



**SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD
Schools Network**

Evidence summary for educators

What the research shows. What
smartphone-free schools have seen.
All in one place.

We all want the same for our students.

Happy today: Enjoy a happy, healthy childhood

Thriving tomorrow: Growing into confident, capable adults

Safe always: Stay safe as they explore the world

But what teachers have long suspected, the evidence now proves: smartphones make all these things harder.

The good news is that schools are perfectly placed to make a real difference.

The impact from smartphone-free schools shows what change looks like in practice. And the benefits for students, staff and parents are clearly visible.

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Section 1

An overview of smartphones' impact on children's happiness, safety and development, alongside outcomes observed in smartphone-free schools

The evidence **Happiness reduced**

Smartphones increase the risk of depression and anxiety, undermine self-esteem, and displace real-life activities through addictive design.



2x higher anxiety

3x higher depression risk

Among children with problematic smartphone use

King's College London, 2024



40% of children turn down real-world social opportunities to stay online.

Internet Matters, 2026

78%

Of children have been exposed to appearance-changing products online that had a negative impact on self-esteem.

Children's Commissioner, 2026

46%

Of teenagers report they are online 'almost constantly' via their phones.

Faverio & Sidoti, 2024

1 in 4

Children and young people show problematic smartphone use, which displaces other enjoyable activities.

Sohn et al., 2019

Happiness

in smartphone-free schools

STUDENTS ARE HAPPIER



Because I haven't had my phone all day, when I get home I don't feel attached to it. I feel more attached to my family than I am to my phone.

Year 7 pupil,
Alderbrook School



It's had a lot of benefits. I'm quite grateful that I've been able to experience this and see what it's like to go to school not needing a phone.

Year 12 pupil,
Fulham Boys School



Now that we don't have phones, everyone's a bit happier.

Year 5 pupil,
Birkenhead Junior School

PARENTS ARE HAPPIER

100%

Support returned from parent survey a year after no-smartphone-on-site policy implementation.

Maryanne Ramsbottom,
Birkenhead Junior School

95%

Of parents at primary level back smartphone-free school days, with almost no opposition to total bans.

UWE Bristol, 2025

STAFF ARE HAPPIER

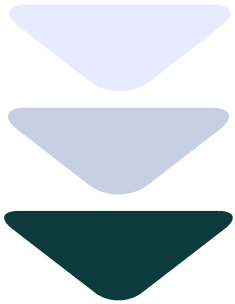
▼ 13%

Staff turnover reduced from 23% to under 10%.

Damien McBeath, John Wallis Academy

The evidence **Thriving reduced**

Smartphones fragment attention, disrupt learning and undermine healthy development.



GCSE results **1–2 grades lower** at schools without an effective smartphone ban.

Mansfield et al., 2024

2x

Children using devices at bedtime have over double the risk of a disrupted night's sleep than those without access.

Carter et al., 2016

20 minutes

Time taken for pupils to refocus after a phone-related distraction.

UNESCO, 2023



Students who spend more than 4 hours a day on digital leisure are **more likely to skip school**.

OECD, 2025

THE IMPACT

Thriving

in smartphone-free schools

SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP AND USAGE OUTSIDE SCHOOL DECREASES

▼ 63%

Y6 smartphone ownership reduced from 75% to 12% a year after a ban.

Matthew Tavender, Cunninghill Primary

16%

Reduction in use of social media apps at home after first year of policy.

Maryanne Ramsbottom, Birkenhead Junior School

LEARNING IMPROVES

^ 1-2 grades

GCSE results 1–2 grades higher at schools with an effective smartphone ban.

Mansfield et al., 2024

BEHAVIOUR IMPROVES

▼ 94%

Reduction in behaviour incidents from 125 to 7.

Winton Academy

The evidence Safety reduced

Smartphones increase children's exposure to grooming, exploitation and harmful content, and make online bullying harder to escape.

70%

Of teachers report witnessing in-school conflict that originated from smartphone-related experiences outside of school.

UWE Bristol, 2025



Among children 8-17 who are bullied, **8 in 10 experience it through a device.**

Ofcom, 2022

89%

Percentage increase in grooming crimes against children in six years.

