mobile phones in the previous week. We therefore set out to investigate the true state of smart phone usage in UK schools – and whether there was a link to school performance.

Policy Exchange's Investigation

Policy Exchange sent out 800 Freedom of Information requests to primary and secondary schools in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland inquiring as to their mobile phone policy. We also inquired as to the number of mobile phone confiscations. We classified the responses into four categories:

- **Effective Ban.** Phones not allowed in school or stored in lockers or equivalent at start of day.
- **Ban but phone present.** Phones banned, but present with the student (e.g., in bags).
- **Partial ban**. Phones banned in some places but allowed in others, for example at break and lunch, or in certain areas.
- **No ban.**

Over half the schools responded to our FOI requests. We found that, across the UK, the vast majority (84%) of primary schools had 'Effective bans' in place. With regards to secondary schools, however, although no schools had 'No ban', only 11% of schools had an 'Effective ban', with just over half (52%) having a 'Ban with phone present', and about a third (36%) only a 'Partial ban'. We further found that schools with an 'Effective ban' had a dramatically lower number of confiscations in the previous term (26) than either of the less restrictive policies (159 for 'Banned but phone present'; and 141 for 'Partial ban'), indicating clearly that each of these policies typically results in a large number of phones continuing to be misused.

We then considered the subset of secondary schools in England to investigate whether there was a correlation between the type of ban and school performance – restricting this to England only as this was where robust and consistent data existed on measures such as Progress 8, Attainment 8, Ofsted ratings and proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals.

We found that secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' were more than twice as likely (43%) to be rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted – more than double the 21% of all England secondary schools with this rating. The difference between schools with an 'Effective ban' and schools with other policies was found to be statistically significant with a p-value of 0.002.

We further found that the mean Progress 8 score of secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' (0.23) was noticeably higher than the mean Progress 8 score for any other policy type, 0.13 higher than the mean score for secondary schools with only a 'Partial ban' and 0.25 higher than the mean score for secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student', a difference of 1.0 – 2.0 GCSE grades, respectively. The difference between schools with an 'Effective ban' and schools with other policies was found to be on the edge of statistical significance, with a p-value of 0.059.

We found that secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' had only a marginally higher Attainment 8 score than schools with other policies, a difference that was not statistically significant.

Finally, we considered whether or not there was any correlation between the type of phone policy and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (a common proxy for disadvantage), in order to ascertain whether or not our performance measures were simply picking up differences in the pupil cohort. We found that those secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' had a slightly higher mean proportion of 28.12%. This is 2.61% higher than the mean of secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student', and 6.54% higher than the mean of secondary schools with only a 'Partial ban'. Nationally, a higher proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals is correlated with lower Progress 8 and worse Ofsted ratings – making it even more impressive that schools with an 'Effective ban' buck this trend.

The findings, while not demonstrating causality, show a clear correlation between an effective phone ban and better school performance, as measured by both Ofsted rating and Progress 8. Particularly taking into account the strong support given to effective bans by many school leaders who have implemented effective bans, and the wide range of international evidence demonstrating that effective bans on phones in school can have a positive impact on attainment, attention and other factors such as a reduction in bullying or improved mental health, these results offer further support for all schools implementing an effective ban on mobile phones.

Recommendations

The virtue of this subject is that it does not require primary legislation, public funding or major government programmes to make a difference. Any head-teacher or multi-academy trust or board of school governors in the UK can choose to implement an effective ban in schools. Whilst only one amongst the many issues in school leaders' busy and difficult in-trays, it is one that is simple, deliverable and effective – and one that offers potential benefits not just for school performance and pupil attainment, but for children's well-being, mental health and freedom from bullying.

Accordingly, our recommendations are addressed to school leaders as much as to Government.

- **School leaders should implement effective bans on mobile phones.** To be most effective, this should involve phones being handed in or stored in lockers, Yondr pouches, or equivalent, at the beginning of each day, or alternatively banned from site. These correspond to either Policies (a), (b) or (c) in the non-statutory Government guidance on Mobile Phones in Schools.[4]
- **School leaders should ensure bans are consistently and effectively enforced.** This includes empowering and expecting all staff to take action if they see a phone on site, resolutely backing teachers who enforce the policy against criticism from children, parents or campaigners, and ensuring that confiscated phones are retained for long enough to have a significant deterrent effect.
- **Government should carefully monitor whether or not schools are implementing effective bans on phones and, if the situation does not improve within a year, make the current guidance statutory and binding.** A core source of evidence should be the next iteration of the National Behaviour Survey.
- **Ofsted should incorporate the emerging body of evidence on mobile phones into its Education Inspection Framework and inspector training**. This is an area where evidence and best practice is evolving rapidly and inspections and inspectors must be abreast of it when carrying out inspections.
- **Ofsted should carry out thematic work to understand barriers to adoption of bans and how they have been overcome** – highlighting the best practice of successful adopters to encourage greater implementation of effective bans.
- **Teacher Training providers should ensure they incorporate the latest evidence on phones, social media and mental health**

4. Department for Education, *Mobile phones in schools: Guidance for schools on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day*, February 2024, link

into their curricula. This should include teaching about effective models of phone bans and enforcements.

- **The Children's Commissioner should use her statutory powers to extend the study in this report to a much larger number of schools.** This would enhance the evidence base on the impact of effective bans.
- The Education Endowment Foundation should carry out further research to assess and investigate the impact of effective phone bans on school performance, pupil attainment, mental health and bullying.

Chapter 1 – The Link Between Smartphones, Social Media & Health and Wellbeing in Children and Adolescents

The 'Crisis of Our Time': The Decline in Global Youth Mental Health

One of the most significant public policy challenges we face today is to reckon with the decline in the mental health of young people, a phenomenon which has been particularly notable since the early 2010s, reflected not just in higher recorded prevalence of emotional disorders, such as depression and anxiety, or of loneliness, but also in the growth of serious mental illness and suicide.[5] The United States Surgeon General has recently described this as the "*crisis of our time*", with impacts felt far beyond health and wellbeing, ranging from social development to academic attainment.[6]

This is a problem with a global reach. The findings of the most recent World Health Organisation 'Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children' survey (2021/2022), covering Europe, Central Asia and Canada reveals a decline in life satisfaction and self-rated health amongst those surveyed, whilst "*the prevalence of 13- and 15-year-olds feeling low, having headaches and experiencing dizziness was twice as high for girls than for boys in most countries and regions*".[7] In the United States between 2010 and 2020, feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness—as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviours—increased by about 40% among young people, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 'Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System'.[8] Similar patterns, meticulously catalogued by scholars in recent years including Jonathan Haidt, Zach Rausch and Thomas Potrebny reveal similar phenomena across a large number of developed nations, including Australia, New Zealand and the Nordic countries.[9] A 2019 study found the proportion of adolescents (aged 12 to 19) in the Republic of Ireland reporting severe anxiety had doubled from 11% to 22% since 2012.[10] Similar findings have been observed in Canada, Australia and Japan.[11] A 2021 study, authored by Jonathan Haidt and Jean M. Twenge, found that loneliness increased between 2012–2018 in adolescents from 36 of the 37 countries studied.[12] A recent article in the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*

5. There is a vast literature on this subject. Useful overviews include:

   Kieling C, Buchweitz C, Caye A et al, '*Worldwide Prevalence and Disability from Mental Disorders Across Childhood and Adolescence – Evidence From the Global Burden of Disease Study*', **JAMA Psychiatry. 31st January 2024,** link

   Barican JL, Yung D, Schwartz C, et al, '*Prevalence of childhood mental disorders in high-income countries: a systematic review and meta-analysis to inform policy making*', **BMJ Mental Health, Vol 25 Issue 1 p36-44, 20th January 2022,** link

   Thapar A, Eyre O, Patel V and Brent D, '*Depression in Young People*', **The Lancet, Vol 400 Issue 10352 p.617-631, 5th August 2022,** link

   Rapee R, Creswell C, Kendall P, Pine D, Waters A, '*Anxiety disorders in children and adolescents: A summary and overview of the literature*', **Behaviour Research and Therapy (ScienceDirect) Vol 168, September 2023,** link

   Shorey S, Debby E, Wong C, '*Global prevalence of depression and elevated depressive symptoms among adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis*', **British Journal of Clinical Psychology, Vol 6 Issue 2 P.287-305, 26th September 2021,** link

   Silva SA, Silva SU, Ronca DB, Gonçalves VSS, Dutra ES, Carvalho KMB, '*Common mental disorders prevalence in adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analyses*', **PLoS One, 23rd April 2020,** link

6. Education Week, '*Kid's Declining Mental Health Is the 'Crisis of Our Time', Surgeon General Says*', 25th April 2023, link

7. Cosma A, Abdrakhmanova S, Taut D, Schrijvers K, Catunda C, Schnohr C, '*A focus on adolescent mental health and well-being in Europe, central Asia and Canada*', in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children international report from the 2021/2022 survey, Vol 1, WHO and hbsc, 2023, link

8. CDC, '*Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System*', 2021, link

9. For evidence from Canada, see Gadermann AM, Gagné Petteni M, Janus M, Puyat JH, Guhn M, Georgiades K, '*Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Immigrant, Refugee, and Nonimmigrant Children and Youth in British Columbia, Canada*', JAMA Netw Open, 15th February 2022, link. For evidence relating to the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland), see: Haidt, J., Rausch, Z., & Potrebny, T. (ongoing), '*Nordic adolescent mood disorders since 2010: a collaborative review*', Unpublished manuscript, New York University, link. For an overview of the evidence from Europe, see: Rausch Z, Potrebny T, Haidt J, '*The Youth Mental Health Crisis is International Part 4: Europe*', After Babel, 30th January 2024, link

10. Dooley B O'Connor C, Fitzgerald A, O'Reilly A, '*My World Survey 2, The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland*', UCD and Jigsaw, 2019, link

11. For Canada, see: Kerr S and Kingsbury M, '*Online digital media use and adolescent mental health*', Statistics Canada, 15th February 2023, link. For Australian evidence, see: Fardouly J, Magson N, Rapee R, Johnco C, Oar E, '*The use of social media by Australian preadolescents and its links with mental health*', Journal of Clinical Psychology, Vol 76 Issue 7 p. 1304-1326, 31st January 2020, link. For Japanese evidence, see: Adachi, M., Takahashi, M., Shinkawa, H. et al, '*Longitudinal association between smartphone ownership and depression among schoolchildren under COVID-19 pandemic*', Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, Vol 57 p.239-243, 12th November 2021, link

12. Twenge J, Haidt J, Blake A, McAllister C, Lemon H, Le Roy A, '*Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness*', Journal of Adolescence, Vol 93 p. 257-269, December 2021, link

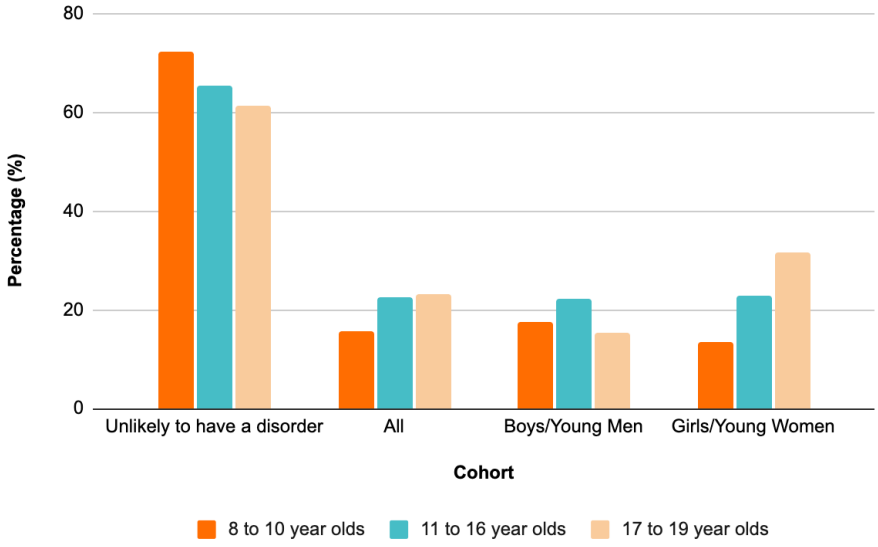
suggests that 34% of adolescents globally, aged 10-19 years, are at risk of developing clinical depression.[13]

The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in England

The most recent (and robust) population survey of mental health among children and young people in England was carried out in 2017.[14] That study showed a significant rise in 'emotional disorders', such as anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), which had increased in prevalence from 4.3% to 5.8% among respondents between 1999 to 2017. Slightly more girls than boys had emotional disorders in 2017 (6.1% compared to 5.6%), but an increasing trend was observed in both boys and girls.[15]

Further analysis from NHS Digital since 2017 suggests a further significant increase in the prevalence of emotional disorders. In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a 'probable mental disorder' (compared with 12.1% in 2017). In 2023, this included 20.3% of 8- to 16-year-olds and 23.3% of 17- to 19-year-olds (see Fig. 1 & 2).[16]

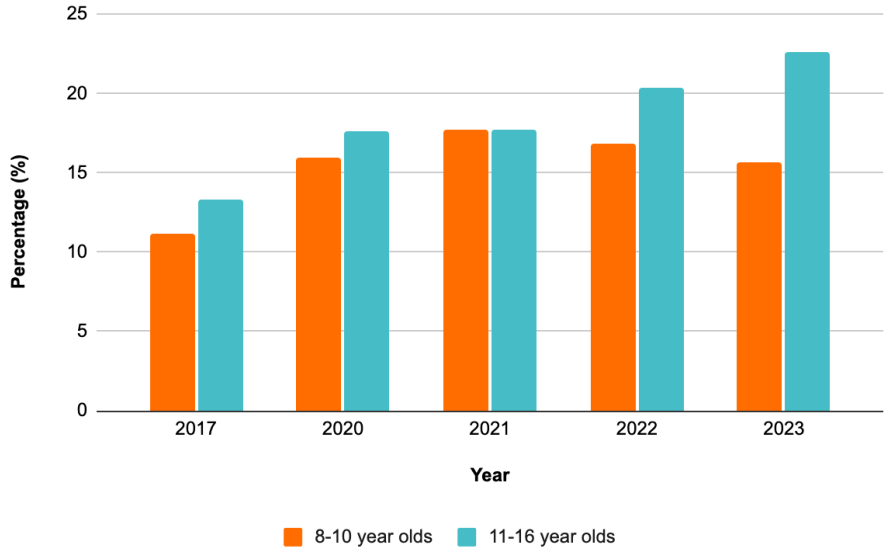
Figure 1 – Mental health of child or young person by age and sex, 2023 – % of those with a "probable mental disorder"



Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link

13. Shorey S, Debby E, Wong C, *'Global prevalence of depression and elevated depressive symptoms among adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis'*, British Journal of Clinical Psychology, Vol 6 Issue 2 P.287-305, 26th September 2021, link
14. Major surveys of the mental health of children and young people in England were carried out in 1999, 2004, and 2017. The 2017 Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey (published in November 2018) "provides England's best source of data on trends in child mental health". As the preamble to the survey results explains, "while surveys use brief tools to screen for nonspecific psychiatric distress or dissatisfaction, this series applied rigorous, detailed and consistent methods to assess for a range of different types of disorder according to International Classification of Disease (ICD-10) diagnostic criteria. All cases were reviewed by clinically-trained raters", see: NHS England, '*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS]*', 22nd November 2018, link. More recently however, NHS Digital has conducted follow up 'waves' to the 2017 study (in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023) which enable changes to be monitored against the 2017 study.
15. Ibid. The 2017 study found that all other types of disorder, including behavioural disorders, hyperactivity and less common disorders have remained similar in prevalence to the previous studies in 1999 and 2004. See also: RCPCH, '*Prevalence of mental health conditions*', 2020, link
16. NHS Digital, *Mental Health of Children and Young People Surveys*, link.

