Smartphone-free Schools?

Platforming Pupil Voice: A Pupil Centred Digital Use Framework

Jessica Ringrose, Edith Rodda, and Dawn Aytoun

UCL Life Lessons GRAND CHALLENGES

Table of Contents

Executive summary

In June 2026, the UK Government announced it was implementing a social media ban for under-16s. This followed the April 2026 introduction of a statutory smartphone-free schools' policy where schools must implement smartphone bans throughout the entire school day, with compliance monitored by Ofsted (Department for Education, 2026). Together, these policies form part of a broader political push to regulate children's access to digital technologies.

There is little empirical evidence, however, that banning young people from social media or restricting smartphones in schools addresses the underlying causes of online harm. These policies target individual users rather than the technology companies and platform designs facilitating harm (Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025). Further, concerns have been raised about privacy, dataveillance, and the growing reliance on age-assurance technologies (Phippen, 2026). Large-scale UK research suggests that banning smartphones at school does not by itself improve academic grades or increase children's wellbeing (Goodyear et al., 2025). The largest study of phone bans to date in USA likewise found that school phone banning had no impact on academic achievement or bullying, arguing instead that bans could be harmful for pupils, because disciplinary incidents increased, particularly in the short-term (Hunt et al., 2026). School smartphone bans have not, therefore, achieved their stated aims of improving academic and health outcomes for pupils, rather these policies enforce compliance to practices restricting the use of devices already in place in most schools, reducing schools and educators' professional judgement and autonomy.

Despite the rapid uptake of smartphone-free school policies in England there has been relatively little research focused on pupil voice on this issue. Responding to this gap, a team of researchers from University College London (UCL) collaborated with Life Lessons Education to investigate the impacts of school smartphone banning policies, capturing the perspectives of 732 pupils (aged 11-18), 27 Educational Professionals and 41 Parents.

We found that whilst Smartphone bans are widely supported by adults (87% of educators and 88% of parents) most young people (75% of pupils) disagree with blanket smartphone banning. Adults feel the bans will alleviate disruptions and simplify classroom management, whereas pupils' experience smartphones as supporting communication, safety, emotional regulation, and everyday organisation. Pupils explained that while banning smartphones may reduce the visibility of digital issues at school, these issues can go underground, with pupils feeling less able to report concerns to adults. In contexts where pupils cannot bring devices onto school premises, bans can also create anxiety and risks.

This report argues that rather than solving underlying problems of addictive platform design and online harm, policies banning children's use of technology deflect and defer issues around phone use. Bans shift responsibility away from technology companies onto schools, young people, and families. While ostensibly designed to address concerns around wellbeing, distraction, and online safety, we found smartphone bans have unintended consequences, including reducing opportunities for digital literacy, erosion of trust between adults and young people, and new safeguarding risks.

To address these problems, our recommendations offer ways for adults to better support pupils through smartphone-free school policy implementation, championing pupil voice and rights. We offer a 'Pupil Centred Digital Use Framework, which outlines four steps of:
(1) collaborative consultation; (2) building competency and understanding; (3) clarity of expectations; and (4) regular active review.

Key findings

1. Bans can present an overly simplistic response to a complex issue

1.1 A generational divide

87% of educators and 88% of parents agreed with Smartphone banning, whereas 75% of pupils disagreed with blanket banning. This represents a significant disparity between adult and youth perspectives not only on smartphone banning but the meaning and use of technology more widely in society.

1.2 Adult Anxieties: Smartphones as existential threat

In contemporary society, adults rely heavily on smartphones throughout the working day to manage communication, coordination, and information. Yet school pupils are expected to suspend access to these same infrastructures for the entire school day. In a highly digitized world, it is difficult to disentangle online life with offline life, yet these policies treating smartphones solely as external threats risk overlooking the lived realities of the young people they are designed to govern.

Smartphones are frequently framed by adults in this research simply as distractions that must be removed from the school environment to improve attention, behaviour, and wellbeing. Educators and parents believe bans act as protective measures, citing views that Smartphone bans reduce distractions and bullying and improve academic performance and wellbeing, despite little empirical evidence to support this.

2. Rushed, non-consultative smartphone policies can be harmful

2.1 New safeguarding risks

Removing access to smartphones eliminates tools that young people rely on to navigate their daily environments and support their learning, setting up a whole new set of safeguarding concerns to manage. Implementing a Smartphone-free School without infrastructure for devices creates a range of safeguarding issues that have not been adequately addressed.

2.2 AirTagging pupils? Tracking, trust and control

For instance, at schools without device pouches pupils cannot bring their phones onto school premises at all, creating safety risks. In the most restrictive policy contexts, where Smartphones were banned from school premises, policy guidance said smartphones were to be replaced with technologies such as brick phones or GPS tracking devices, such as AirTags, which were affixed to the pupil's blazer or schoolbag. While these systems allow adults to monitor pupils' location, they reduce young people's ability to communicate their own circumstances and needs. Pupils explained that air tagging/tracking undermined trust between themselves and authority figures.

2.3 Financial burden and Increasing inequality

Requirements to purchase replacement brick phones, tracking devices (such as AirTags), or other technologies were perceived as unfair and impractical for some households. This could mean that some pupils are left with no phone at all. These policies may exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities, with pupils in lower-income school communities highlighting that smartphone bans can create additional financial pressures for families.

2.4 A cycle of punishment

Pupils demonstrated considerable familiarity with school smartphone policies and often developed strategies to adapt to – and circumvent – them. This was because the bans are experienced as punitive rather than supportive. Workarounds included bringing substitute devices, circumventing phone pouches, or shifting digital activity (including cyberbullying or influencing) outside of school hours. Rather than eliminating smartphone use entirely, strict bans may transform it into a hidden or contested practice, increasing tension between pupils and educators – something phone bans were introduced to decrease. Bans create a cycle of punishment, punishing educators who do not enforce the bans, and punishing pupils who do not abide by them.

2.5 Displacement of harm rather than reduction or prevention

Our evidence suggests that smartphone bans may reduce the visibility of digital conflict within school environments without eliminating the underlying behaviours. In some schools, reported incidents decreased following bans, but this often reflected a redistribution of responsibility to parents or external authorities (such as police) rather than a disappearance of the behaviour itself.

2.6 The Edtech and AI paradox

Young people are increasingly using EdTech and AI tools yet receiving contradictory messages about the role of this technology. For instance, pupils are expected to find and complete their homework using online apps and need to use AI for competitive advantage in schooling, but they are not trusted to have access to online tools on their phones at school.

2.7 Deferring the development of tech skills and self-regulation

Sixth form pupils described the switch from policies of smartphone banning in secondary school to having free access to it in sixth form as too abrupt, noting that they were suddenly expected to manage their own digital behaviour without having previously developed these skills. Excluding smartphones from the school environment may delay opportunities for young people to develop responsible digital practices.

3. Bans can impede structured and mindful technology regulation

3.1 What are pupil's rights and needs?

Pupils raise the same concerns as adults about distraction, concentration, harmful online content and behavioural misuse of phones, but even amongst those that agree with bans, they recognise that complete bans are too restrictive. For pupils, smartphones operate as essential infrastructures through which they organise travel, maintain contact with family, manage school and personal responsibilities, regulate emotions, and participate in peer relationships. This was particularly evident among younger pupils and girls, who referenced fears related to safety while travelling independently. For some pupils, smartphone access provided reassurance and emotional support during the school day by allowing them to link up with their full support network, which can predominantly sit outside the school environment.

3.2 What supports do pupils want?

The 75% of pupils that disagreed with the bans understood a need for restriction of phones at school, including no phones in lesson times, and sanctions for those that use phones in harmful ways. Pupils recognise adult concerns about distraction and misuse, but they argue that blanket smartphone bans do not target harmful behaviours, and are instead punitive, damage relationships between pupils and educators, and misunderstand how pupils use their phones in day-to-day life. Pupils ask for supportive tools to address the harmful elements of technology rather than banning it from their lives. Pupils consistently said they wanted structured and mindful regulation, such as rules that pupils keep phones off during lessons, but are allowed access during breaks, and educators confiscate devices only when misused.

Introduction

On June 15, 2026, the UK Prime Minister announced the UK would be following Australia in implementing a social media ban for under 16s. The government press release read 'Children will be given back their childhoods thanks to government action to ban social media platforms from offering services to under-16s, with less time for scrolling and more time for play' (Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology, 2026). This decision follows a government consultation on the impact of social media on young people's mental health, wellbeing and safety and represents one of the most significant interventions in children's online lives since the Online Safety Act. The announcement was met with applause from parent and lobby groups and criticism from the academic and stakeholder community. The primary critique of the policy is it being implemented at speed and without consideration of research evidence – there was less than two weeks between the close of government consultation and the announcement of the ban. The main elements of the ban will be to restrict under 16s access to services such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and X, although the final list has yet to be confirmed. The proposal would require platforms to verify users' ages and prevent underage access and will depend heavily on age-assurance technology. Additionally, adults will have to verify their age to access social media, using passports, driver's licenses, or credit cards.

And yet there is no clear scientific evidence on a specific age being appropriate for Smartphone use and banning children from social media targets the individual user rather than the technology companies and platforms facilitating harm (Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025). There are also serious questions being raised about privacy and dataveillance via age verification technology, which is also being pushed as a regulatory fix to stop children accessing social media.

The announcement of the social media ban for under 16s followed only weeks after the government announced another statutory, legal ban on smartphones in schools in England through an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. On April 21st 2026 a total access ban in schools was announced turning previously voluntary guidance into a mandatory requirement, with many schools expected to use lockable pouches or storage lockers. The new statutory policy covers the entire school day, including break times, lunchtime, and between lessons and is a statutory legal requirement to be monitored through Ofsted to ensure consistency across all schools (Department for Education, 2026).

According to BBC News, the bill was forced on the government by Conservative peers in the House of Lords: 'Education minister Baroness Jacqui Smith told the House of Lords... that the government would table an amendment to its landmark Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill creating a clear legal requirement for schools on the matter' (Standley, 2026).

What is important for this report is that the statutory smartphone-free schools policy is connected to the under-16 social media ban - both work together to police children's use of technology. As noted by Andy Phippen (2026), the move to crack down on schools' phone policies is 'performative': 'What is being presented as a decisive intervention into children's wellbeing and as a response to harmful technology, is in practice, the legal amplification of a reality that already exists across most schools'.

Phippen suggests this turns professional judgement into ***regulated compliance*** via Ofsted. The British Medical Journal likewise published a statement April 28, 2026 arguing the new bill is problematic, with experts arguing that 'smartphone bans in schools are also "known not to work" yet the UK is rushing forward with flawed policies... [which is] not uncommon during periods of moral panic when policy often reflects moral pressure and perceived popularity rather than good science.' The commentator noted: 'Unfortunately, youth will

suffer as a consequence, because these policies may have unintended negative consequences and distract from the real matters that influence youth mental health' (BMJ, 2026).

It is within this context – the absence of meaningful government response to a coercive technology sector and harmful technological design – that the bill to enforce mobile phone bans in schools has been introduced as something to placate the public. In the absence of political will or capacity for Ofcom to address online harms, governments focus on other policy levers, a social media ban and school bans, where schools act as agents of device regulation.

But is this policy push on device restrictions in schools part of a political ploy that fails to address the root problems of profit-driven tech companies which peddle purposefully addictive tech design to all people, including children?

How will under 16s social media bans and smartphone-free schools' legislation address a wider social crisis of harmfully designed social media and problematic use?

Our research investigates the impacts of the already comprehensive banning policies in five highly diverse school sites over several months from June to December 2025. When we set out to study the impact of smartphone banning in schools we had three hypotheses in mind, building upon previous research on behavioural policies and RSE curriculum. We postulated that:

1. Abstinence-based thinking around smartphone use in schools (total bans) would erode trust between young people and adults.
2. As a result of loss of trust young people might feel less supported to report digital issues, and they would be pushed into the non-school or private realm instead.
3. Restrictive policies would potentially most adversely impact vulnerable and marginalised youth, including those struggling with mental health.

Now, having undertaken research with 732 pupils (aged 11-18), 27 educational professionals, and 41 parents, we found people, parents, and educators are all concerned about negative technology impacts, but Smartphone bans do not necessarily address these problems. We found that what young people want is support, not a disciplinary policy that erodes trust and support between adults and young people. We argue school-based banning does not solve the harmful impacts of social media or AI on mental health and wellbeing or educational attainment that are used to rationalise these policies.

The smartphone-free schools policies also shift the burden away from school as a place to have conversations about technology and harmful effects back onto young people and their parents. We will show how phone bans result in young people experiencing the majority of 'addicted behaviour' at home away from the social support of their peers and educators at school.

We will also show how the implementation of the phone policies matters greatly and how the lack of consideration of pupil's views and experience -- 'pupil voice' -- and failure to adequately consult with parents has created harmful outcomes for some of the young people and families in our research. We argue that the rapid policy push to implement a phone-free school can lead to types of enforcement in ways that are potentially harmful for all stakeholders (including of course schools themselves) and serve to distract from underpinning issues around education.

Indeed, as we were working on this report the contradictory landscape of EdTech and the encroachment of AI into everyday educational use alerted us to a massive contradiction. Why is technology such as AI chatbot tutors for poor young people across England acceptable (Department for Education, 2026), but young people's individual use of devices

for learning using the same AI chatbot technology banned? How are such decisions being made and what is their impact for education and the future of society?

What our report shows is that phone ban policies need to have transparent aims and line up with a 'whole-school' approach to safeguarding and digital literacy.

The ostensible goals of smartphone bans are clear, but there are additional, potentially harmful impacts for pupils and parents that must also be taken seriously. Schools must take all stakeholder perspectives into account, particularly young people. What happens for children that already use their phone for things like looking up their bus timetable, paying for public transport, and checking in with carers on their way to and from school? These are the dilemmas we dive into in our report, bringing to life the dramas and struggles that have ensued as we were researching increasingly restrictive phone bans implementation in 2025. We hope you find these stories illuminating and they give you pause to stop and consider your own relationship to smartphones, realising there is no quick solution to a current society-wide crisis of human's relationship to technology created by platform capitalism.

Research background

This section reviews the existing evidence on smartphone bans in schools, focusing on their intended benefits, limitations, and wider implications. While such policies are often justified in relation to distraction, attainment, and wellbeing, the research base remains mixed and, at times, contradictory. In addition, a growing body of work highlights issues of displacement, inequality, and inconsistent implementation. This literature suggests that smartphone bans are not a straightforward solution, but part of a more complex set of sociotechnical and educational challenges.

The stated goals of smartphone bans vs. the research evidence

Smartphone bans in schools are often framed as the best response to concerns around distraction, declining academic performance, and young people's wellbeing.

Research on distraction and attainment has contributed to this policy momentum. Beland and Murphy (2016, p.12) conducted a difference-in-differences study in four English cities and found that bans led to a 0.07 standard deviation increase in GCSE scores, with the largest gains among low-achieving pupils. Similarly, OECD PISA data indicates that two-thirds of 15-year-olds report distraction from digital devices in most or every mathematics class, with significant negative associations between distraction and test scores (Beck, 2024).

In relation to wellbeing, Abrahamsson (2024), using register data from over 1,100 Norwegian lower secondary schools, found that a national ban reduced mental health specialist consultations among girls by 60%, decreased reported bullying incidents, and increased GPA. The strongest gains occurred among previously low-performing female pupils, suggesting that the effects of bans may be highly gendered and disproportionately beneficial for certain groups. These findings contribute to a policy narrative in which smartphone restriction is positioned as a relatively straightforward intervention capable of addressing a range of complex educational and social issues.

Overall, however, empirical evidence supporting smartphone bans remains mixed and, largely, contradictory. Some studies report improvements in attention and attainment; others find weaker or inconsistent effects. For example, King's College London research cited in the House of Lords report (Beck, 2024) found that once gender, social class, and school behaviour were controlled for, pupils in schools with phone bans scored lower on PISA tests than those in schools permitting phone use. A Hungarian national survey described during interviews with education ministries found that only around one-third of educators reported increased pupil attention and concentration following the introduction of bans, despite improving attention being a central policy objective (Crêteur et al., 2026). This means that most educators did not observe improved pupil focus, even after phones were removed from the classroom environment. This is notable, considering a key reason for banning mobile phones is increased focus and decreased distractions (Crêteur et al., 2026). Further, across the countries studied, the report found no evidence that smartphone bans led to measurable improvements in academic performance.

Similarly, while reductions in reported bullying or mental health incidents are sometimes observed, these may not necessarily reflect actual reductions in harm. As we explore in this study, a decline in reporting may indicate that pupils are less able or willing to report incidents under restrictive conditions, a concern also raised by Phippen (2024) in the British context. Meta-analyses further complicate the picture. Böttger and Zierer (2024) identified only a small positive effect on pupils' social wellbeing, while Campbell et al. (2024), in a scoping review of 22 studies, concluded that blanket bans produce inconsistent outcomes across educational and mental health domains. A study be Henry Saffer (2026) examined

the causal effects of smartphone bans on the mental health of pupils in the United States, and found that there is no clear evidence that school smartphone bans reduced overall screentime or improved psychological wellbeing.

McCoy and Marcus-Quinn (2025) argue that policy debates are overly focused on correlative data and fail to distinguish between educational and recreational phone use. This is critically important since educational and recreational elements of phone use often blend as this report will demonstrate.

Most recently, in USA, the largest ever research project on school phone bans to date (Hunt et al., 2026) compiled data from Yondr (the California start up that created lockable phone pouches). The study covered approximately 4,600 American schools, giving the first nationally representative look at phone bans. The research found phone bans do not increase test scores nor do they reduce bullying (NBC News, 2026). The researchers explained 'for academic achievement, average effects [of phone bans] on test scores are consistently close to zero' and likewise they found 'little evidence of [bans] effects on school attendance, self-reported classroom attention, or perceived online bullying.' Moreover, the report found that 'in the first year after adoption, disciplinary incidents increase and pupil subjective wellbeing falls' (Hunt et al., 2026), reasoning that the above harms 'even out' after years of use.

Therefore, despite the stated aims of these policies, a growing body of evidence suggests that bans frequently fall short of their objectives. They do not deliver on the promise of improving performance achievement and better exam results across the board. Nor do they improve mental and psychical wellbeing. We consider that the policy push toward school Smartphone bans may therefore be a case of seeming to offer an easy and quick remedy for a highly complex social problem. In this report we ask how implementation and support around bans can make a significant difference in reducing the harms experienced by young people.

The displacement effect

A growing body of evidence suggests that smartphone bans do not fundamentally reduce digital engagement, but instead displace it. Goodyear et al. (2025), analysing survey data from 1,227 pupils in 30 English secondary schools, found that stricter smartphone policies reduced school-time phone use by approximately 30–40 minutes per day but showed no significant association with mental wellbeing, overall daily screen time, or social media use. In other words, while bans succeeded in removing phones from view during the school day, they did not alter the underlying patterns of digital engagement or emotional distress that they were designed to address. Likewise, Wood et al. (2023) observed declines in reported phone use following enhanced screen time restrictions, yet no statistically significant improvements in anxiety, depression, or general wellbeing. Campbell et al. (2024), in a scoping review of 22 mixed-methods studies, concluded that blanket bans produce inconsistent outcomes across educational and mental health domains. Rather than prohibition, they recommend approaches that foster pupils' critical digital literacy and platform navigation skills.

These findings suggest that exposure-focused policies may address the visible symptoms of digital distraction but neglect the emotional, relational, and developmental functions of digital technologies in young people's lives. They also suggest that phone bans in schools do little to reduce the impacts of harmful algorithmic control and coercion that is now increasingly recognised as built into the platform design of the major social media and AI platforms adopted by youth. These include Snapchat (which has integrated SnapAI chatbot), TikTok, and Meta (Instagram used primarily by youth), YouTube, Roblox and others which use addictive recommender algorithms. Phone banning at school is at best a deferral mechanism which then pushes phone addiction and behavioural issues into the

out-of-school context of home life, becoming more exclusively the responsibility of parents and carers as we explore in our report in depth.

Inequality, vulnerability, and unintended consequences

The evidence that banning mobile phones will benefit young people is weak, and in some cases, such bans may produce unintended harms. Research shows that abstinence approaches do not work in relation to mitigating other health issues such as underage sex or drug and alcohol use in England. An unanticipated byproduct of phone banning is that it may deter young people from help-seeking when something goes wrong online and reduce trust between adults and young people (Phippen, 2024). Further, framing smartphone and social media use as inherently harmful, misses how technology can be helpful in seeking online information and support, particularly for LGBTQ youth (Berger et al., 2022). Another byproduct can be the further undermining of digital literacy. Overall, banning young people from devices and tech erodes child rights to technology (Livingstone and Third, 2017).

These concerns are particularly significant for vulnerable and marginalised groups. Research shows that lower-achieving, poorer young people, as well as girls and LGBTQIA+ youth, are already disproportionately affected by online harms (Bohnert and Gracia, 2023; Horeck et al., 2023). Blanket bans may therefore exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly where they are not accompanied by enhanced digital literacy or alternative forms of support.

International studies (Tuncay, 2018; Miller, 2022) also show that bans often trigger circumvention behaviours, calling into question their efficacy. The European Commission (Crêteur et al., 2026) further notes that bans fail to address the root causes of distraction for pupils facing behavioural, emotional, or socio-economic challenges. In addition, smartphones can provide significant benefits, including access to learning, support for pupils with special educational needs, and tools for managing health conditions or caring responsibilities (Beck, 2024). Removing access without providing alternatives risks overlooking the essential role these technologies play in young people's lives.

