



**SMARTPHONE
FREE CHILDHOOD**

Parenting in the Digital Age

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX8OlaeS9d0>



What has happened over the past decade?





IN TWO DECADES, EVERYTHING'S CHANGED

2004



2004

Nokias ruled



2007

The first iPhone launches



2008

Apple app store opens



2012

4G launches in the UK, enabling internet everywhere



2025

89% of 12-year-olds own a smartphone, permanently connected to the internet via 4g/5g



THEY'RE NOT REALLY 'PHONES' AT ALL



MOBILE PHONE

Make calls, send texts, play Snake



POCKET SUPERCOMPUTER

24/7 access to the internet in your pocket



PARENTS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

94%

of primary school
parents think
smartphones
are harmful

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496 people,
April 24

70%

of parents believe
smartphones
negatives impact
family life

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24

75%

of parents believe
that the UK should
ban social media
for U16s

Martin Lewes survey, 6 March (21,854 responses)



YOUNG PEOPLE WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

67%

of 16-18 year olds
think smartphones
are harmful

Parentkind poll, 2024

1 in 5

of 16-18 year olds
have felt “life is not
worth living” due to
social media

Parentkind poll, 2024

50%

of teens say they are
“addicted” to social
media

Millennium Cohort Study, 2024

YET SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM



25%

of 5-7 year olds
in the UK own their
own smartphone

89%

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





EVERYONE'S GOT ONE BECAUSE EVERYONE'S GOT ONE



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



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

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



**So what exactly
is the problem?**



WHAT DO THESE ITEMS HAVE IN COMMON?





When children first started getting smartphones in the early 2010s we didn't understand their impact. No level of safety testing was done before releasing smartphones for children to use.

Now we do, and the evidence is overwhelming.

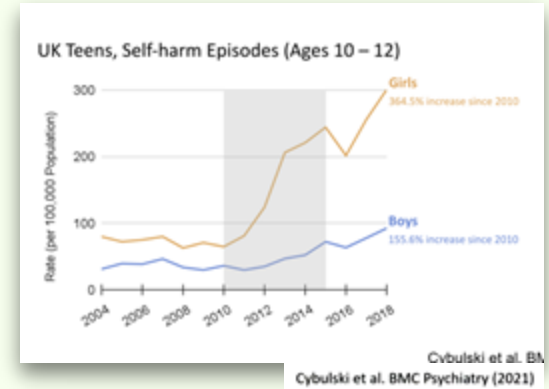
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Vgq0vgkT2yY>



SMARTPHONES ARE FUELLING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, loneliness and even suicide among teens have all dramatically spiked globally since 2010 – when children started getting smartphones.

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



3x

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

King's College London, 2024

1 in 5

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

Parentkind Poll, 2024

53%

The number of children referred to emergency mental healthcare in England has soared by 53% in three years

Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024



‘Facebook was targeting 13-17 year olds... it could identify when they were feeling worthless or helpless and then share this with advertisers’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3qc6QjfJyc>



“The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency. It is time to require a warning label on social media platforms.”



Dr Vivek Murthy

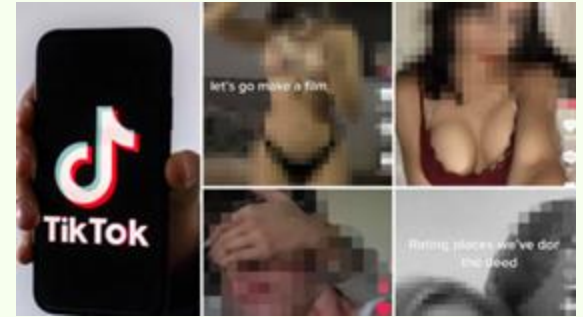
US Surgeon General, 2024



SMARTPHONES EXPOSE KIDS TO HARMFUL CONTENT

Having unrestricted access to the internet in your pocket creates a gateway to extreme content and viewpoints that we'd never dream of exposing children to in real life.

Hardcore pornography, extreme political views, sexualised and violent imagery, trolling and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders have become part of the fabric of modern childhood.



75%

of UK 15 year olds questioned
had been
sent beheading videos

British Board of Film Classification Report, March 2022

90%

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

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools, 2021

51%

of UK 11-13 year-olds
have seen hardcore
pornography online



MISOGYNY, THE USE OF AI DEEP FAKES AND CHAT BOTS

Teen Girls Confront an Epidemic of Deepfake Nudes in Schools

Using artificial intelligence, middle and high school students have fabricated explicit images of female classmates and shared the doctored pictures.