Figure 2 – Mental health of child or young person by age and sex, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 – % with a "probable disorder"

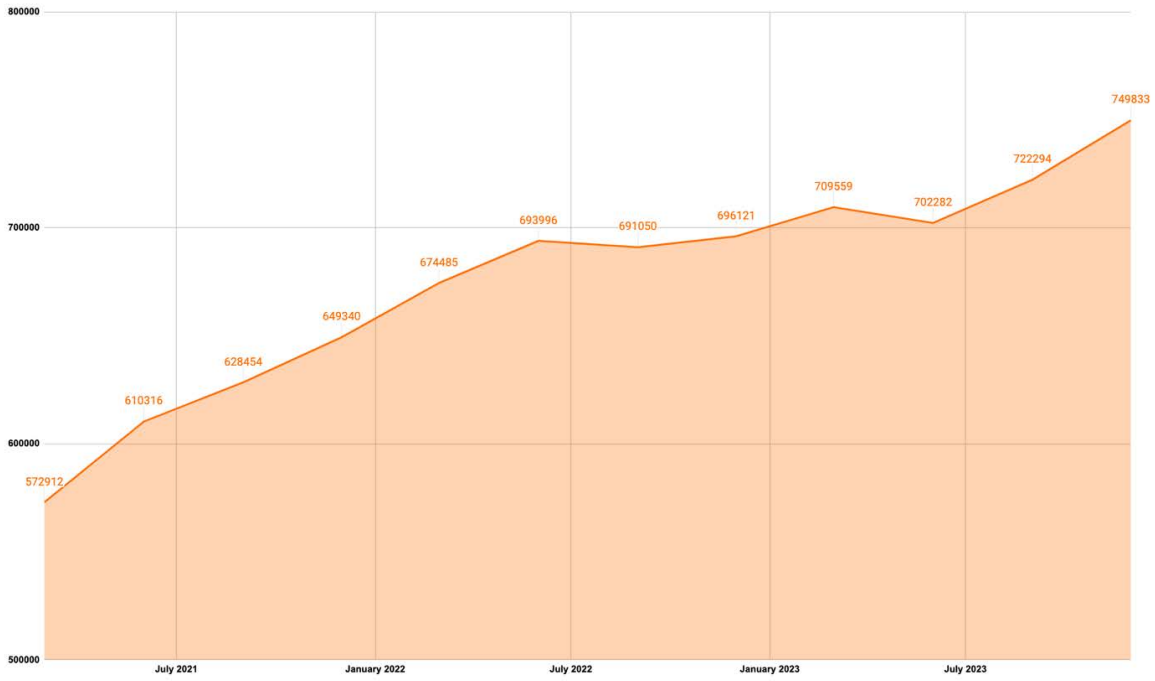


Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link

There is a clear link between the growth in reported incidence of mental disorders and demand for NHS mental health services. Changes to "*diagnostic criteria, reduced stigma, and increased awareness*" may partially explain this rise but, as one study puts it, "*we cannot rule out true increases in incidence occurring in the population*".[17] 445,000 children and young people accessed NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (also known by the acronym, CAMHS) in November 2023. This number has increased significantly in recent years (see Fig. 3), with 30% more accessing CAMHS in December 2023 than in 2021.[18] Concurrently, the number of 12- to 17-year-olds in England prescribed antidepressants has also risen sharply, more than doubling between 2005 and 2017. About two-thirds of patients using antidepressants are girls.[19]

17. Cybulski L, Ashcroft D, Carr M, Garg S, Chew-Graham C, Kapur N, Webb R, '*Temporal trends in annual incidence rates for psychiatric disorders and self-harm among children and adolescents in the UK, 2003–2018*', BMC Psychiatry, Vol 21, 3rd May 2021, link
18. NHS England, '*Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics Dashboard*', link
19. NIHR, '*Antidepressants for children and teenagers: what works for anxiety and depression?*', 11th November 2022, link

Figure 3 – Children and young people accessing NHS mental health services, March 2021-December 2023



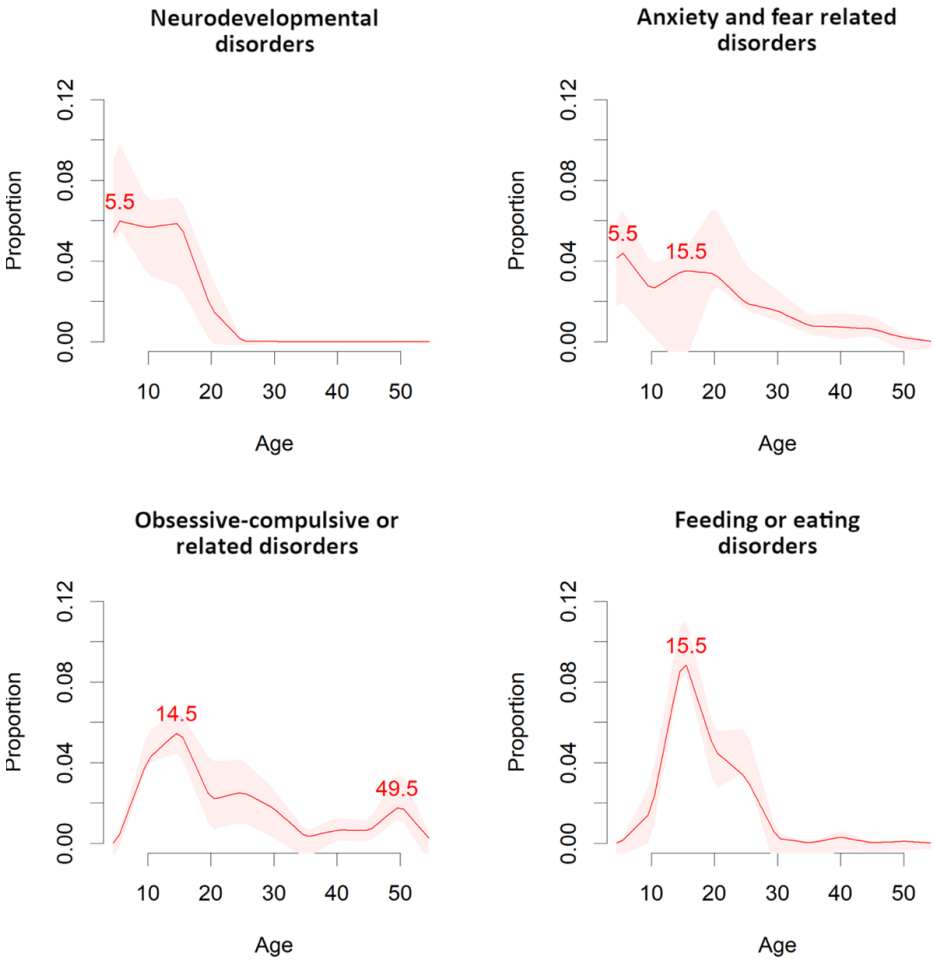
Source: NHS, 'Mental Health Services Monthly Dashboard', link

Investigating the Impact

Mental health is influenced by a wide array of factors, but we know that early years and childhood represent a highly significant period which can affect predisposition to mental ill-health.[20] Half of all mental health disorders start before the age of fourteen. Three quarters of mental health problems start before the age of twenty-five.[21] A useful visual overview of this can be observed in Fig. 4 below which depicts the distribution of age of onset for a range of mental disorders based upon a large-scale, global meta-analysis.[22]

20. UK Government Department of Health and Social Care, '*Improving the mental health of babies, children and young people: a framework of modifiable factors*', 8th January 2024, link
21. Kessler RC, Amminger GP, Aguilar-Gaxiola S, Alonso J, Lee S, Ustun TB, '*Age of onset of mental disorders: a review of recent literature*', Curr Opin Psychiatry, Vol 20 Issue 4 p. 359-364, July 2007, link
22. McGrath J, Al-Hamzawi A, Alonso J, Altwaijri Y, Andrade LH, Bromet EJ et al, '*Age of onset and cumulative risk of mental disorders: a cross-national analysis of population surveys from 29 countries*', The Lancet, Vol 10 Issue 9, 30th July 2023, link

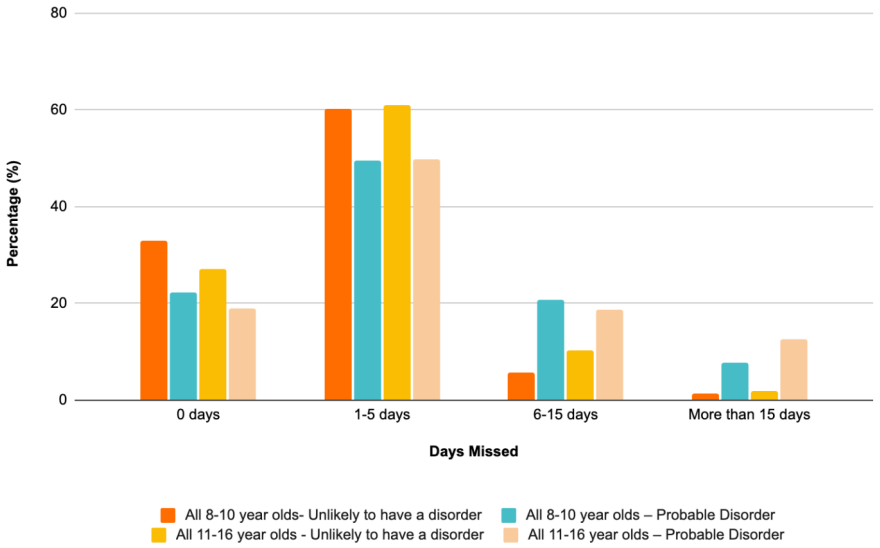
Figure 4 – Meta-analytic distribution of age of onset for specific mental disorders



Source: Solmi M, Radua J, Olivola M et al, 'Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies', Molecular Psychiatry, Vol 27, 2nd June 2021, link

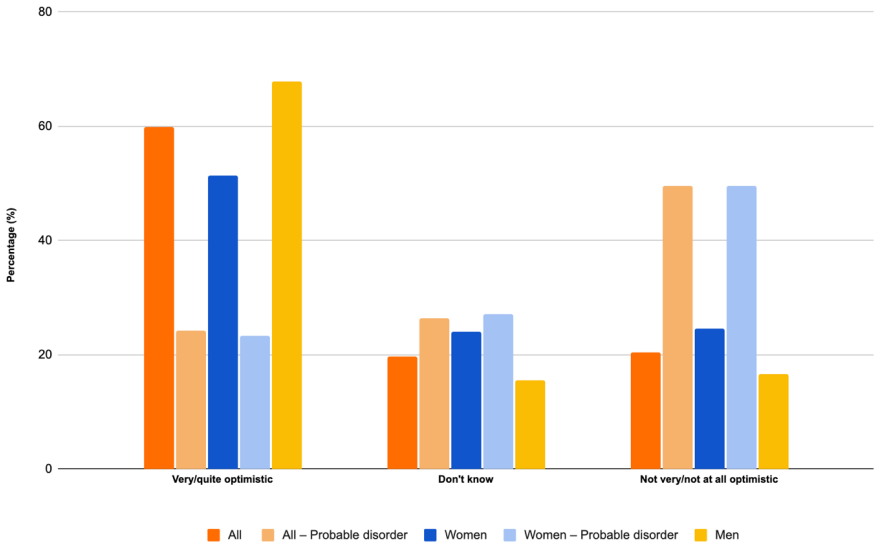
Poor mental health and mental illness in childhood and adolescence has significant knock-on effects throughout the life course. Based on the latest figures in the UK, those with 'probable mental disorders' are more likely to take longer periods of absence from education (see Fig. 5) and are significantly more likely to be pessimistic about their health overall (see Fig. 6)

Figure 5 – Number of missed days of schooling by mental health of child, age and sex, 2023



Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link

Figure 6 – Feelings about the future by their health (incl. mental health) of 17–23-year-olds by mental health and sex, 2023



Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link. Note: No data for 'Men- Probable disorder' was recorded.

Those with poor mental health are far more likely to be out of work than their healthy peers.[23] Between 2018 and 2022, 21 per cent of 18-24-year-olds with mental disorders were unemployed, compared to 13 per cent of those without mental health problems.[24]

23. Policy Exchange has examined the link between poor health, including mental ill-health and economic inactivity in a recent report, entitled '*None of Our Business?*', 28th February 2024, link

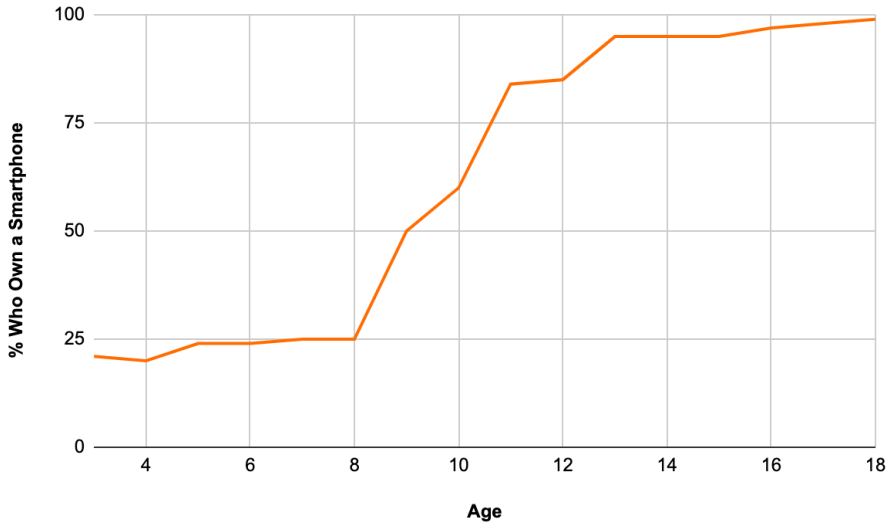
24. McCurdy C, Murphy L, '*We've only just begun-Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*', Resolution Foundation, 26th February 2024, link

Smartphones & Social Media Use by Children and Adolescents

A range of factors have been suggested as catalysing or hastening (either independently, or in combination) the decline in the mental health of children and young people in recent years.[25]

Some of the most widely discussed, include: a decline in stigma and a greater willingness for individuals to disclose poor mental health; adverse economic conditions limiting opportunity for young people since 2008; greater awareness (and anxiety) about international issues, ranging from war to global warming; greater academic pressures and volume of school work and the impact of social isolation brought about by 'lockdowns' during the COVID-19 pandemic.[26] Some academics have studied (and convincingly concluded) that a lack of independence and a decline in opportunities for children and adolescents to play, roam and engage in activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults has also played a role.[27] Perhaps the most significant hypothesis examined in recent years however has been the link between smartphone ownership, social media use and a greater prevalence of mental health disorders.[28]

Figure 7 – Percentage of Children and Adolescents Who Own a Smartphone (by Age), 2023



Source: Ofcom, 'Children and Parents : Media Use and Attitudes', 29th March 2023, link ; Ofcom, 'A window into young children's online worlds', 19 April 2024, link.