The AI paradox

The tension between technology control and innovation in school settings has become sharper with the rapid emergence of generative AI. While schools increasingly ban personal smartphones in the name of attention, safety, and discipline, the same institutions – encouraged by national policy – are simultaneously being asked to adopt AI-powered educational technologies. In the UK, the Department for Education's policy paper on generative AI in education states that AI 'has the power to transform education', promoting its use for lesson planning, marking, and personalised learning (DfE, 2025). Yet at the same time, the DfE's updated January 2026 guidance states that schools should be 'mobile phone-free environments by default'. This creates contradictory signals for both educators and pupils: some forms of digital engagement are framed as harmful and in need of restriction, while others are presented as essential for educational progress. As the 5Rights Foundation (2026) has argued, EdTech is being rolled out in classrooms without sufficient evidence of educational benefit or adequate safeguards for children, raising questions about whose interests such selective governance ultimately serves. Further, pupils are expected to do their homework using online tools, some which are as simple as Google, others involving EdTech. However, they are not trusted to have access to online tools on their phones at school. This is further evidence of the contradictory messages young people are receiving about their digital lives.

Consultation and policy implementation

Perhaps most significantly, research highlights that the impact of smartphone bans is shaped not only by what policies prescribe, but by how they are designed and implemented. Randhawa et al. (2024) found significant variation across 80 English secondary schools in how policies were rationalised, enforced, and experienced. Similarly, the European Commission study (Crêteur et al., 2026) which looked at 7 schools in 4 countries emphasises the critically important role of consultation with implementation, and how these stakeholder relationships, negotiations and buy in often matter much more than policy design itself. They found incremental, consultative approaches generating much greater legitimacy than rapid, top-down restrictions. For example, in Hungary, the smartphone ban policy was implemented without prior dialogue with pupils, who called the ban a 'hatchet job', and perceived it as 'absurd' and 'infantilising'. This resulted in self-reported non-compliance rates of 90% (Crêteur et al., 2026).

These findings suggest that smartphone governance cannot be understood as a simple binary between banning and permitting. Instead, outcomes are shaped by institutional culture, stakeholder engagement, and the extent to which policies reflect the lived realities of pupils.

A lived experience perspective – Platforming pupil voice

While existing policy debates often rest on quantitative studies of screen time and achievement, only a small number of studies explore pupils' lived experiences using qualitative methods. Bar et al. (2025) and Reynolds et al. (2025) are among the few that centre youth voices.

While policy research often frames smartphone bans as neutral tools for behavioural regulation, qualitative studies reveal that pupils interpret these interventions through a lens of power, autonomy, and emotional needs. In a large-scale study of 1,549 South Australian secondary school pupils, Bar et al. (2025) found that reactions to the "Off and Away" all-day phone ban were far from uniform. Although some pupils acknowledged short-term benefits, such as improved face-to-face interaction and reduced classroom disruptions, many described deeper emotional and relational costs. Pupils reported feeling disconnected from their families, particularly during moments of stress, and lamented the loss of self-regulatory tools like music, breathing apps, or access to supportive messages. When emotional needs had to be mediated through school staff, pupils often found the process 'weirdly invasive', underscoring broader discomfort with adult surveillance and institutional control.

Reynolds et al. (2025) further highlights how such policies are experienced not just as restrictive but as fundamentally illegitimate. They found widespread critique of school bans as 'top-down', fear-driven measures that failed to acknowledge young people's lived realities. Pupils challenged the credibility of adult rationales, mocking phrases like 'brain rot' and questioned the absence of youth consultation in shaping digital rules.

These critical perspectives contrast with quantitative research such as Goodyear et al. (2025) which evaluates the impact of school bans on adolescent mental health using standardised self-report scales. While the study found modest reductions in total screen time and small improvements in internalising symptoms, it also reported no meaningful effects on depression or anxiety. Such metrics, while valuable, offer little insight into how pupils themselves make sense of these changes or what roles digital tools play in their coping strategies. The emotional and symbolic dimensions revealed by qualitative accounts are largely absent from such designs.

Moreover, both Reynolds et al. (2025) and Bar et al. (2025) emphasise that pupils experience these policies not just as logistical changes but as relational fractures – moments where trust is lost and authority is contested.

Thus, the majority of smartphone banning research is quantitative measures of screen time, attainment, and wellbeing, but far fewer studies explore how smartphone bans are experienced in practice. Qualitative research suggests that young people interpret these policies through questions of trust, autonomy, and legitimacy, often resisting or adapting to restrictions in ways that are not captured by quantitative metrics (Bar et al., 2025; Reynolds et al., 2025).

This study builds on prior work by using mixed methodologies to foreground the lived experiences of young people, parents, and educators across diverse school contexts. By combining questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and participatory methods, this research examines how smartphone bans are implemented, negotiated, and experienced in everyday life, asking how they can better support young people.

Our study

This study addresses gaps in understanding experiences of phone banning in UK schools, through a suite of qualitative methodologies that prioritise understanding the lived experiences of multiple stakeholders (pupils, parents, educators) across diverse school contexts. It is situated within a policy environment characterised by increasing policy implementation of smartphone banning (summer of 2025), often in advance of clear or consistent evidence of such policies impacts or effectiveness in addressing the assumed problem of distraction and social disengagement due to smartphones. Our research sets out to understand how these policies operate on the ground – and how they are experienced by those who are implementing and those who are experiencing these policies.

To do so, we developed a mixed-methods design combining questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and participatory arts-based methodologies. This approach enables a detailed exploration of how smartphone restrictions are implemented, interpreted, and adapted across different settings, and how they intersect with broader issues of inequality, digital culture, and young people's everyday lives. By centreing youth voice alongside the perspectives of parents and educators, this report contributes a nuanced, sociologically grounded account of smartphone governance in schools, moving beyond binary debates about banning versus permitting toward a more complex understanding of how digital technologies are lived, negotiated, and regulated in a highly digitized society.

Research questions

This research sought to understand how smartphone restriction policies are experienced across school communities. The study asked the following overarching question:

How are smartphone banning policies being experienced from the perspective of schools, educators, parents and young people?

Further questions included:

1. What types of bans are being implemented? (No phone/Yondr pouches, phone away boxes/access to device but must not be on at all at school/access to device and allowed at break time).
    - How does the type of ban shape the experience of the restriction and in which ways?
    - How does the implementation of the ban shape the experience of the restriction and in which ways?

2. What are the expectations and experiences of smartphone bans, from key stakeholders?

    - What do parents/carers think? What are young people's views? What are educators' perspectives?

3. Do smartphone and social media restrictions ostensibly aimed at improving educational outcomes also adversely impact young people, leaving them less likely to report abuse?

4. Do bans leave vulnerable and marginalised youth, including those experiencing mental health difficulties, more at risk? Particularly if smartphone restrictions are not accompanied by enhanced digital literacy?

Methodology

Our project adopted a mixed-methods approach that sought to access the views of the main stakeholders in this issue, educators, parents and youth. We combined questionnaires, interviews, and participatory arts-based methods to capture the perspectives of young people, parents, and education professionals.

Questionnaires are effective for reaching a larger and more diverse population than possible in qualitative research. Anonymity in questionnaire design can encourage candid discussion of views. For instance, parents might disclose their fears and educators their views without worrying about researcher interactions. Harder to reach pupils who may be less comfortable speaking in group settings can also participate. However, while questionnaires provide breadth, they often fail to capture the meanings that young people assign to their experiences.

Qualitative approaches such as focus groups and creative methods are essential for deepening and contextualising these findings. Through qualitative inquiry, we aim to uncover the emotional, relational, and context-specific ways that pupils experience, adapt to, and reimagine smartphone governance, moving beyond a deficit framing toward a richer understanding of digital life in schools. To meaningfully explore how young people experience and interpret school smartphone policies, researchers believe a mixed methods approach that combines the reach of quantitative tools with the depth of qualitative insight will be helpful. Integrating surveys, focus groups, and participatory arts-based methods allows for a richer understanding of the emotional, social, and institutional dimensions of youth digital life. These dimensions are often overlooked in policy-driven research (Lundy, 2007; Cahill, 2007).

Total sample

- 732 Pupils
- 27 Educational Professionals
- 41 Parents

Phase 1: Qualitative questionnaires

Questionnaire design

Three separate questionnaires targeted for our three sample sets (parents, educators, and pupils) were administered. A mix of qualitative and quantitative open-ended question format were used. All groups were asked if they agreed with phone bans, and why or why not.

Educators were asked to qualitatively reflect on the experience of implementing and managing phone restriction. Parents were asked about their decision making and implementation of phone restrictions in the home. Pupils were asked to reflect on the experiences of phone restriction both in the home context and the school context.

Questionnaire distribution and sampling methodology

Life Lessons launched the questionnaires via a webinar with the UCL academic team to publicise the topic of phone ban policies and circulate the questionnaire. Links to the survey were shared with all Life Lesson schools (approximately 500 schools and organisations). Access to the questionnaires was freely available and information was collected anonymously and with few restrictions (no log in needed and possibility to exit at any time). The questionnaires were live for a period of approximately 6 months.

We achieved responses from 634 pupils, 24 educators and 42 parents. Most responses from pupils came from 7 schools, who supported pupils to fill out the survey within school hours. These schools were regionally spread across London, the South West, the South East and the Midlands, and included 3 mainstream settings (including 1 grammar school), 1 independent school, 1 international school and 2 specialist settings (including a referral unit).

Using a self-selected sample does present the limitation of only gathering responses from engaged and invested individuals; nonetheless, the questionnaire achieved a broad geographical reach, and respondents came from most types of English schools.

Phase 2: Qualitative case study school visits

In addition to questionnaires, we conducted in-depth case study research with 5 of these schools. This included participatory focus groups with youth using arts-based methodologies to centre them as knowledgeable actors. We conducted 16 focus groups with 98 pupils (aged 11-18) and conducted individual interviews with a smaller number of educators.

During the qualitative data collection in summer and autumn of 2025, the most common forms of phone bans in UK schools were

- No phone on your person: Phones must be handed in to educators at the start of the school day or stored away in lockers or Yondr pouches.
- Kept in bags: Phones must be turned off and kept in school bags throughout the day.
- Partial ban/restricted use: Phones are permitted only during break/lunchtime, or, in some cases, for educational tasks with teacher permission.
- Total ban: The phone is prohibited on school premises entirely.

At that time, it was up to each individual school to determine which ban best suits their individual school needs, but they had to comply with some element of a phone ban, per UK government guidance (Rahali et al., 2025). The five secondary schools we worked with represented different socio-economic and geographical schooling contexts with varying smartphone policies to maximise a diverse sample.

1. X Academy
    - Inner-city academy school in London
    - High deprivation 65% qualify for Pupil Premium free school meals
    - Strictest policy: smartphones prohibited on school premises; pupils encouraged to use brick phones or GPS trackers (AirTags)
    - 2 youth focus groups and 1 teacher interview conducted
2. W Grammar
    - Boys Grammar school in Kent
    - Girls are introduced in sixth form
    - Selective school, 7% eligible for Pupil Premium free school meals
    - Smartphones permitted on campus but must remain switched off and unused during the school day.
    - 4 youth focus groups and 1 teacher interview conducted

3. Z Independent Boarding School
    - Independent Boarding School (Location concealed)
    - Highly selective elite school; tuition cost is Boarding, approx. £20,000 Day, £16,000 (per term)
    - Strict no-phone policy during the school week
    - 2 youth focus groups and 1 teacher interview conducted
4. Y Mixed Comprehensive
    - Suburban mixed-gender comprehensive state school in London
    - Approx 20% Pupil Premium FSM - Lower than national average of 25.7%
    - Smartphones prohibited during the school day
    - 3 youth focus groups and 1 teacher interview conducted
5. V All Girls Faith School London
    - Inner city London
    - High deprivation 40% eligible for Pupil Premium free school meals higher than national average of 25.7%
    - School recently shifted from a stricter policy to a slightly more flexible approach, though phones remained prohibited during school hours
    - 5 youth focus groups and 1 teacher interview conducted

Focus groups were organised in small mixed-gender (where possible) groups to encourage peer discussion and allow participants to reflect collectively on their experiences. Individual teacher interviews were conducted during fieldwork visits or online afterwards if needed. Several focus groups were conducted online after the original visit to work with further pupils. Focus groups facilitate shared dialogue among peers, but they are shaped by group composition and social dynamics. Mixed-gender settings, in particular, may influence open discussion on some topics. In our project, girls were sometimes reluctant to speak freely about gender-specific issues such as online or in school harassment in the presence of boys in our mixed-gender focus groups. To address this, we also conducted some follow-up sessions with pairs of girls or smaller groups of girls, that offered more conducive spaces for exploring their views on these topics.

X Academy			W Grammar			Z Independent Boarding School			Y Mixed Comprehensive			V All Girls Faith School		
Focus group 1	Year 7 and 8	6 boys 2 girls	Focus group 1	Year 9	7 boys	Focus group 1	Year 9	8 boys	Focus group 1	Year 7	4 boys 1 girl	Focus group 1	Year 9	6 girls
Focus group 2	Year 9 and 10	3 boys 2 girls	Focus group 2	Year 12	4 boys 3 girls	Focus group 2	Year 9	5 girls	Focus group 2	Year 8	3 boys 2 girls	Focus group 2	Year 10	6 girls
Teachers		1	Focus group 3	Year 12	5 girls	Teachers		1	Focus group 3	Year 9	3 boys 4 girls	Focus group 1	Year 12	3 girls
Total students		**13**				**Total students**		**13**						
			Focus group 4	Year 12	11 boys				Teachers		1	Focus group 2	Year 12	5 girls
			Teachers		1				**Total students**		**17**	Focus group 2	Year 12	5 boys
			Total students		**30**							Teachers		1
												Total students		**25**
												Total students across all schools		**98**
												Total teachers across all schools		**5**

Table 1. Case study school visit participants

Focus group arts-based methodologies

Focus group interviews with pupils were designed around creative and participatory arts-based methodologies, which allow for the generation of visual data which depicts how social media platforms are used and experienced. Our creative methodologies included: digital timelines, post its, most used apps, parental rules, and smartphone drawing templates (see also Ringrose et al., 2021; 2022; 2024). We supported inclusive dialogue as interviewers by rotating speaking turns, using written prompts, or beginning with creative activities to ease participants into discussion and reduce social pressure.

Figure 1: Photographs of participants in focus groups responding using creative, arts-based methodologies

Digital timelines

Task: Digital timelines were introduced first to create a context for young people to show when, where, and why smartphones and apps enter everyday life. Participants marked a 'typical day' with moments of digital device engagement (e.g., wake-up, commute, breaks, after school, evening).

The output: A temporal map that makes visible micro-rhythms of technological engagement (e.g., maintenance practices vs spontaneous connection) and how access intersects with school/home routines.

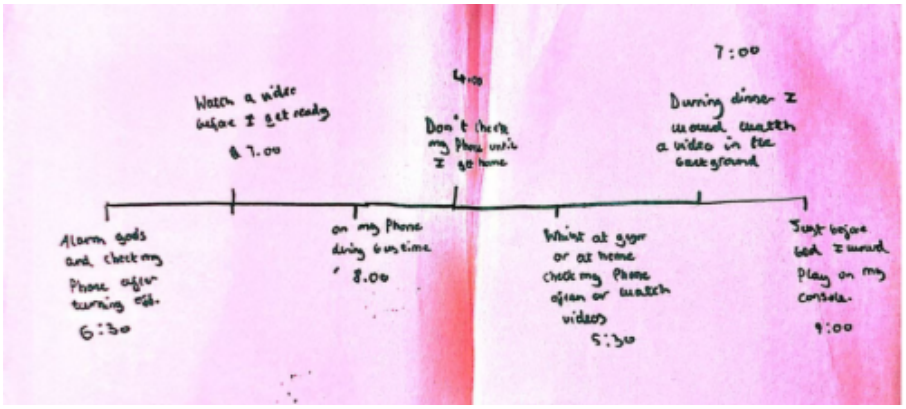
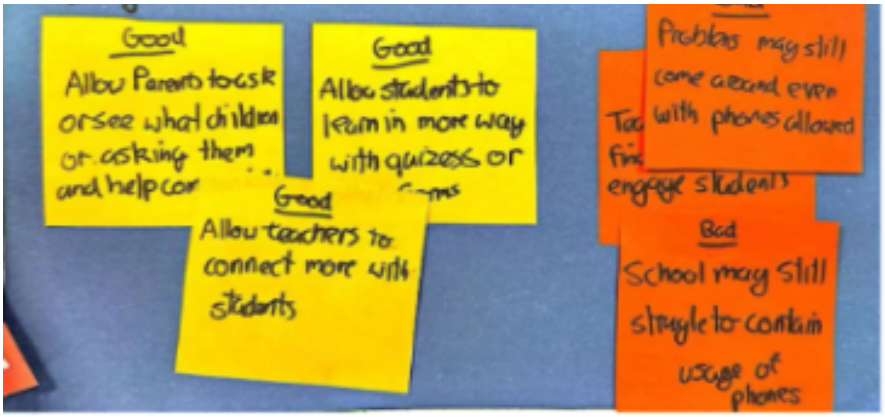


Figure 2: Olajide (14 years old) Digital Timeline

Post-its

Task: Participants were asked to write responses on Post-it notes reflecting the positive and negative aspects of smartphone bans based on their own experiences at school.

Output: Post-its offer a set of visual depictions of pupils' perspectives on phone bans. This activity allows pupils to generate individual responses on Post-its and creates a touchstone for discussing pros and cons collectively within the focus group.



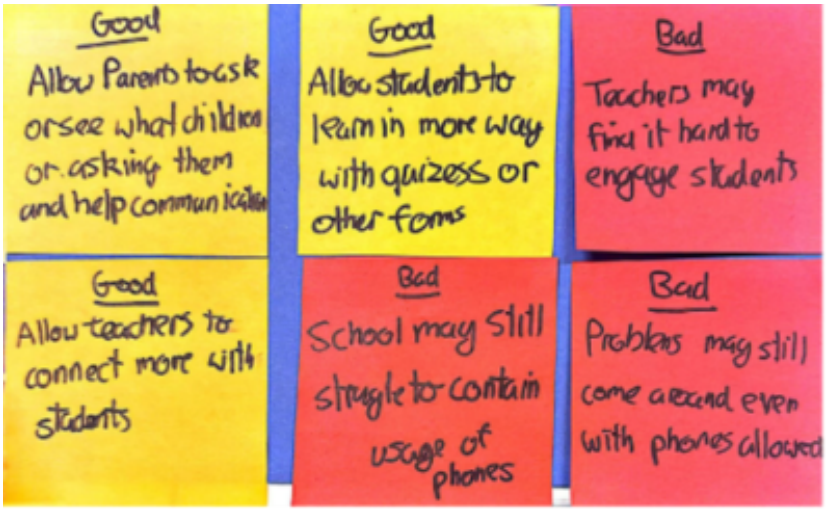


Figure 3: Examples of two pupil's Post-its task.

Favourite apps and screentime estimates

Favourite apps and screentime estimate activities were used to explore how young people prioritise and understand their own app usage.

Task: Participants were asked to rank the apps they use from most to least used, identifying their favourite platforms and estimating the amount of time they spend on each.

Output: A visual hierarchy of app use, showing patterns of preference, frequency, and perceived importance across different platforms. This activity provided insight into how young people understand and evaluate their own digital practices, highlighting the relationship between habitual use, personal value, and platform-specific engagement.

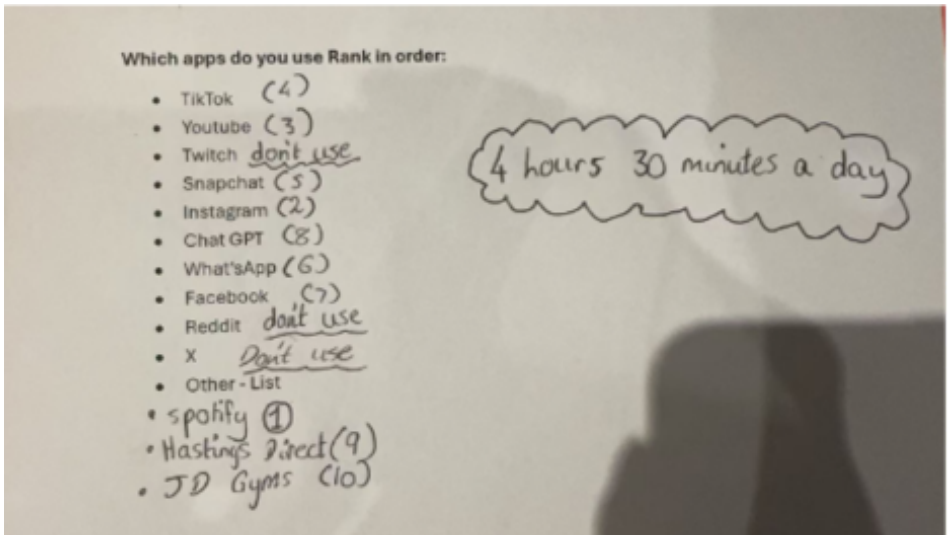


Figure 4. An example of a young person's (Amy, 17 years old) favourite apps and screentime estimates

Parental regulation task

We also used prompts around parents' rules regarding phone time to get at what was happening in their home space outside of school. The parental regulation prompts were used to explore how young people experience and interpret rules governing their phone and social media use at home.

Task: Participants responded to a series of structured prompts (e.g. 'A rule I have about my phone is…', 'When my parent says "no phone", I feel…', 'The rule I wish I could change is…' and 'If I made the rules, they would be…'). These prompts encouraged participants to reflect on both the rules themselves and their emotional and practical responses to them.

Output: A set of written responses capturing young people's perspectives on parental regulation, including perceived benefits, frustrations, and desired changes. This activity provided insight into how young people negotiate digital boundaries within the home, revealing tensions between regulation, autonomy, and trust. It also highlighted that young people often recognise the purpose of restrictions while simultaneously articulating a desire for greater flexibility and understanding.