NSPCC, 2024

7 in 10

Secondary school age children have seen harmful content online, the most likely being bullying and hate content.

Ofcom, 2025

90% of girls



50% of boys



Report receiving unwanted sexual content on their phones.

Ofsted, 2021

THE IMPACT

Safety

in smartphone-free schools

Safeguarding incidents and bullying reduce inside and outside school

▼ 60%

Reduction of safeguarding incidents outside school.

David Smith, Fulham Boys School

▼ 28%

Reduction in students speaking to strangers online.

Maryanne Ramsbottom, BHSA Junior School

▼ 90%

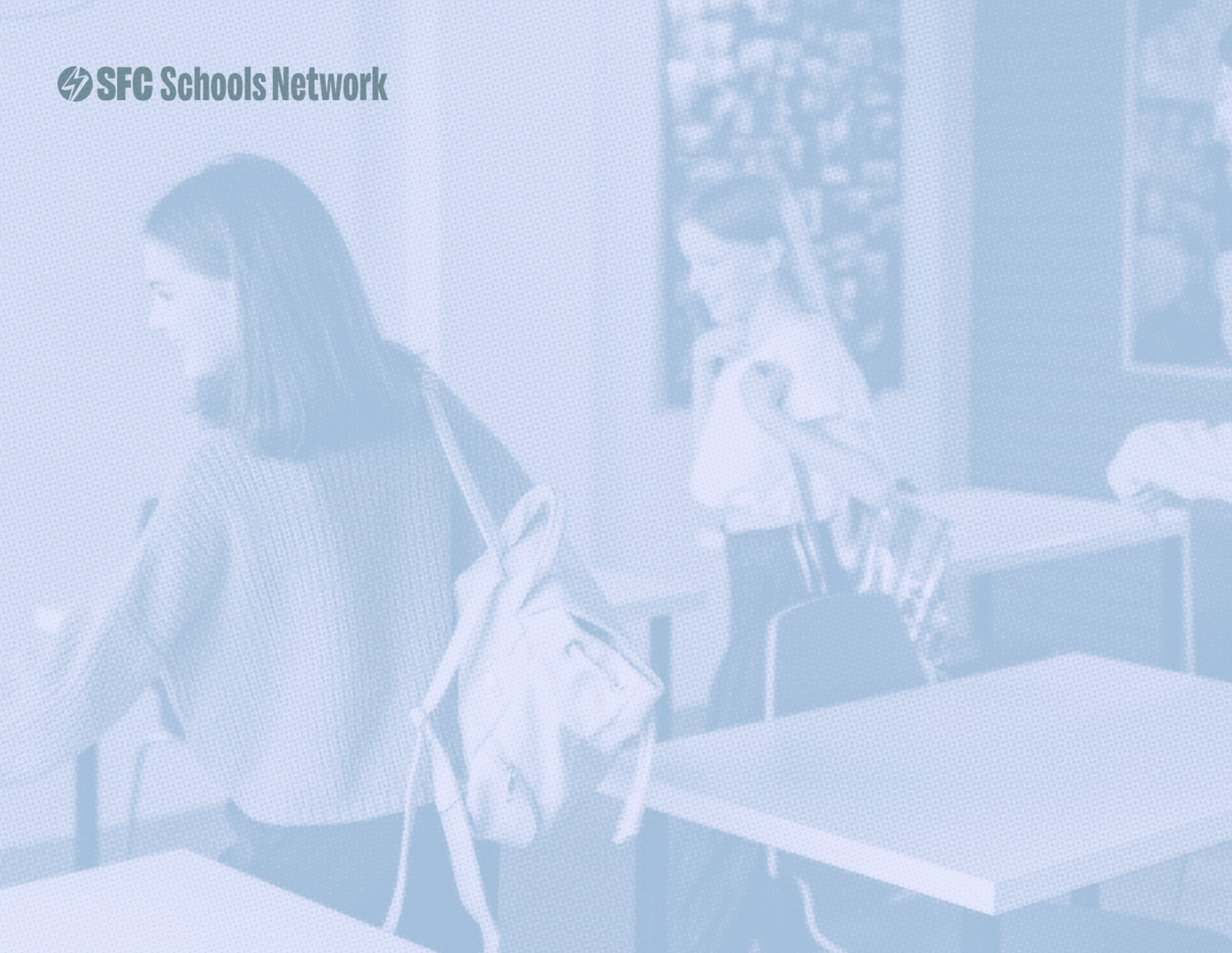
Reduction in child sexual exploitation cases for our younger years including sexting and online grooming.