Ownership of a smartphone in the UK increases gradually from birth to eight years of age (ca. 25% ownership) where the rate of ownership accelerates to levels that are near-universal among children aged 12 (90%+) and remains so into adulthood. This acceleration in ownership coincides with the move for many children from primary to secondary school.[29]

Access to or ownership of a smartphone – which reaches more than 75% by the time a child enters secondary school (see Fig. 7) – comes therefore

25. For a useful review, see: Twenge JM, '*Here are 13 Other Explanations for the Adolescent Mental Health Crisis. None of Them Work*', After Babel, 24th October 2023, link

26. A useful, and comprehensive overview of hypotheses can be accessed here: Haidt J, Rausch Z (ongoing), '*Alternative Hypotheses to the Adolescent Mental Illness Crisis: A Collaborative Review*', link. On the impact of levels of poverty, see: Nature, '*The great rewiring: is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness?*', 29th March 2024, link On the impact of COVID-19, see: Bell IH, Nicholas J, Broomhall A, Bailey E, Bendall S, Boland A, Robinson J, Adams S, McGorry P, Thompson A, '*The impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health: A mixed methods survey*', Psychiatry Research, Vol 321, March 2023, link

27. Gray P, Lancy DF, Bjorklund DF, 'Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Metal Well-Being: Summary of the Evidence', The Journal of Pediatrics, Vol 260, 23rd February 2023, link. This argument is also convincingly advanced in Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (London, 2018)

28. Among the first authors to examine this link was Professor Jean M. Twenge: The Atlantic, '*Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?*', September 2017, link. In 2017 she published *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (London, 2017). She has followed up that earlier study with *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future* (London, 2023), see in particular pp. 392-450.

29. Ofcom, '*Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes*', 29th March 2023, link

at a particularly significant time in their development, when emotional sensitivity to its communicative and interactive features is heightened and when other behaviours, such as risk-taking are more prevalent than other age cohorts.[30]

97% of 12–15-year-olds now own a mobile phone in the UK. According to the latest survey from Ofcom, most adolescents last year spent between 1 and 3 hours per day accessing online content via their smartphone.[31] By the age of 10, the majority of children (61%) possess their own smartphones. When children turn 11, and typically start secondary school, the percentage of them with a smartphone increases substantially. By this age, just 17% do not have a smartphone.

The main use of smartphones is to access the internet – particularly social media. YouTube is currently the most-used online platform in the UK among 3-17-year-olds (88%), followed by WhatsApp (55%), TikTok (53%), Snapchat (46%), Instagram (41%) and Facebook (34%). Use of WhatsApp, TikTok and Snapchat increased from 2021 (up from 53%, 50% and 42% respectively), while Facebook was less popular over the past twelve months (down from 40%).[32] The majority (63%) of 8–11-year-olds are reported as using social media platforms.[33]

Research by Ofcom's Children's and Parents' Media Literacy Tracker shows that smartphones are the second most popular way for children aged 3-15 to access the internet (68%, compared to 72% for tablet devices). As children get older, they are increasingly likely to use a smartphone to go online, from 39% of 3-4-year-olds to 94% for children between the ages of 12 and 15.

65% of those aged 35 and under look at their phone within five minutes of waking up; 60% do so five minutes before going to sleep.[34]

The Impact of Smartphone and Social Media Use on Children and Adolescent Mental Health

The influence of smartphones upon health outcomes – particularly mental health – is shaped by a wide range of factors which include, but are not limited to: the amount of time spent accessing content; the type of content accessed; engagement with that content; interactions with others via the platform; and how the use of the smartphone disrupts or distracts from other activities, both in the learning environment and other settings, including sleep and physical activity.

Social media has been proven to have benefits in providing positive community and connection with those who might share similar interests or identities, whilst it can also prove an important means of accessing information or as a medium for self-expression.[35] But the use of smartphones and access to social media has demonstrable negative impacts. An overview of these impacts is found in Table 1 below.[36]

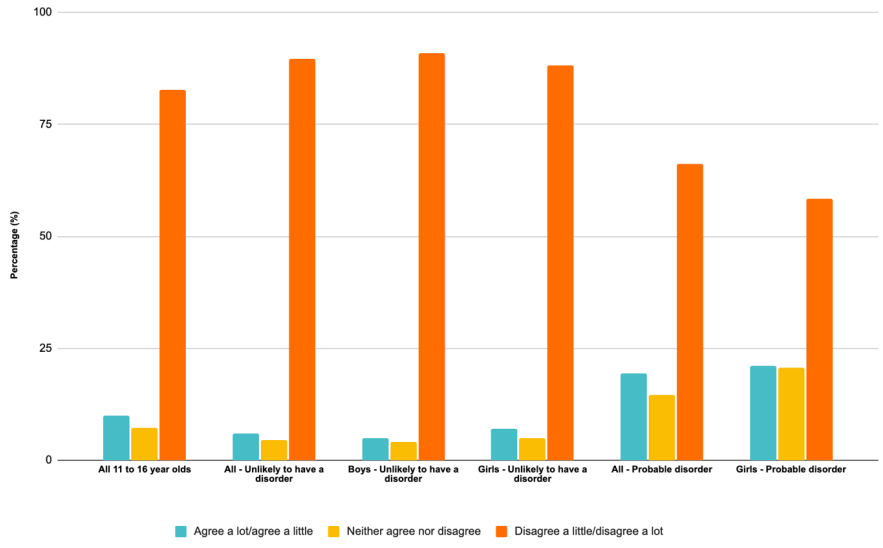
'Problematic smartphone usage' is now observed in approximately one in every four children and young people.[37] Problematic – or excessive – use has been "*associated with difficulties in cognitive-emotion regulation, impulsivity, impaired cognitive function, addiction to social networking, shyness and low self-esteem*". It

30. Steinberg L, '*A Social Neuroscience Perspective of Adolescent Risk-Taking*', Dev Rev Vol 28 Issue 1 p. 78-106, March 2008, link
31. Ofcom, '*Children and Parents: media use and attitudes report 2023*', 29th March 2023, link
32. Ofcom, '*Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes*', 29th March 2023, link
33. Ibid
34. Uswitch, '*UK mobile phone statistics, 2023*', 7th February 2024, link
35. Ridout B, Campbell A, '*The Use of Social Networking Sites in Mental Health Interventions for Young People: Systematic Review*', Journal of Medical Internet Research, Vol 20 Issue 12, December 2018, link
36. Readers should note that our overview of the literature in Table 1 is illustrative, rather than systematic or comprehensive.
37. Sohn SY, Rees P, Wildridge B, Kalk NJ, Carter B, '*Prevalence of problematic smartphone usage and associated mental health outcomes amongst children and young people: a systematic review, meta-analysis and GRADE of the evidence*', BMC Psychiatry, Vol 19, 29th November 2019, link. This study defines 'problematic' usage as producing "at least some element of dysfunctional use, such as anxiety when the phone was not available, or neglect of other activities".

can also impact posture, sleeping patterns, physical activity rates, whilst it can also enhance unhealthy eating habits and cause changes in the volume of the brain's grey matter.[38] 1 in 8 (12.6%) 11- to 16-year-old social media users have reported they have been bullied online (see Fig. 8).[39] A recent study by Ofcom, the UK's communication regulator, notes that parents of 3-17-year-olds currently feel that "*the risks to their children using social media, messaging or video sharing apps/sites outweigh the benefits*".[40]

There is, therefore, significant alignment between increased child and adolescent ownership of smartphones, increased access to social media and a notable decline in reported psychologicalwellbeing.[41] As Professor Jonathan Haidt puts it in an article in *The Atlantic*, whilst the "*underlying psychology is complex*", the "*answer can be stated simply*": that there is a correlation between ownership and use of smartphones and declining mental health. "*Those were the years when adolescents in rich countries traded in their flip phones for smartphones and moved much more of their social lives online*", he states.[42] Indeed, the most thorough analysis to date of these links is made in a new publication, authored by Haidt, entitled *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* which contends that the inter-relation of two major factors are responsible for the decline in children and adolescent mental health: the end of the "play-based childhood", and the rise of a "phone-based childhood".[43]

Figure 8 – % of Those Agreeing with the Statement "I have been bullied online": Feelings about social media 11- to 16-year-olds by mental health and sex, 2023



Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link. Note: data for 'Boys – probable disorder' was not detailed.

The debate has been fast-moving in recent years. Until recently, there were few experts suggesting that the link between smartphone use and declining mental health represented more than an association or a

38. Wacks Y, Weinstein AM, 'Excessive Smartphone Use Is Associated With Health Problems in Adolescents and Young Adults', Frontiers Psychiatry, Vol 12, 28th May 2021, link. See also Chau K, Bhattacherjee A, Senapati A, Guillemin F, Chau N, '*Association between screen time and cumulating school, behavior, and mental health difficulties in early adolescents: A population-based study*', Psychiatry Research, Vol 310, April 2022, link and Stiglic N, Viner RM, '*Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents: a systematic review of reviews*', BMJ Open, Vol 9 Issue 1, 3rd January 2019, link

39. NHS England, '*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 – wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey*', 29th November 2022, link

40. Ofcom, '*Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes*', 29th March 2023, link

41. This link is examined in Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millenials, Gen x, boomers and Silents and What They Mean for the Future* (New York, 2023), pp. 392-416. See also: Twenge JM, Joiner TE, Martin GN et al, ' Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time', Clinical Psychological Science, Vol 6 Issue 1, 14th November 2017, link and Twenge, J. M., Cooper, A. B., Joiner, T. E., Duffy, M. E., & Binau, S. G. (2019), '*Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005–2017*', Journal of Abnormal Psychology, Vol 128 Issue 3 p. 185–199, link. We also recommend the following resources: J. Haidt, Z. Rausch & J. Twenge, (ongoing) '*Adolescent mood disorders since 2010: A collaborative review*'. Unpublished manuscript, New York University, link

42. The Atlantic, '*End the Phone-Based Childhood Now*', 13th March 2024, link

43. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (London, 2024)

correlation. Just five years ago, in 2019, the Chief Medical Officers for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland examined the association between screen-based activities and mental health, concluding there was insufficient evidence to establish causality and to back a cap on screen time, instead recommending a precautionary approach and action by schools, government and technology companies.[44] The most recent work by influential scholars including Haidt and Twenge however now suggests smartphones represent a causative factor in declining children and adolescent mental health, necessitating a review of our underlying policy assumptions. As Haidt wrote last year, "*skepticism was justified in 2019 but is not justified in 2023.*"[45]

The design and delivery of NHS mental health services have not yet caught up. A recent audit of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) showed that less than 5% of young people assessed over a three-month period were routinely asked about their social media use during initial assessment. Moreover, there was no proportional increase in enquiry for 'high risk' cases, with the review finding that "social media use and associated risks were not routinely enquired".[46] Another recent study finds that "*targeting both staff-level and organisation-level barriers to digital risk assessments in CAMHS is crucial*".[47] A study from the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust suggests how natural language processing of clinical records may be used to identify online activity recording in Electronic Health Records, enabling researchers to now investigate associations with a range of adolescent mental health outcomes more effectively.[48]

44. UK Government Department of Health and Social Care, '*UK CMO commentary on screen time and social media map of reviews*', 7th February 2019, link. This was based upon a major review: Dickson K, Richardson M, Kwan I, MacDowall W, Burchett H, Stansfield C, Brunton G, Sutcliffe K, Thomas J, '*Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews*', EPPI – Centre, UCL Institute of Education, January 2019, link

45. Haidt J, '*Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here's the Evidence*', After Babel, 22nd February 2023, Link

46. James C, Shetty V, '*P69 Inquiry of social media use in adolescents assessed in a camhs clinic in UK*', BMJ Paediatrics Open, Vol 3 Issue 1, 18th November 2019, link

47. Lau-Zhu A, Anderson C, Lister M et al, '*Assessment of digital risks in child and adolescent mental health services: A mixed-method, theory-driven study of clinicians' experiences and perspectives*', Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, Vol 28 Issue 1, 6th May 2022, link

48. Sedwick R, Bittar A, Kalsi H, Tamara B, Down J, Dutta R, '*Investigating online activity in UK adolescent mental health patients: a feasibility study using a natural language processing approach for electronic health records*', BMJ Open, Vol 13 Issue 5, 25th May 2023, link

Table 1 – An Illustrative Review of the Academic Literature on Smartphone Use, Social Media and Mental Health

Theme	Study & Findings
Multiple Indicators	• The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2023) states "*there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents". "Bullying, sexual harassment, exclusion, hate messages, exposure to inappropriate content such as self-harm strategies, and sleep problems, which can lead to stress, low mood, depression, injury, and even death*".[49] • Results from The Study of Cognition, Adolescents and Mobile Phones (the largest study of its kind investigating the impact of mobile phones and social media on young people's brain function, cognitive development, and physical and mental health) has shown a deterioration amongst adolescents in London, with "*deterioration exacerbated in girls, those with pre-existing high total mobile phone use, and those with pre-existing disrupted sleep*".[50]
Screen Time/ Exposure	• A study of a "large national sample" of U.S. children and adolescents finds "*more hours of screen time are associated with lower well-being in ages 2 to 17; high users show less curiosity, self-control, and emotional stability; Twice as many high (vs. low) users of screens had an anxiety or depression diagnosis.*"[51] • A longitudinal cohort study of 6,500+ U.S. adolescents aged between 12–15, adjusted for baseline mental health status, found that adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media "*faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety*".[52] • A study of over 50,000 Korean children and adolescents found "*curvilinear relationships between smartphone usage time and adverse health outcomes after > 4 h/day. Adolescents using smartphones 2–4 h/day showed no increased adverse health outcomes compared to non-users, except for smartphone overdependence*".[53] • A panel network analysis of 12,041 UK adolescents found that, across time, "*estimated time spent interacting with social media predicts concentration problems in female participants. However, of the factors included in the current network, social media use was one of the least influential factors… with bullying, lack of family support and school work dissatisfaction exhibiting stronger associations*".[54]
Differences by sex	• "*Adolescent girls spent more time on smartphones, social media, texting, general computer use, and online, and boys spent more time gaming and on electronic devices in general. Associations between moderate or heavy digital media use and low psychological well-being/mental health issues were generally larger for girls than for boys.*"[55]