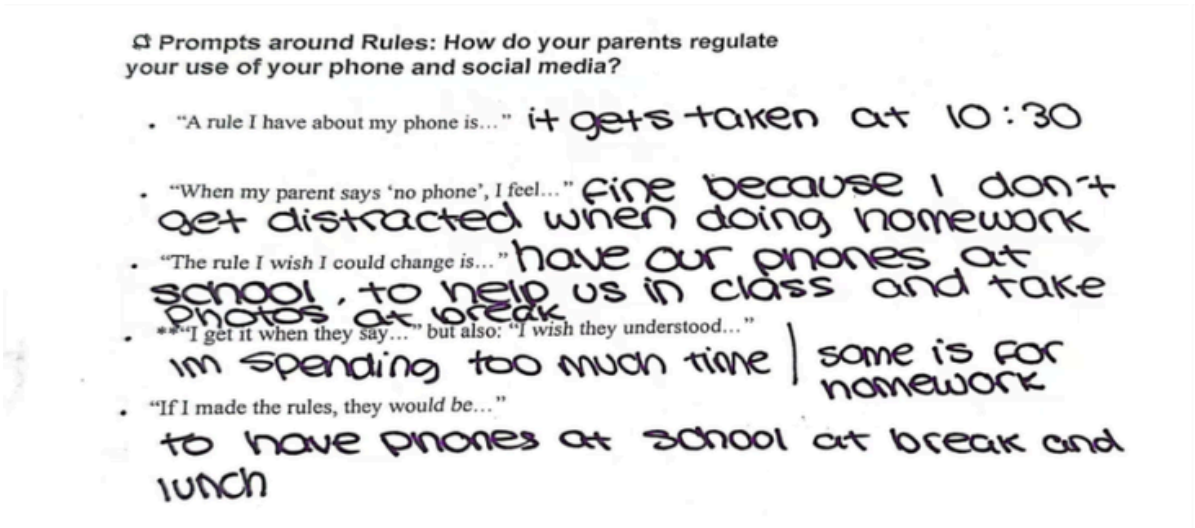


Figure 5: An example of a young person's (Chloe, 14 years old) parental regulation task

Smartphone drawing templates

Smartphone drawing templates were used to explore the types of content young people encounter across different smartphone platforms.

Task: Participants were given templates of smartphones and specific social media platforms and asked to fill them in with the kinds of content they typically see, engage with, or associate with each platform.

Output: Visual representations of platform-specific content environments, capturing the range of material young people encounter, including entertainment, communication, educational content, and potentially harmful or risky material. This activity made visible how different platforms are experienced as distinct digital environments, each with their own norms, content types, and risks. It provided insight into how young people interpret and navigate these environments, highlighting the role of platform design and algorithms in shaping everyday digital experiences.

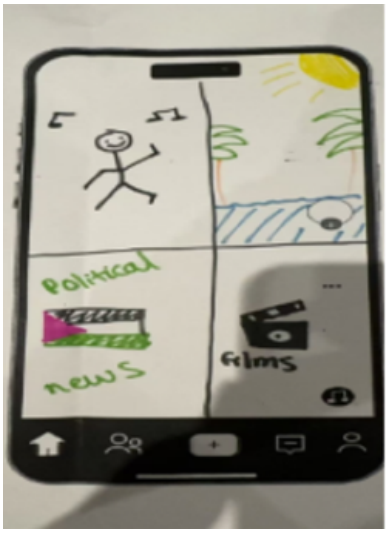


Figure 6: An example of a young person's (Sienna, 17 years old, W Grammar School) Smartphone drawing template. She uses her smartphone for music, photos, news and films.

Figure 7: An example of a young person's (Jaiden, 14 years old, X Academy) Smartphone drawing template. He uses his smartphones for basketball content.

The importance of mixed methodologies for gaining stakeholders' views

The combination of questionnaires, participatory methodologies, and arts-based data creates triangulation and allows for multiple viewpoints and ways of interpreting experiences. The questionnaires bring a macro-overview of attitudes to smartphone bans, a larger sample of open-ended questions, whilst the focus group interviews facilitate dialogue, and the arts-based methodologies bring a visual representation to issues of daily use of phones and ideas about phone bans.

Participatory arts-based approaches provide alternative ways for pupils to communicate their experiences, especially those who find verbal expression challenging. Drawing templates, digital timelines, and social media prompts help participants reflect on topics such as school rules, digital autonomy, and feelings of inclusion or exclusion (Thomson, 2008; Luttrell, 2010). These techniques support expression across emotional, cognitive, and symbolic domains. Such methods are grounded in values of youth agency and participatory justice. According to Cahill (2007), creative research approaches empower young people and recognise them as active contributors to the research process. Offering multiple forms of participation can also ensure that pupils with learning differences, language barriers, or social anxiety are able to engage meaningfully.

Ethical research with young people involves creating psychologically safe environments by using accessible language, and tasks which offer multiple ways for participants to communicate and for researchers to 'attune' to these experiences and 'amplify' voice (Renold et al., 2026). These methodological choices reflect a commitment to working with young people rather than researching them from a distance. They recognise young people as experts on their own lives and seek to ensure their insights shape both academic understanding and educational responses.

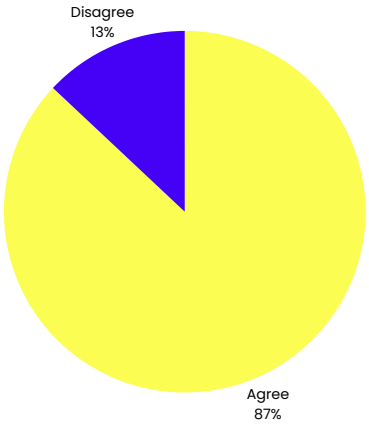
Results

Phase 1: Questionnaire Results

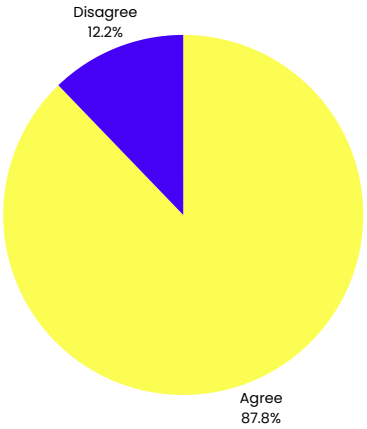
1. Diverging Perspectives: Adults and Young People

Whilst the questionnaire had a range of findings, we will focus on the most salient results, which is whether respondents agreed with phone bans, and why. The questionnaire identified a clear divergence between young people and the adults in their lives regarding school smartphone bans. 75% of surveyed pupils reported that they were opposed to phone bans, compared with only 12% of parents and 13% of educators who opposed phone bans. This means that 88% of parents and 87% of educators were in favour of phone bans, whereas only 25% of young people were. This represents a substantial divergence between the young people and adults in our study. These findings indicate, however, not simply disagreement, but fundamentally different interpretations of the role smartphones play in young people's lives.

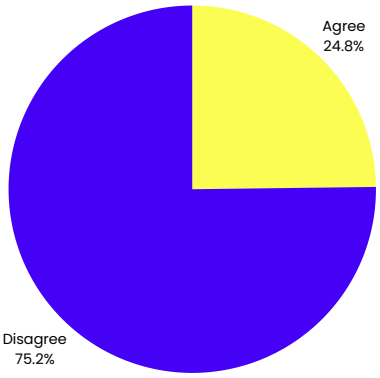
Percentage of <u>educators</u> that agree/disagree with smartphone bans at school



Percentage of <u>parents</u> that agree/disagree with smartphone bans at school



Percentage of <u>pupils</u> that agree/disagree with smartphone bans at school



Responses to our open-ended questions revealed that pupils articulated nuanced and context-sensitive perspectives on smartphone regulation. Rather than advocating unrestricted access, many proposed structured and proportionate approaches that balanced concentration, safety, and responsible use. Their accounts frequently connected school policy to broader social realities, including digital communication norms, safety concerns, and emotional wellbeing.

Parents and educators, by contrast, largely framed smartphone bans as protective interventions. Their reasoning reflected widespread public discourse surrounding digital risk, developmental harm, and safeguarding responsibilities. Within this framework, restriction was positioned as a preventative measure intended to improve attention, reduce exposure to harmful content, and support children's wellbeing. These perspectives are significant, particularly given that it is adults that are more likely to shape institutional and policy decisions.

However, the findings of this study suggest that the intended protective outcomes of bans do not always align with young people's lived experiences. As those directly affected by school smartphone policies, pupils offer insights into how such measures function in practice – including their implications for safety, anxiety management, peer relationships, and trust in educational institutions. Despite this, young people's perspectives remain comparatively underrepresented in both policy debates and academic research on smartphone regulation. Accordingly, this report adopts a children's rights framework (Livingstone and Third, 2017), positioning young people not solely as subjects of protection but as stakeholders whose experiences and perspectives are essential to developing fair, effective, and contextually responsive policy.

2. Educator's Perspectives on Smartphone Bans: Expectations, Pressures, and Limited Impact

Educators – including classroom educators, middle leaders, and senior leadership staff – largely framed smartphone bans as pedagogical and safeguarding tools. 87% of educators in the survey supported smartphone bans with 13% saying they disagreed with phone bans, particularly blanket banning policies. Educators reasoning reflected a protective and preventative logic concerned with classroom management, concentration, and institutional responsibility. Educators' responses illuminate how these policies are understood within everyday school practice.

A central concern among educators was the impact of smartphones on attention and classroom engagement. Devices were described as competing with educators for pupils' focus and drawing pupils toward social media or messaging platforms during instructional time. Several educators reported perceivable improvements when phones were removed from the school environment:

> *Pupils pay more attention to their learning, having done DofE and trips where pupils don't have access to phones, they actually play and interact, it's a much more positive environment seeing them be kids again.*
>
> Teacher, Mainstream school, London

> *Less time taken up by educators having to deal with behaviour around mobile phones.*
>
> Teacher, Lincolnshire

In these accounts, smartphone bans are positioned as mechanisms for restoring focus, reducing behavioural disruptions, and improving the overall classroom climate.

The anticipated effect is increased attentiveness, more positive peer interaction, and greater instructional efficiency. For educators working within high-pressure accountability frameworks, such outcomes are professionally significant.

The phrase 'seeing them be kids again', while offered informally, reflects a broader educational discourse that associates smartphone absence with a return to more traditional forms of childhood interaction. Implicit in this framing is the idea that digital technologies have altered children's behaviour in ways that diminish spontaneity, physical play, or face-to-face engagement. Smartphone bans, therefore, are seen not only as disciplinary tools but as interventions designed to restore a particular model of childhood.

At the same time, contemporary childhood operates within materially different social conditions. Since the late 2000s, digital technologies have become embedded in everyday communication, coordination, and identity formation. Increased parental safety concerns, social geographies including urban density or rurality mean that young people's opportunities for unstructured, in-person interaction are often more constrained than in previous generations. Within this context, smartphones may function not solely as distractions but as compensatory tools for maintaining social connection. This raises a tension between the aspiration to recreate pre-digital forms of interaction and the structural realities shaping young people's lives.

Educators also emphasised the administrative benefits of bans. Reduced time spent addressing phone-related misconduct was described as improving workflow and allowing greater focus on teaching. From an institutional perspective, this is a pragmatic and understandable outcome. However, it invites further consideration of how behavioural reduction is being measured. While visible in-class disruptions may decrease, other forms of smartphone-related harm — such as cyberbullying or online harassment — do not necessarily disappear. Instead, they may shift temporally (occurring after school hours) or become less visible within the school environment. If phones are prohibited items, pupils may feel less able to disclose incidents occurring on their devices, potentially altering reporting dynamics rather than eliminating harm. This raises important safeguarding questions about whether bans reduce risk or simply relocate it beyond immediate institutional oversight.

Safeguarding concerns were explicitly articulated by several educators, who framed smartphones as conduits for exposure to harmful or developmentally inappropriate material:

> *I believe young people have access to very negative things online which has a significant impact on their primary socialisation.*
>
> Senior leader, Kent

Here, smartphones are constructed as environments capable of shaping socialisation processes in harmful ways. Within this framing, restricting access during school hours is interpreted as a protective act that limits exposure to negative influences during a substantial portion of the day. That logic is preventative and rooted in duty-of-care obligations.

However, school-based restriction operates within a broader ecosystem of digital access. Most young people retain full access to their smartphones outside school hours. This raises two empirical questions: first, whether exposure to harmful content is meaningfully reduced by school-time prohibition alone; and second, whether removing devices from the school context limits opportunities for guided digital literacy, boundary-setting, and responsible use education. If young people are expected to navigate digital environments independently beyond the school gate, the extent to which bans prepare them for that responsibility warrants examination.

On the other hand, many educators expressed concern about the regulative environment, and amongst the 13% that disagreed with phone bans, educators communicated their feeling that schools should have autonomy to make decisions in the interests of the school community and pupils:

> *It feels too authoritarian. There haven't been bans on previous years. It's a bit like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.*
>
> Middle leader, Pickering

> *I'm very much on the side of head educators being allowed to do what is right for their school rather than a blanket ban.*
>
> Middle leader, Lincolnshire

This ambivalence highlights an important tension within educator perspectives: while the majority support smartphone bans as practical tools for managing behaviour and safeguarding pupils, a minority express concern about the implications of externally imposed, blanket policies. Their responses suggest that opposition is not necessarily to regulation itself, but to the removal of professional autonomy in determining what is appropriate for specific school contexts. Teacher critiques of blanket banning are less about endorsing unrestricted smartphone use and more about maintaining contextual, flexible governance that can respond to the needs of particular pupil populations. This tension also reflects a broader contradiction within contemporary schooling. Educators are simultaneously positioned as professionals responsible for safeguarding and pedagogical decision-making, while also operating within increasingly centralised policy environments that prescribe uniform approaches to complex social issues. Blanket smartphone bans, therefore, may be experienced not only as behavioural tools, but as extensions of top-down governance that constrain educators' capacity to exercise judgement. Importantly, this minority perspective reinforces a key finding across the dataset: the debate is not between regulation and non-regulation, but between different models of regulation. Even among those skeptical of bans, there remains recognition that smartphone use requires management. The point of contention lies in whether prohibition represents the most effective, proportionate, and contextually appropriate strategy.

Overall, however, in a context of reduced resources, timetabling pressures, examinations and audit and performance cultures in schools educators came out on the side of phone bans making it easier to contain and deliver the curriculum and enforce behavioural sanctions. Educators frame smartphone bans as practical, protective, and pedagogically beneficial. Their support reflects professional concerns about concentration, safeguarding, behavioural management, and developmental wellbeing. Yet when these intended outcomes are examined alongside young people's accounts – particularly those relating to safety, emotional regulation, and disclosure – a more complex picture emerges. As the following sections demonstrate, many pupils do not reject regulation itself, but question whether total prohibition aligns with their lived realities or effectively addresses the underlying issues adults seek to resolve.

3. Parents' Perspectives on Smartphone Bans: Protection, Risk, and Responsibility

In a contemporary information environment characterised by rapid technological change, evolving scientific research, and highly visible media narratives about digital risk, parental decisions about children's smartphone use can become particularly complex. Within this context, 88% of surveyed parents expressed support for school smartphone bans, with only 12% disagreeing with the banning approach. Like educators, parents' reasoning consistently reflected a protective logic; however, smartphones were framed not simply as distractions, but as dangerous, as potential developmental, psychological, and social risks.

Parents frequently articulated concerns about long-term cognitive and neurological impact. Their apprehension extended beyond short-term classroom distraction and into fears about enduring harm:

> *It shortens their attention span, compromises their social life and skills, it's addictive and wires their neurology in a way that makes them more prone to more substance addiction.*
>
> Parent, London

> *Yes, restricting access to devices during certain hours/activities will increase focus and learning ability as attention levels are not demised by the short form content accessed regularly.*
>
> Parent, Kent

Here, smartphones are constructed not merely as competing stimuli, but as technologies capable of reshaping neurological development. The anticipated benefit of bans, therefore, is preventative: by removing devices during school hours, parents believe children's attention, learning capacity, and long-term wellbeing will be protected. From this perspective, school bans operate as a buffer against parental anxieties around perceived developmental risk (Stern, 2025).

Concerns about exposure to harmful content were also prominent. Several parents framed smartphones as gateways to aspects of 'grown up life' that children are not yet developmentally prepared to navigate:

> *There are loads of things which are part of grown up life – driving, drinking alcohol, watching horror films, voting, getting married, having sex etc etc – which children's brains aren't sufficiently developed to cope with. Smartphones will be part of all our lives at some point. I'd advocate for waiting until kids are into their teens – say 14 – before giving them the internet in their pocket...*
>
> Parent, Kent

This account extends beyond school-based regulation and advocates delayed access to smartphones altogether. The protective rationale is clear: restricting access is seen as developmentally appropriate and morally responsible. Smartphones are positioned as environments containing risks that exceed children's cognitive and emotional readiness.

Parents also emphasised the importance of in-person social interaction, constructing online communication as qualitatively inferior to face-to-face engagement:

> *First, children need to be engaging in face to face contact with other young people, online is not the same.*
>
> Parent, London

> *My son will be able to focus on learning and building relationships with his peers in real life.*
>
> Parent, Kent

Here, bans are framed as mechanisms for restoring 'real' social development and relational depth. Implicit in these accounts is the belief that smartphone removal will strengthen peer relationships and improve children's social skills. This reflects a broader cultural narrative in which digital interaction is seen as displacing more authentic forms of connection.

For some parents, concern extended beyond distraction or social development to an acute sense of behavioural inevitability and technological manipulation:

> *I do not give my children (age 13) a phone at all. Smartphones are a constant distraction and are designed to draw your attention to them, it is hard enough for adults to regulate but a child's brain is not yet developed enough to manage what is designed specifically to have you spend more time on the screen than interacting in real life. A no-phone policy in school is not enough. Children go to the toilets to check their phones, they use them in class behind books and find ways to get around the policy. Some children have 'stunt phones' and give in a dummy phone if caught in order to keep their actual phone with them.*
>
> Parent, London

This account positions smartphones as intentionally addictive technologies and children as neurologically unequipped to resist them. Regulation, from this perspective, must be external and firm because self-regulation is assumed to be developmentally unattainable. Bans are therefore justified not only as protective but as necessary behavioural containment.

Amidst the 12% who disagreed with the bans, there were some parents who expressed ambivalence and concern about blanket bans.

> *Unfortunately technology is part of our lives now. Our children's use it for many things, educational apps, connecting with others, taking photos, alarm clocks, fitness apps, spellings, and more. We should instead be educating children with facts, about the benefits and the negatives of phone use. This isn't just a child issue, adults struggle with phone use too. Education is better for everyone - not banning otherwise it becomes even more appealing!*
>
> Parent, Kent

I don't want to choose either yes or no, my response is much more nuanced than this.

Parent, London

While the dominant parental framing positions smartphone bans as protective and necessary, a minority of parents express discomfort with the rigidity of blanket approaches. Their accounts suggest an awareness that smartphones are not only sources of risk, but also embedded within everyday family life as tools for communication, learning, and organisation. These parents do not reject concerns about harm or overuse; instead, they question whether prohibition is the most effective way to address these issues. In particular, the suggestion that banning may fail to equip young people with the skills needed to manage technology independently points toward a more educative model of regulation. This reflects a shift from viewing smartphones as external threats to be removed, and towards understanding them as technologies that require guided engagement. As such, even within a predominantly pro-ban parental landscape, there is evidence of emerging uncertainty about whether restriction alone can achieve the outcomes parents seek. This tension reinforces the need to examine not only why bans are supported, but how effectively they translate into meaningful developmental and educational benefits in practice.

However, generally, across parents' accounts, they frame smartphone bans as preventative safeguarding measures intended to enhance attention, protect neurological development, reduce exposure to harmful content, and strengthen offline relationships. Their support for bans reflects a coherent and internally consistent logic rooted in care, protection, and developmental responsibility.

Therefore, an important empirical question emerges: do school-based smartphone bans produce the developmental, social, and safeguarding benefits that parents anticipate? While parents construct restriction as protective, the findings from young people in this study complicate this assumption. As later sections demonstrate, many pupils describe smartphones not solely as sources of distraction or harm, but as tools for safety, emotional regulation, and social coordination. This raises a tension between the intended protective effects of bans and their lived consequences for young people – a tension that becomes particularly pronounced among more vulnerable pupil groups. Moreover, this study also found that reducing screen time in school didn't necessarily reduce overall engagement with social media outside of school. Rather than dismissing parental concerns, the findings suggest the need to examine how protective intentions translate into practice, and whether ban during school hours meaningfully addresses the risks parents seek to mitigate.

4. Young People's Perspectives on Smartphone Bans: Supportive Regulation, Not Prohibition

Children and young people (aged 11-18) differed in their pattern of response. Only 25% of young people agreed with the bans. The reasons the young people gave for this were highly complex and varied. Some agreed because they said it was 'sensible' and you 'don't need them [smartphones]'. Others stated same key words as parents and educators: that phones were 'a distraction' from 'concentration', that phones were 'addictive', and that social media was 'bad' and let kids see 'inappropriate content'. Indeed, some of these responses directly reproduced or parroted key policy phrases and parental concerns, making us think that they were repeating the messages they'd heard from adults.

> *If it is not banned, kids will use it in break time and it will ruin lessons after it because their brain would be searching for a source of dopamine.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, Kent, Independent Boarding School.

Other pupils raised points about how dependency on phones for social uses 'prevented them from engaging with others'. Some offered incredibly thoughtful responses:

> *Since COVID [lockdown], young people have lost their communication skills due to being isolated. In schools, the idea of phones being banned, allows these young people to communicate directly with others and improve their communication, which is essential for every situation in life.*
>
> Pupil, 14 - 16 years old, Kent, Specialist or Alternative Provision.

