



**SMARTPHONE  
FREE CHILDHOOD**

# Smartphones: the new frontier in parenting

WATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DX8OIaeS9d0>

PARENT PRESENTATION 2025



**SMARTPHONE  
FREE CHILDHOOD**

**What has happened over the  
past two decades?**

PARENT PRESENTATION 2025



# In two decades, everything's changed

2004



2025



2004

**Nokia's ruled**

2007

**The first iPhone launches**

2008

**Apple app store opens**

2012

**4G launches in the UK, enabling internet everywhere**

2025

**97% of 12-year-olds own a smartphone, permanently connected to the internet via 4g/5g**



# They're not really 'phones' at all



## Mobile Phones

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



**97%**

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.

Now we do, and the evidence is overwhelming.

[WATCH: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Vgq0vgkT2yY](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Vgq0vgkT2yY)

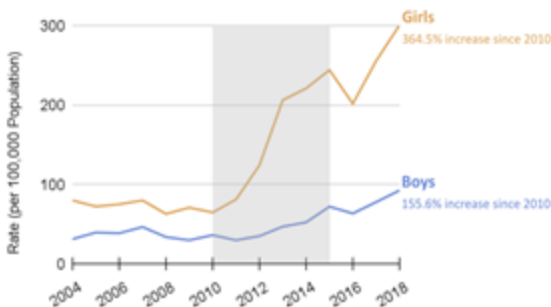


# Smartphones are fuelling a mental health crisis

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm 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.

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



# 67%

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'

Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024

# 53%

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

Parentkind Poll, 2024



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

**[WATCH: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3qc6QjfJyc](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

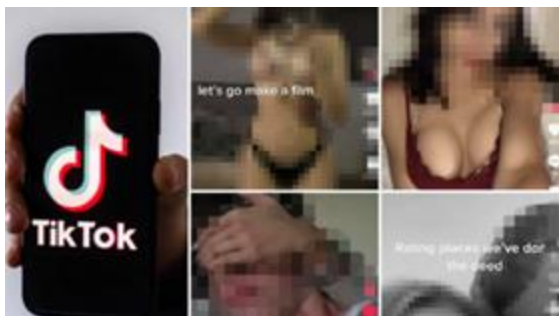


# Smartphones expose children to harmful content

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.

## The dangers of platforms like TikTok



**51%**

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

British Board of Film Classification Report, March 2022

**75%**

of UK 15 year olds questioned had been sent beheading videos

Digital Childhoods, children's commissioner report, 2022

**90%**

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

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools, 2021

# ⚡ THE USE OF AI - DEEP FAKES, CHAT BOTS, BEAUTY RATING...

## *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 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).

## Time spent on phones is only going up



**46%**

of teens say they use their phones "almost constantly"

Pew Research Centre, Aug 2022

**29hrs**

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

Childwise Monitor Report, 2021

**2in3**

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

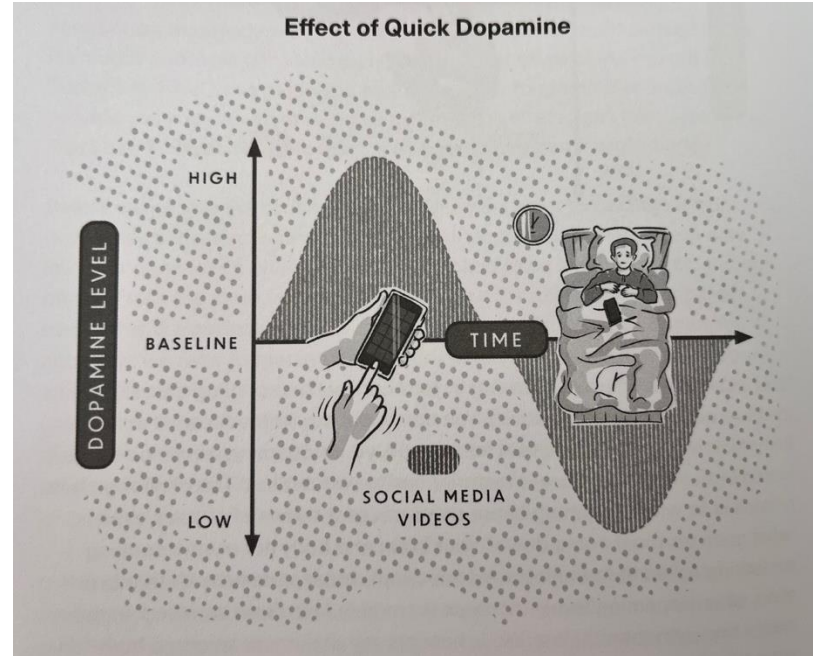
Common Sense Media, 2023



# 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

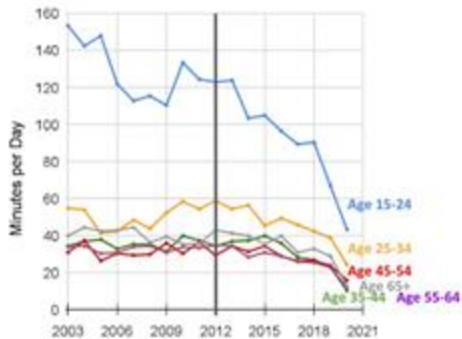


# Smartphones are changing childhood

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

The 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.