49. The US Surgeon General's Advisory, *'Social Media and Youth Mental Health'*, 2023, link
50. Shen C, Smith RB, Heller J, Spiers ADV, Thompson R, Ward H, Roiser JP, Nicholls D, Toledano MB, *'Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Relation to the Use of Digital Technologies: Longitudinal Cohort Study'*, Journal of Medical Internet Research, Vol 26, 2nd July 2024, link
51. Twenge JM, Campbell WK, *'Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study'*, Preventative Medicine Reports, Vol 12 p.271-283, December 2018, link
52. Riehm KE, Feder KA, Tormohlen KN et al,' *Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth'*, JAMA Psychiatry, Vol 76 Issue 12m p.1266-1273, 11th September 2019, link
53. Ho Cha J, Choi YJ, Soorack R, Moon JH, *'Association between smartphone usage and health outcomes of adolescents: A propensity analysis using the Korea youth risk behavior survey'*, PLOS One, 6th December 2023, link
54. Panayiotou M, Black L, Carmichael-Murphy P, Qualter P, Humphrey N, *'Time spent on social media among the least influential factors in adolescent mental health: preliminary results from a panel network analysis'*, Nature Mental Health, Vol 1 p.316-326, 8th May 2023, link
55. Twenge JM, Martin GN,' *Gender differences in associations between digital media use and psychological well-being: Evidence from three large datasets'*, Journal of Adolescence, Vol 79 p. 91-102, February 2020, link

Brain development	• Frequent social media use may be associated with distinct changes in the developing brain in the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex (which control impulse, emotion etc.).[56] According to one recent model, nearly a third (31%) of social media use may be attributable to self-control challenges magnified by habit formation.[57]
Anxiety and depression	• A unique natural experiment which leverages the staggered introduction of a social media platform across U.S. colleges, associated with an increase in depression (9% over baseline) and anxiety (12% over baseline) among college-aged youth (n = 359,827 observations).[58] • A small, randomized controlled trial amongst U.S. college-aged youth found that limiting social media use to 30 minutes daily over three weeks "led to significant improvements in depression severity".[59]
Diet, eating disorders, body dissatisfaction	• A recent study finds significant positive correlations between social media use and both depressive and disordered eating symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and anxiety.[60] • A study from South Korea concluded that the "*duration and content type of smartphone use are independently associated with dietary risk factors among adolescents*", noting that with "prolonged" use of a smartphone was an increased chance of skipping breakfast and reducing fruit consumption.[61]
Poor mental health and school attendance	• An estimated one-in-eight (12 per cent) of 11-16-year-olds with poor mental health problems missed more than 15 days of school in the autumn term of 2023 compared to just one-in-fifty (2 per cent) of their healthier classmates.[62]
Poor mental health, behaviour and attainment at school	• Poor mental well-being associated with higher rates of disruptive behaviour, and lower educational attainment.[63]
Concentration and attainment	• Students who did not use mobile phones in class "*wrote down 62% more information in their notes, took more detailed notes, were able to recall more detailed information from the lecture, and scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple-choice test than those students who were actively using their mobile phones*".[64] • A systematic review suggests that "*exposure to excessive screen time in children can be associated with attention problems*".[65] • One study finds "*the mere presence of a cell phone may be sufficiently distracting to produce diminished attention and deficits in task-performance, especially for tasks with greater attentional and cognitive demands*".[66]

56. Achterberg M, Becht A, van der Cruijsen R, van de Groep I, Spaans JP, Klapwijk E, Crone EA,' Longitudinal associations between social media use, mental well-being and structural brain development across adolescence', Dev Cogn Neurosci, Vol 54, 19th February 2019, link and Crone EA, Konijn EA, '*Media use and brain development during adolescence*', Nature Communications, Vol 9, 21st February 2018, link
57. The US Surgeon General's Advisory, *'Social Media and Youth Mental Health'*, 2023, link
58. Braghieri L, Levy R, Makarin A, '*Social Media and Mental Health*', American Economic Review, Vol 112 Issue 11 p. 3660-93, November 2022, link
59. Hunt MG, Marx R, Lipson C, Young J, 'No *More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression*', Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, Vol 37 Issue 10m December 2018, link
60. Blanchard L, Conway-Moore K, Aguiar A, Önal F, Rutter H, Helleve A, Nwosu E, Falcone J, Savona N et al, '*Associations between social media, adolescent mental health, and diet: A systematic review*', Obesity Reviews, Vol 24 Issue S2, 27th September 2023, link
61. Seaun R, Hajin J, Hannah O, '*Smartphone Usage Patterns and Dietary Risk Factors in Adolescents*', The Journal of Nutrition, Vol 152 Issue 9 p. 2109-2116, September 2022, link
62. McCurdy C, Murphy L, '*We've only just begun-Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*', Resolution Foundation, 26th February 2024, link
63. Finning K, Ukoumunne OC, Ford T, Danielsson-Waters E, Shaw L, Romero De Jager I, Stentiford L, Moore DA, '*The association between child and adolescent depression and poor attendance at school: A systematic review and meta-analysis*', J Affect Disord, February 2019, link
64. Kuznekoff JH, Titsworth S, '*The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning*', Communication Education, Vol 62 Issue 3 p.233-252, 12th February 2013, link
65. Santos, RMS, Mendes, CG., Marques Miranda, D, Romano-Silva, MA, '*The Association between Screen Time and Attention in Children: A Systematic Review*', Developmental Neuropsychology, Vol 47 Issue 4 p. 175–192, 17th April 2022, link
66. Thornton B, Faires A, Robbins M, Rollins E, '*The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May be Distracting*', Social Psychology, Vol 43 Issue 6, 1st January 2014, link

Cyberbullying	• In a review of thirty-six studies, a consistent relationship between cyberbullying via social media and depression among children and adolescents was found.[67] • Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has suggested that one in five children (19%) aged 10-15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.[68] • A secondary analysis of data from the Our Futures study, a nationally representative, longitudinal study of 12,866 young people aged 13 to 16 years old in England, finds "*mental health harms related to very frequent social media use in girls might be due to a combination of exposure to cyberbullying or displacement of sleep or physical activity, whereas other mechanisms appear to be operative in boys.*"[69]
Poor sleep	• Poor sleep has been linked to "*altered neurological development in adolescent brains, depressive symptoms, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours*".[70] • Sleep problems are also common among adolescents diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and evidence suggests a bi-directional relationship between sleep disturbances and mental health problems.[71]
Spinal posture	• A study amongst university students found that those with a high rate of use (> 5 h per day), heightened risk and likelihood of developing musculoskeletal disorders.[72]
Physical activity	• One study finds "*smartphone addiction was associated with less physical activity, such as daily walking, and consequently may be harmful to physical health by resulting in higher fat mass and decreasing muscle mass induced by less physical activity.*"[73]
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	• Self-reported and diagnosed attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in adolescents, although more research is necessary to understand whether one causes the other
Secondary Impacts	• Individual (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status) and family/ home (e.g., parental usage and attitudes toward technology) factors all impact on relationships between smartphone/ social media use and mental well-being.[74]

The Significance of School

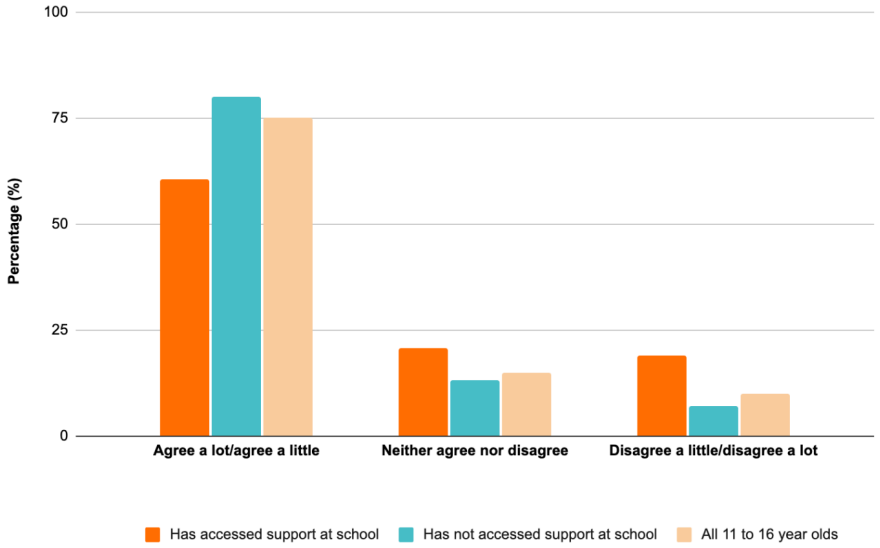
Most children spend more time in school than any other place outside their home, and parents concerned about their child's mental health will turn to teachers for advice more often than any other professional group.[75] Last year, a majority (53%) of all children in England with a "probable mental disorder" accessed health and wellbeing support at school.[76] A majority agreed with the statement that ""*I am able to access support in my school when I need it*" (see Fig. 9).

Given roughly 10% of a child's life is spent in educational environments, schools have become an important setting and "protective factor" for

75. Newlove-Delgado T, Moore D, Ukoumunne OC, Stein K, Ford T, '*Mental health related contact with education professionals in the British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey 2004*', The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice, Vol 10 Issue 3, 13th July 2015, link
76. NHS England, '*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey*', 21st November 2023, link
67. Hamm MP, Newton AS, Chisholm A et al, '*Prevalence and Effect of Cyberbullying on Children and Young People*
- *A Scoping Review of Social Media Studies*', **JAMA Pediatrics, Vol 169 Issue 8 p. 770-777, August 2025**, link
68. UK Parliament, '*Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education*', October 2023, link
69. Viner RM, Gireesh A, Stiglic N, Hudson LD, Goddings AL, Ward JL, Nicholls DE, '*Roles of cyberbullying, sleep, and physical activity in mediating the effects of social media use on mental health and wellbeing among young people in England: a secondary analysis of longitudinal data*', The Lancet Child Adolesc Health, Vol 3 Issue 10, 13th August 2019, link
70. The US Surgeon General's Advisory, '*What Drives Mental Health and Well-Being Concerns: A Snapshot of the Scientific Evidence*', Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023, link
71. Alvaro PK, Roberts RM, Harris JK, '*A Systematic Review Assessing Bidirectionality between Sleep Disturbances, Anxiety, and Depression*', Sleep, Vol 36 Issue 7 p. 1059-1068, 1st July 2013, link
72. Jacquier-Bret J, Gorce P, '*Effect of day time on smartphone use posture and related musculoskeletal disorders risk: a survey among university students*', BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders, Vol 24, 12th September 2023, link
73. Kim SE, Kim JW, Jee YS, '*Relationship between smartphone addiction and physical activity in Chinese international students in Korea*', J Behav Addict, Vol 4 Issue 3, 29th September 2015, link
74. Wood G, Goodyear V, Adab P, Al-Janabi H, Fenton S, Jones K, Michail M, Morrison B, Patterson P, Sitch AJ, Wade M, Pallan M, '*Smartphones, social Media and Adolescent mental well-being: the impact of school policies Restricting dayTime use-protocol for a natural experimental observational study using mixed methods at secondary schools in England (SMART Schools Study)*', BMJ Open, Vol 13 Issue 7, 5th July 2023, link

mental health.[77] As such, from 2018, the Government has introduced a national implementation programme, targeting the development of five-hundred mental health support teams (MHSTs) in England who will work in education settings. A new role, the education mental health practitioner (EMHP) has been created for the programme.[78]

Figure 9 – % of those Agreeing with the Statement "I am able to access support in my school when I need it": Feelings about mental health support at school, by whether accessed support at school and sex, 2023



Source: NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey', 21st November 2023, link.

As such, a growing number of clinical professionals have begun to advocate smartphone bans in the school setting as a pragmatic, preventative intervention for a significant and growing public health challenge. As one study puts it, it represents "*a plausible intervention to improve mental well-being, possibly operating through improving the related behavioural outcomes (e.g., physical activity, sleep, academic performance, classroom behaviour)*".[79]

These are conclusions which are increasingly being reached internationally. For instance, the German Society for Child and Adolescent Medicine [*Deutschen Gesellschaft für Kinder- und Jugendmedizin*] is of the opinion that "*it would clearly be better for children's health, their ability to concentrate and learn and, above all, for their social skills, if schools banned cell phones.*"[80]

77. UK Government Department for Education, '*Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges*', 2nd June 2021, link

78. Ellins J, Hocking L, Al-Haboubi M, Newbould J, Fenton SJ, Daniel K, Mays N, '*Implementing mental health support teams in schools and colleges: the perspectives of programme implementers and service providers*', Journal of Mental Health, 8th November 2023, link

79. Wood G, Goodyear V, Adab P, Al-Janabi H, Fenton S, Jones K, Michail M, Morrison B, Patterson P, Sitch A, Wade M, Pallan M 2023, '*Smartphones, social Media and Adolescent mental well-being: the impact of school policies Restricting dayTime use-protocol for a natural experimental observational study using mixed methods at secondary schools in England (SMART Schools Study)*', **BMJ open, Vol 13 issue 7, 5th July 2023**, link

80. Quotation translated by the authors, cited in: RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland, '*Smartphones an Schulen: Wie viel Handyverbot ist sinnvoll?*', 29th February 2024, link

Insights of Relevance to a School Smartphone Ban

1. **Overall reduced social media can be linked to improved mental health.** Limits on the use of social media can produce benefits for mental health among children and young adults. A small, randomized controlled trial amongst adolescents found that limiting social media use to thirty minutes daily over three weeks "*led to significant improvements in depression severity*".[81] Another randomised controlled trial found deactivation of a social media platform for four weeks improved subjective well-being (i.e., self-reported happiness, life satisfaction, depression, and anxiety).[82]
2. **Limiting use of a significant modality for bullying during the school day.** Data from the Office for National Statistics (2020) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10-15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.[83]
3. **Limiting smartphone use and the opportunity to encourage alternative, healthy behaviours.** There is a growing body of research, both in the UK and internationally, which suggests a positive association between participation in physical activity and academic performance in young people.[84] In one study from the Czech Republic, the number of children observed as reading magazines was almost 60% higher than where smartphones were allowed. An increase in book reading, board and card game playing was also observed.[85] Another recent study in Denmark found that a ban on smartphone usage during school break over a four-week period would "*improve the everyday conditions for health among a broad range of children*", with the intervention leading to a "decrease in sedentary behaviour and a slightly larger increase in moderate physical activity for girls".[86] This link between screen-time and physical activity is significant. In a study of nearly 25,000 U.S. teenagers, about 20 percent used screened devices (smartphones, tablets, or video games) more than five hours per day. This group was 43 percent more likely to be obese than participants who experienced less screen time.[87]

81. Hunt MG, Marx R, Lipson C, Young J, '*No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression*', Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, Vol 37 Issue 10, December 2018, link
82. Allcott H, Braghieri L, Eichmeyer S, Gentzkow M, '*The Welfare Effects of Social Media*', American Economic Review, Vol 110 Issue 3 p. 629-676, March 2020, link
83. UK Parliament Committee, '*Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education*', October 2023, link
84. Norris E, Shelton N, Dunsmuir S, Duke-Williams O, Stamatakis E, '*Physically active lessons as physical activity and educational interventions: A systematic review of methods and results* ', Preventive Medicine, Vol 72 p. 116-125, March 2015, link
85. Kopecký K, Fernández-Martín F-D, Szotkowski R, Gómez-García G, Mikulcová K, '*Behaviour of Children and Adolescents and the Use of Mobile Phones in Primary Schools in the Czech Republic*', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol 18 Issue 16, 6th August 2021, link
86. Pawlowski CS, Nielson JV, Knudsen LS, Schmidt T, '*A ban on smartphone usage during recess in increased 10-14 year old children's physical activity; a Danish school intervention study*', European Journal of Public Health, Vol 32 Issue 2, 29th August 2022, link
87. Kenney EL, Gortmaker SL, '*United States Adolescents' Television, Computer, Videogame, Smartphone, and Tablet Use: Associations with Sugary Drinks, Sleep, Physical Activity, and Obesity*', The Journal of Pediatrics, Vol 182 p. 144-149, 14th December 2016, link

Chapter 2 – The Link Between Smartphones, Smartphone Bans and Academic Attainment in Schools

As has been set out in Chapter One, there are several reasons outside of academic performance why a ban on smartphones in schools could be desirable. These include a wish to encourage healthier, play-based activities; a reduction in the opportunities for cyber-bullying during school hours; and most simply, an overall reduction in the amount of time spent on smartphones and social media. With school constituting a major portion of children's waking hours, this last may in itself be an impactful intervention.