David Smith, Fulham Boys School

Zero

Number of safeguarding incidents related to smartphone ownership for younger years in first half-term of new smartphone policy.

Tom Beveridge, Alderbrook School



Section 2

Data on the views of young people, teachers and parents

Young people wish things were different

74%

Of older teenagers feel that social media is harmful to children and young people.

Parentkind, 2024

1 in 5

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

Parentkind, 2024

48%

Of teens say they are “addicted” to social media.

Millenium Cohort Study, 2024

Teachers wish things were different

99%

Teachers surveyed in SFC Schools Network would support a statutory ban on mobile phones in school.

SFC Schools Network teacher poll, 2026

92%

Of teachers said their lessons were being interrupted by asking pupils to put away their mobile phones.

Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, 2024

97%

Of teachers agree that there should be greater regulation of children’s social media use.

TES, 2026

Parents wish things were different

94%

Of primary school parents think smartphones are harmful.

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496 people, April 24

71%

Of parents of children aged 3-17 believe that the risks of their child using social media, messaging, and video-sharing apps outweigh the benefits.

Ofcom, 2025

7 in 10

Parents fear their child might be bullied online.

Ofcom, 2025

Children deserve spaces to grow, connect and discover who they are, and schools are uniquely positioned to provide these spaces.

In choosing to create those environments, educators are doing what they have always done best: putting children first.

Section 3

Further reading: detailed research on smartphones' impact on wellbeing, learning and safety

Further reading: happiness

Depression

2× higher anxiety and 3× higher depression risk among children with problematic smartphone use. [King's College London, 2024](#)

Children who are on social media for more than three hours a day are more likely to develop greater levels of depression and anxiety as teenagers. [Imperial College London, 2026](#)

Two hours of daily screen time increases the risk of depression with the longer the exposure, the greater the risk. [Zhu et al., 2025](#)

Mental health and wellbeing

78% Of children have been exposed to appearance-changing products online that had a negative impact on self-esteem. [Children's Commissioner, 2026](#)

74% Of older teenagers feel that social media is harmful to children and young people. [Parentkind, 2024](#)

50% Of students report experiencing negative events through smartphone-based group chats, such as WhatsApp, making it the most common platform for harmful interactions. [UWE Bristol, 2025](#)

Social media is harming adolescents' wellbeing and mental health at a scale large enough to cause changes at the population level. [Haidt & Rausch, 2026](#)

The younger the age at which a child first has a smart device, the worse the mental health that the young adult reports today. [Sapien Labs, 2023](#)

Addiction

1 in 4 Children and young people show problematic smartphone use, which displaces other enjoyable activities. [Sohn et al., 2019](#)

46% Of teenagers report they are online 'almost constantly' via their phones. [Faverio & Sidoti, 2024](#)

Further reading: thriving

Academic outcomes and achievement

GCSE results 1–2 grades higher at schools with an effective smartphone ban.

[Mansfield et al., 2024](#)

In-class phone bans improve academic outcomes, especially for vulnerable student groups.

[Sungu et al., 2025](#)

Students who spend an excessive amount of time on digital recreation have lower academic performance and sense of belonging at school. [OECD, 2025](#)

School mobile phone bans increased test scores by 6.4%, with the greatest gains among low-achieving students. [Beland & Murphy, 2015](#)

The greater the use of a phone while studying, the greater the negative impact on learning.