**Daily Avg Time with Friends (minutes)**



**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.



Dr Susie Davies, founder of Papaya Parents, citing NHS DATA



# Sadly, we could go on



## SLEEP

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

Jama Paediatrics, 2016



## BULLYING

84% of bullying now takes place on a device

CommonSense Media, 2023



## DISTRACTIONS

On average teens are bombarded by 237 smartphone notifications a day

LookUp



## ARGUMENTS

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

Ofcom, 2022



## ROAD SAFETY

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

HMD, 2024



## CRIME

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

ONS, 2020



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

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

STEVE JOBS



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

EVAN SPIEGEL



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

BILL GATES



**WATCH:** [https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxJYD6\\_0hwhZiNkBQa0VsylADUs3A9bOxM?feature=shared](https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxJYD6_0hwhZiNkBQa0VsylADUs3A9bOxM?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.

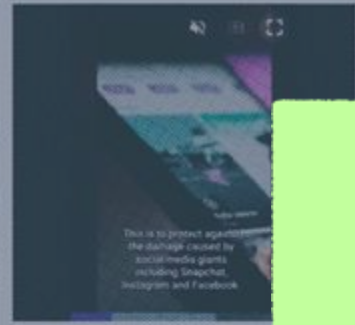


**Or we...**

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 children



'Enough is enough': Fed confirms nationwide social media ban - and reveals it will work

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

Education  
Children's exposure to harmful online content a 'public health crisis', says Minister

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



said that they are open to children using social

THE IRISH TIMES  
Education  
Mobile phones set to be banned across all



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 Willsheher in Paris

Follow Kim Willsheher



The Minister for Education is planning to ban mobile phones from all second-level schools from September 2024. Research shows that use of devices is a major cause of distraction and cyberbullying. Photo: Patrick J. Ryan/PA Wire

Carl O'Brien  
...ve that is intended to protect children's mental

...ire schools in the zones by July 1, 2026, as by children in

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



to trial at schoo



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

could follow Australia in banning social media for teenagers

Ministers are considering ways to stop children from using harmful content online, citing the impact on mental health.

By Rachel Sylvester  
September 12 2024, 5:50pm, The Times

are open to a ban on social media. Newsom warned that such a law was likely to be

children's exposure to harmful online content a public health crisis, says Minister

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

By Shawn Donnelly  
Shawn Donnelly  
York

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Free Scho... st popul... statewide... More tha... re passed.

ool crack...

are among

**Leaders across the world  
are thinking about how to  
legislate to protect children**

**But proper regulation of big  
tech will take years, and we  
don't have time to waste**



**The solution is to  
work together**



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

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



# **This is what Smartphone Free Childhood is all about.**

It's a growing movement of 150,000 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

01

Delay smartphones  
until at least 14

02

Delay social media  
until at least 16

03

A simple phone to  
stay in contact

04

Shared access to a  
family computer



**SMARTPHONE**



**SOCIAL MEDIA**



**SIMPLE PHONE**



**FAMILY  
COMPUTER**



# Parental controls aren't the solution



Even the most tech-savvy parents struggle to manage parental controls



Some apps require updates to hundreds of settings to make them age appropriate



Even if your child's phone has controls, their friends may not so they may be sent harmful 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