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



Dame Rachel de Souza

Children’s Commissioner for England, 2022

SMARTPHONES APPS ARE ADDICTIVE BY DESIGN

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

So it’s little wonder that many children are routinely ‘spending six, seven, eight hours a day on social media – often more’ (Ofcom, 2024).



46%

of teens say they use their phones “almost constantly”

Pew Research Centre, Aug 2022

29 hours

Per week is the average British 12-year-old now spends on their smartphone

Childwise Monitor Report, 2021

2 in 3

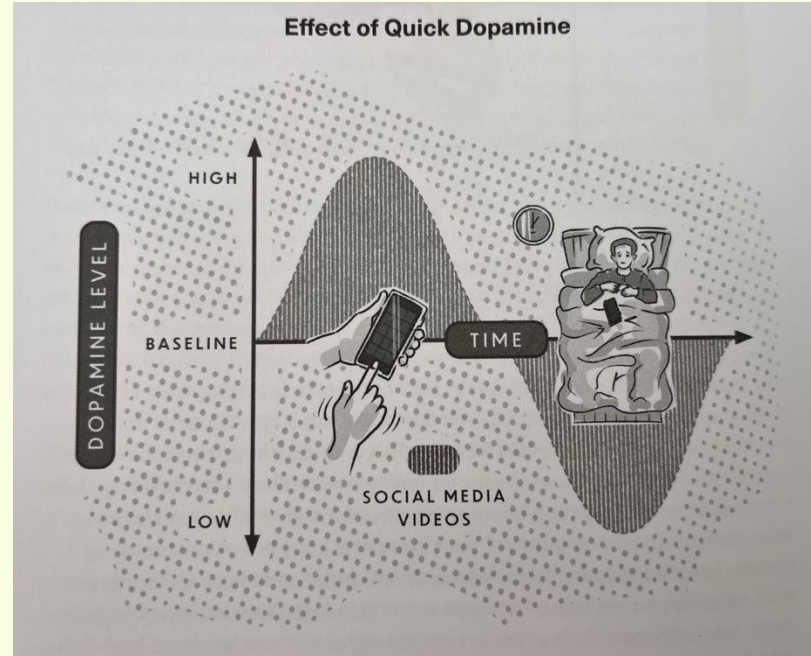
of 11-17 year olds ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ find it difficult to put down their phone

Common Sense Media, 2023

SMARTPHONES ARE HIJACKING OUR DOPAMINE REWARD PATHWAYS

Phones, social media and gaming platforms give us a spike of dopamine so we want to do it more and more.

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





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

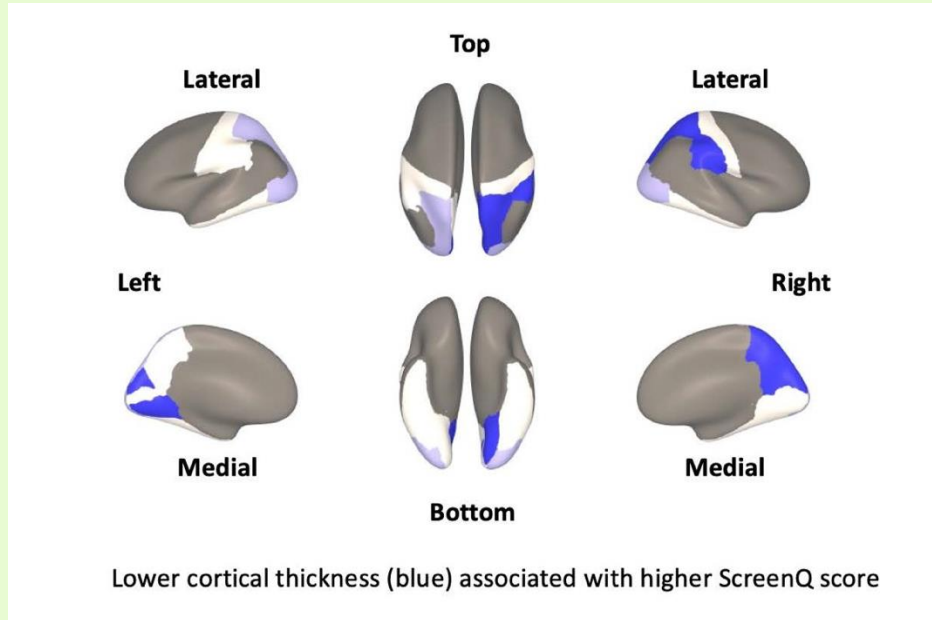


Aza Raskin

Co-inventor of ‘infinite scroll’, turned campaigner



RESEARCH INDICATES THAT EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME IS IMPACTING CHILDREN'S BRAIN DEVELOPMENT



Studies show correlation between excessive screen time and lower cortical thickness in certain brain areas, particularly in children, impacting language, reading, and social skills (empathy, understanding facial expressions).



