

GPV/KCV CALLS FOR DISCUSSION ON USE OF SMARTPHONES BY CHILDREN

GPV/KCV welcomes the discussions now happening around the world about the use of smartphones by children and young people and encourages all families to think about the issue.

An article from a mother in the UK about smartphones and children outlines some of the arguments in favour of being cautious about the use of these devices. It comes at a time when the UK is looking at ways to restrict the use of smartphones by children.

I'm a teacher – and this is why I'm not giving my son a smartphone yet

By Lola Okolosie, English teacher and writer focusing on race, politics, education and feminism.
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The adverse effects on children's mental health are well known, and pre-teens are too young to safely navigate the Internet

"But everyone has one," pleads my son as his father and I tell him, for the umpteenth time, that no, he will not get a smartphone. Not now and probably not for a few more years.

Despite our firm resolve, it is hard not to feel sorry for him. As the end of year 6 draws closer, the weeks are peppered with stories of new classmates whose parents have, as one friend texted recently, "cracked".

WhatsApp groups are springing up so that friends going to different secondaries can easily keep in touch. It is a world of interaction he will remain ignorant of, but, much though it pains me to see the turmoil it causes, I feel vindicated each time I read about the detrimental impact that smartphones are having on children.

One report published¹ earlier this year from the children's commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza, revealed that nearly a third of young people will have viewed pornography by the age of 11.

Such content, De Souza clarifies, will not be the equivalent of "top-shelf" material some parents may have viewed in their youth and which today would be considered quaint. It is material in which "depictions of degradation, sexual coercion, aggression and exploitation are commonplace, and disproportionately targeted against teenage girls".

Or there is the research conducted last year by Ofcom showing that bullying² is more likely to happen on a device rather than face to face.

School bullies are not new, but their ability to reach into the sanctuary of the home is a recent development. The problems that arise from pupils' interactions on social media are taking up large portions of teachers' time. In February, headteacher Jon Boyes of Herne Bay high school told parents that they would have to sort out arguments between pupils that have taken place online. It was "impossible for the school to police" and the principal cause of "disagreements, stress, anxiety and trauma" among pupils, he wrote. The head urged parents to try to limit screen time, and reminded them that "most social media platforms have a minimum age of 13 years old ... meaning most students in years 7 and 8 should not even be using social media".

1 Children's Commissioner of the UK. (2023). Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children. [Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/evidence-on-pornography-s-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children/)

2 Ofcom. (2022). Threat of online bullying greater than offline. [Threat of online bullying greater than offline - Ofcom](https://www.ofcom.gov.uk/consult/condocs/onlinebullying/onlinebullying22/onlinebullying22.pdf)

Although buying your child a smartphone may seem like the best way to keep them safe, or to ensure they don't end up feeling socially isolated, evidence suggests that the technology is having dangerous effects on children's mental health. The most recent survey published by the OECD's programme for international student assessment (Pisa), of 15- and 16-year-olds in 37 countries around the world, showed that³ in all but one of those countries, nearly twice as many adolescents had "elevated levels of loneliness" with "school loneliness" proving high when smartphone access and internet use were also high. These findings were echoed in a recent global study⁴ of nearly 30,000 young adults, which found a link between the age a child received their first smartphone and their mental health in young adulthood.

Children who were given a phone later went on to experience better mental wellbeing in relation to their self-confidence and their ability to relate to others, researchers found. Conversely, those who received a phone at a younger age were more likely to experience suicidal thoughts, feelings of aggression towards others and the sense that they were detached from reality. These trends proved stronger in females than males but were consistent across all 41 countries surveyed in the report.

Children with smartphones spend, on average, more than three hours⁵ a day online, away from family time and in-person interactions. Social media compels them to "compare and despair"⁶, and puts them in touch with toxic influencers such as Andrew Tate.⁷

You might be inclined to dismiss all this as a pointless exercise in closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. Yet given what we know, I don't think defeat is an option.

Parents should be willing to entertain the notion that it's possible to reject following the herd, at least until their children are old enough to navigate what they find on the internet. In fact, both TikTok and Snapchat require users to be 13 years old. There is power in pushing back against the idea that a smartphone is the only way to keep a child safe, or of ensuring they have access to important friendships. We can, like the 45,000 Texans who are part of the Wait Until 8th movement, which empowers parents to delay giving a smartphone to their children until 8th grade (year 9), hold the line until they become teenagers.

My son is only 10. He's nowhere near ready to wade through the confusing and harmful detritus that he will no doubt find on the Internet. He hasn't developed the emotional maturity to deftly avoid the litter along his route. As his parent, why would I assume he could navigate terrain many adults struggle to get a handle on? Since I can't, I'll make do with betting that he can survive with a good old-fashioned "dumbphone", at least until he's older.

3 Adams, R. & Barr, C. (2019). British schoolchildren among least satisfied, says OECD report: Influential survey reveals UK 15-year-olds reported biggest declines in life satisfaction. [British schoolchildren among least satisfied, says OECD report | Education | The Guardian](#)

4 Sapien Labs. (2023). Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Wellbeing Outcomes. [Sapien-Labs-Age-of-First-Smartphone-and-Mental-Wellbeing-Outcomes.pdf \(sapienlabs.org\)](#)

5 PA Media. (2020). Most children own mobile phone by age of seven, study finds. [Most children own mobile phone by age of seven, study finds | Young people | The Guardian](#)

6 Gilmour, P. (2017). How to Break the Debilitating Social Media Cycle of 'Compare and Despair'. [How To Break The Debilitating Social Media Cycle Of 'Compare And Despair' \(graziadaily.co.uk\)](#)

7 Fazackerley, A. (2023). 'Vulnerable boys are drawn in': schools fear spread of Andrew Tate's misogyny. ['Vulnerable boys are drawn in': schools fear spread of Andrew Tate's misogyny | Violence against women and girls | The Guardian](#)