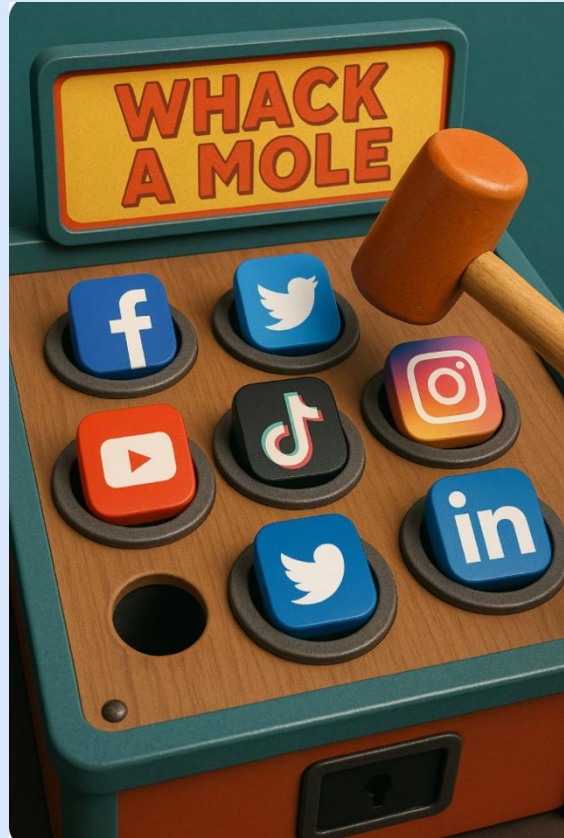
Using VPN software

Hacking the WiFi router

Memorising your passcode



**THERE IS ALWAYS THE NEXT UPDATE OR LOOP HOLE...**





# 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



SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD  
**PARENT PACT**

Select your region ▾

Select your school ▾

Select your school year ▾

Name

## STEP 02

Sign the Pact to delay  
until at least 14



## STEP 03

View results for your  
region, school & class



# The movement is growing across the UK

# 158,412

Parent Pacts have been signed in 18 months



# It's happening in Kent

**5,329**

Parent Pacts have been  
signed in Kent

**464**

Across this many schools



# WORKING WITH SCHOOLS...





# AMHERST SCHOOL CASE STUDY

- Not a single complaint
- Positive feedback from parents
- Encouraged delaying smartphones
- Increase in face-to-face interaction and outdoors play

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

**WATCH: <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 on 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.

**CONTENTS**

- Message from Mr Reid PAGE 1
- Notices PAGE 2
- Clubs & Library PAGE 3
- Let's Celebrate PAGE 4
- Community Events PAGE 5



# LOCAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS ARE CHANGING POLICY...

## From September 2024...

Riverhead and Amherst Schools (Sevenoaks)

## From September 2025...

- Sevenoaks Primary School (Sevenoaks)
- Otford Primary School (Sevenoaks)
- Hextable Primary School (Swanley)
- High Firs Primary School (Swanley)
- Crockenhill Primary School (Swanley)
- Oakfield Primary Academy (Dartford)
- Woodlands Primary School (Tonbridge)
- Sussex Road Primary School (Tonbridge)
- Hildenborough C of E Primary School (Tonbridge)
- St James Primary School (Tunbridge Wells)

## From September 2026...

- Stone St Mary Primary School (Dartford)
- Churchill C of E Primary School (Westerham)



## **AND LOCAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS...**

### **From September 2025...**

- Trinity School (Sevenoaks) Yondr pouches
- Sevenoaks School (Sevenoaks) Basic phones only – Years 7 and 8

### **From September 2026...**

- Tunbridge Wells Girls Grammar School (Tunbridge Wells)
- The Skinners' School (Tunbridge Wells)

*Basic phones only for new Year 7 in-takes*



# 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

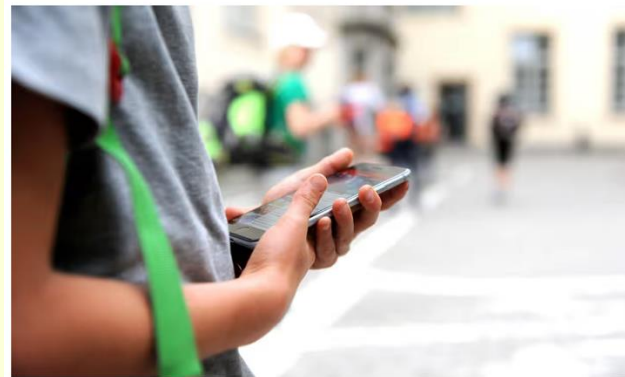


## Delay buying children smartphones, schools urge



## '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**

Smartphone-free areas/ times

## **Keep phones out of the bedroom**

Particularly first thing in the morning and overnight!

## **Discuss use and online risks as a family**

Encourage regular discussion and open dialogue

## **Ways to reduce addiction to devices**

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





# 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/ Agreement

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 Screen Time Limits**

Limits on apps and downtime.

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

### **Block adult content**

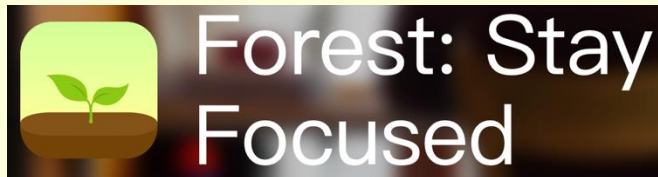
Block adult content and private browser mode in parental control settings

### **Delete/ Block VPN**

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

### **Private mode**

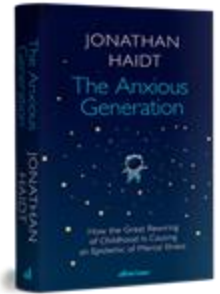
Set to private mode (so your child cannot be tracked)





# 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](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/>





**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.

**WATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46PgxESLktA>**

# **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)**

# SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD

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

@smartphonefreechildhood



Smartphone Free Childhood is a restricted fund under the auspices of Prism the Gift Fund, Charity Number 1099682.