This pupil situates smartphone use within a wider social history, linking it to post-pandemic isolation and weakened face-to-face confidence. The quote is significant because it shows young people engaging sociologically with their own generation: the problem is not simply the phone itself, but the role it may play in displacing already fragile in-person interaction. Even here, support for bans is rooted in a specific social concern rather than a simple moral opposition to devices.

Some pupils pointed to more concrete lived experiences where phones were used to disturb or harass others, such as 'blasting music' or 'filming others':

> *Some pupils could take non-consental [sic] photos and videos of people that could make them feel very uncomfortable.*
>
> Pupil, 14 - 16 years old, Kent, Specialist or Alternative Provision.

The concern here is bodily autonomy, consent, and vulnerability to image-based abuse. This is important because it shows that some young people support bans in response to genuinely harmful peer practices. At the same time, it also suggests that the problem is not phone possession in itself, but the misuse of phones in ways that violate others' privacy and dignity.

Others suggested that phones were an issue of cost, and socioeconomic differences were exacerbated when phones were permitted at school:

> *You don't have to worry about it being stolen, not wanting photos being taken of you when you are not aware of it, people brag/show off about how expensive their new phone is.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, London, Secondary school.

This pupil demonstrates that smartphones are also understood by some young people as objects that intensify visible inequalities between pupils. The issue here is status display, theft risk, and the social pressure attached to expensive devices. This reveals that support for bans may sometimes reflect an attempt to level the social field inside school, reducing opportunities for both showing off and victimisation. In this sense, bans can appear protective not only educationally, but materially and socially.

Some pupils thought phones were problematic due to cheating and looking up answers:

> *Because otherwise people will be on their phones all the time not do the work or just search up the answers.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, Kent, Mainstream school.

This response reflects a specifically educational concern: that phones make disengagement and shortcutting easier. The reference to 'search[ing] up the answers' also suggests young people's awareness that smartphones now provide access not just to distraction, but to AI tools and instant academic assistance. This is significant because it shows that pupils' concerns are evolving alongside technological change. Their support for restriction can be partly shaped by the sense that personal devices blur the boundary between learning, cheating, and automated help.

Even amongst those pupils who agreed with a smartphone ban, there was a great deal of complexity and nuance in the answers, with young people recognising that while phones could be harmful, they were still something that people needed and deserved access to:

> *[Should be banned] Because kids may take photos of each other and may leak personal information but they should get a room to use phones quietly.*
>
> Pupil, 13 years old, Kent, Grammar school.

> *Very addictive but we need them for safety when walking to and from school.*
>
> Pupil, 12 years old, London, Mainstream school.

> *Nice to have a break still should be allowed to bring them just turned off.*
>
> Pupil, 14 years old, London, International school.

I agree up to the age of 11 as afterwards for secondary school you will require a phone for your safety traversing public transport, however to counteract this need the government should enforce a safe search law up till the age of 16/18.

Pupil, 18 years old, Kent, Mainstream school.

I agree with this to a certain point. Phones are useful for research, educational apps, etc. I think they should be restricted at times, but not completely banned.

Pupil, 12 years old, Kent, Mainstream school.

Phone restrictions when policed properly, in a non-restrictive manner I believe can be beneficial to both educators and pupils. For example, with the rise of ChatGPT, many pupils aren't developing key skills needed to help their learning. However things such as yonder [sic] pouches are too restrictive and not only encourage misbehaviour as backlash, but can also cause adverse mental health problems for pupils.

Pupil, 17 years old, Kent, Mainstream school.

These responses are especially important because they show that even pupils who support bans rarely support absolute prohibition without qualification. Across these quotations, young people repeatedly build in exceptions, conditions, or limits: quiet rooms, switched-off phones, age-based distinctions, educational uses, and non-restrictive enforcement. This indicates that their support is not for a simple yes/no ban model, but for proportionate and differentiated regulation. In other words, even among the 25% who agree with bans, the preferred model remains conditional, flexible, and attentive to context.

These responses show that young people's views are far more nuanced than public debates often assume. Even where pupils endorse restriction, they do so selectively, grounding their views in concerns about distraction, consent, cheating, inequality, or weakened social interaction rather than in a blanket rejection of smartphones themselves. What emerges is not a simple pro-ban position, but a preference for bounded, proportionate, and purpose-specific regulation. Young people are therefore not rejecting adult concerns; they are differentiating between harmful uses of phones and the legitimate functions that phones also serve in their daily lives. This distinction is crucial, because it suggests that support for restriction should not be misread as support for total prohibition.

Having considered the 25% of pupils who said they agreed with the bans, we now look at the other 75 % not in favour of bans. These pupils' opposition is not rooted in a desire for unrestricted access. Rather, like the pupils we just discussed, qualitative responses demonstrate a consistent preference for structured regulation over total prohibition. Pupils articulated nuanced positions that engaged directly with adult concerns about distraction, misuse, and harm, while simultaneously highlighting aspects of smartphone use that they perceived as overlooked in policy discourse.

Contrary to media portrayals of disengaged pupils prioritising social media over learning, participants offered detailed reflections on how smartphone policies shape their daily school experience. Across the dataset, pupils constructed blanket bans as misaligned with contemporary social realities. They frequently described bans as unrealistic, punitive, and insufficiently responsive to the complexities of digital life. Importantly, pupils did not reject adult authority outright; instead, they questioned whether total prohibition was a proportionate or effective response to the problems identified by parents and educators.

Many pupils proposed alternative regulatory models that closely mirrored institutional safeguarding logics but retained conditional access. Recurring suggestions included:

- On silent in bags during lessons
- Allowed during break/lunch
- Confiscated only if misused
- Strict punishments could be enforced for harmful behaviours
- Older vs younger pupil distinctions

Their comments reflect a desire for moderated governance rather than absence of rules:

> *I think if pupils keep their phone off during school time there's no reason to get the phone taken.*
>
> Pupil, 17 years old, Kent, Mainstream school.

> *I think we should be allowed our phones but not in class it has to be on silent in our bags.*
>
> Pupil, 13 years old, London, Mainstream school.

> *Use my phone for homework, see what lessons I have the next day... Should not be banned but changed a bit not completely.*
>
> Pupil, 12 years old, London, Mainstream school.

These accounts suggest that pupils recognise the legitimacy of concentration and behavioural concerns raised by adults. However, they position total bans as a misdiagnosis of the problem, arguing that misuse – rather than device possession – should be the focus of regulation. This represents a shift from prohibition toward responsibility-based governance.

Several pupils explicitly framed schools as spaces where digital skills should be developed rather than eliminated:

> *Instead of banning phones we should teach kids how to use it in a better way so they learn how to actually use it in real life.*
>
> Pupil, 14 years old, London, Mainstream school.

This statement encapsulates a recurring theme: young people view school not only as a site of academic instruction but also as preparation for navigating a digitally mediated society. From this perspective, structured engagement may be seen as more developmentally aligned than enforced abstinence.

5. Smartphones as Everyday Infrastructure

A particularly significant divergence between adult rationales and youth experience emerged around safety. While adults frequently described smartphones as sources of risk, many pupils constructed them as protective tools. This theme was especially prominent among girls and younger secondary pupils (aged eleven to thirteen), who referenced fears of knife crime, abduction, and other emergencies:

> *Since knife crime is becoming more popular in the UK...*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, London, International school.

> *If phones get banned and I get abducted after school I have no chance of trying to escape.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, London, Mainstream school.

> *Phones should not be banned because it helps with safety for example walking home and getting captured and abused and stabbed.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, London, International school

Although the statistical likelihood of such events remains relatively low, the fear expressed is socially meaningful. For these pupils, smartphone access functions as a form of psychological reassurance and perceived control over vulnerability. In this context, bans may inadvertently heighten anxiety rather than reduce it. This complicates adult safeguarding narratives that position phones primarily as threats to wellbeing. Similarly, a number of pupils described smartphones as tools for emotional regulation, particularly in moments of distress:

> *If I am feeling sad... I need to text my parents.*
>
> Pupil, 11 -13 years old, London, Mainstream school.

> *Because if I have a panic attack I can't contact my parents or guardian .*
>
> Pupil, 14 - 16 years old, Kent, Specialist or Alternative Provision.

Here, smartphones are framed as mechanisms for managing anxiety and maintaining contact with trusted adults. While adult policy discourse often links smartphones to increased anxiety, pupils' accounts reveal a more complex relationship in which devices may both contribute to and alleviate emotional distress. The removal of access during the school day therefore has implications not only for discipline, but for perceived security and support.

The impact of bans was particularly pronounced among pupils in specialist provision settings. These participants frequently referenced heightened anxiety, experiences of being misunderstood by staff, and concerns about delayed responses during crises. For some, phone access was intertwined with family health situations or acute emotional vulnerability:

6. Tensions and Contradictions in Lived Experience

These questionnaire findings suggest that disagreement over smartphone bans is not rooted in fundamentally opposing values, but in different understandings of how digital technologies function in young people's lives. Parents and educators largely frame smartphones as sources of risk, distraction, and developmental harm, and therefore support restriction as a protective intervention. Young people, by contrast, recognise these risks but emphasise the ways in which smartphones also function as essential tools for safety, communication, emotional regulation, and participation in everyday social life. This divergence reveals a central limitation of current policy approaches. Smartphone bans focus on the removal of devices as a means of addressing complex issues such as distraction, online harm, and wellbeing.

Young people's accounts suggest that opposition to blanket bans does not stem from a rejection of adult concern, but from disagreement over method. Pupils consistently supported structured boundaries and consequences for misuse. What they resisted was the erasure of smartphone access altogether. In doing so, they articulate an alternative governance model grounded in trust, developmental differentiation, and digital responsibility.

When placed alongside parental and educator rationales, these findings reveal a central tension: adults frame bans as protective interventions designed to enhance concentration and safeguard wellbeing, while many young people experience smartphones as integral to safety, emotional regulation, and contemporary social participation. This does not invalidate adult concerns; rather, it highlights the complexity of translating protective intentions into policy outcomes.

From a children's rights perspective, this tension is significant. Young people in this study demonstrate the capacity to engage critically with digital risk, propose proportionate regulation, and articulate their own wellbeing needs. Their accounts suggest that effective policy may require collaboration and guided engagement rather than total prohibition – an approach that recognises young people not solely as subjects of protection, but as stakeholders in shaping the conditions of their education.

Importantly, young people in this study do not reject regulation. Rather, they consistently advocate for structured, proportionate approaches that support them in developing the skills required to navigate digital environments responsibly. This suggests that effective policy may lie not in eliminating access, but in recognising smartphones as part of the everyday infrastructures of postdigital youth and childhood and designing approaches that engage with this reality rather than attempt to suspend it. In this sense, smartphone bans risk prioritising institutional order over supporting young people to live responsibly in a digitally mediated society. Policies that focus solely on restriction may overlook opportunities to build digital competence, trust, and autonomy, and may instead displace or obscure the very challenges they seek to resolve.

Phase 2: School Case Study Results

X Mixed Gender Academy: No Smartphones on School Premises - AirTag your child

Policy brief: No smartphones can be brought onto school premises, replacement brick phones unseen during the day, GPS tracking in bags or uniforms for parents to monitor children's location.

Key findings

Smartphone bans at X Academy do not eliminate digital risk, but instead redistribute it beyond the school's jurisdiction while replacing communication with systems of surveillance. Pupils remain embedded in digital infrastructure, but are denied the tools to engage with it directly. This shifts responsibility for managing digital harms onto families while limiting pupils' autonomy and capacity to develop digital competence.

Policy context

X Academy operates one of the most restrictive smartphone policies observed in this study, and it mirrors the phone policies currently being recommended by the UK government. Pupils are prohibited from bringing smartphones onto school premises, meaning they cannot carry their phones when travelling to or from school. Parents are instead encouraged to purchase brick phones and GPS tracking devices, such as AirTags, to maintain contact and monitor their children's location. This policy represents a prohibition-based approach that seeks to eliminate smartphones entirely from pupils' institutional lives, rather than regulate their use within it. In doing so, the policy reframes smartphones not as tools embedded within contemporary childhood, but as external threats requiring removal.

X Academy is located in an area of high socioeconomic deprivation and operates under the academy model. They have strict behavioural discipline and heightened performance expectations. 'No-excuses' behaviour policies are designed to maximise institutional order and minimise disruption, and within this context, the smartphone ban functions as an extension of broader institutional governance strategies, prioritising behavioural compliance and risk reduction. Additionally, X Academy is a member of a 40-school partnership which, in July 2025, announced that mobile phones must be banned on school campuses by September 2026. Thus, external pressure was placed on X Academy leadership to implement a phone ban by their trust (Ghaemi, 2025).

The deputy headteacher described how the policy was initially resisted by parents, who expressed concerns that removing smartphones would undermine their children's independence and safety while travelling to and from school. In response, the school encouraged parents to purchase alternative technologies, including brick phones and GPS tracking devices:

> *My pushback was… you can spend five pounds on GPS tracking, or you can spend 10 pounds on a brick phone… A GPS tracker, something like an AirTag or something they can, can have in their bag or their blazer or a traditional brick phone.*
>
> Deputy headteacher, X Academy

This response reflects a substitution-based approach, in which smartphones are replaced with more limited or surveillance/tracking technologies rather than engaging with their broader social and infrastructural functions.

While these alternatives allow parents to monitor their children's location or maintain basic contact, they do not provide the same level of autonomy, flexibility, or communicative capacity as smartphones. This demonstrates that the policy at X Academy prioritises surveillance and behavioural containment over supporting pupils' independent navigation of their social and physical environments.

Even these replacement devices are subject to strict regulation. The deputy headteacher explained that if a brick phone is seen or heard during the school day, it is confiscated, and repeated incidents result in the phone being returned directly to parents. Pupils who bring smartphones in violation of the policy are required to surrender them, and refusal may result in placement in an interim exclusion room. This illustrates that the policy is not simply concerned with managing harmful behaviours, but with enforcing institutional authority over the presence of personal communication technologies themselves.

At the same time, the school acknowledges that pupils still require communication tools. As the deputy headteacher explained:

> *They can stand at the school gate and make a phone call on a brick phone. They can send you a text message on a brick phone. Then you get the interesting pushback of, well, who's gonna buy that brick phone? So you spend 800 pounds because they've got an iPhone 16, but you won't buy a 10 pound brick phone.*
>
> Deputy headteacher, X Academy

This substitution-based approach fails to address the broader communicative and social functions that smartphones serve in young people's lives. While devices such as AirTags can provide parents with location data, they do not enable pupils to communicate their circumstances, needs, or sense of safety. In this way, surveillance replaces communication. This shifts young people from active agents capable of managing their own safety and mobility to passive subjects of external monitoring. Rather than supporting the development of autonomy, the policy restructures safety as something observed by adults rather than enacted by pupils themselves. This reflects a broader logic within prohibition-based policies, in which technological restriction prioritises institutional visibility and parental oversight over young people's independent capacity to navigate their environments.

The deputy headteacher reported seeing a dramatic reduction in behavioural incidents following the implementation of the smartphone ban:

> *I can say the number of incidents we have dealt with in school has decreased by about 96%. Okay. Is it still happening? Yes. Are we still made aware of some incidents? Yes. Mm. Um, but what has happened is parents now have to take ownership and responsibility for their children's online usage. And before they weren't because the school would deal with it. Oh, the school's done the sanction. That's fine. Oh, the school's given the child, um, an internal or a fixed term suspension because they threatened violence online. That's not on us anymore. That's not the parent having to deal with that. And we tell parents to refer it to the police.*
>
> Deputy headteacher, X Academy

At face value, this reduction appears to indicate that the smartphone ban has been highly effective.

However, closer examination reveals that this decline reflects a redistribution of responsibility rather than the elimination of harmful behaviour. By prohibiting smartphones entirely, the school removes itself from the domain in which many of these behaviours occur. As a result, incidents that would previously have been "dealt with by the school" are no longer addressed institutionally, rather they are displaced beyond the school's formal jurisdiction into the family and community.

Pupils went on to explain that the headteacher's assumption that the problematic behaviours on phone at school have 'stopped' is fundamentally inaccurate:

> *Last year phones were specifically used to record fights and bully people online and the school believed that the like recording of fights and bullying have stopped. But it's because now they don't know what happened on social media.*
>
> Jaiden, X Academy

Jaiden explains that it is not the behaviour is not happening, but that it is not being seen at school, hence placing responsibility outside of the school to manage issues with peer groups. This is shift of burden around online postdigital harms, rather than a resolution or support around such behaviour. The ban reduces the school's involvement in managing digital conflict by redefining such issues as external to institutional responsibility. Parents are now expected to manage these behaviours independently or refer them to external authorities such as the police. The school is no longer an informed and supportive resource, both for the parents, and, more markedly, for the pupil. In this way, the policy functions not only as a behavioural intervention but as a mechanism for redefining the boundaries of institutional accountability. This demonstrates a key limitation of prohibition-based approaches: they alter where and how problems become visible, rather than addressing the social and behavioural dynamics that produce them.

How young people actually use and experience tech

Some pupils expressed agreement with the smartphone ban, particularly in relation to its role in preventing distraction and harmful behaviour. For example, Zion, Year 10, stated:

> ***ZION**:* It's fair… it's not really good to have a smartphone in school…And it's kind of safety. 'Cause some people use their phones for, for the wrong things.
> ***INTERVIEWER**:* What things?
> ***ZION**:* Recording people and just like being destructive.

Similarly, Ava-Lee framed exclusion for phone use as a necessary consequence from visible irresponsibility:

> *Obviously if you're turning around you're gonna get distracted….But I mean, it's not that you can't do anything, it's just the things are like you shouldn't do it…because you've just shown that you're not responsible enough to be let, to be allowed to do like the nice things or the things that it's not a problem to do…and that's why you ended up in the exclusion in itself*
>
> Ava-Lee, X Academy

These accounts demonstrate how prohibition-based governance can shape pupils' own understanding of responsibility and institutional authority. Pupils understand that if you misuse something, you will lose access to it, until you show you know how to use it responsibly.

However, ban-based logics *presume pupils*' inability to responsibly use their smartphones responsibly. Ava-Lee and Zion's extracts show an awareness of this nuance in their preference for restrictions, rather than outright bans.

However, it was clear that the individual experiences of pupils had not been taken into consideration when it came to the implementation of this policy. For example, in several cases, pupils had downloaded the school's official parent's application, which provides access to timetables, detentions, and behavioural records. Everly described how pupils use the app to manage their academic and behavioural responsibilities:

> ***EVERLY****:* It's mostly for the parents but obviously some pupils we, we get it yeah, we have the login in. So you could put on your phone if you wanted to.
> ***EVERLY****:* So you can see anything detentions or even the, the G points, which is the….good points,..

In Success's digital timeline, she documents 'occasionally check during school to check if I have gotten a detention' (on the parent's app):

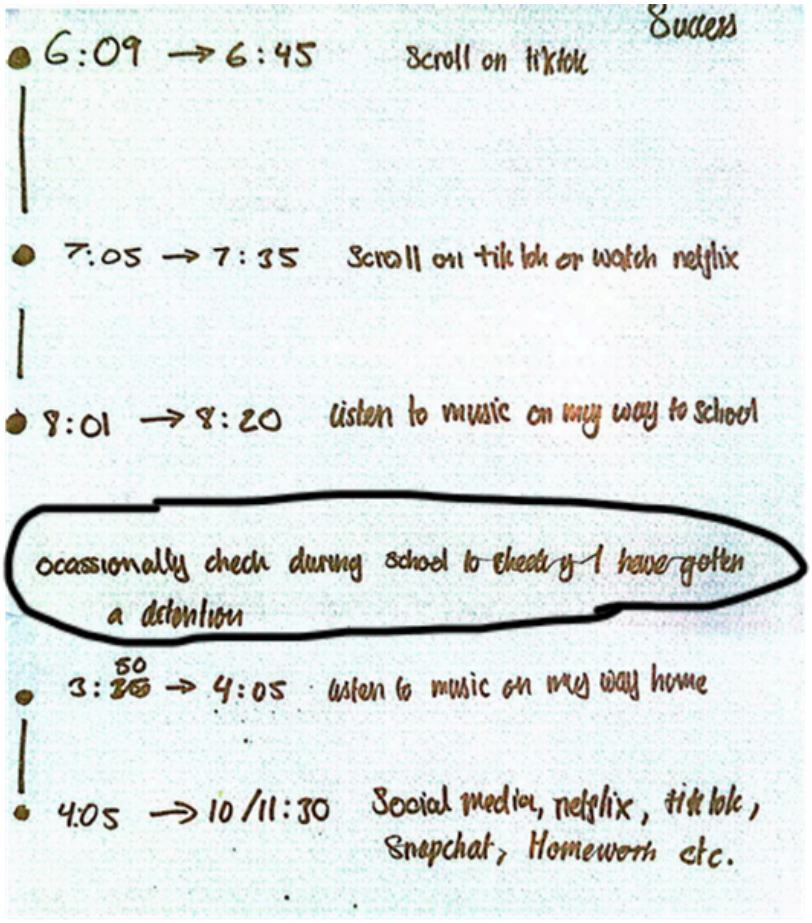


Figure 8: Success's digital timeline

Everly and Success's experiences suggest that pupils often have more responsibility that they are managing than schools' may be aware of. Success has downloaded the app to monitor her behaviour as she explained because she was encouraged in her family environment to monitor her own behaviour. hese experiences imply the need to take family structure and rules into account.

When monitoring systems are transparent and accessible to pupils, pupils do not necessarily develop negative attitudes, indeed more transparent monitoring systems can support young people with self-regulation around digital interactions and time online.