Schools, however, are most fundamentally intended to be a place of learning. So what evidence is there for the impact of smartphones on academic attainment?

In looking at evidence from the existing literature, we should be clear that we are not assessing the wider impact of technology in schools. This is an entirely separate subject, and it is clear that, where used well, technology has the potential to enhance learning within schools – both as an enabler of other subjects, and in terms of the utilisation of technology itself. Rather, we are focusing solely on the impact of smartphones and equivalent devices, when possessed by pupils, and on the impact of bans.

Existing Evidence of Impact of Smartphones on Academic Attainment

One of the earliest studies to assess the impact of smartphones on academic attainment was carried out by academics at the London School of Economics in 2016. By surveying schools in four English cities, and taking into account student characteristics and prior achievements, they found that:

> *"Student performance in high stakes exams significantly increases post ban, by about 0.07 standard deviations on average. These increases in performance are driven by the lowest-achieving students. This suggests that the unstructured presence of phones has detrimental effects on certain students and restricting their use can be a low-cost policy to reduce educational inequalities."*[88]

88. Beland LP and Murphy R, *'Ill Communication: Technology, distraction & student performance'*, Labour Economics, Vol 41 Issue C p. 61-76, 2016, Link

Fascinatingly, the study found that the impact was particularly strong for the lowest-achieving students. Those in the bottom quartile of prior achievement gained 14% of a standard deviation – while those in the top quartile neither gained nor deteriorated.

Another study in Brazil attempted to test the relationship between actual smartphone use and academic attainment, this time amongst young adults at university. They found that, "*Each 100 min spent using the device on average per day corresponded to a reduction in a student's position at the school's ranking of 6.3 points*" – and that if one looked only at usage during class time, the impact doubled.[89]

A Belgian study attempted to move beyond correlation to establish causation – like the Brazilian study, looking at the impact of mobile phone use on university students. It found that, "*A one-standard-deviation increase in daily smartphone use yields a decrease in average exam scores of about one point (out of 20).*"[90]

Other studies have not found such an impact. A study from Sweden which sought to replicate the design of that in England by Beland and Murphy (2016), found "*no impact of mobile phone bans on student performance.*"[91]

A Norwegian study found no overall significant effect of mobile phone bans on academic results. However, when they divided the sample into public and private schools, they did find private schools experienced a somewhat positive effect of a mobile phone ban on academic performance. This suggests that school culture could make a difference to whether or not bans improve student performance. The study also found that a mobile phone ban reduced bullying – which is a welcome outcome even if academic attainment was not affected.[92]

A more recent Norwegian study investigated mobile phones in middle schools, combining survey and administrative data. It found that phone bans decreased bullying for both sexes, and that for girls – particularly girls from low socio-economic backgrounds – both their mental health and their academic attainment improved[93].

More recently, UNESCO has sounded alarm bells over the use of mobile phones in school in a report titled Technology in Education: A Tool on whose Terms? It states that:

> "*A meta-analysis of research on the relationship between student mobile phone use and educational outcomes covering students from pre-primary to higher education in 14 countries found a small negative effect, which was larger at the university level. The decline is mostly linked to increased distraction and time spent on non-academic activities during learning hours. Incoming notifications or the mere proximity of a mobile device can be a distraction, resulting in students losing their attention from the task at hand.*"[94]

The report goes on to say that it can take students up to 20 minutes to refocus once they have been distracted from learning[95].

89. Felisoni DD and Godoi AS, '*Cell phone usage and academic performance: An experiment*', Computers and Education, Vol 117 p.175-187, February 2018 Link
90. Baert S et al, ' *Smartphone Use and Academic Performance:*

    Correlation or Causal Relationship?', GLO Discussion Paper, No 384, 2019 Link
91. Kessel D, Hardardottir HL and Tyrefors B, '*The Impact of Banning Mobile Phones in Swedish Secondary Schools* ', Economics of Education Review, 24th August 2020, Link
92. Guldvik MK, Kvinnsland I et al, '*Smarter without smartphones? : e□ects of mobile phone bans in schools on academic performance, well-being, and bullying*', Norwegian School of Economics, December 2018, Link
93. Abrahamsson S, *Smartphone bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health*, Institutt for samfunnsøkonomi, SAM01/04 (2024), Link
94. UNESCO, '*Technology in Education: A Tool on whose Terms?*', 2023, Link
95. Ibid.

Case Study – Galicia & Castilla La Mancha, Spain[96]

- **Description**: A recent evaluation of regional government policy which banned mobile phones in primary and secondary educational centres in 2014 (Castilla La Mancha) and 2015 (Galicia), two Spanish regions below average in real income per capita rankings, representing what the authors of a recent review describe as enabling the "analysis of a policy intervention that could impact educational development, while not based on large investments of economic resources, entails great interest in the case of disadvantaged regions".
- **Results**: After less than three years since the ban was put in force (2015-2017), students' PISA scores in Galicia improved by around 10 points in maths and 12 points in sciences.
- **Conclusion**: the study highlights the "potential effects of a regional-level non-spending-based policy on a fundamental driver of development, such as the skills in maths and sciences of middle-school students", which also "addresses the potential effects of these policies on bullying incidence".

The OECD's PISA 2022 study found clear evidence of a link between being distracted by mobile phones and performance in maths in the PISA assessment. They found that:

> *"Students who reported being distracted by other students using digital devices in some, most or every maths class scored 15 points lower in PISA maths tests than those who barely experienced this. This represents the equivalent of three-quarters of a year's worth of education, even after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile."*[97]

The report found that 65% of pupils were distracted by digital devices in at least some lessons – but that this varied widely between countries, ranging from above 80% in Argentina, Brazil and Finland to just 18% in Japan and 32% in South Korea[98].

Interestingly, this evidence did not translate to clear evidence that phone bans were effective. Although levels of distraction were lower in the 13 countries in the study where phones were banned, they were still significant. As the OECD says, *"It seems schools can ban phones, but they are not always effectively enforced."*

At an individual school level, though some school leaders can initially be sceptical about the benefits of a full ban on phones, once implemented, the majority are strongly supportive of the benefits. Tom Bennett, the Government's Behaviour Tsar has said[99]:

97. Schleicher A, '*PISA 2022 Insights and Interpretations*', OECD, 2023, Link
98. Ibid
99. Tom Bennett OBE via X (formerly Twitter), 24th September 2023, Link
96. Beneito P and Vicente-Chirivella Ó, '*Banning mobile phones in schools: evidence from regional-level policies in Spain*', Applied Economic Analysis, Vol 30 Issue 90, 25th January 2022 Link

Where bans fail it is – again – because of a failure to enforce the rules. As the OECD found – and as the research we present in Chapter 3 demonstrates – the simple existence of a ban does not guarantee that phones will actually be absent. Clear, consistent enforcement is fundamental. Educational expert Doug Lemov has written:

> *"These bans are often followed by remarkable and instantaneous change. "It has transformed the school. Social time is spent talking to friends," a teacher from Australia told my colleagues and me. "It is so nice walking around the yard seeing students actually interacting again, and no distractions during class," said another.*
>
> *The change, teachers told us, was quick—so long as you could get the adults to follow through. That is, if the rule was consistent and enforced, then students adapted quickly and were happy, even if they fought it at first. If the ban didn't work, the problem was usually that some of the adults didn't follow through. "Consistent enforcement from all = key," one teacher explained in a note."*[100]

Overall, the pre-existing evidence that bans on mobile phones in school support increased attainment is strongly suggestive, but not conclusive. It is highly likely that the type of ban, and whether or not it is effectively enforced, plays an important role in whether or not bans are effective. Our research, presented in the next chapter, aims to contribute to and further strengthen this evidence base.

Current Policy and Practice

Policy

In England, individual schools or multi-academy trusts are responsible for determining their own policy as to mobile phone use. This includes whether they are fully or partially banned, as well as the sanctions for non-compliance with the policy.

The Department for Education has issued non-statutory guidance setting out that "*All schools should develop and implement a policy that creates a mobile phone-free environment by prohibiting the use of mobile phones and other smart technology with similar functionality to mobile phones throughout the school day, including during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime.*"[101]

100. Lemov D, '*Take Away Their Cell Phones*', Education Next, Vol 22 Issue 4, 2nd August 2022, Link
101. UK Government Department for Education, '*Behaviour in Schools – Advice for headteachers and school staff*', February 2024, Link'

As non-statutory guidance, this is not binding upon schools, but sets out a clear recommendation by the Government of the position that they wish schools to take.

The more detailed non-statutory Mobile Phone Guidance sets out in more detail how such a ban could be implemented, setting out four principal types of ban that would be compatible with the guidance[102]:

a) **No mobile phones on the school premises** – A school may decide that no mobile phones should be brought to school by its pupils, and they must be left at home or with parents. This policy provides a very simple boundary which is straightforward to enforce as any mobile phone found at school would be in breach of the policy.

b) **Mobile phone handed in on arrival** – A school may decide that its pupils may require access to their mobile phones before and after school, but they do not want pupils to have access to their mobile phones throughout the school day. On entry to the school each pupil hands in their device to school staff and these are then collected at the end of the school day. Schools should be mindful that even if a pupil has handed in one mobile phone, they may have another mobile phone in their possession.

c) **Mobile phones kept in secure location, which the pupil does not access throughout the school day** – Some schools may have established bag-free days where personal possessions are kept in lockers, or similar secure storage. If mobile phones are brought to the school, at the start of the school day they should be put straight into lockers or similar secure storage and not be accessed by the pupil until the end of the day.

d) **Never used, seen or heard** – Some schools may choose to adopt a policy where pupils keep possession of their mobile phones only on the strict condition that they are never used, seen or heard – with consequences for breaching this that are sufficient to act as an effective deterrent. It is important that schools enforce this policy vigorously, consistently and visibly, to the effect that mobile phone use is prohibited throughout the school day. To support this, it may be appropriate for a school to ensure that parents and pupils clearly understand the sanctions that may be applied, to establish a strong no-phone culture. Schools will often stipulate that the mobile phone is switched off at the bottom of the school bag; confiscation may be an immediate consequence otherwise. As this

7

policy becomes established through consistent application, the culture of the school will change, with pupils less likely to attempt to use their phones.

The guidance clearly sets out that in exceptional circumstances, such as where a pupil requires- a phone to monitor a health condition such as diabetes, they should be allowed, setting out that *'Where mobile phone use allows pupils to manage their medical condition effectively, it would not be reasonable for a school to prevent this.'*[103]

With regards to other relevant documents, the Ofsted School Inspection Handbook does not mention mobile phones[104]. Keeping Children Safe in Education does mention phones on a number of occasions, including in connection with bullying and with the sharing of inappropriate material.[105]

102. UK Government Department for Education, '*Mobile Phones in Schools -Guidance for schools on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day*', February 2024, Link
103. Ibid
104. UK Government Ofsted, '*School Inspection Handbook*', 2024, Link
105. UK Government Department for Education, '*Keeping Children Safe in Education*', 1st September 2023, Link

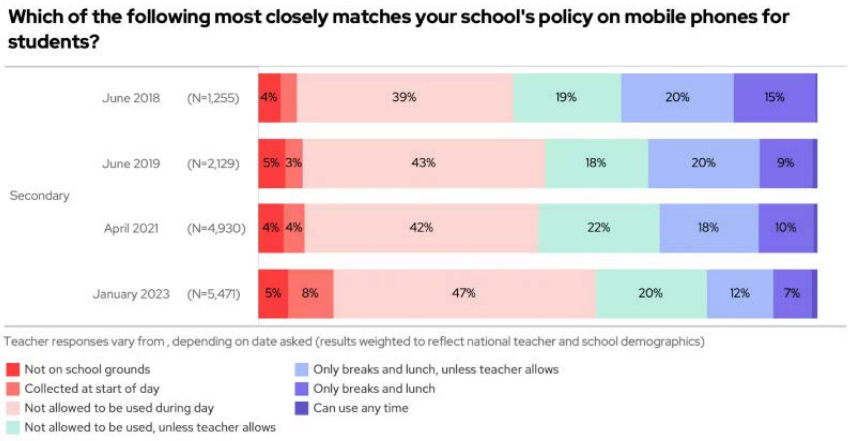
In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the decision on whether or not to ban phones is similarly left to the school, though the overarching policy framework in these countries is more ambiguous about phones than in England; with Scotland, for example, emphasising *'The safe and responsible use of mobile technology.'*[106]

Practice

Effective phone bans are in place in the vast majority of UK primary schools. A survey by Teacher Tapp in 2023 found that in three quarters of primary schools phones were required to be handed in at the start of the day[107] – and our own research, carried out a year later, found an even higher proportion of schools with effective bans.