SMARTPHONES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING CHILDHOOD

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

The opportunity cost to childhood is profound. The average UK 12 year-old now spends over four hours per day on their smartphone, displacing the kinds of activities that have shaped childhood for millennia.



43%

of US teenagers' waking minutes are spent on screens

Gitnux Marketdata Report, Jan 2024

30%

Since 1975, the daily average time children spend playing outdoors has fallen by 30%, while screen-based activities have risen 23%

Zach Rausch - Mullan 2019

65%

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

American Time Use Study



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



Dr Jonathan Haidt

Professor of Social Psychology, NYU



~Susie

In the last decade there have been 70% less outdoor accidents and 93% more incidents of self harm in children... as a GP I can promise you it's much easier to mend a broken bone than a broken mind.





SADLY, WE COULD GO ON...



SLEEP

Bedtime use of smartphones doubles children's risk of poor sleep



BULLYING

84% of bullying now takes place on a device (a lot of it unreported by children)



DISTRACTIONS

On average teens are bombarded by 237 smartphone notifications a day



ARGUMENTS

55% of parents say their child's smartphone use causes big family arguments



ROAD SAFETY

Mobile phone distraction is a major cause of road accidents involving children



CRIME


500 children a day were mugged in 2020 in the UK, almost all for smartphones



It's little wonder that many of the people who created this technology keep it away from their kids

STEVE JOBS

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



EVAN SPIEGEL

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



BILL GATES

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



https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxJYD6_0hwhZiNkBQa0VsyIADUs3A9bOxM?feature=shared



**Parents are in an
impossible position**



BECAUSE OUR 'CHOICE' ISN'T REALLY A CHOICE AT ALL



Either we...

Give our children access to a product that we know to be harmful.



Or we...

Risk alienating them from their peers at a crucial stage of their development.

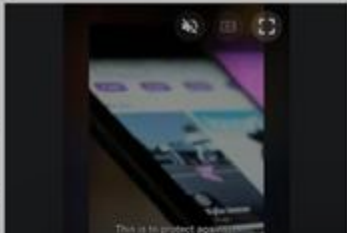
IT'S A LOSE-LOSE; FOR PARENTS, FOR CHILDREN & FOR SOCIETY

LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

Education
Mobile phones set to be banned across all second-level schools under new Government plans



Figures show that there is a mental health crisis among young people. Ministers believe social media is partly to blame
GETTY IMAGES



said that they are open to... children using social me... nment adviser warned th... ontent online was likely to

'Enc... conf... med... it will work

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



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

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

Kim Willsher in Paris

Follow Kim Willsher



The Minister for Education is planning phones from all second-level schools research which links use of devices to distraction and cyberbullying. Photos Barlow/PA Wire

Carl O'Brien
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ire schools in the zones by July 1, 2026, e by children in le more than a year

California Schools Must Restrict Phones Under New Law Signed by Newsom

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

Listen to this article - 4:43 min



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GETTY IMAGES

LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

BUT PROPER REGULATION OF BIG TECH WILL TAKE YEARS, AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE

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

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

Kim Willsher in Paris

Follow Kim Willsher

distraction and cyberbullying. Photograph by Barlow/PA Wire

Carl O'Brien

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Anthony Albanese has revealed how a nation's account and F

Education

Children's harmful on a 'public health crisis', says Minister

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



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The New York Times

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**The solution is to
work together**



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

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



This is what Smartphone Free Childhood is all about.

It's a growing movement of 350,000 parents in the UK who are coming together to support each other in delaying access to smartphones and social media for their children.

It's coordinated via a national network of WhatsApp communities where parents can learn more about the issue, find other like-minded parents and support one another.



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

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

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



OUR RECOMMENDED APPROACH

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



SMARTPHONE



SOCIAL MEDIA



SIMPLE PHONE



FAMILY COMPUTER



PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T THE SOLUTION WE EXPECT THEM TO BE...