Other pupils described significant practical and social difficulties associated with the transition from smartphones to brick phones. Several participants reported feeling disoriented using unfamiliar devices, despite complying with the policy:

INTERVIEWER: How many of you have brick phones now?
Several participants raise hands.
EVERLY: I have it, but I don't know how to use it.
INTERVIEWER: You don't know how to use it?
EVERLY: Yeah. You feel like very disoriented with it. Still, even if you have your brick phone they're still going to take it and give it to you at the end of the day.
SUCCESS: The same protocol as a smartphone.
INTERVIEWER: So how do they take it? What happens? You come in and you have to give it to them and then if you want to use it, you have to go to the office?
EVERLY: No, if you're seen with it, they'll take it.
INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see.

This highlights an often-overlooked assumption within smartphone bans: that communication technologies are interchangeable. In practice, smartphones and brick phones serve fundamentally different functions. Smartphones operate as multifunctional infrastructures through which young people organise their daily lives (payment for services), access institutional information (homework apps), and maintain social relationships (contact with parents and family). Brick phones, by contrast, provide only limited communicative capacity. This substitution does not simply remove access to distraction, but removes access to the broader infrastructural functions that smartphones provide.

Pupils also expressed concern about the financial implications of the policy. Jaiden described the expectation that families should purchase additional devices and tracking technologies:

…They're trying to tell parents they should purchase things like AirTags, which is cost… AirTags like the apple product that you can track … and I see as like an expensive burden on people and like it's better off to have the phones tracked and taken away from pupils in school to be given back at the end of the day rather than banned completely. Because then it just means parents will know where their children are… Um, I think like it really isn't fair because some pupils like they might not be able to afford AirTags. 'Cause um, at the end of day, like some people they might have phones that mainly to contact parents and to also like share locations with parents. But to buy a brick phone is also buying another phone. On top of that you have to buy air tag, which can also be very costly.

Jaiden, X Academy

This demonstrates how prohibition-based policies shift both financial and logistical responsibility from institutions onto families. Rather than managing phone use within the school environment, the policy requires families to invest in alternative technologies to maintain communication and endorse tracking mechanisms to ostensibly enable safety. In a context of socioeconomic deprivation, this imposes additional burdens on households that may already have limited resources.

Points of tension and contradiction

Success (14 years old) describes the phone ban as 'disrespectful' and 'demeaning', and states that she believes the school is attempting to demonise smartphones. She contrasts X Academy's total prohibition with other schools that allow pupils to bring smartphones at older ages:

> *Um, in like in another school...they're not allowed their phones up until a certain year. So like if you're in year 10 you're allowed to bring your smart phone. And I was thinking to myself, why not this school? And it's 'cause they just don't think we're responsible enough 'cause it's like, what do you mean we're not responsible enough to bring a phone to school... like, in a way its disrespectful.. And like you could think that that's a bit demeaning. 'cause it's like, what do you mean we're not responsible enough to bring a phone?*
>
> Success, X Academy

This response demonstrates that smartphone bans are experienced by some pupils not only as behavioural restrictions, but as judgements about pupils' competence and moral character. To the pupils, the policy communicates an institutional assumption that pupils are inherently incapable of managing digital technologies responsibly. In doing so, the ban does not simply regulate behaviour, but constructs pupils as subjects requiring external control. This undermines opportunities for pupils to develop autonomy and reinforces hierarchical power relations between pupils and institutional authority, which can have further implications for help seeking behaviour. While schools may not be intentionally communicating these messages to pupils, and are under massive governmental and societal pressure to create smartphone-free spaces, this is how the pupils are perceiving the bans.

Success also situates the ban within a broader technological context, questioning its relevance in a society where digital technologies are pervasive:

> *The phone ban, it's like promoting like the regression of technology. I don't understand why we shouldn't be, um, allowed to use our phone, especially when we're in an age where technology's all around us, like we're in like a peak. So now that we're not being able to use it, it's also trying to like demonise using phones as well.*
>
> Success, X Academy

This highlights a key contradiction within prohibition-based approaches. Smartphones are central to communication, education, and social participation in contemporary society, yet pupils are required to suspend their use entirely within school environments.

> *I mean in the school they promote, you know, responsibility and being like a young adult yet they still like find a way to like, infantilise, but make us as if like we don't know what we're doing half the time, so we can be responsible for us like not getting into fights, doing this, doing that. But like we can't be responsible for something that like literally everybody has, which is a phone. And to me, I don't know, it just doesn't make sense because like a lot the school holds like a lot of pupils accountable for like a lot more things that seem more serious than just bringing their phones to school. Yeah. So that's just my personal opinion.*
>
> Success, X Academy

Success notes the paradox that the school is apparently based on values of 'responsibility' as part of the ethical code they sign up to, but that the phone rule 'infantilises' pupils. Success wonders why pupils are deemed responsible for some things and not others. From pupils' perspective, the ban represents not a neutral safety measure, but an attempt to exclude them from technologies that structure everyday life. This creates a disconnect between institutional governance and the realities of postdigital childhood, where digital competence is an essential component of social and educational participation. Taken together, Success's account illustrates that smartphone bans operate not only as behavioural interventions, but as mechanisms of institutional control that shape how pupils are positioned within the educational environment. Rather than fostering responsible technology use, prohibition-based policies risk producing disengagement and resentment by framing pupils as untrustworthy and incapable of participating in digital society.

Jordan also raised concerns about the practical risks associated with centralised phone storage systems, where a large number of devices are held by a single teacher. Reflecting on proposals that would require pupils to hand in their phones, he noted:

> *I think that rule would even attract theft as well. 'Cause that much phones, with one teacher … that much. People could like couldn't be trusted.*
>
> Jordan, X Academy

For many pupils, mobile phones represent one of the most valuable personal possessions they own, making the prospect of storing dozens of devices in a single location a potential security risk. Jordan's comment reflects an awareness not only of the vulnerability of pupils' belongings, but also of the potential risks placed on educators themselves, who would effectively be responsible for safeguarding large quantities of valuable devices throughout the school day. In this sense, the concern is not framed purely as self-interest but also as consideration for staff safety, recognising that concentrating valuable items in one place could create situations where educators become targets for theft. This observation illustrates how pupils are often acutely aware of the material risks associated with school policies. Rather than rejecting regulation outright, Jordan's response demonstrates practical reasoning about how enforcement mechanisms may create unintended consequences for both pupils and educators. His comment highlights that policies designed to control smartphone use can also introduce new forms of risk.

Pupils at X Academy primarily come from low-income households, where mobile phones serve critical infrastructural functions supporting safety, mobility, and family coordination. As Jordan explains:

> *If they didn't have their phones… their parents wouldn't know where they are… Especially if the child doesn't come home at all.*
>
> Jordan, X Academy

This demonstrates that smartphones function as essential safety tools within pupils' everyday lives, particularly as they enter adolescence and begin to travel independently. The phone enables real-time communication between pupils and parents, allowing young people to actively participate in managing their own safety. Prohibiting access to smartphones therefore removes pupils' ability to manage risk independently. In this way, the ban shifts safety from a communicative process involving pupils themselves to a form of external monitoring conducted by adults, in this case, via AirTags.

It is important to note that GPS tracking technology is also a key tool used in coercive control and primes children for acceptance of these surveillant technologies (Brookfield et al., 2024).

Pupils also drew a clear distinction between participatory monitoring, in which they retain access and awareness, and external surveillance conducted without their involvement. Continuous location tracking, in particular, was experienced as a breach of trust. Success explained:

> *No. I'm not good for it. I'm not tracked, but if my mom was to track me even like, no, like somebody couldn't track my location, it just, it kind of creates a distrust between me and them. Um, and like I'm more, I don't really lie to my parents that much. I'm very honest. So if they don't trust me with like, simply where I am or like the circumstances that I put myself in, then I don't know what to tell them.*
>
> Success, X Academy

This demonstrates that surveillance does not simply increase safety but reshapes relational dynamics between young people and authority figures. Rather than fostering responsibility, external monitoring can undermine trust by positioning pupils as inherently suspicious subjects.

Pupils responded more positively to management approaches grounded in trust and demonstrated responsibility. Jordan and Ava-Lee described how their parents allowed them autonomy over their phone use as long as their academic performance and behaviour remained strong:

> ***JORDAN:*** As long as my grades are fine, they don't really mind.
> ***INTERVIEWER:*** Yeah. Is that similar for people? Like as long as your grades are good, it doesn't matter?
> ***AVA-LEE:*** And behaviour.

Overall, pupils prefer participatory co-management rather than substitutive surveillance that routes information only to parents. In contrast, institutional access to pupils' personal devices without consent was experienced as deeply intrusive. Jaiden described an incident in which school staff accessed his phone:

> *I also find it quite, um, scary that like the IT department, they like could gain access to phones and I experienced it in year eight where my phone had taken and they went that they got, somehow got my password to my phone and they went through my phone.....Um, I felt like quite violated and my mother was very like, concerned on the fact that it went through my phone without my permission. They didn't understand my point of view and I don't know, it just created a very negative atmosphere for me. You know?*
>
> Jaiden, X Academy

These findings ultimately demonstrate that governance approaches grounded in surveillance and prohibition do not simply regulate behaviour, but reshape relationships between pupils, families, and institutions. While such policies may increase institutional control and reduce visible incidents, they do so by externalising responsibility and limiting pupils' capacity to develop independent digital autonomy.

In contrast, participatory approaches that allow pupils to access, understand, and manage digital systems themselves are more likely to foster trust, responsibility, and meaningful engagement with institutional expectations.

Despite no longer being able to bring devices to school pupils continued to use them for educational purposes at home:

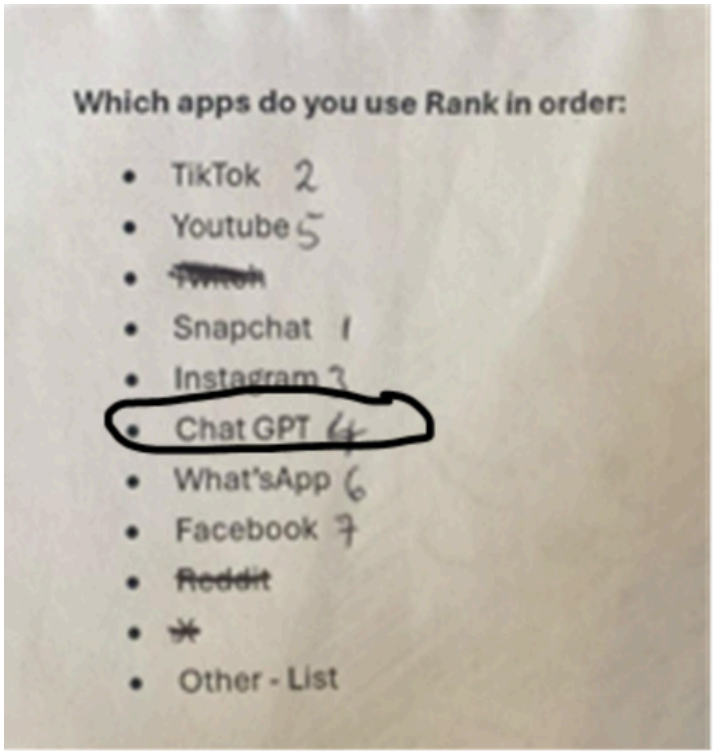


Figure 9: Ava Lee, 15, said ChatGPT was her 4th most used app.

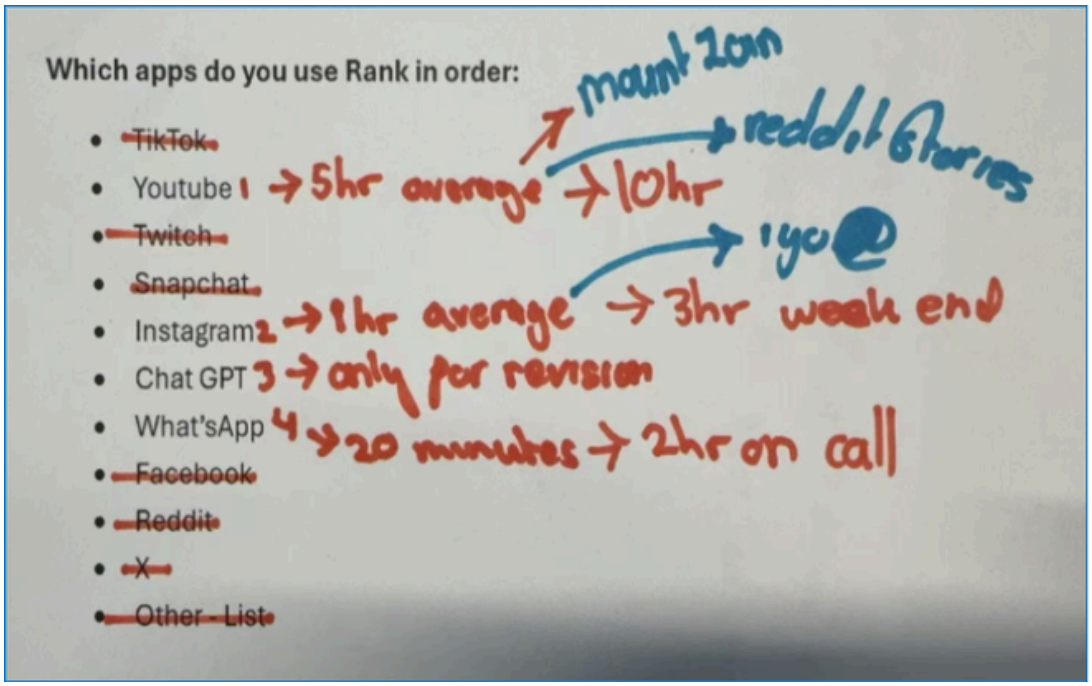


Figure 10: Joy, 13, said ChatGPT was her 3rd most used app, 'for revision'.

Adaptations and workaround behaviours

Pupils also recognised the practical limitations of technological enforcement mechanisms. Ava-Lee and Success discussed the possibility of pupils circumventing restrictions by bringing alternative or substitute devices:

> ***INTERVIEWER:*** What do other people think about those [Yondr] pouches?
> ***SUCCESS:*** I think that would be terrible.
> ***AVA-LEE:*** Yeah***.***
> ***SUCCESS:*** Um, honestly speaking, if the school introduced that type of policy, I wouldn't bring my actual phone to school at all. No. Even that's even a lie. I'll bring a fake phone. I'll probably just like get a phone case no more. Seriously... they're not gonna take my phone.
> ***AVA-LEE:*** Yeah. I think, I think that's just a lot of work. It's a whole-school. Right. A lot of kids more than obviously, let's say more than 200 kids with everyone with, with uh, wallets (pouches), meaning, okay, let's say now they can say it's every small school with one teacher who hands out. Even that it takes long, it's a whole long process to come into school and everyone having to hand it in before everything starts. It's ...long in the processes and then it restricts everyone from.....and then also some kids... would bring a fake phone, they still have their phones and some would be cheeky like that and not bring a real phone so it still cancels it out. Yeah.

This illustrates how prohibition-based policies can produce unintended behavioural adaptations. Rather than eliminating phone use entirely, strict bans may encourage concealment and circumvention. This shifts pupil behaviour away from open, regulated use toward covert practices that operate outside institutional awareness. In this way, prohibition may reduce visible compliance while undermining opportunities for transparent governance and trust.

Implications

The X Academy case illustrates the consequences of extending ban-based governance toward its most restrictive form. By removing smartphones entirely from pupils' possession, the school seeks to prioritise safety and reduce exposure to digital risk. However, this approach does not simply regulate smartphone use within institutional space; it also limits pupils' ability to participate directly in the digital infrastructures that organise communication, safety, and everyday coordination. Pupils remain embedded in digital systems, but their capacity to engage with them is mediated through substitute technologies such as brick phones and GPS tracking devices. While these tools enable forms of contact and location monitoring, they do not provide the same capacity for real-time communication, decision-making, or self-management. In this sense, pupils are positioned less as active participants in managing their daily lives and more as individuals whose movements can be tracked and accounted for. This creates a tension between safeguarding and autonomy. The policy prioritises institutional distance from digital risk while offering more limited opportunities for pupils to develop the confidence and competence required to navigate digital environments independently. As a result, pupils are protected from certain risks, but may also be distanced from the processes through which digital responsibility is learned. The case of X Academy therefore highlights the limits of total bans as a strategy. In postdigital contexts, where digital competence is increasingly foundational to social and institutional life, restricting access without corresponding opportunities for guided engagement may constrain the development of these essential skills.

W Grammar School: Delay and defer devices until sixth form

Policy brief: Phones can be on campus, but must be switched off and in bags at all times until sixth form where 'educational use' is unregulated

Key findings

W Grammar School demonstrates policy contradictions between strict regulation in lower years and unregulated educational use in sixth form, common across UK schooling. This case illustrates smartphone restrictions work to delay and defer mindful engagement with digital technologies for educational purposes. Pupils are prevented from developing habits of responsible use in earlier years, but are later expected to integrate smartphones and AI tools into their learning with minimal guidance. As a result, pupils must navigate complex digital systems independently at the point of greatest academic pressure.

Policy context

W Grammar School is an academically selective boys' school that admits girls in the sixth form. Pupils are permitted to bring mobile phones onto school premises, however, devices must be switched off and kept in bags at all times. Pupils are prohibited from using their phones not only during lessons, but also during break and lunchtime periods. This is a point of pride for W Grammar, with one teacher stating:

> *We're quite strict in comparison to other schools. Our pupils, the expectation is that as soon as they walk through the school gates that the mobile phones are off, they're allowed to have them on their person, but often in their bags and obviously in terms of mobile phones and the way that society is developing is that it's become such a big part of, uh, parents being able to be in contact with their child and track where they are. Yeah. That we don't have a zero, you cannot bring your phone into school, but pupils are allowed to bring them in, but they have to be off and in their bags. They are not allowed to use them during break times. And lunchtimes where other schools will allow pupils to use them during social times, we have a zero, you're not allowed on them.*
>
> Teacher, W Grammar School

This policy reflects an institutional commitment to eliminating phone use entirely from the school day, including during social time. While pupils retain physical possession of their devices, they are functionally excluded from daily school life. However, this ban is abruptly reversed in sixth form. Pupils in Years 12 and 13 are permitted unrestricted access to their phones throughout the school day, including during lessons and independent study periods.

Jonathan described how phones are routinely integrated into his academic work:

> *I use my phone during most lessons. If it's on like EduLink or like Spotify if I have an independent study session or just, yeah, just like Google in case, um, the educators instructed us to do some kind of research on the topic we're learning about.*
>
> Jonathon, W Grammar School

In this context, phones shift from prohibited distractions to legitimate educational tools without an adequate transitional framework or explicit instruction in responsible use. This abrupt policy shift, common upon sixth form commencement creates a structural contradiction. For five years, pupils lack opportunities to develop independent self-regulation in relation to mobile phone use.

They are then expected, upon entering sixth form, to immediately exercise precisely the form of self-management that the earlier ban prevented them from learning.

How young people actually use and experience tech

To examine how smartphones are used during lesson time following the removal of restrictions in sixth form, we will examine the digital timelines of sixth form pupils: Jonathon, Caleb, Cody, and Amy.

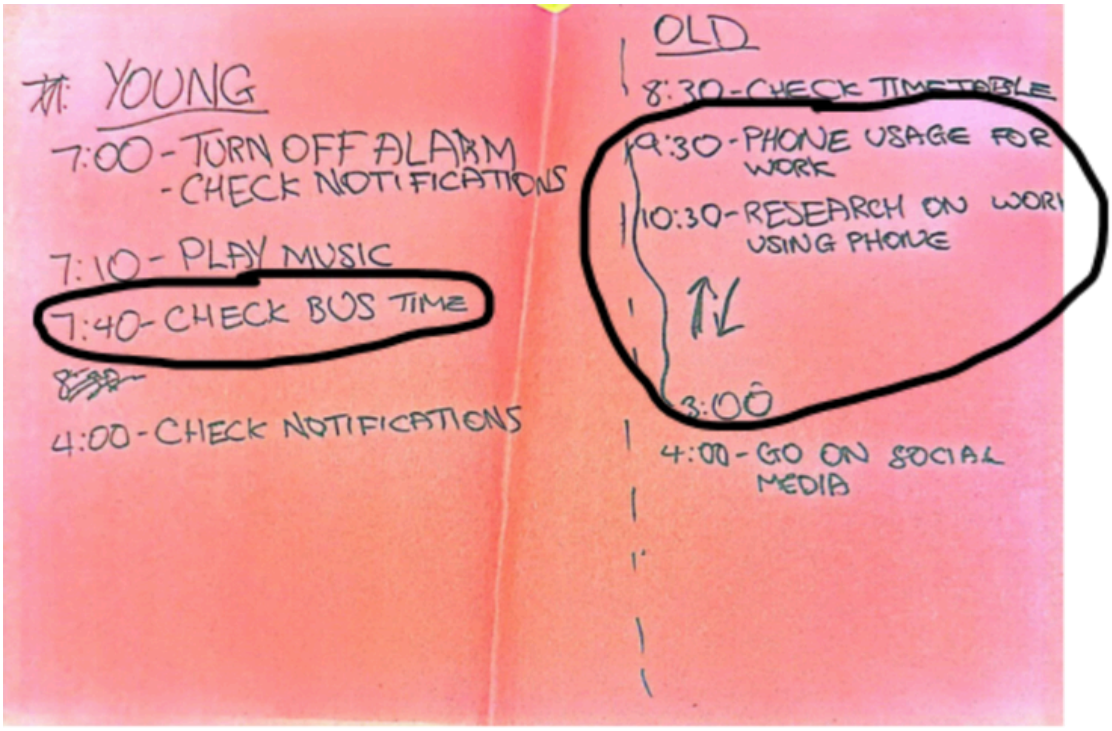


Figure 11: Jonathon's digital timeline

Jonathon draws different timelines for his younger self and older self. For his older (sixth form) self, Jonathon draws arrows going back and forth using his phone for research on work from 9:30-3:00pm, which vividly shows how he shifts from no phone use during school with young self and complete immersion of smartphone with old self in educational context after the shift in Year 12.