There is considerable variation, however, in the policies applied in secondary schools. The same survey for Teacher Tapp found in 2023 that only 13% of secondary schools required phones to be banned from site or handed in at the start of the school day. Almost 1 in 5 allowed them to be used at break and lunch, and close to two-thirds had policies that meant the phones were present with the pupils throughout the day, even if they were not meant to be being used (See Fig.10).

Figure 10 - Teacher polling on mobile phones in schools



Source: Teacher Tapp, 'Strike update, phone rules and restorative justice!', 31st January 2023, Link

Furthermore, survey evidence also shows that these bans are often not being enforced. When asked this year, 1 in 5 teachers said that a student had taken a mobile phone out in a lesson that day, and 1 in 20 that their most recent *lesson* had been disrupted by unauthorised use of a mobile phone[108].

Similarly, in Policy Exchange's landmark behaviour survey from 2018, 78% of teachers said they had seen phones being used in the last week, with 54% saying this occurred every day. Only 50% of teachers thought that the sanctions indicated by their school's behaviour policy was 'very frequently' or 'frequently' applied when a student was using a mobile phone in breach of the rules[109].

106. Scottish Government, *'Safe and responsible use of mobile technology in schools: guidance'*, 19th November 2013, Link
107. Teacher Tapp, *'Strike update, phone rules and restorative justice!'*, 31st January 2023, Link
108. Teacher Tapp, *'Phone policies, side hustles, rote learning and pride'*, 6th February 2024 Link
109. Williams J, *'It Just Grinds You Down'*, Policy Exchange, 2018 Link

These surveys are consistent with evidence from the Government's most recent National Behaviour Survey[110]. This found that 38% of teachers and 57% of pupils said that some, most or all lessons has been disrupted by mobile phones in the last week. Particularly striking is the discrepancy between the proportion of pupils and teachers who said that 'most' or 'all' lessons were disrupted: 30% of pupils vs only 8% of teachers (see Fig.11). This suggests that pupils are accessing their phones covertly and often, disrupting their own learning and that of others whilst remaining below the radar of teachers.

Figure 11 – Teacher and pupil views on misbehaviour in schools

Table 5: Frequency of types of pupil misbehaviour in the past week (Secondary school teacher views, June 2022)

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
Talking	20%	30%	38%*	12%*	1%
Shouting out	8%	13%	37%*	31%*	10%*
Arriving to lessons late	6%	21%	47%*	21%	4%
Answering back/challenging instructions	4%	9%	34%	34%*	19%*
Throwing things (non-aggressively)	1%	3%	19%	38%*	40%*
Using mobile phones	2%	6%	22%	32%*	37%*

Base: Secondary school teachers who had taught in the past week (n=548).

Source: SCP NBS June 2022. Individual weighting. * Indicates a significant difference between secondary school teachers and pupils (see Table 6). "Thinking about the lessons you taught during the past week, how often, if at all, did the following occur when it was not supposed to?"

Table 6: Frequency of types of pupil misbehaviour in the past week (Pupil views, June 2022)

	All lessons	Most lessons	Some lessons	Rarely	Never
Talking	38%*	33%*	20%	5%	1%
Shouting out	21%*	25%*	30%	16%	4%
Arriving to lessons late	14%*	24%	38%	19%	3%
Answering back/challenging instructions	11%*	21%*	31%	23%	11%
Throwing things (non-aggressively)	8%*	15%*	26%*	31%	17%
Using mobile phones	13%*	17%*	27%*	23%	16%

Base: All pupils (n=1,908).

Source: PPLP NBS June 2022. * Indicates a significant difference between pupils and secondary school teachers (see Table 5). "Thinking about the lessons you attended during the past week, how often, if at all, did the following occur when it was not supposed to?"

Source: UK Government Department for Education, 'National Behaviour Survey', June 2023, Link

110. UK Government Department for Education, '*National Behaviour Survey*', June 2023, Link

Again, this is consistent with the evidence from our own research, presented in the next chapter, that found a wide variety of effective bans, bans and partial bans existing in secondary schools and – particularly in schools with partial bans, or where the phones were allowed to remain in the possession of the pupil – a high degree of phone use and confiscation of phones continued to occur.

International policy and practice

Smartphone bans in school are becoming more commonplace, globally. As in England, such bans typically make exceptions for students with disabilities and for educational or health-specific uses, where this is approved by school leadership and teaching staff.

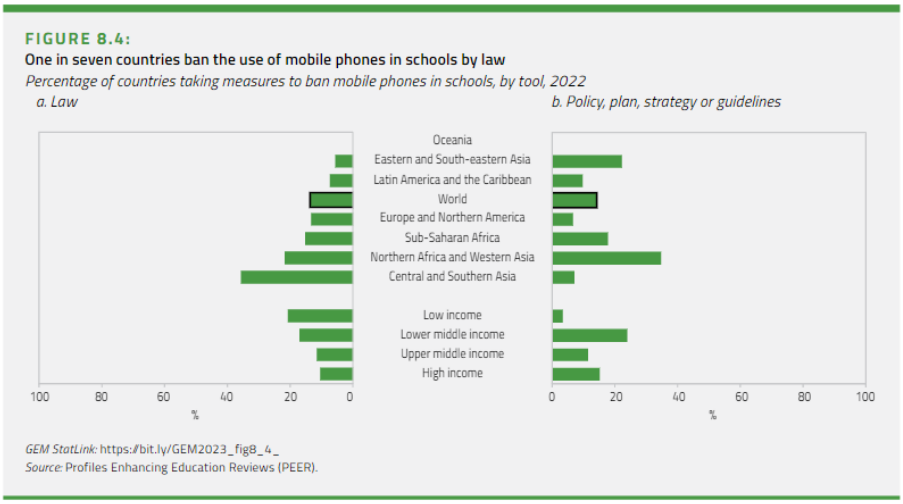
The idea of banning mobile phones from schools stretches back to at least the mid-2000s – with, notably, high school bans in New York City (2006 to 2015) and Japan (2009 to 2019).[111] NYC enacted a complete ban of student phones from school premises at all times. Other examples of bans or partial bans include:

- **In 2018,** France bans pupils from using mobile phones in primary and middle schools.[112]
- **In 2019, four states in Australia (Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, and Western Australia)** banned smartphones for students up to 18 years, largely taking the "Off and Away, All Day" approach.[113]
- **In 2021, China** barred children from taking phones to school.[114]
- **In 2022, Italy** banned cell phones during lessons.[115]
- **In 2023, the Dutch government** announces that mobile phones, tablets and smartwatches would be largely banned from classrooms.
- **In 2023, the State of Florida** passed a law requiring public schools state-wide to ban student cell phone use during class time.[116]

The direction of travel has not all been one way. In 2015, for example, the Mayor of New York removed a 10-year ban of phones in schools, claiming that abolishing the ban could decrease inequality.[117] But the overall trend has been towards greater restrictions. Bans of a variety of forms have also been introduced in Israel, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, Ontario in Canada and a ban is possible in Finland.[118] A recent report from UNESCO, found one in seven countries have laws that ban the use of mobile phones (See Fig.12).[119]

111. Selwyn N, Aagaard J, '*Banning mobile phones from classrooms: An opportunity to advance understandings of technology addiction, distraction and cyberbullying*', **British Journal of Educational Technology, Vol 52 Issue 1 p. 8-19, 2021**, link
112. Forbes, 'The Mobile Phone Ban In French Schools, One Year On. Would It Work Elsewhere?', 30th August 2019, link
113. The Age, '*Noise levels dialled up as school's total phone ban gets kids talking*', 20th February 2018, link
114. BBC News, '*China bans children from using mobile phones at school*', 2nd February 2021, link
115. Italian Ministry of Education and Merit, '*Stop ai cellulari in classe: circolare del Ministero inviata alle scuole. Valditara: "Tuteliamo l'apprendimento dei ragazzi e il rispetto per i docenti"*', 20th December 2022, link
116. The New York Times, '*School Cellphone Bans Are Trending. Do They Work?*', 31st October 2023, link
117. Beland LP, Murphy R, '*Ill Communication: Technology, distraction & student performance*', Labour Economics, Vol 41 p. 61-76, August 2016, link.
118. The Mayor.eu, '*Will Finland ban smartphones in schools?*', 27th June 2023, link
119. UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, *'Global education monitoring report, 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms?'*, 2023, link

Figure 12 – Percentage of countries taking measures to ban mobile phones in schools



Source: UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 'Global education monitoring report, 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms?', 2023, link

Similarly, the OECD, in its latest PISA study, found that in 13 countries and economies more than two-thirds of students attend schools where cell phone use is prohibited[120].

As in the UK, whether or not these bans are actually enforced can vary greatly. The OECD reported that, "*29% of students in schools where the use of cell phones is banned reported using a smartphone several times a day, on average across OECD countries, illustrating that cell phone bans are not always effectively enforced.*"[121]

120. Albania, Brunei Darussalam, Greece, Hong Kong (China)*, Jordan, Kosovo, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Spain, United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

121. OECD, '*PISA 2022 Results Volume 2: Learning During – and From – Disruption*', 2023, Link

Chapter 3 – An Investigation into the Impact of Effective Phone Bans in Schools in England

Methodology

In December 2023, Policy Exchange submitted 800 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to a randomly chosen selection of maintained schools and academies across the UK. The purpose of this research was to determine schools' policy for mobile phone use by pupils and assess any relationship between mobile phone policies and academic progression measures such as Progress 8.

The 800 schools were randomly selected as follows[122]:

- 250 secondary schools in England
- 250 primary schools in England
- 50 secondary schools each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- 50 primary schools each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Special schools were excluded from the selection process as the considerations concerning mobile phone use may differ considerably in special schools and be highly dependent upon the type of special school.

122. The random selection was made by using a random number generator to select the appropriate number of schools from a full list of school Unique Reference Numbers of the relevant population.

What we asked schools:

1. *Is student possession and/or use of a mobile phone during the school day banned or partially banned? Please provide a copy of any relevant policy documents/guidance/codes of conduct.*

2. *Which of the following most closely matches your school's policy on mobile phones for students:*
   - *a) Not on school grounds.*
   - *b) Collected or placed in locker at start of day.*
   - *c) Not allowed to be used during day.*
   - *d) Not allowed to be used, unless teacher allows.*
   - *e) Only breaks and lunch, unless teacher allows.*
   - *f) Only breaks and lunch.*
   - *g) Can use any time.*

3. *How many mobile phones were confiscated from students during the Autumn Term 2023, and for how long, on average, were these phones confiscated for? If you have any records regarding phone confiscations for the Autum Term 2023, please provide a copy of these records.*

4. *Does your school's policy on mobile phones for students also apply to other portable smart technology, such as smart watches? If there are separate policies for other portable smart technology, please provide a copy of any relevant documents/guidance/codes of conduct.*

We made clear to schools that, '*for the purposes of this Request, by 'mobile phone', we mean any wireless handheld device which allows users to transmit and receive voice, video, or other data. This definition also includes 'smart phones' which can perform many of the functions of a computer, often including a touchscreen interface; the ability to access the internet; the ability to download apps; and the ability to connect to other devices, such as a smart watch.*'

We also asked schools to share a copy of any other relevant policies/documents relating to the matters in question.

Response Categorisation

To classify different schools' policies consistently and appropriately, and to evaluate the effectiveness of each policy, we developed the following method of categorisation, based on each school's response to the FOI request.

A more detailed explanation of each category, as well as examples, can be found in **Annex A**.

Questions 1 and 2: Mobile Phone Policy

Information provided for both questions 1 and 2 was used to categorise the school's mobile phone policy. The term 'policy' refers to both written documents or established practices within a school. Where it was provided, the formal written policy was used to clarify and interrogate any other answers provided to the FOI and was considered to be the definitive statement of the school's policy on mobile phones.

Policies were considered for (a) primary schools (Reception to Year 6) and (b) secondary schools (Years 7 to 11). Where a school also contained a sixth form, the policies for the sixth form – which frequently differed - are discounted for the purposes of this methodology.

The following categories were developed:

Policy Type	*Types of policy included*
Effective ban	• Phones not permitted on school grounds. • Phones are collected or removed from pupil at the start of the day. • Pupils are required to place phones in lockers or similar receptacles at the start of the day, where they must remain until the end of the day.
Banned but phone present with student	• Not allowed to be used, but students permitted to retain their phones.
Partial ban	• Phones permitted to be used in class, where the teacher allows, for educational purposes. • Phones permitted to be used in breaks and lunch, unless teacher allows. • Phones permitted to be used in breaks and lunch. • Phones permitted to be used in certain areas of the school only.
No ban	• Can use phones at any time
Insufficient information	• A clear answer to the question could not be discerned

For all of the categorisations, an exception was permitted for a policy that stipulates students are able to request their phone/use a school phone in medical/exceptional circumstances, for example, if a pupil needs to manage a medical condition such as diabetes.

It is recognised that these classifications are imperfect and not a full reflection of how practices vary from school to school. In particular, a school where phones must be kept in their bags, but enforcement is consistently applied with strict sanctions could have a more effective policy than one where phones must be placed in lockers at the beginning of the day – but there are no effective sanctions for disobedience. Nevertheless, we consider them to be reliable proxies for how 'full' a mobile phone ban is – and, as the data below on confiscations confirms, they appear to be a valid measure of how 'present' phones are at times and in places where they should not be.

Question 3: Number of Phones Confiscated in the Autumn Term 2023

If the school gave a number, this number was recorded as the number of phones confiscated.

The numbers given in these responses are the number of incidents of confiscation, not the number of students phones were confiscated from (a phone may have been confiscated from a student more than once).

If the school stated they do not keep records on phone confiscations, this was categorised as 'No records kept'. Where a clear answer to the question could not be discerned, this was categorised as 'Insufficient information.'

Question 4: Other smart devices

Responses here were classified into one of four categories:

- Same policy for smart technology
- Different policy for smart technology
- No policy for smart technology
- Insufficient information

Results

Of the 800 requests, 407 schools responded – either fully or in part- to the questions asked, 393 did not respond, and 0 explicitly refused the request. Of these responses, 230 were from secondary schools and 177 were from primary schools.

	England Primary	England Secondary	Scotland Primary	Scotland Secondary	Wales Primary	Wales Secondary	Northern Ireland Primary	Northern Ireland Secondary
Responded	125	162	12	24	18	25	22	19
Refused	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not responded	125	88	38	26	32	25	28	31
Total	250	250	50	50	50	50	50	50

Due to the larger number of responses, and the consistent and centralized data on school characteristics such as Progress 8 and Ofsted ratings[123], the following analysis focuses on schools in England. However, high level findings are also presented for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mobile Phones in Primary Schools

Out of the 400 requests sent, a total of 177 primary schools across the UK responded, either in full or in part; 125 from England, 12 from Scotland, 18 from Wales, and 22 from Northern Ireland.

It is clear that the large majority of primary schools in England, and across the UK as a whole, are banning phones effectively and comprehensively; 84% of primary schools in the UK and 88% of primary schools in England had an 'Effective ban'.