[Sunday et al., 2021](#)

PISA 2022 shows students distracted by digital devices in class scored 15 points lower in maths - almost three-quarters of a year's learning. [OECD, 2023](#)

Students struggling in school, and behind academically, are more likely to suffer negative smartphone experiences. [UWE Bristol, 2025](#)

Physical health and development

2x

Children using devices at bedtime have over double the risk of a disrupted night's sleep than those without access. [Carter et al., 2016](#)

21%

Every additional hour of screen time daily increases myopia risk by 21%. In children already diagnosed with myopia, an extra hour raises the risk of progression by 54%. [Foreman et al., 2021](#)

Habitual social media use in adolescence is linked to divergent brain development, particularly in sensitivity to social rewards and punishments, with implications for psychological adjustment. [Maza et al., 2023](#)

75% of teachers report witnessing tiredness and fatigue in students, attributed to smartphone use outside of school hours. [UWE Bristol, 2025](#)

Attention and learning

It takes 20 minutes for pupils to refocus after a phone-related distraction. Study cited in UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2023

More than 2 hours of recreational screen time a day for children between 8 and 11 years worsens working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function. Donnelly, 2018, 'More Than Two Hours Screen Time A Day Could Damage Children's Brain Development'

Students not using phones in class wrote down 62% more information in notes, recalled more information, and scored a full grade and a half higher on multiple-choice tests than peers using phones. Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013

The presence of a phone is sufficiently distracting to diminish attention and cause deficits in task-performance, especially for tasks with greater attentional and cognitive demands. Thornton, Faires, Robbins and Rollins, 2014

59% Of students across the OECD said their attention was diverted due to other students using phones, tablets or laptops in at least some maths lessons. OECD, 2024

70% of primary teachers and 82% of secondary teachers reported they would prefer an outright ban on phones in their school. Teacher Tapp, 2025

Inspection

Secondary schools with an effective phone ban were over twice as likely to be rated outstanding - 43% of schools with effective bans rated Outstanding vs 21% overall. Mansfield, Phillips & Webb, Policy Exchange, 2024

Time and opportunity cost

40% Of children are turning down real-world social opportunities to stay online. [Internet Matters, 2026](#)

23hrs Average time a child spends online each week. [Internet Matters, 2026](#)

89% Of 12-year-olds own a smartphone, and so do a quarter of children aged 5 to 7. [OECD, 2024](#)

A third of children aged 5 to 7 use social media unsupervised. [Ofcom, 2024](#)

Children aged 8-14 spend an average of nearly 3 hours online each day, increasing to 4 hours among 13-14 year-olds. [Ofcom, 2025](#)

Limiting smartphone use encourages alternative, healthy activities: reading magazines increased by 60%, along with board and card games in one study. [Kopecký et al., 2021](#)

Truancy and suspensions

Students who spend more than 4 hours a day on digital leisure are more likely to skip school than those with moderate use. [OECD, 2025](#)

Further reading: safety

Bullying

8 in 10 Among children 8-17 who are bullied, 8 in 10 experience it through a device.
[Ofcom, 2022](#)

Girls continue to be more likely than boys to experience nasty or hurtful interactions online: There continues to be a gender imbalance between those who experience nasty/hurtful interactions online, with 34% of girls saying that they have ever experienced this compared to 28% of boys, in line with last year. [Ofcom, 2025](#)

65% teachers have observed bullying behaviour in school that was initiated through smartphone use beyond school hours. [UWE Bristol, 2025](#)

Explicit images

7 in 10 secondary school age children have seen harmful content online, the most likely being bullying and hate content. [Ofcom, 2025](#)

79% Of children have encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age that children first see pornography as being 13 years old.
[Children's Commissioner, 2023](#)

90% of girls and 50% of boys report receiving unwanted sexual content on their phones - most of this is from other children in their class. [Ofsted, 2021](#)

Grooming and sexual exploitation

89% Increase in online grooming crimes against children in six years.
NSPCC, 2024

400% Increase in sexual crimes committed against children online since 2013.
Critchley, 2024, Oral evidence given to the House of Commons Education Committee

26% Increase in child sexual exploitation and abuse online in a year. Half the crimes were committed by children aged 10-17, with 64% sharing indecent imagery.
Guardian, 2025

48% Of sexual Communication with a Child offences were on Snapchat.

81% Of grooming cases take place against girls.
NSPCC, 2024

60x A child is 60X more likely to be groomed online than abducted from the street. Using comparison of reported/estimated incident volumes from NSPCC FOI, 2023/4- (7,062 reported online grooming cases) and Home Office / PACT / CEOP - (116 estimated stranger child abductions 2024/5)

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