> *I wake up, I turn off my alarm and check my notifications. It's at seven. And then whilst I'm getting ready for school, uh, I, I use my phone to play music. And then, uh, I use my phone also when I'm ready to check the bus times when I leave my house. And I don't really use it until I get to school. And when I get to school, I mainly use my phone. I use my phone during most lessons. If it's on like EduLink or like Spotify if I have a independent study session or just, yeah, just like Google in case, um, the educators instructed us to do some kind of research on the topic we're learning about. And then after school, uh, I use my phone again to look at bus times. And then when I get home around four, I tend to use my phone on social media, uh, yeah. Until, until I sleep around 10 to which I put my phone on.*
>
> Jonathon, W Grammar School

Examining how pupils use their phones during school hours and analysing the nuance of their digital timelines corresponding to school hours revealed that pupils routinely moved between educational and entertainment applications within the same lesson periods.

Caleb's timeline (Figure 12) shows that during school hours he used Microsoft Teams and Outlook, both school platforms used to access lesson materials and communicate with educators. Alongside these applications, he also reported using ChatGPT to support academic work, while simultaneously accessing Spotify.

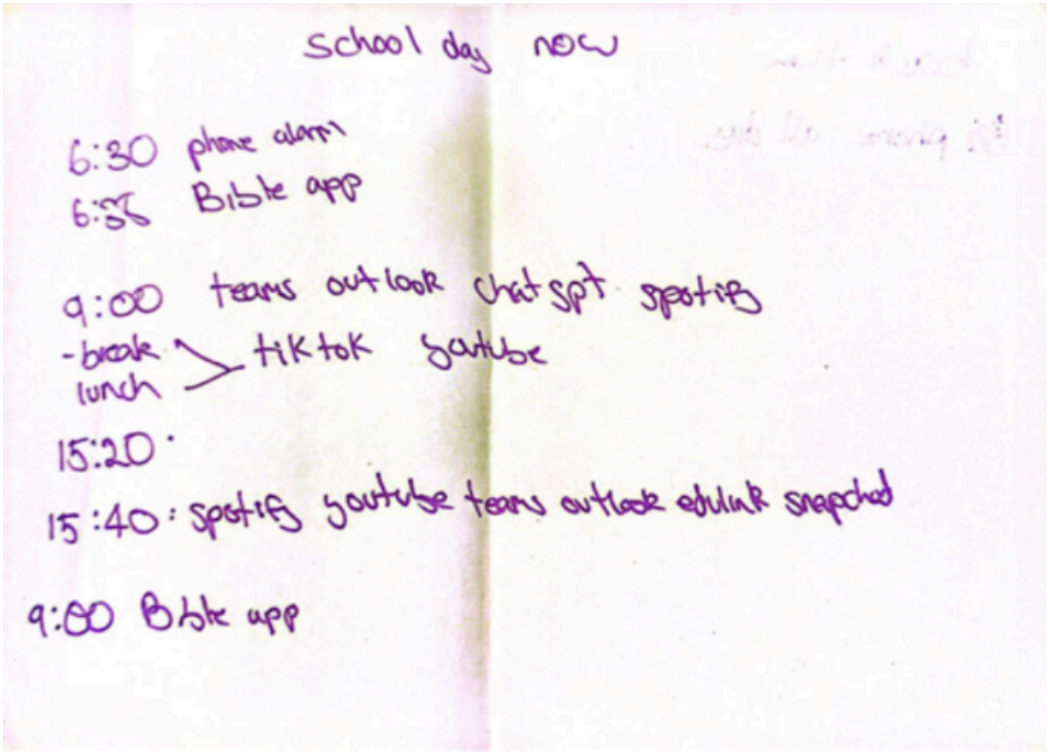


Figure 12: Caleb's digital timeline

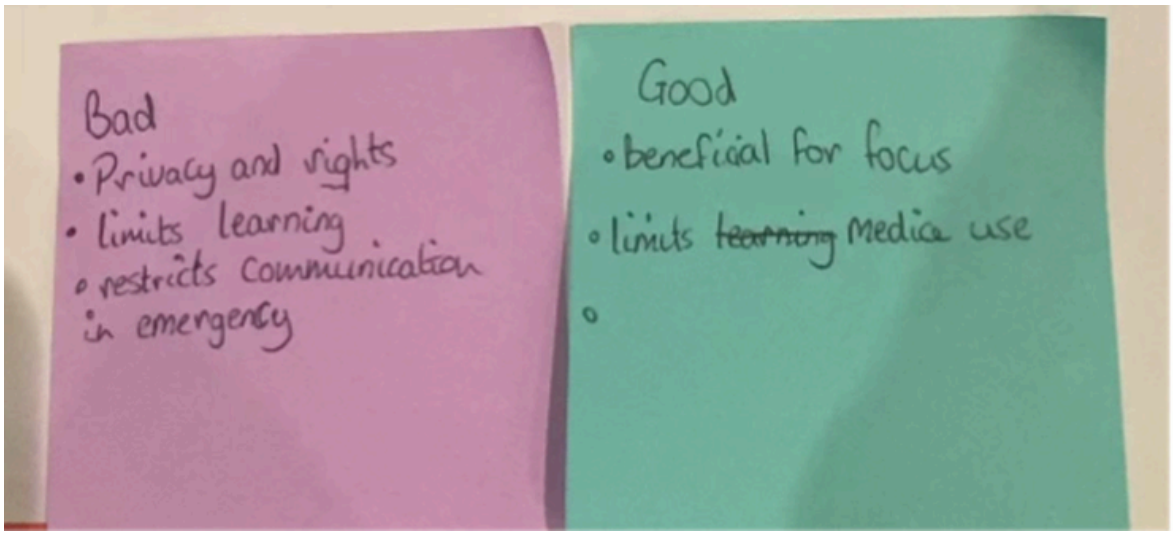


Figure 13: Caleb's Post-its about what he thinks are the good and bad aspects of the phone bans.

Caleb's digital mapping demonstrates that tools used for formal educational participation and those used for personal regulation, such as music streaming, operate within the same technological environment. His Post-it notes also show he feels that limiting technology means 'limits learning'. In the focus group he related the nuance of the back and forth:

So my school day now I wake up at six 30. So I pull off my alarm at 6.30 and then, uh, 6.35, I read my Bible in my phone. So the Bible app. And then I don't use my phone really until when I get to school at nine o'clock and, uh, it's nine o'clock in school. I use my, my phone on. I use, um, teams, outlook, uh, Spotify, chat, GPT, um, break and lunch. I usually use TikTok, YouTube. And then going back to lessons, back to the same teams. Outlook, chat, GPT, maybe Spotify, if I'm doing, um, independent learning. Then, uh, walking home, Spotify when I get home, um, that's when I use more social media apps. So Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram. And uh, if I'm doing work, then I also put, uh, teams, outlook, Edu-link and Spotify. And then I stopped using my phone around nine. I read, I read my Bible on my phone at nine and then I put my phone away. So yeah, that's it.

Caleb, W Grammar School

Additionally, Caleb explained in a focus group that being able to use his phone for educational purposes had changed how he thought about and used the device more broadly. When asked whether his phone habits had shifted, he reflected that he now used social media less frequently:

***INTERVIEWER**:* So do you feel you've definitely changed how you use your phone now?
***CALEB**:* Yeah.
***INTERVIEWER**:* You're using the social media less?
***CALEB**:* Uh, yeah.
***INTERVIEWER**:* Yeah? Why is that?
***CALEB**:* Um, I don't know. I feel like it's, it's not really productive, so it's a form of entertainment, but uh, you can't just always have entertainment. You need to do something productive. So I realized I needed to like minimize my, my phone usage when it comes to entertainment. Really start doing other stuff.

Caleb's account suggests that when smartphones are incorporated into educational activities, pupils may begin to reassess how they use them more generally. Rather than treating the phone solely as a source of entertainment, Caleb describes developing a distinction between 'productive' and 'unproductive' uses, and actively adjusting his behaviour accordingly. In this case, exposure to educational uses of the device appears to have encouraged a form of self-regulation, where the pupil independently moderates his own social media use. This finding challenges the assumption underlying prohibition-based policies that responsible phone use must be produced through restriction alone. Instead, Caleb's reflection suggests that opportunities to use smartphones constructively within educational contexts may support the development of the very self-regulation that bans are often intended to produce.

Similarly, Cody's timeline indicates that while at school he accessed Microsoft Teams and Safari to retrieve educational content and complete academic tasks. However, his timeline also records the use of music during the same school-day period. These platforms serve different functions – Safari and Teams enable participation in institutional learning, while music supports regulation – but they were accessed through the same device and within the same institutional timeframe.

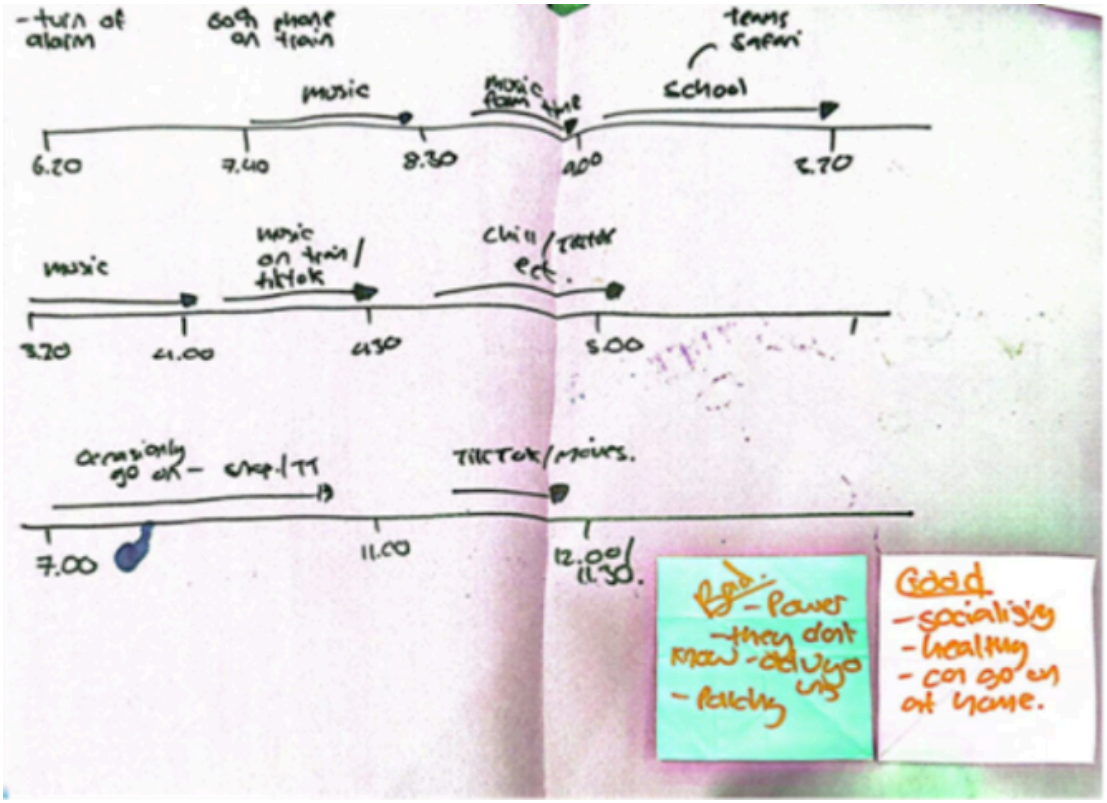


Figure 14: Cody's digital timeline and Post-its

Amy's timeline further reinforces this pattern. Between 9:00am and 3:20pm, corresponding directly to lesson time, she reported using her phone to access the internet for homework and classwork. At the same time, her timeline also records the use of music and social media throughout the school day. This demonstrates that the smartphone functions as a unified interface through which both institutional learning and personal digital engagement occur.

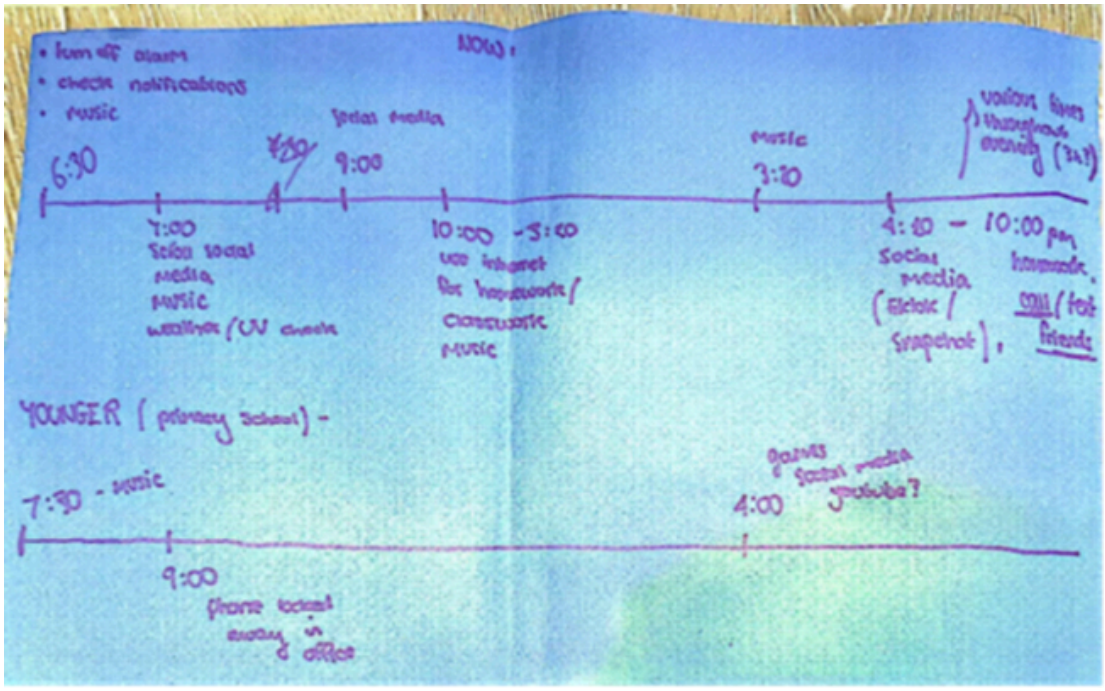


Figure 15: Amy's digital timeline

Points of tension and contradiction

The Favourite apps activity, in which pupils ranked their most-commonly used to least-commonly used applications, revealed how often pupils are using AI Chatbots such as ChatGPT. See, for example, the following pupils.

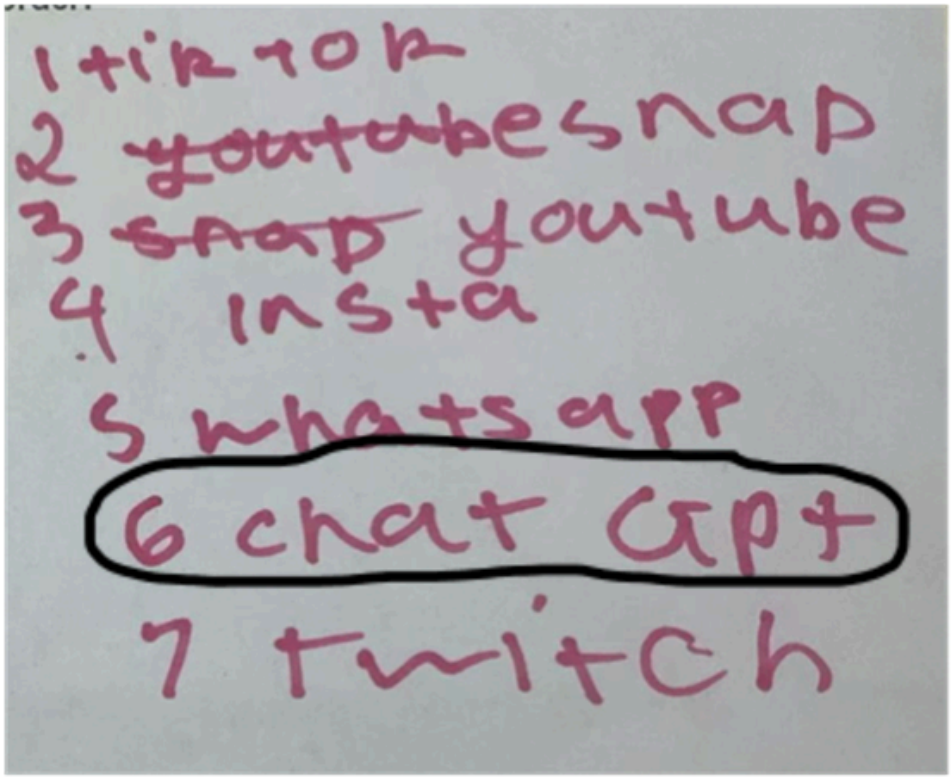


Figure 16: Christoph, 14, said ChatGPT was his 6th most used app.

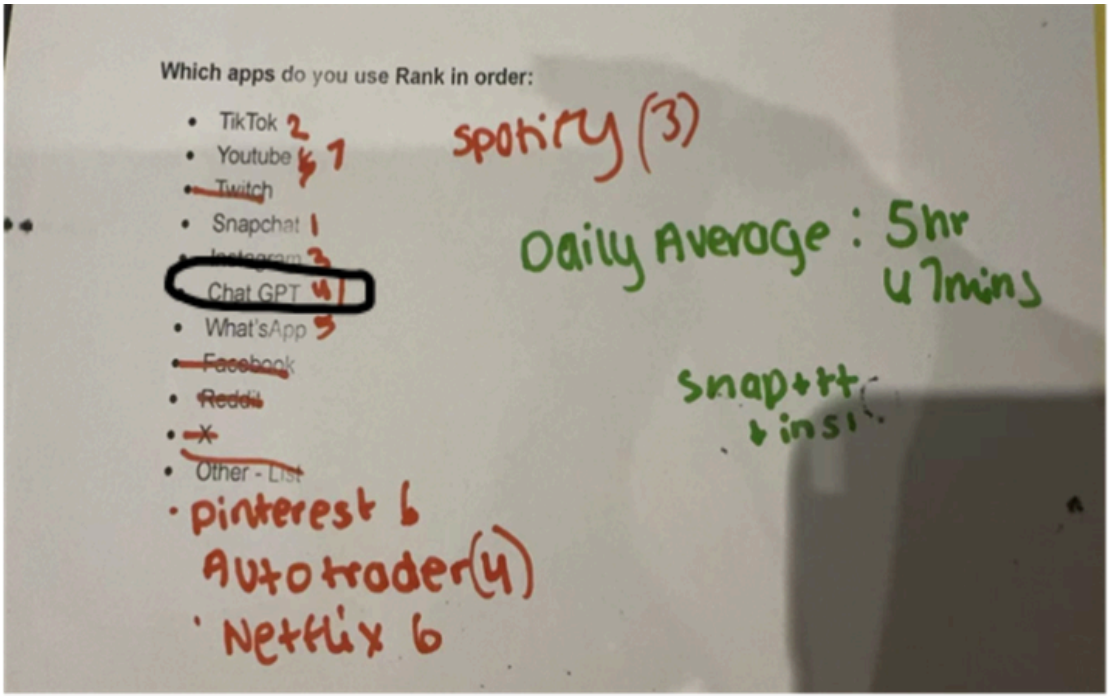


Figure 17: Amira, 17, said ChatGPT was her 4th most used app

At W Grammar School, ChatGPT usage increased dramatically with age, which aligns with school policy regarding smartphones. Recall that in sixth form pupils are allowed access to their smartphones and – as we saw from their digital timelines – begin using them during school hours to support their education.

Pupils saw AI and ChatGPT as another tool to support their learning:

> *But then it does help with like learning ...revision. It is like, it's just like artificial intelligence. So it just, just knows everything. So you can just, you can actually learn from it and like it can teach you stuff. Teaches you like exam techniques as well*
>
> Jonah, W Grammar School

The pupils discussed using AI to summarise or simplify materials, structure answers, and check work:

> *I like took photos and I'd put it in, and I was like, summarise these and like easier. And I... I think it really helped me to be honest. And I yeah, I did much better than I was predicted in English...*
>
> Amira, W Grammar School

> *But you could also be asking like how do I... how would I structure this question, like what should I say in this question?... it saves time when that educators marking it or doing it yourself.*
>
> Harriet, W Grammar School

> ***INTERVIEWER**:* Do you trust it [ChatGPT]?
> ***RORY**:* So you can't trust everything it says but like for like a maths equation... or problem, it can't really be changed. But more or like political views and stuff that could be influenced.