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

58%

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

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

47%

of teens with controls in place say they have bypassed them

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

And teens find multiple ways to bypass controls:

Performing a factory reset

Using VPN software

Hacking the WiFi router

Memorising your passcode



THE PARENT PACT

**makes collective
action simple**



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

Step 01.

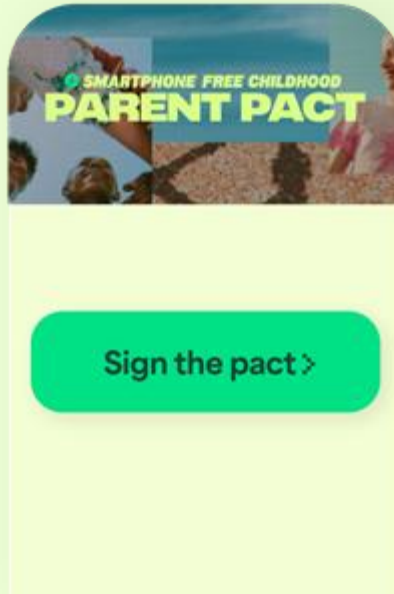
Select your region & child's school



The screenshot shows the 'Step 01' interface. At the top is a banner with the text 'SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD PARENT PACT' over a background of children playing. Below the banner are four input fields: 'Select your region' with a dropdown arrow, 'Select school' with a dropdown arrow, 'Select school year' with a dropdown arrow, and 'Name'.

Step 02.

Sign the Pact to delay until the end of Year 9



The screenshot shows the 'Step 02' interface. It features the same banner as Step 01. Below the banner is a large green button with the text 'Sign the pact >'.

Step 03.

View results for your region, school & class



The screenshot shows the 'Step 03' interface. It features the same banner as Step 01. Below the banner, the text 'National (UK)' is displayed. Underneath, there are two large green buttons: the top one contains the number '54,420' with 'CHILDREN' written below it, and the bottom one contains the number '8,033' with 'SCHOOLS' written below it.

THE MOVEMENT IS GROWING ACROSS THE UK

143,926

Parent Pacts have been signed since launching in September (figure as of 10 June 2025)





IT'S HAPPENING IN KENT...

4751

Parent Pacts signed
(as of 10 June 2025)

466

Schools with a
signed pact

1600+

West Kent
WhatsApp Community
membership



Working with schools...



AMHERST SCHOOL CASE STUDY

- Not a single complaint
- Positive feedback from parents
- Discouraged parents from buying their children smartphones
- More real-life interaction/ outdoors play

“I was so relieved, the pressure to get my child a smartphone was instantly taken away”

<https://vimeo.com/1069558140>

MESSAGE FROM MR REID

Smartphones
By the end of last academic year we had the vast majority of our **Year 6 children bringing a smartphone to school** which was then placed in a box during school time and stored in the school office. I have spent much time reflecting whether children need to bring a smartphone to a junior school. I have always been under the impression that the reason for bringing a phone to school was due to **parents' safety fears** when their child walks to school independently.

At the end of Term 6 I spent time asking the Year 6 children why they were bringing a phone to school and if it was linked to safety. **The answer was no!** The children described that they liked to bring their phone to school as it gave them the opportunity **to go on their phone (gaming, social media or watching videos) before school and after school when they weren't with their parents.** For many children walking to and from school looking at their phone is a **far greater road safety danger.** We have unintentionally also created an unwelcome element of **peer pressure** linked to children feeling they have to bring a phone to school or issues regarding what type of phone they have.

Therefore I would like to **trial from Monday 23rd September** children not to bring a smartphone to Amherst School. If your child does need a phone linked to walking independently to school please could it not be a smartphone. This would be a phone that they can make calls on or text only. We have some children who are already doing this. This phone would still be handed in each day.

We see a sharp increase in the number of Year 6 children owning a smartphone after the Kent Test and Christmas. I would like to establish this new routine before more children own a smartphone. **I hope you are supportive of this change.** As a parent myself (children aged 14, 12 and 9) I know how hard this area is.

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- Community Events PAGE 5



OTHER SCHOOL COMMUNITIES ARE LEADING THE WAY...