123. UK Government, '*Get Information About Schools*', an information register of schools and colleges in England, link

Policy Type	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
Effective ban	88%	50%	94%	68%	84%
Banned but phone present with student	2%	42%	6%	9%	6%
Partial ban	2%	8%	0%	0%	2%
No ban	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Insufficient information	9%	0%	0%	23%	9%
Number of England schools that responded to this question: 125/250 *Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question: 12/50* *Number of Wales schools that responded to this question: 18/50* *Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question: 22/50*					

This is broadly consistent with – but suggests an increase in – the 2023 study by Teacher Tapp cited above which found that approximately three quarters of primary schools had an effective ban on schools.

Of those primary schools with an 'Effective ban', some specified that mobile phones are not allowed by any pupil on school grounds. For example:

- 'Pupils are not allowed mobile phones in our school…With the advances in phone, digital technology and social media we found that devices in school/used or misused could have unmanageable consequences so it was more effective not to permit them.'

Other primary schools with an 'Effective ban' permitted mobile phones to be brought in, but only when these phones were handed in to a teacher/ the office at the start of each school day. This rule often applied to Years 5 and 6 only, with younger years being forbidden from bringing phones onto school grounds. For example:

- 'Pupils may bring mobile devices into school and they must be left in the school office on arrival'
- '*Our children (Y5 & Y6 only) are allowed to bring a mobile phone to school - but it must be turned off as soon as they enter the school site. Devices are then handed to a teacher who locks them away until the end of the school day*'

Mobile phone Confiscations:

Incidents of mobile phone confiscations are very low across the board for primary schools in the UK. In all four parts of the UK the average number of mobile phone confiscations for Autumn Term 2023 was zero, or very close to zero, for all policy types.

It should be noted however that whilst a lower number of confiscation

incidents could signal a more successful policy, it may also signal a poorly enforced policy, students using mobile phones without detection, or simply, given the age of primary school pupils, low numbers of children bringing phones into school.

Policy Type	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
All policy types	0.09	0.13	0	0	0.07
Effective ban	0.07	0	0	0	0.05
Banned but phone present with student	0	0.33	0	0	0.17
Partial Ban	2*	0	-	-	1
No ban	-	-	-	-	-
Insufficient Information	-	-	-	0	0
Number of England schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 93/250 *Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 8/50* *Number of Wales schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 13/50* *Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 14/50*					

**This is a sample of only one school.*

Mobile Phones in Secondary Schools

Questions 1 and 2: Mobile Phone Policies in Secondary Schools

We asked schools for information about their approach to student's mobile phones in schools.

The data for secondary schools presents a very different picture to that of the primary school data above. Whilst it is promising to see that no schools had 'No ban' on mobile phones, across all four countries in the UK a very low proportion of schools had an 'Effective ban' on mobile phones – only 13% of secondary schools in England and 11% of secondary schools from the UK as a whole.

'Banned but phone present with student' was the most common policy in the UK as a whole and in England – with 52% of secondary schools having this policy in both cases. Worryingly, there were also a considerable number of secondary schools which had a 'Partial ban' – 34% of schools in England and 36% of schools in the UK as a whole.

Policy Type	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
Effective ban	13%	0%	12%	5%	11%
Banned but phone present with student	52%	88%	32%	32%	52%
Partial ban	34%	8%	56%	63%	36%
No ban	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Insufficient information	1%	4%	0%	0%	1%
Number of England schools that responded to this question: 162/250 *Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question: 24/50* *Number of Wales schools that responded to this question: 25/50* *Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question: 19/50*					

Those schools with an 'Effective ban' displayed a variety of comprehensive policies. Some schools operated on the basis that mobile phones were not permitted at all on school grounds:

- 'Possession and use of mobile phones by students is banned and devices should not be brought into school.'

Other schools with an 'Effective ban' allowed students to bring mobile phones with them for the journey to and from school, but stipulated these phones must be handed in for safekeeping at the start of each school day:

- 'If students choose to bring a mobile phone to school, it MUST be handed in for safekeeping at 8.30am and collected at 3.30pm. Mobile phones are handed in to the hatch at the front office. Students will be asked to queue at the hatch and down past G19 / student toilets when handing in and collecting their phones. Students will be required to show their ID card for collection of the phone at 3.30pm. At 3.30pm mobile phones can be used outside the inner school gates and not within the school grounds.'
- 'Learners must hand their phones in every morning to their Learning Group Leaders. These phones will be locked away securely and returned to them at the end of the day. Any learner that arrives late to school must hand their phone in to learner reception and collect it from learner reception at the end of the day. If a learner has multiple phones, they must hand in all devices.'

One secondary school with an 'Effective ban' specified using the 'Yondr' system of lockable pouches to ensure any mobile phones brought onto school grounds by pupils remain inaccessible during the school day:

PROCESS

ARRIVAL - Before entry onto EGA site, students will place their phone inside their Yondr pouch

LOCK - Once inside the gate, the pouch will be locked. Students will maintain possession of their phone at all times *(unless they fail to place their phone in the pouch and/or fail to lock it)*

UNLOCK - To use their phones again, students tap their pouch on an unlocking base located by the entry/exit gates.

Part of one school's mobile phone policy

Some schools with an 'Effective ban' made explicit reference in their policy to the damaging effects they believed could result from students having access to their mobile phones during the school day, using these reasons as justification for their policy. For example, one secondary school detailed the following policy:

- 'Your child will still be able to have a phone on their way to and from school. However, they will need to drop off their SMART phone at the school office on arrival at school and pick it up at the end of the day. In school, your child has access to several IT suites throughout the day. Our filters detect misuse and prevent students from accessing inappropriate information. Since not all pupils have SMART phones, no lesson requires their use to fulfil learning objectives. No child's education will suffer due to their not having a SMART phone in school.'

The school's policy then provides further explanation:

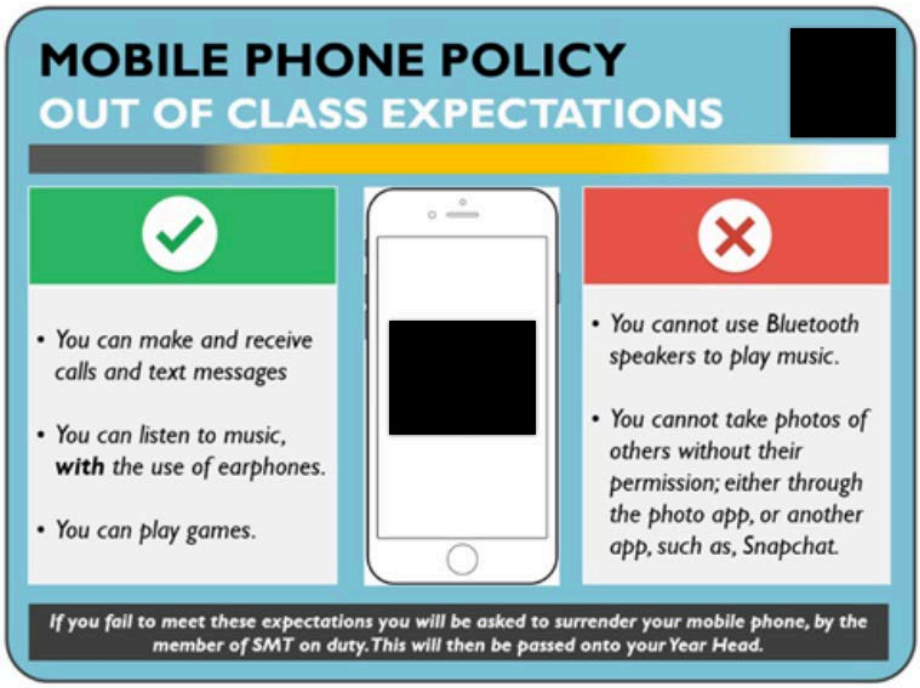
Why are SMART phones being prohibited in Years 7-11?

- **Research**: A study by the London School of Economics[1] found that banning phones had the effect of giving pupils an extra week's education over the course of an academic year. Researchers looked at schools in four cities and found test scores increased by more than 6% in those which banned phones.
- **Risk of grooming**: Smartphones give unsupervised access to the internet. The dangers of grooming and sexual harassment are significant. The number of parents who report 'losing their child' to the underworld of social media increases daily.
- **Relationships**: If given access to pornography via a smartphone, many secondary school aged pupils (especially boys) will watch it. The damaging effects of pornography are well attested.[2] Moreover, the pandemic has driven many of our children into an unhealthy dependence on a virtual world for their social interaction. We would like your child's time in school to be spent forming healthy, respectful, face-to-face friendships.
- **Reliance**: An increasing number of pupils appear to be addicted to social media and gaming on their SMART phones. During downtime, many pupils spend a considerable amount of time on their phones, and a few display extreme reactions to having their phones confiscated.
- **Ridicule**: Cyber-bullying takes many forms and can have catastrophic consequences. In the recent past, our pastoral team has had to hold restorative justice meetings following damaging, unkind posts on social media. Similarly, images and videos taken without the permission of the subject are sometimes used to ridicule others and can compound mental health issues.

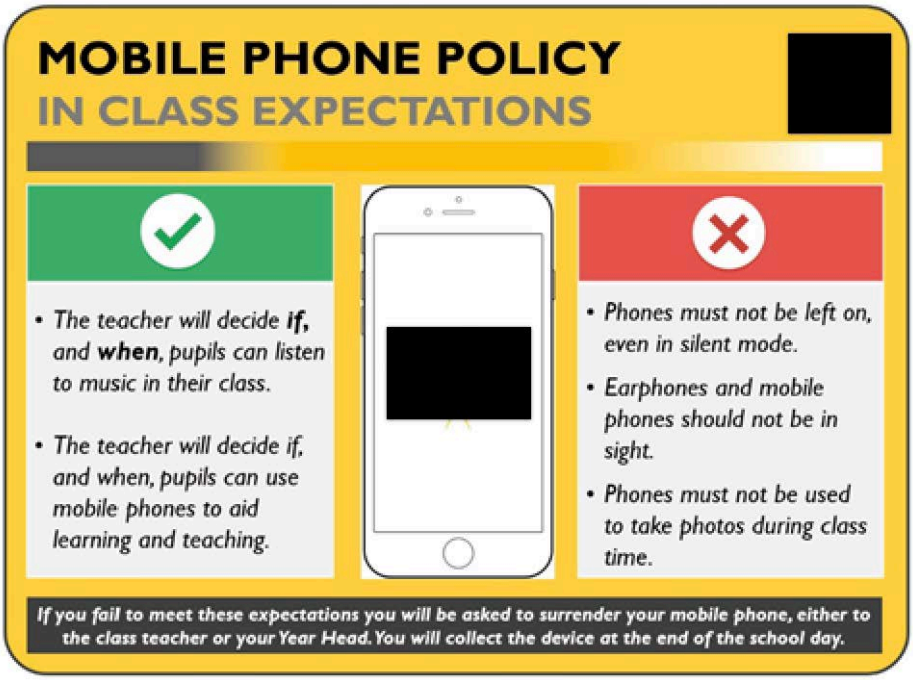
Part of one school's mobile phone policy

Of those schools with a 'Partial ban', whilst some only permitted student's mobile phones to be used when the teacher allowed for educational activities, other schools permitted more wide-ranging use, for example:

- 'Mobile phones may be used during break and lunchtimes in the designated areas. These are dining areas, quad and field only.'



Posters of one school's mobile phone policy specifying that students are permitted almost full use of their phones at break and lunch, including making phone calls and listening to music.



Posters of one school's mobile phone policy specifying that students may be permitted to listen to music during lessons.

Grammar and Faith Schools

Included in our random sample of 250 England secondary schools were 11 selective (grammar) schools and 42 faith schools. We received responses to our request, either in full or in part, from 10 of these selective schools and 27 faith schools.

Overall, the results for grammar and faith schools show little difference from the general trend. In both cases, a low percentage of schools had an 'Effective ban' – 10% of grammar schools and only 7% of faith secondary schools (compared to 13% of all English secondary schools). The only notable difference being that, for grammar schools, the most common policy was a 'Partial ban' rather than 'Banned but phone present with student' (the most common policy for all other samples), with 60% of grammar schools having a 'Partial ban' compared to 30% with 'Banned but phone present with student'. It should be noted, however, that this is a small sample of grammar schools and no strong conclusions should be drawn from this.

Policy Type	England Grammar Schools
Effective ban	10%
Banned but phone present with student	30%
Partial Ban	60%
No ban	0%
Insufficient information	0%
Number of schools that responded to this question: 10/11	

Policy Type	England Faith Secondary Schools
Effective ban	7%
Banned but phone present with student	67%
Partial Ban	22%
No ban	0%
Insufficient information	4%
Number of schools that responded to this question: 27/42	

Question 3: Mobile Phone Confiscations in Secondary Schools

How does a school's policy relate to its number of device confiscations?

We asked schools for information regarding confiscations of mobile phones in the Autumn Term 2023 (September - December). A total of 202 secondary schools out of 400 responded to question 3; 111 provided a numerical figure, 81 stated they did not keep records on confiscations and 10 provided insufficient information. For England secondary schools specifically, 149 schools responded to question 3; 82 provided a numerical figure, 56 stated they did not keep records on confiscations and 11 provided insufficient information.

It should be noted that whilst a lower number of confiscation incidents could signal a more successful policy, it may also signal a poorly enforced policy, i.e, staff neglecting to confiscate mobile phones when the policy requires them to do so, or students using mobile phones without detection. A high number of phones confiscated clearly indicates that phones are often present; a low number could mean either an effective ban or lax enforcement.

The numbers given in these responses are the incidents of mobile phone confiscation, not the number of students phones were confiscated from (a phone may have been confiscated from a student more than once).

Where a data box is left blank, no schools falling into this category provided numerical figures from which to take an average.

Average number of mobile phone confiscations in Autumn Term 2023 in secondary schools:

The average number of mobile phone confiscation incidents across the UK varies significantly, notably however, in England (the only region with data for all 3 key policy types and the largest sample size), the average number of confiscation incidents was significantly lower for secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' (26) when compared to those secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student' (159) or a 'Partial ban' (141). We can therefore say confidently that both of the less restrictive policies clearly involve a large number of phones continuing to be misused.

Policy Type	England	Scotland*	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
All policy types	135	5	244	74	134
Effective ban	26	-	-	-	26
Banned but phone present with student	159	0	99	64	143
Partial Ban	141	10	327	79	152
No ban	-	-	-	-	-
Insufficient Information	-	0	-	-	0

Number of England schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 82/250

Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 4/50

Number of Wales schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 11/50

Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question with a numerical figure: 14/50

**Sample size is only 4.*

Secondary Schools in England with the 10 highest mobile phone confiscations:

We also considered the secondary schools in England with the 10 highest number of mobile phone confiscation incidents. None of these 10 schools had an 'Effective ban' in place, whilst 70% had a 'Banned but phone present with student' policy and 30% had a 'Partial ban'.