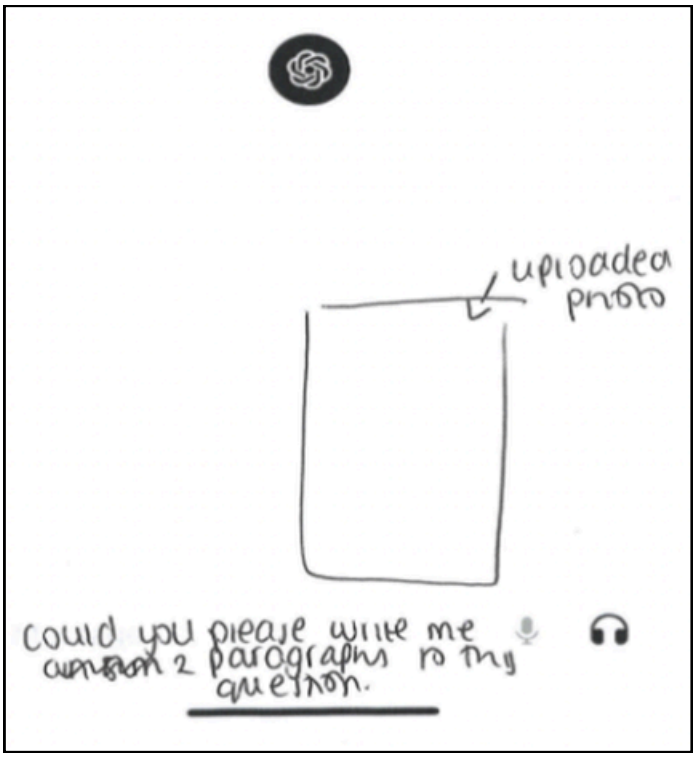


Figure 18: Smartphone template of ChatGPT "Could you please write me 2 paragraphs to this question"

These findings highlight a growing contradiction within school policy and practice. On the one hand, pupils are increasingly expected to engage with AI tools, such as ChatGPT and other forms of EdTech, as part of their learning, reflecting a broader governmental and institutional push toward AI integration in education. On the other hand, many of these same pupils are subject to smartphone bans that restrict access to the very devices through which these tools are most readily available. This creates a fragmented technological environment in which certain forms of digital engagement are actively encouraged – particularly those aligned with institutional productivity – while others are prohibited. In practice, this means that access to AI is not evenly distributed, but contingent on school policy, age, and institutional context. At W Grammar School, only sixth form pupils are permitted to access smartphones during the school day, meaning they have access to digital learning tools, including AI, that younger pupils are systematically excluded from.

At the same time, national policy is actively promoting the integration of AI into education, including the rollout of AI tutoring tools targeted at disadvantaged pupils (Department for Education, 2026). While positioned as a mechanism for reducing inequality, this approach risks entrenching a new form of digital stratification. Pupils in more privileged contexts are more likely to access human forms of support – private tutoring, parental guidance, and teacher time – while less advantaged pupils are increasingly directed toward automated, AI-mediated forms of assistance. This raises the possibility of an emerging 'analogue privilege' divide, in which access to human support becomes a marker of advantage, while AI becomes a substitute rather than a supplement. In this context, the expansion of AI does not simply democratise access to learning but may reconfigure inequalities by differentiating between those who receive human attention and those who are expected to rely on automated systems.

Pupils themselves are already navigating these tensions. While they recognise the utility of AI for efficiency and performance, they also express concern about over-reliance, skill erosion, and the implications for their own thinking:

> *I think I depend on it a bit too much. I would miss it because I feel like AI makes us too dependent and it doesn't help us in exam conditions because we need to use our critical thinking.*
>
> Harriet, W Grammar School

> *OK, so I found that using AI has really like corrupted my morals... But nowadays like I get set a simple task and I kind of have to ask AI to do it for me. And like when I'm talking to my parents I kind of have to like put the question in. I feel like AI has actually taken away kind of like my ability to think on my feet quickly.*
>
> Jonah, W Grammar School

At the same time, pupils identified a perceived double standard in how AI is used within schools, noting that educators may benefit from these tools while pupils are subject to stricter scrutiny and regulation:

> *I think a lot of this time with educators as well. It does make their job significantly easier. I would argue that where it gets to a point like making your own AI chatbot that does everything for you, like maybe a little bit too much easier than your job should be.*
>
> Harriet, W Grammar School

These findings suggest that current school approaches to technology are not only inconsistent, but risk being internally contradictory. Smartphones are removed in the name of safeguarding and attention, while AI – often accessed through those same devices – is promoted as a solution to educational challenges. In practice, this creates a fragmented and uneven landscape in which young people are simultaneously restricted from and expected to participate in digitally mediated learning. Rather than resolving the challenges posed by emerging technologies, this dual approach risks deepening inequalities, displacing rather than addressing concerns about distraction and learning, and limiting opportunities for pupils to develop critical, reflective, and equitable relationships with the tools that are increasingly shaping their educational futures.

The methodologies, including the Digital timelines and Favourite apps, demonstrate young people are involves navigating complex boundaries between institutional and personal digital engagement – skills that pupils are expected to exercise without having had opportunities to develop them within the school environment before they move into sixth form. The older pupils recognised this difficulty referencing the multifaceted use of phones for 'everything'.

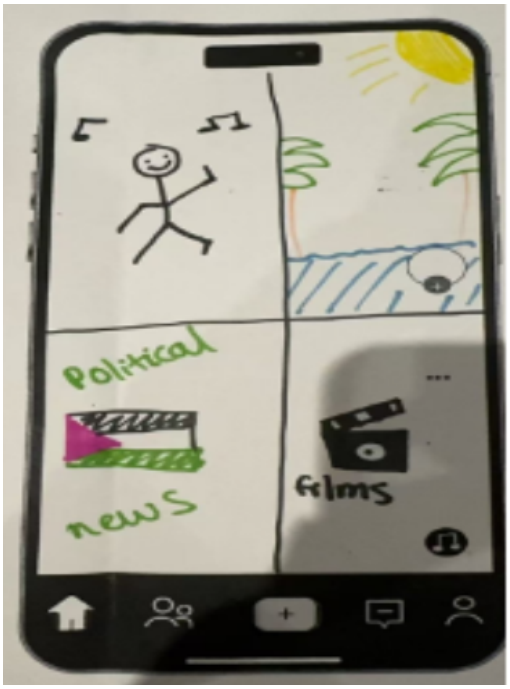


Figure 19: Amira, 17, uses her phone for 'everything', including music, political news, films, and lifestyle.

Many expressed concerns about their screen time and demonstrated awareness of their own problematic usage patterns, but also described self-reflexive and mindful check-ins to regulate their behaviour

Arianna described how screen time monitoring exposed patterns she had not previously recognised:

> *I think it's good to like have it [screentime] like visualised for you because a lot of the time like you don't realize how long you're spending on it. So like when I realize like how much I've spent on it, it kind of makes me think like, oh, I should probably stop spending so much time on my phone .*
>
> Ariana, W Grammar School

This reflects a developing awareness of digital habits, but awareness alone did not translate into effective behavioural change. Cody described attempting to use built-in screen time limits, but ultimately overriding them:

> *Sometimes I used to try and set myself like, you can set like a screen time limit and I used to do that, but every time I did it I just end up like clicking ignore and then carrying on anyway.*
>
> Cody, W Grammar School

Similarly, Callie described attempting to impose self-directed restrictions, with mixed success:

> *And sometimes I'll tell myself, sometimes I'll be like, um, if I'm bored or something, I'll tell myself I don't, I'm not gonna go on my phone for that until this time because I feel like I'm on it too much.*
>
> Callie, W Grammar School

These accounts demonstrate that pupils are aware of the risks associated with excessive phone use and actively attempt to regulate themselves. However, they also reveal the difficulty of developing self-regulation skills without prior structured support, which they pupils note is needed in the lower years:

> *I think for the lower school, um, obviously phone restrictions are necessary because of the access, the easier access to misinformation or bad media that they can see online. So obviously there needs to be some form of regulation, but um, things like on the pouches is a bit of a, an extreme. Because, um, phones as previous points were made with the socialization thing, like people that struggle to socialize, maybe it's easier for them just to use their phone, but also phones can be used to educate. So it does have like, it's like a two-sided coin issue... complete regulation isn't necessary*
>
> Jonathon, W Grammar School

This illustrates a fundamental limitation of ban-based approaches. By removing phones entirely during compulsory schooling, the institution avoids the immediate challenges associated with managing pupil phone use.

However, it also eliminates opportunities for pupils to develop the skills necessary to regulate their own behaviour. As a result, when restrictions are lifted in sixth form (or after the completion of school), pupils are expected to exercise self-regulation without having had opportunities to practice or develop these capacities within a supported environment. This reflects a broader institutional logic in which compliance is prioritised over competence. Rather than teaching pupils how to manage distractions, set boundaries, and use technology responsibly, the school relies on exercising control. When that control is removed, responsibility is transferred to pupils without offering them any preparation. This approach is particularly significant given the school's stated role in preparing pupils for university and professional life, where independent technology management is essential. The sudden transition from total ban to unrestricted access creates a gap between institutional regulation and real-world expectations.

Additionally, Amy explained that the phone ban had not reduced bullying, but had instead shifted where it takes place and removed a potential source of support for pupils experiencing it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think this phone regulation that they have now, do you think it's stopping bullying?
AMY: No.
INTERVIEWER: Can you say more?
AMY: I think that the exact same stuff happening just outside of school. They just wait until they get home.
INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's like the same or made worse by the fact that it's not allowed in school?
AMY: I think the, like, I think the mental health of the person who's getting bullied would be worse because like I said, like they don't have their phone there when they're like socially like isolated in school. Yeah. Like if they're sitting alone and they're getting bullied, even if the bullying's happening outside of school, it's not like they're gonna be happy in school. So that's when the phone comes in. It's like, you know, you can sit there and like call your mom if you need to, you know?

Amy's account suggests that banning phones does not necessarily prevent bullying but may instead displace it beyond the boundaries of the school day. At the same time, removing access to phones can eliminate a source of immediate emotional support for pupils who feel isolated or distressed during school hours. In Amy's example, the phone is not framed as the cause of the harm but as a potential coping mechanism that allows pupils to contact family members or maintain a sense of connection when they are struggling. Her account therefore complicates the assumption that removing phones from school environments automatically improves pupil wellbeing. Instead, it suggests that bans may reduce the visibility of certain behaviours within school while leaving the underlying social dynamics unchanged, and in some cases removing tools that pupils use to manage difficult situations. Cody suggests there is a need for better digital literacy to address the issues with fear and to move from a fear-based approach to a better understanding of the uses of phones, the content they are consuming and their experiences as young people:

I mean, they think the phones are like the problem for everything. They like the phones too. That doesn't really relate. I mean the main fear is, I think it's rooted in safety... I think it's the same with educators and that's why PSHE doesn't work because the educators, they don't really know what's going on. I think parents are the same. They have their own ideal phones, but they read their own stuff that's made by adults and they think we do.

Cody, W Grammar School

Adaptations and workaround behaviours

The young people also reflected upon how prohibition approaches were affecting behaviour and the impact of highly regulatory and policing approaches to pupils. Year 12 girls at W Grammar explained their previous schools' use of Yondr pouches, which are lockable pouches designed to physically prevent pupils from accessing their phones during the school day. While often presented as a technological solution to behavioural issues, pupils' accounts suggest that such measures do not eliminate phone use, but instead transform it into a site of contestation between pupils and institutional authority. Sienna described widespread dissatisfaction with the pouches at her previous girls' school:

Like everyone hates it so much and it's always just like, try and find stuff that like unlock your yonder pouch. Buy those like magnets online that unlock it. If you bang it against the table, will it work? Oh wow. If you can get away with it, people do it.

Sienna, W Grammar School

Pupils went on to describe the specific techniques used to circumvent the restrictions, including striking the pouch against hard surfaces or using strong magnets to unlock the mechanism. As Jane explained:

You just have to whack it really hard... If you get, like, a really, really, really strong magnet, it like opens it.

Jane, W Grammar School

These accounts demonstrate that technological enforcement mechanisms do not eliminate phone access, but instead shift pupil effort toward evasion. The policy becomes not a behavioural boundary but a technical obstacle to overcome. Dora's account further emphasises that these policies do little to reduce actual phone use:

I was getting around the pouches anyway, so I was using it the same amount that I would have used it before I had the pouch and now I use it the same amount as well.

Dora, W Grammar School

This suggests that prohibition may alter the visibility of phone use without reducing its prevalence. Pupils continue to use their devices, but outside the formal boundaries of institutional awareness.

At the same time, pupils did not reject regulation entirely. Ash articulated a distinction between proportionate restriction and total bans:

I think restrictions are needed for young years... it's building onto like a healthy relationship with your phone... But to the point of locking your phone in a pouch all day, that's almost just making you want it more.

Ash, W Grammar School

This statement reflects a broader sociological pattern in which restrictive institutional controls can actually increase the social significance of banned objects, transforming them into sites of heightened attention, rather than the intended outcome of eliminating their relevance.

These findings indicate that lockable device pouches, for example Yondr pouches, may produce unintended behavioural consequences. Rather than encouraging pupils to develop internal self-regulation, the system positions phone use as a prohibited act requiring concealment. This shifts the pupil-institution relationship from one based on trust to one structured around surveillance, compliance, and evasion. Excessively restrictive measures, such as locking devices for the entire school day, were described as intensifying pupils' focus on their phones rather than reducing it.

This suggests that external technological enforcement, in isolation, is insufficient to produce meaningful behavioural change. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Yondr pouches function less as preventative tools and more as symbolic mechanisms of control. While they may reduce visible phone use within institutional spaces, they do not eliminate access or address the underlying motivations driving phone use. As a result, their effectiveness as behavioural interventions is limited.

Implications

The W Grammar case study reveals a fundamental contradiction within ban-based smartphone policies. For the majority of compulsory schooling, mobile phones are treated as objects that must be entirely excluded from the classroom environment. Yet in sixth form, these same devices are immediately reintroduced as educational tools, with pupils expected to use them independently and responsibly within lessons. The digital timelines demonstrate that once this transition occurs, smartphones function as multifunctional infrastructures through which educational participation, personal regulation, and social communication take place simultaneously. Educational platforms such as Teams, Outlook, and EduLink coexist alongside music, messaging, and social media within the same device and within the same lesson periods. ChatGPT is a daily coach and tutor, and the school messaging was contradictory around its uptake by both staff and pupils. Pupils therefore navigate complex boundaries between institutional and personal digital practices in real time. However, the earlier ban of phones during lower school removes opportunities for pupils to develop the skills necessary to manage these boundaries within a supported educational environment. As a result, self-regulation is expected at the precise moment institutional control is lifted. Pupil accounts further demonstrate that prohibition does not eliminate phone-related behaviours but often displaces or transforms them. Attempts to enforce bans through technological containment systems such as Yondr pouches produced circumvention strategies, while restrictions on phone access were also described as removing tools pupils use for emotional support during socially difficult moments at school. These findings suggest that smartphone bans may successfully remove devices from classrooms during compulsory schooling, but they do not remove the social, emotional, and educational functions that smartphones serve in young people's lives. Instead, the W Grammar case illustrates how prohibition resolves the immediate institutional problem of visible phone use while leaving pupils to navigate the complexities of digital life independently once restrictions are lifted.

Z Independent Boarding School: Analogue privilege?

Policy brief: Phones collected and kept secure for school week

Key findings

At Z Independent Boarding School, the effectiveness of a strict smartphone ban is sustained by extensive analogue resources that reduce pupils' reliance on digital technologies. However, engagement with digital platforms persists through hidden, distributed, and temporally concentrated practices. The policy produces a form of institutional enclosure, limiting access to external networks while intensifying internal social environments. This model relies on privilege and surveillance rather than preparing pupils to navigate digital life beyond the institution.

Policy context

Z Independent Boarding School operates one of the most restrictive mobile phone policies observed in this study. Unlike day schools where phones are regulated within school hours, this policy extends beyond the classroom to encompass pupils' entire weekly routine. Phones are physically removed on Sunday evening and stored by house staff until Saturday morning, meaning pupils have no access to personal devices for the majority of the week. The stated aim of this policy is not only to reduce distraction and improve behaviour, but to cultivate a contained place-based, physical, social-cultural network for the pupils which cuts them off from online interactions. As an elite boarding school, Z Independent Boarding School provides extensive analogue infrastructures – structured extracurricular activities, continuous peer interaction, and round-the-clock pastoral support – aimed at reducing pupils' reliance on digital devices for communication, entertainment, and emotional support.

Figure 20: During the Smartphone template task, pupils drew idyllic elements of their school campus, such as a golf course.

In this sense, the policy is not simply a restriction, but part of a wider institutional environment in which digital technologies are rendered less necessary. This reflects a form of analogue privilege, where access to resources, time, and structured social opportunities allows the school to substitute for functions that smartphones typically perform in other contexts.

Pupils consistently described the policy as restrictive, particularly in relation to maintaining relationships beyond the school:

> *It's hard for us to like keep up with other schools and like old friends when we don't get [phones] at all.*
>
> Debbie, Z Independent Boarding School

> *It's like in like the age, like in the generation we are now, like everyone has a phone. Everyone needs, needs a phone. Like... But I feel like having no phone is giving us no independence. And also like taking away like just like time to our time to like talk to other people and like it's just like, it's hard to just twenty four seven never have your phone.*
>
> Bella, Z Independent Boarding School

This suggests that the policy does not simply reduce phone use, but produces a form of institutional enclosure, where access to external networks, information, and communication is significantly constrained. While this may support immersion in school life, it also limits pupils' ability to remain connected to the wider social world.

However, as one pupil noted, the removal of smartphones is explicitly linked to encouraging in-person interaction between the pupils.

> *I think, yeah... They want you to interact.*
>
> Max, Z Independent Boarding School

While framed as promoting socialisation, this can also be understood as the cultivation of a particular form of social environment. In an elite boarding context, peer interaction can be seen as contributing to the formation of networks, relationships, and forms of social capital that extend beyond the school itself. From this perspective, the restriction of phones does not simply reduce distraction, but actively redirects pupils' attention toward the immediate peer group. This reinforces a contained social world in which relationships are intensified internally, rather than maintained externally. The policy therefore shapes not only how pupils communicate, but with whom, prioritising intra-school connections over wider social networks.

How young people actually use and experience tech

However, pupils explained that the strict, full-week smartphone ban leads them to binge on the weekends:

> *I feel like I use it more like on the weekends because I don't get it during the week. Yeah, So it's almost more unhealthy.*
>
> Jake, Z Independent Boarding School

This account suggests that the removal of smartphones during the school week does not reduce use overall, but instead redistributes it into more concentrated periods. Rather than fostering balanced or moderated engagement, the policy appears to produce a pattern of intensified use when access is restored on the weekends. In this sense, the ban may inadvertently encourage the very behaviours it seeks to prevent, transforming everyday use into episodic 'binge' consumption. This pattern is significant because it challenges the assumption that restriction leads to healthier digital habits. Instead, it indicates that young people's engagement with smartphones is not simply a matter of access, but of habituation shaped by availability, routine, and context. When access is tightly constrained, use does not disappear – it becomes compressed and, in some cases, more difficult to regulate. This reinforces a broader finding of the study: that prohibition-based approaches may alter when and where smartphone use occurs, but do not necessarily address the underlying patterns of engagement that shape young people's relationships with digital platforms.

The pupils also discussed how the ban has made their lives inconvenient, and advocated for even a slight loosening of restrictions:

> *Well I feel like in the beginning their aim, I think their aim of the cell phones banned, like to try and make people more social but I feel like it really doesn't help. Like even with our phones on weekends personally I still, I still hang out with friends. I still go to socials. I still, I still go to [town]with friends and I think, I think we shouldn't have them all the time. Also it's difficult to communicate. Like say you want to go to dinner with friends, you have to send 'em an email which takes time 'cause you're on a laptop and the laptop don't load their laptops and nobody never opens their laptops all the time.*
>
> Thomas, Z Independent Boarding School

> *I think we should get it like maybe once a day, like an half an hour, an hour just to communicate with like, 'cause some people have more friends outside of school or just friends outside of school they just like to communicate with and it's like half an hour's not gonna do anything harm. It's just gonna be half an hour where you can relax and just go on the phone.*
>
> William, Z Independent Boarding School

This account highlights that once the world has gone postdigital, it cannot be undone. While analogue privilege may support some in-person interaction, it does not fully replace the communicative functions that smartphones provide. Pupils continue to require real-time, flexible coordination with both peers inside and outside the school, which analogue systems such as email cannot replicate effectively. Further, even at Z Independent Boarding School, the policy produces everyday friction, where simple social activities become time-consuming and inefficient, revealing the extent to which smartphones function as infrastructural tools rather than optional conveniences. Additionally, it complicates the assumption that removing phones increases socialisation. As Thomas explains, pupils continue to engage socially regardless of phone access, suggesting that the policy does not create sociability but instead reshapes how it is organised. It also highlights pupils' desire for proportionate regulation rather than total restriction. Requests for limited, controlled access indicate that pupils are not rejecting boundaries but are advocating for policies that better reflect their actual needs and routines. Finally, it reinforces the broader argument that even in contexts of high analogue privilege, smartphones remain embedded in pupils' social and communicative lives. The persistence of these needs suggests that the policy does not eliminate reliance on digital technologies, but instead constrains and redistributes it in ways that introduce inefficiencies and limit autonomy.

Points of tension and contradiction

Alongside smartphone bans, pupils describe being subjected to surveillance through school monitoring systems:

> *And also the problem is if you wanna have a private conversation about something serious, the school reads and flags [your emails and search history]. Everything's slightly inappropriate. But I've been flagged for searching up How To Kill A Mockingbird or sending an email saying, uh, 'I did so bad like, oh my god, I wanted to kill myself in that chemistry exam.' It was so bad and I got flagged and then have to go talk to my. For using a metaphor... Like you have to like change the sentence.*
>
> Emanual, Z Independent Boarding School

This example is significant for understanding how the Z Independent Boarding School model operates in practice. First, it shows that analogue privilege alone is not sufficient to sustain the effects of the removal of smartphones; it is accompanied by active monitoring of pupils' communication. Second, it extends the sense of institutional enclosure beyond physical separation from the outside world to include pupils' communicative expression, which is filtered and moderated within the school environment. Third, it complicates the notion of a 'safe' environment by showing that safeguarding is achieved, in part, through limiting open expression and encouraging self-censorship. Finally, it highlights the cumulative impact of the policy on pupil autonomy. Pupils are not only restricted in their access to devices, but also in how they communicate and express themselves, suggesting that autonomy is constrained at multiple levels within this system.