NEWS | LONDON

More than 100 schools across Barnet to go smartphone-free

Sadiq Khan's office has said it will 'take note' of how the policy plays out in the borough

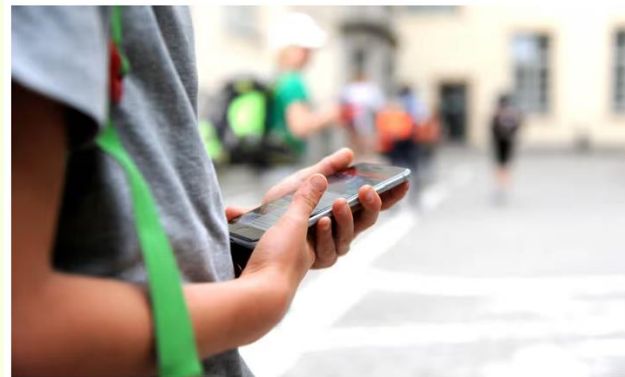


Delay buying children smartphones, schools urge



'Much easier to say no': Irish town unites in smartphone ban for young children

Parents and schools across Greystones adopt voluntary 'no-smartphone code' in bid to curb peer pressure



Headteachers in 30-plus primaries across St Albans got together to draw up a joint letter to send to families, in which they declared their schools smartphone-free and urged parents to delay giving their children a smartphone until at least year 9 of secondary school.



Supporting Healthy Screen Habits



MODELLING, COMMUNICATION AND CLEAR BOUNDARIES

Model good habits

Children often follow their parents' lead and model parents' own habits and boundaries

Set clear boundaries and reduce distractions

(Contract agreement)

Smartphone-free areas/ times

Ways to reduce addiction to devices

E.g. monochrome mode, turn the phone off when not using/ doing homework and keep out of site

Keep phones out of bedroom

Particularly first thing in the morning and overnight!

Discuss use and online risks as a family

Encourage regular discussion and open dialogue





DO YOUR RESEARCH AND BE PREPARED

Latest Research

Podcasts: Your Undivided Attention, The Dopamine Slot Machine

Reading: Anxious Generation, Stolen Focus, <https://www.humanetech.com>

Readiness Assessment

Does your child exhibit self-control with other devices? Have you discussed the online harms and risks?

What is your child like with other expensive items? If the item is lost/ damaged, who is paying for a replacement? Does your child communicate openly with you?

Get to know apps

Test apps to understand the algorithms and content being shared to assess whether it is right time for your child to use it

Graded exposure

See how your child responds to apps, review regularly, don't be afraid to delete



PUT THE BEST CONTROLS IN PLACE

Set Screentime Limits

Limits on apps and downtime.

Encourage 'do not disturb' mode or use of a parent shield, e.g. Forest app

Block adult content

Block adult content and private browser mode in parental control settings

Delete/ Block VPN

Prevent children bypassing parental controls, e.g. Qustadio software

Private mode

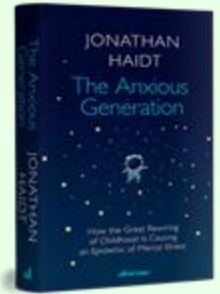
Set to private mode (so your child cannot be tracked)





USEFUL LIST OF RESOURCES

- **Kent Webinar (November 2024):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBt27rHnXk>
- **Swiped, Channel 4 documentary:**
<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/swiped-the-school-that-banned-smartphones>
- **Education webinar – Sophie Winkleman and Jonathan Haidt:**
<https://youtu.be/Uh-j0XvR6K8>
- **Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation:**
https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=anxious+generation%2C+jonathan+haidt&crd=2C303S4T75J3F&srefix=anxious+generation+jonathan+haid%2Caps%2C87&ref=nb_sb_noss_2
- **Health Professionals For Safer Screens – Webinars and Parent resources:**
<https://healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org/resources/resources-for-professionals/resources-for-education-professionals/>





IN THE MEDIA...



21 OCT 2024 · 16 MIN

Smartphones - time to live without them?

ITV News - What You Need T

▶ Play



"TikTok is Like Fentanyl!": Here's How We Can Free The Anxious Generation | Jonathan Haidt



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



WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

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

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

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

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

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



Let's keep talking...

“Growing up I resented my parents for not letting me have a smartphone until I was 16. I now thank them for the rest of my life...”

(US ScreenStrong Ambassador, 2024)



Join over 350,000 parents across the UK

Sign up to the West Kent Smartphone Free Childhood community



West Kent Smartphone
Free Childhood

WhatsApp group

A square QR code with a white WhatsApp logo in the center, used for joining the West Kent Smartphone Free Childhood WhatsApp group.

Weekly updates - West Kent

WhatsApp group

A square QR code with a white WhatsApp logo in the center, used for joining the Weekly updates - West Kent WhatsApp group.



SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD

www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk

@smartphonefreechildhood



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