Top 10 highest confiscation figures:	
1	671
2	536
3	470
4	433
5	425
6	370
7	350
8	336
9	331
10	280

Policy Type	England Secondary Schools with the 10 highest confiscations
Effective Ban	0%
Banned but phone present with student	70%
Partial Ban	30%
No ban	0%
Insufficient Information	0%

Question 4: Wider Smart Technology

To what extent do schools have policies on wider smart technology?

We asked schools whether their policy for wider smart technology (such as smart watches) is the same as their policy for mobile phones.

Secondary schools:

The results suggest some level of uncertainty amongst schools over how to approach pupils' use and possession of wider smart technology. Whilst many schools are taking the same approach to smart technology as their approach to mobile phones, a significant percentage are neglecting to develop any policy for wider smart technology.

In England 49% of secondary schools have the same policy for smart technology as they do for mobile phones, whilst a significant 33% have no policy for smart technology. These figures are similar for the UK as a whole, 48% and 33% respectively.

Policy Type	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
Same policy for smart technology	49%	26%	44%	63%	48%
Different policy for smart technology	9%	0%	8%	0%	7%
No policy for smart technology	33%	26%	40%	37%	33%
Insufficient Information	9%	48%	8%	0%	12%
Number of England schools that responded to this question: 160/250 *Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question: 23/50* *Number of Wales schools that responded to this question: 25/50* *Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question: 19/50*					

Of those secondary schools who specified a different policy for smart technology, this included policies such as:

- *'Smart watches are permitted in the academy as long as they're not used in lessons and inside school for anything other than telling the time'* (A secondary school with an 'Effective ban' on mobile phones)
- *'Smart watches are allowed at present'* (A secondary school with an 'Effective ban' on mobile phones)
- *'Smart watches must not be activated to receive calls/messages during the school day'* (A secondary school with a 'Partial ban' on mobile phones where students are permitted to use their mobile phones at break and lunch).

Primary Schools:

In this section, the results for primary schools are included alongside secondary schools since it presents one area in which the data presents similar patterns. Once again, there is a level of uncertainty as to how to approach wider smart technology. In England, 52% of primary schools adopted the same policy for smart technology, and a significant 25% had no policy for smart technology; these figures are similar for the UK as a whole, 50% and 26% respectively.

Policy Type	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	All UK
Same policy for smart technology	52%	55%	69%	24%	50%
Different policy for smart technology	4%	0%	8%	0%	3%
No policy for smart technology	25%	9%	23%	43%	26%
Insufficient Information	19%	36%	0%	33%	21%
Number of England schools that responded to this question: 106/250 *Number of Scotland schools that responded to this question: 11/50* *Number of Wales schools that responded to this question: 13/50* *Number of Northern Ireland schools that responded to this question: 21/50*					

Collectively, these results suggest it is important that more schools are able to confidently consider the impact of, and their policies on, smart technology more broadly, particularly that this is likely to become increasingly ubiquitous.

Mobile Phone Policy and School Performance in England

Having ascertained information about the differing mobile phone policies in secondary schools in England, we wished to ascertain whether there was any correlation with measures of school performance.

The principal measures we considered were Progress 8 scores and Ofsted ratings, as these are the most robust measures of school performance. We also considered Attainment 8, as an alternative measure of success (albeit one that is heavily dependent on the cohort of students). Finally, we considered whether or not there was any correlation between the type of phone policy and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (a common proxy for disadvantage), in order to ascertain whether or not our performance measures were simply picking up differences in the pupil cohort.

All figures in this section refer only to the FOIs responses received from Secondary Schools in England.

Ofsted Rating

Across England, 'Good' is the most common Ofsted rating for secondary schools, with 63% of all inspected schools being awarded this rating[124]. Our sample of responses was broadly comparable, with 69% of schools rated 'Good' by Ofsted.

The results show those secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' as having noticeably higher Ofsted ratings, with 43% of these schools

124.UK Government, '*Schools commentary: the emerging picture from 2022/23 inspections*', link

being rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted – more than double the 21% of all England secondary schools with this rating[125]. Meanwhile, only 18% of secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student' were rated 'Outstanding', this figure falls even lower to 15% for secondary schools with only a 'Partial ban'.

Policy Type	Percentage of schools rated Outstanding	Percentage of schools rated Good	Percentage of schools rated Requires Improvement	Percentage of schools rated Inadequate	Percentage of schools with no valid Ofsted data	Total
Effective ban	43%	52%	0%	0%	5%	100%
Banned but phone present with student	18%	66%	9%	1%	6%	100%
Partial ban	15%	78%	7%	0%	0%	100%
No ban	-	-	-	-	-	-
Insufficient information	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	
Number of schools who responded to this question and had an Ofsted rating: 156/250.						

A one-tailed t test was performed to determine whether these results were significant, comparing schools with an 'Effective ban' to schools with other policies. The difference was found to be statistically significant with a p-value of 0.002.

Progress 8

The average Progress 8 score from our sample of responses was 0.05, broadly comparable to, though slightly higher than, the average Progress 8 score in England[126] of -0.03.

The mean Progress 8 score of secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' (0.23) was noticeably higher than the mean Progress 8 score for any other policy type, 0.13 higher than the mean score for secondary schools with only a 'Partial ban' and 0.25 higher than the mean score for secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student', a difference of 1.0 – 2.0 GCSE grades, respectively.

Policy Type	Mean Progress 8 Score
Effective ban	0.23
Banned but phone present with student	-0.02
Partial ban	0.10
No ban	n/a
Insufficient information	-0.10
Number of schools who responded to questions 1&2 and which had available Progress 8 data: 159/250	

125. Ibid

126. UK Government: Local Government Association, *'Average Progress 8 score in England'*, link

A one-tailed t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in means of Progress 8 results between schools implementing an 'Effective ban' and schools implementing less stringent phone policies (excluding schools with no valid Progress 8 data). the difference was found to be on the edge of significance (p-value = 0.059).

The sample of schools with an 'Effective ban' was relatively low which, particularly given the statistically significant result for Ofsted ratings, suggests that a larger sample may well give a more clearly significant result.

Attainment 8

The average Attainment 8 score in England[127] is 46.4, the average Attainment 8 score from our sample of responses presents a broadly similar figure at 48.83.

The results show that secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' had only a marginally higher mean Attainment 8 score when compared to the mean score of other policy types.

Policy Type	Mean Attainment 8 Score
Effective ban	50.48
Banned but phone present with student	47.83
Partial ban	49.88
No ban	n/a
Insufficient information	43.60
Number of schools who responded to this question and which had Attainment 8 data available: 158/250	

A one-tailed t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in means of Attainment 8 results between schools implementing an 'Effective ban' and schools implementing less stringent phone policies. This difference was not found to be significant, with a p-value of 0.24.

Attainment 8 is known to be highly dependent on the cohort of students present at the school, and we consider both Progress 8 or Ofsted ratings to be more reliable measures of school performance, when assessing the impact of mobile phone policies.

Free School Meals

Finally, we considered whether or not there was any correlation between the type of phone policy and the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (a common proxy for disadvantage), in order to ascertain whether or not our performance measures were simply picking up differences in the pupil cohort. Schools with higher proportions of students on Free School Meals are, nationally, less likely to achieve a positive Progress 8 or to be rated Outstanding. Therefore, if the schools with effective phone

127. UK Government: Local Government Association, '*Average Attainment 8 score in England*', link

bans had a less disadvantaged cohort of pupils, this might mean that their better results were due to their pupil cohort, rather than the impact of the effective ban.

Across England, 23.80% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals[128], from our sample of responses; as with the other measures, the average proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals is similar - 24.45%.

Whilst the mean proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals is similar across the board for each policy type, significantly, those secondary schools with an 'Effective ban' had an overall higher mean proportion of 28.12%. This is 2.61% higher than the mean of secondary schools with 'Banned but phone present with student', and 6.54% higher than the mean of secondary schools with only a 'Partial ban'.

Policy Type	Mean Proportion of Children Eligible for Free School Meals
Effective ban	28.12%
Banned but phone present with student	25.51%
Partial ban	21.58%
No ban	n/a
Insufficient information	19.60%
Number of schools who responded to this question which had information on free school meals available: 160/250	

Conclusion

The findings, while not demonstrating causality, show a clear correlation between an effective phone ban and better school performance, as measured by both Ofsted rating and Progress 8. This is despite the fact of the schools with effective phone bans having a higher proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals than those with laxer policies – something that is usually anti-correlated with these measures.

It is possible that these results reflect a third, underlying factor: for example, it is plausible that schools with firmer behaviour policies across the board are more likely to implement effective bans on mobile phones, and it is these broader behaviour policies that lead to the improved school performance. A larger sample size would also be desirable to confirm the significance of the Progress 8 result. Nevertheless, particularly taking into account the strong approbation given to effective bans by many school leaders who have implemented effective bans, and the wide range of international evidence demonstrating that effective bans on phones in school can have a positive impact on attainment, attention and other factors such as a reduction in bullying, these results offer further support for implementing an effective ban on smart phones in schools.

128. UK Government, '*Schools, pupils and their characteristics*', link

Annex A: Further Details on Research Methodology

To classify different schools' policies consistently and appropriately, and to evaluate the effectiveness of each policy, Policy Exchange developed the following method of categorisation, based on each school's response to the FOI request.

Questions 1 and 2: Mobile Phone Policy

Information provided for both questions 1 and 2 was used to categorise the school's mobile phone policy. The term 'policy' refers to both written documents or established practices within a school. Where it was provided, the formal written policy was used to clarify and interrogate any other answers provided to the FOI and was considered to be the definitive statement of the school's policy on mobile phones.

Policies were considered for (a) primary schools (Reception to Year 6) and (b) secondary schools (Years 7 to 11). Where a school also contained a sixth form, the policies for the sixth form – which frequently differed - are discounted for the purposes of this methodology.

The following categories were developed:

Policy Type	Types of policy included
Effective ban	• Phones not permitted on school grounds • Phones are collected or removed from pupil at the start of the day • Pupils are required to place phones in lockers or similar receptacle at the start of the day, where they must remain until the end of the day.
Banned but phone present with student	• Phones are not allowed to be used, but students permitted to retain their phones.
Partial ban	• Phones permitted to be used in class, where the teacher allows, for educational purposes. • Phones permitted to be used in breaks and lunch, unless teacher allows • Phones permitted to be used in breaks and lunch • Permitted to be used in certain areas of the school only.
No ban	• Can use phones at any time
Insufficient information	• A clear answer to the question could not be discerned

For all of the categorisations below, an exception was permitted for a policy that stipulates students are able to request their phone/use a school phone in medical/exceptional circumstances, for example, if a pupil needs to manage a medical condition such as diabetes.

Effective Ban:

This would include:

- Phones not permitted on school grounds
- Phones are collected or removed from pupil at the start of the day
- Pupils are required to place phones in lockers or similar receptacle at the start of the day, where they must remain until the end of the day.

Examples:

- 'Pupils are not allowed mobile phones on the school site. If seen or heard, they are confiscated'
- 'If a student brings their phone to school then during AM registration their mobile phone is to be placed in a secure locker in their form room where the key is held by their form tutor. It will remain in the locker for the duration of the school day and will be returned to the student at the end of PM registration.'
- [Only] 'children who walk to and from school without an accompanying adult may carry a mobile phone for safety. In these cases, children may bring a mobile phone on to the school premises but must deposit it with the school office at the start of the day and collect it from the office at the end of the day.'

Banned but phone present with student:

This would include:

- Not allowed to be used, but students permitted to retain their phones.

Examples:

- 'Students are allowed to have mobile phones with them on-site; these should be switched off and placed in their bag, blazer or locker. Students are not permitted to use their mobile phone while they are on the school site.'
- 'Once on the school site, students must switch their phones off and they must be kept in their bags/lockers throughout the day.'

Partial ban:

This would include:

- Permitted to be used in class, where the teacher allows, for educational purposes.
- Permitted to be used in breaks and lunch, unless teacher allows
- Permitted to be used in breaks and lunch
- Permitted to be used in certain areas of the school only.

This categorisation is dependent on phone use being confined to designated times and areas.

A policy would also be classified as a 'partial ban' if there is a substantial number of students, i.e. an entire year group, who are permitted to use their phones at certain times during the day, even if use is more heavily restricted for the other year groups.

Examples:

- 'Mobile phones may be used during break and lunchtimes in the designated areas. These are dining areas, quad and field only… Mobile phones will be 'out of sight' in all lessons unless a member of staff gives permission to use for a specific task eg scan a piece of work, google a fact, complete a quiz, use the calculator, photo a good example, revise, prepare, research, etc ….'
- 'While on school premises at break and at lunchtimes, in designated areas only, Year 10, 11 and Sixth Form students may use features such as text messaging, answering services, call diversion and vibration alert to receive important calls.'

No Ban:

This would include:

- Can use any time

This includes policies where use is allowed at any time, including between lessons and/or during lessons.
Examples:

- No schools fell under this category

Insufficient Information:

Where a clear answer to a question could not be discerned, a school's answer is categorised under 'insufficient information'.

Examples:

- *'Our children don't bring mobile phones into school because they are too young'* – it is not clear here whether this is the school's rule that children do not bring phones in or if it is simply a statement of facts that the majority of the children choose not to come in with phones, regardless of any policy.

Question 3: Number of Phones Confiscated in the Autumn Term 2023

If the school gave a number, this number was recorded as the number of phones confiscated. The numbers given in these responses are the number of incidents of confiscation, not the number of students phones were confiscated from (a phone may have been confiscated from a student more than once).

If the school stated they do not keep records on phone confiscations, this was categorised as 'No records kept'. Where a clear answer to the question could not be discerned, this was categorised as 'Insufficient information.'

Question 4: Other smart devices

Responses here were classified into one of four categories:

- Same policy for smart technology
- Different policy for smart technology
- No policy for smart technology
- Insufficient information

Same policy for smart technology:

This included where the policy document given by the school explicitly covers both mobile phones and other smart technology, or where the same approach is taken to phones and smart technology, even if this is set out in different documents.

Examples:

- 'All technology being used for the purpose of communication'.
- 'This policy for mobile phones extends to, headphones, smart watches, digital devices and accessories.'

Different policy for smart technology:

This includes where there is an existing policy on smart technology, but this differs substantially from the school's approach to mobile phones.

Examples:

- 'Students will not be permitted to use smart devices or any other personal technology whilst in the classroom, but mobile phones should not be used anywhere on Academy premises.'

No policy for smart technology:

Examples:

- 'Mobile phones and earphones only devices covered by policies.'
- 'No policy as "Currently no pupils have smart watches".'
- 'Other devices such as smart watches are only covered by external examination rules'.

Insufficient Information:

Where a clear answer to this question could not be discerned, a school's answer was categorised under 'insufficient information'.

Examples:

- 'No'– it is not clear whether this means their phone policy does not apply to smart tech and they have another policy, or that they have no policy.

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