

Smartphones: A Complex Jigsaw

While an all-out ban is unrealistic, society needs to reset its relationship with smartphones, writes Dr Stephen Burley



In February 2024 the Department for Education issued new guidance to schools on banning smartphones throughout the school day. The foreword, written by the Education Secretary Gillian Keegan, set out the rationale: “One of the greatest challenges facing schools is the presence of mobile phones. Today, by the age of 12, 97 per cent of pupils own a mobile phone.”

With one in five pupils experiencing online bullying, Keegan writes that “By removing mobile phones from the school day, we can create a safe space where pupils are protected from the risks and dangers associated with social media and cyber-bullying.”

Despite the solid reasoning, the guidance was largely greeted by a collective eye roll from educationalists. The then general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Geoff Barton, declared the government guidance “a non-policy for a non-issue”.

In his view, most schools already had policies and systems in place to ban phones in schools, and the new guidance was exactly that – guidance without the teeth to enforce or support schools in this work.

Fast forward a month to March 2024 and we saw the publication of Jonathan Haidt’s, *The Anxious Generation: How the great re-wiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, which has inspired school leaders to sit up, listen, and hurriedly buy numerous copies for colleagues.

Haidt offers a powerful and compelling analysis of the causes of the mental health crisis among young people in the 2010s. During this decade, young people, according to Haidt, retreated from the real world to their smartphones in their bedrooms, radically reducing the time spent developing real-world friendships and connections. In the process, they have limited their personal growth and development whilst harming their mental health.

This “re-wiring of childhood experience” through unrestricted access to the dangerous and unpredictable worlds of social media and the internet corresponded with increased

supervision of children by adults in the real world, preventing the forms of unsupervised free play that are essential for childhood development.

“As with smoking, this will be the work of decades rather than years”

For Haidt, the tragic paradox is that we have embraced and enabled unfettered access to the dangers of the smartphone, whilst preventing children from unrestricted free play in their communities due to needless fears and a culture of “safetyism”.

According to Haidt, those born after 1995 – Gen Z – were the first in history to experience childhood with an iPhone in their pockets, sucking them into hours each day of addictive scrolling through social media, distracting and removing them from social life, community and friendship in the real world. The consequences have been plain to see in a global picture of deteriorating mental health among young people.

Haidt is not without his critics. For example, Blake Montgomery sees Haidt’s thesis as a gross simplification of a far more nuanced and complex problem. He cites a range of meta-studies of research papers – notably that of Professor Candice Odgers at the University of California – that find no correlation at all between smartphone ownership, social media usage and adolescent mental health. However, for Haidt, the coincidence between the rapid rise of smartphone technology and the dramatic decline of mental health among young people is irresistible: what else could have caused this?

The statistics he provides are shocking: emergency hospital visits for self-harm among girls in the USA increased by 188 per cent and by 48 per cent among boys. Suicide rates among girls in the USA increased by 167 per cent and by 91 per cent among boys; and, by 2023, one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 had a mental disorder.

The data depicts an extraordinary mental health crisis among young people across the Western world through the last decade, with the impact of Covid lockdowns exacerbating this further since 2019. Whatever the nuances and academic debates around the underlying causes, Haidt undoubtedly sheds important light on key areas of childhood experience and has made educationalists, parents, academics and some politicians, sit up and listen.

“We all need to work on a deeper cultural and societal change”

He has highlighted the dangerous consequences of unfettered access to social media, whilst suggesting some common-sense mitigations: no smartphones before Year 10; no social media for under 16s; phone-free schools; and far greater emphasis on and opportunity for unsupervised play and childhood independence.

This brings us full circle back to Gillian Keegan's core point: the importance of phone-free schools. This is, without doubt, one aspect of a far wider body of work that needs to be done to educate both young people and adults in order, ultimately, to break our unhealthy addiction to smart technology.

As with smoking, this, I suspect, will be the work of decades rather than years and, it seems to me, we are only at the beginning of the journey as we reflect on the 2010s, the rise of smartphones, and the effect this has had on society – both young and old – on mental health and wellbeing.

There has been some progress. As Gillian Keegan states: "The Government's Online Safety Act 2023 is the most comprehensive piece of online safety legislation anywhere globally". However, it doesn't go nearly far enough to protect girls from the dangers of Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok in their most vulnerable years, or boys from the risks of gaming, gambling and pornography. Like Haidt, the House of Commons Education Committee now recommends a statutory ban on mobile phones in schools and a total ban on mobile phones for under 16s.

"Smart technology, mobile phones and AI are here to stay"

Whilst these developments and debates take their course, we all need to work on a deeper cultural and societal change. Schools, parents, community leaders, local authorities and governments must work together to model a better relationship with technology, and to support each other to manage smartphone usage more effectively – in school, at home during mealtimes and for at least an hour and half before bedtime.

Nationally and globally, we need to re-set our addiction to smartphones and give primacy to the importance of face-to-face conversation in the present of the real-world. This way, we can all become more present, more human, more sociable and less distracted.

What Haidt has done for us is unpick the breadth and depth of the issue and to suggest a pathway to a better future, where real-world connection, play and socialisation are prioritised in every school, family, community and country.

Where I differ from Haidt is that I don't endorse an anti-technology position. Smart technology, mobile phones and AI are here to stay, and we all know that technology in schools can support and enhance teaching and learning, preparing pupils for the world of work.

We can't return to the world of the 1980s, but we can all do more to mitigate the risks of harmful online content and addictive social media and gaming. A ban on mobile phones in schools is only one small part of this complex jigsaw.