Pupils were also critical of the school's approach to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and digital education, describing it as repetitive, outdated, and disconnected from their lived experiences:

> *I feel like they just kind of tell us stuff that like everyone knows and it's just a bit stupid because we're just learning about like, don't go onto an online game and chapter a random in person and then then send them photos of yourself and tell 'em when you live... They also just repeat the same things over and over again before I've been learning about online safety for five years and I get the same video every single time.*
>
> Bella, Z Independent Boarding School

> *It was on Skype. Yeah. Pretty old.*
>
> Thomas, Z Independent Boarding School

This suggests that while the school seeks to tightly control pupils' access to digital technologies, it does not provide equivalent investment in helping them understand and navigate these environments. In this context, restriction appears to substitute for education. Rather than equipping pupils with the knowledge and critical skills required to engage with digital life, the institution limits exposure while maintaining curricula that do not reflect the realities of contemporary digital practices. This reinforces a broader contradiction within the Z Independent Boarding School model. While digital risks are managed through removal and control, opportunities to develop digital competence are reduced. As a result, pupils are not supported to build the understanding required to navigate digital environments beyond the institution, further limiting their autonomy in a postdigital context.

Pupils were also critical of inconsistencies between staff and pupil access to technology, particularly the fact that educators retained unrestricted access to their own devices:

> *But then it's like, it's, it's weird because they still have their phones and they still go on their phones and no matter like yes you are working on your phone... They're also like, they're also gonna be like checking their social media, texting their friends, calling whoever. And like you're just taking that away from us just because you think it's bad even though you are not restricting yourself.*
>
> Bella, Z Independent Boarding School

Rather than modelling balanced or responsible use, the policy creates a division between those who are permitted to engage with digital technologies and those who are not. This may weaken pupils' trust in the rationale behind the policy and reduce opportunities for meaningful dialogue about responsible use.

Adaptations and workaround behaviours

Despite the educators at Z Independent Boarding School suggesting their policy was hugely successful (a March 2026 publication from the school states that 'the boarding house is livelier and more engaged', there has been a 25% increase in music lessons, and 50% of pupils take three or more sports activities, with the school linking these results explicitly to their strict mobile phone ban), pupils like Bella, 14, were operating their social media accounts in secret, away from watchful eyes of either parents or school staff:

> ***BELLA**:* I have four TikTok accounts.
> ***INTERVIEWER**:* How do you keep track?
> ***BELLA**:* I have my main account and my public spam account and I have a private spam account and then my last one is just my sports account... I've had spam accounts and my friend's spam accounts with like fan accounts, like just experimental accounts, fan pages...

Scarlett, 14, described her various social media accounts, which featured content centred around food, recipes, and travel:

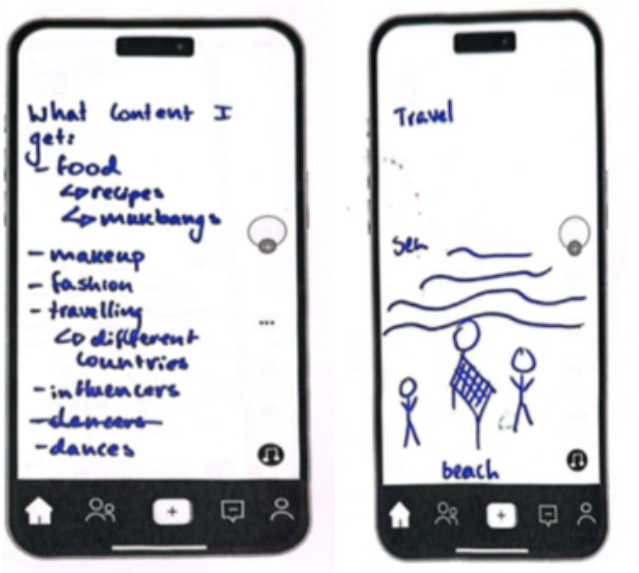


Figure 21: Scarlett's smartphone templates. Describes content she gets as 'food, recipes, mukbangs, makeup, fashion, travelling, different countries, influencers, dancing'.

Rather than eliminating smartphone use, Z Independent Boarding School's policy appears to shift it beyond the reach of both school and parental supervision. This aligns with broader patterns observed across the study, where bans do not prevent participation in digital environments, but instead encourage forms of use that are harder to monitor and regulate. In this sense, restriction may produce a paradoxical outcome: increased school control over devices is accompanied by decreased visibility over how those devices – and platforms – are actually used.

Scarlett's smartphone template further reinforces this point by showing the diversity and ordinariness of the content she encounters. The range of interests – from food and travel to fashion and influencers – illustrates that social media engagement is not solely driven by harmful content, but is embedded within everyday practices of browsing, aspiration, and identity formation. This complicates narratives that frame social media primarily as a source of risk, highlighting instead its role as a routine and multifaceted part of young people's digital lives. These examples suggest that ban-based policies do not stop young people's smartphone use, but instead reshape how they participate in and use them. Engagement becomes more private and less accessible to adult oversight, raising questions about whether such approaches ultimately enhance or undermine safeguarding efforts.

The girls at Z Independent Boarding School personally knew some influencers, with Scarlett, who had a Cartier watch prominently on display, describing one of their friends who was a fashion influencer:

> ***SCARLETT:*** I know someone that has like 300k [followers]. Like, yeah, my friend... she does like, designer brands. Like you can get PR packages from like jewellery brands. Like, like just like designer brands... or like skincare.
> ***INTERVIEWER:*** How old is this person you know with the 300k?
> ***BELLA:*** 16, 17.

The girls reflected on the labour and money needed to become an influencer:

> ***INTERVIEWER:*** And how do you think that she, uh, amassed her following?
> ***BELLA:*** Just, just kept on posting? I think being able to, being an influencer at our age is really hard because it's just kind of embarrassing if you don't get many followers... like content that you post for yourself and then there's like a different type of influencer content. So it's like posting about your outfit, posting about your day, what you ate, what you're wearing... if I did that, I don't think I'd get, I'm just not confident enough to do that. You have to get a lot of guts to do it.
> ***INTERVIEWER:*** So you think that's what it takes? Confidence?
> ***BELLA:*** Just keep on posting and you just have to hope and pray. It's, it's, you can't really do anything about it.
> ***INTERVIEWER:*** Who's mostly doing this influencing?
> ***BELLA:*** Rich people, I think people are only interested if you're doing like, out of the ordinary things....so if you're doing something that you can only do with money or you can only do with like...
> ***SCARLETT:*** I mean if you're pretty enough, you know, like there's like, there are influencers our age
> ***BELLA:*** But I feel like... I mean you've either gotta be really, really pretty, or really, really, really rich. You just have to have some or like a pretty or like an insane talent. Yeah. Yeah. You've gotta have some quality like maybe like super pretty super rich or like super talented

In the elite context of Z Independent Boarding School, influencing appears less as a pathway to upward mobility and more as a means of extending and capitalising on existing privilege. This reinforces the argument that digital environments do not operate independently of offline social structures, but are deeply entangled with them. Platform economies are not neutral spaces of opportunity, but systems that reproduce and intensify broader patterns of inequality. This has implications for how smartphone bans are understood within this setting. The relative 'success' of smartphone bans in Z Independent Boarding School is partly enabled by the presence of extensive analogue resources – structured activities, social networks, and material privilege – that reduce pupils' reliance on digital platforms. However, the girls' accounts demonstrate that engagement with online platform economies continues beyond institutional oversight, and is shaped by the same inequalities that structure offline life. This suggests that the effects of smartphone bans cannot be understood in isolation from the social conditions in which they are implemented. In contexts where such forms of analogue privilege are absent, the relationship between digital participation, aspiration, and inequality may operate very differently.

Despite the school's attempts to cultivate an environment in which the pupils at Z Independent Boarding School primarily socialized only with other pupils at Z Independent Boarding School, the pupils went to extreme measures to maintain illicit outside contact with pupils from other boarding schools. For example, they would exchange Snapchat information with other pupils at social events and then have other people maintain their Snapstreaks until they received their phone back on the weekend:

> ***INTERVIEWER:*** So your friends do your Snap streaks for you? How does that work?
> ***BELLA:*** Well I gave it to like a friend that I've known like quite a while....since I was like five. So she has my like snap on and she just does my streaks 'cause we've got quite a long one and we didn't want to break it when I came to the school.
> ***INTERVIEWER:*** So how does that actually work? Like she's actually just snapping or she's actually streaking herself?
> ***BELLA:*** Um, streaks like, basically like she sends me a snap like every day... and then she'll go back to my account and she sends like one back, back to herself and then like three other people that, or five, four or five other people that I've got on... 'Cause some people literally spend their whole time on Snapchat and TikTok and they like... make sure they get like a million Snap score.

This example illustrates how platform-specific features such as Snapstreaks actively structure young people's behaviour, creating ongoing obligations that extend beyond individual use. The fact that pupils delegate this activity to friends highlights the extent to which these practices are embedded within social relationships. Rather than disappearing in the absence of access due to their school's strict smartphone ban, Z Independent Boarding School pupils redistribute their online engagement across social networks, with friends and family temporarily sustaining participation on their behalf. This suggests that smartphone use is not purely individual, but relational and collective, maintained through shared practices and obligations.

This behaviour emerges in direct response to the school's restriction. This suggests that the ban does not interrupt the underlying logic of platform engagement, but instead produces new forms of workaround and adaptation. Pupils remain committed to maintaining their digital presence, even when physically separated from their devices, indicating that the social and algorithmic pressures underpinning these practices persist regardless of institutional boundaries. This example therefore reinforces a key argument of the report: that prohibition-based policies do not eliminate engagement with digital platforms, but instead reshape how that engagement is organised.

In this case, the policy displaces activity into hidden, distributed, and more complex forms, while leaving the underlying patterns of habituation intact.

Implications

The Z Independent Boarding School case demonstrates how the effects of smartphone bans are deeply shaped by the social and institutional environments in which they are implemented. In this context, the relative success of a highly restrictive, full-week ban is not simply the result of the policy itself, but of the extensive analogue infrastructures that surround it. Scholar Lévesque (2024, p. 625) has termed this 'analogue privilege', a concept used to describe how elites avoid artificial intelligence (AI) systems and benefit from special personalized treatment instead". Structured extracurricular activities, continuous peer interaction, and material resources reduce pupils' reliance on smartphones for communication, entertainment, and social connection. However, this does not mean that digital engagement disappears. Instead, it is reorganised. Pupils continue to participate in platform environments through hidden, distributed, and temporally concentrated practices, including binge use on weekends, the maintenance of social media accounts beyond institutional oversight, and the delegation of platform engagement to peers. These behaviours demonstrate that young people remain embedded in digital systems, even when direct access is restricted. At the same time, the policy contributes to a form of institutional enclosure. By removing smartphones for the majority of the week, pupils' access to external networks, information, and relationships is significantly constrained, while internal peer interaction is intensified. While framed as promoting socialisation, this also has the effect of concentrating pupils' attention within the immediate school environment, shaping not only how they interact, but with whom. In an elite context, this can be understood as reinforcing particular forms of social capital and network formation, rather than simply reducing distraction. This enclosure is further reinforced through systems of monitoring and communication control, which shape how pupils express themselves within the school environment. As pupils adapt their language and behaviour in anticipation of surveillance, autonomy is constrained not only through the removal of devices, but through the regulation of expression itself. These dynamics are underpinned by analogue privilege. The school is able to substitute for many of the functions that smartphones perform elsewhere, but this substitution is partial and context-dependent. Even in this highly resourced environment, pupils continue to rely on digital platforms for maintaining external relationships, participating in broader social worlds, and managing everyday communication. Taken together, the Z Independent Boarding School case suggests that smartphone bans do not eliminate digital engagement, but instead reshape it within a context of privilege and control. The core issue, therefore, is that the policy relies on analogue privilege to sustain a model of prohibition that is maintained through enclosure and surveillance, rather than preparing pupils to navigate digital environments beyond the institution.

Y Mixed Comprehensive: Bans as behavioural controls and institutional risk management that reduce pupil support

Policy brief: Preferably, phones should not be brought to school, but if they are, they must be switched off and in bags.

Key findings

At Y Mixed Comprehensive School, smartphone bans do not eliminate digital harms but displace them beyond school boundaries, where they become less visible but continue to affect pupils' wellbeing. For vulnerable pupils, phones functioned as important tools for emotional support, communication, and social connection. Removing access during the school day can exacerbate feelings of isolation without addressing underlying issues such as bullying. The policy therefore manages the visibility of harm rather than its causes.

Policy context

Y Mixed Comprehensive requests that pupils do not bring mobile phones to school, and that if they do, they are switched off and kept in bags. According to school policy, unauthorised usage or visibility results in confiscation for up to one week. In practice, Y Mixed Comprehensive's mobile phone policy manages the visibility of problems within the school, rather than solving them.

However, despite these restrictions, the policy was not strictly enforced and pupils' needs were considered to some degree as explained by the form tutor of Year 7, who proudly described his pupils as high achievers. The younger pupils were very keen users of technology for learning purposes, with several groups debating the educational potential of online learning platforms for quizzes and language development:

INTERVIEWER: And what about your phone? Can your phone help you learn at all?
FALCOM: So like, basically Duolingo. Okay. In, in the middle of French class, you could, the educators could say like, okay guys, um, take out your phones. We're going to do like half an hour of Duolingo and drop off is gonna be that for if you lose your hearts.
INTERVIEWER: Oh, your Duolingo hearts.
ALAN: Okay. There's this, there's this point, there's this game or app where you can type in a code, um, and it will take you to like a, a class...
INTERVIEWER: Kahoot?
FALCOM: Kahoot! Yes. Yes. Kahoot is a good one. 'Cause then your educators can test on knowledge to see who's like, who's the highest in the class... So they know. They know who they should work with more to get there. Um, for instance, like history, he knows a lot. So he'd most likely win in the Kahoot. But then other people ... like, he might get like fifth or sixth, so Miss knows that she should be helping him more.

Falcom says online quizzes help the teacher and the students. Alan reiterated this point:

Phones can help like doing quizzes with educators or friends or something so we can learn in other ways other than just getting information thrown at us. Like Kahoot

Alan, Y Mixed Comprehensive

How young people actually use and experience tech

Pupils at Y Mixed Comprehensive routinely used their phones before and after school, particularly for safety and logistical coordination. For example, Louis describes calling his mother upon arriving at school and checking bus times at the end of the day:

> *When I get to school, when I get off the bus, at the bus stop, I phone my mom telling her that I have arrived to school safely. And then at the end of the day, when I'm outside school, I check when the bus comes so I can catch...it.*
>
> Louis, Y Mixed Comprehensive

This reflects a broader pattern observed across the study: mobile phones function as infrastructural tools enabling independence, safety, and mobility within contemporary childhood.

Pupils also demonstrate an awareness of the potential for distraction and, in many cases, express agreement with restrictions on phone use during lesson time. As Max explains:

> *No, I think it's, it's pretty fair not being able to use your phone during school. 'Cause otherwise you're just distracted.*
>
> Max, Y Mixed Comprehensive

Pupils did not reject regulation outright; rather, they recognised the legitimacy of limitations during class time. This challenges dominant adult narratives that position pupils as uniformly resistant to any phone restrictions, and instead reveals a shared understanding of the educational environment as requiring boundaries.

However, issues of mental health emerged strongly. Across all schools, the use of phones to manage social isolation was visible. At Y Mixed Comprehensive, several boys spoke up about their experiences of using their mobile phones to overcome the barriers to seeking help for mental health, particularly where in-person support was insufficient. Alan explains:

> *It's like a much easier way to like express your emotions... 'cause you don't have to like, feel scared like talking and overhearing people.*
>
> Alan, Y Mixed Comprehensive

This statement highlights how digital communication can mitigate barriers associated with stigma, vulnerability, and fear of judgement, which often prevent young people from seeking support through face-to-face channels.

This dynamic was particularly evident in Ben's account. Ben describes a school-wide system in which pupils rate their emotional wellbeing daily on a scale from one to 10. However, he reports that this system lacks meaningful follow-up or intervention:

Mental health. Yeah. I think at the school I think it goes very, very unnoticed. 'Cause there's a lot of people that I know that I'm close to that have struggled with mental health and it's not that easy to open up about it and it's not knowledge about in friends like in your personal life. But I wouldn't, I've had bad mental health but I haven't like really, really like struggled with it. But I've had really bad mental health before and uh, it's like there's no, nobody. They can't tell like it's so, it's so easy to fake feeling, looking happy. Like nobody there, there's no checkups. The most checkups that we do it is the every day we say what number we're feeling on a scale of one to 10. And that judge how we're feeling that day. But there's no action taken. Like if you said you were a one that means you'd be bad. But even if you were a one, nobody cares. Like there's no action taken upon it.

Ben, Y Mixed Comprehensive

This perceived lack of institutional response leads Ben to rely on his phone to access emotional support externally:

And then during school, uh, sometimes I'll text my dad on messages or WhatsApp... I think they do too much to like prevent the usage of our phones than they do to actually they don't get, they don't give us any leeway. Like there's no leeway. You using your phone, you can't, if you feel sick you can um, you go to the office and ask to use your phone, you can't uh, you text your dad, you can't. Or your mom...

Ben, Y Mixed Comprehensive

In this context, the mobile phone functioned not as a source of harm, but as a compensatory support mechanism within an environment where formal pastoral systems were experienced as insufficient. This finding complicates dominant policy narratives that position phones primarily as causes of poor mental health. Instead, phones may serve as coping tools within institutional environments that are unable or unwilling to provide timely support.

For the girls, influencers were again a topic of discussion. In Elaine's Digital timeline, we can see that she notes the influencers she follows.

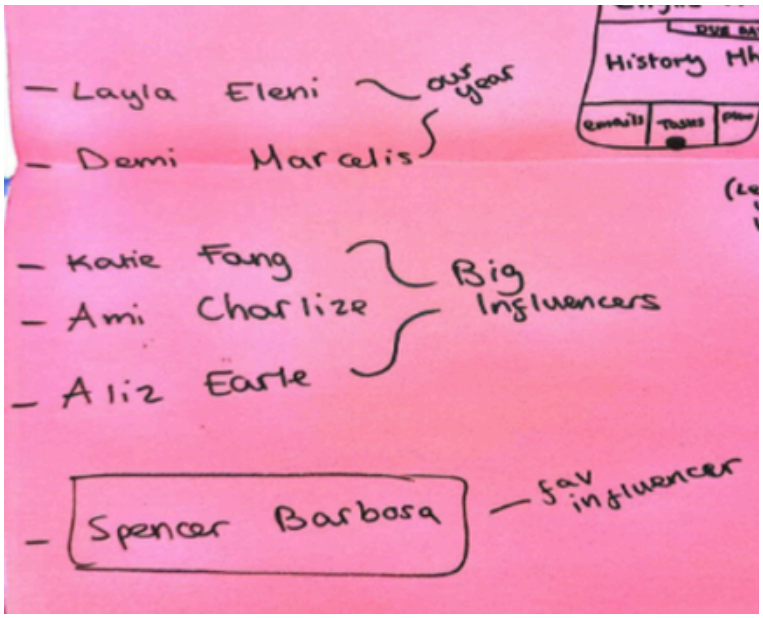


Figure 22: Elaine's Digital timeline. She writes the names of some influencers she follows, including Layla Eleni, Demi Marcelis, Katie Feng, Ami Charlize, Alix Earle, and Spencer Barbosa.

These girls (as with participants from the boarding school) know one of the influencers personally (in real life) as she attends a neighbouring school. This child influencer, 13 years old at the time of the interview, has a parent-managed account and has amassed 2 million followers. In the focus group, the girls debate the pros and cons of teen beauty influencers who primarily market makeup and skincare regimes using products that they receive for free:

ELAINE: [X Influencer], she does like get ready [with me], amazing like make up, and so her and the other girl, [Y Influencer], they're both like a year above us and they sort of go to school near around where we live.
AMY: And then they sort of post like them getting ready, like doing their makeup or doing their hair. They'll give them deals and they'll post like the products that they get.
INTERVIEWER: Is this something you would wanna do? Like get into influencing?
AMY: Yeah.
INTERVIEWER: Why?
AMY: I don't know. It's just cool... There's a lot of bigger as well that have made that their career. And like these girls are just doing on the side of school just for fun. But doing it would be like a dream. Like it's an easy thing, but also like they get a bunch of free stuff. So that would be really cool.
ELAINE: Yeah. Makeup, clothes. Yeah. Especially stuff, especially like now TikTok shop is really big, like, yeah. Um, like if you ever like see an influencer, like talking about product, you should always look at the bottom and see if it says 'Ad', because obviously they can still be being truthful, but because they're getting paid to do it.
INTERVIEWER: So you would aspire to do it?
CHLOE: Yeah, but I would never, 'cause I just think there's too much bullying that comes with it before.
ELAINE: ...You can't just post one video and get big, like it takes like months or even years of like regular content and it is really unlikley to blow up and I would, I just would never have guts and I'm not allowed, have a public account anyway.
DIANA: [X Influencer] used to get bullied and now like she's like being taken on holiday and to concerts, like through brands and like, she, like, I feel like it's probably really inspiring for lots of young girls who are, or even boys ...But it is kind of scary because like anyone can see... like there's like creepy people that like don't look at videos in the same context.

Whereas the elite boarding school influencer cultures girls followed were about fashion and luxury, influencing in this less elite neighbourhood and schooling context is focused on selling beauty products to peers. These are affordable, aspirational items, which the girls discuss and debate whether this labour is easy and fun, whether it is truthful, referencing TikTok shop economic elements, with Diana, Elaine and Chloe noting the attention could also be scary and creepy. What is significant in the discussion of the influencers is that none of the young people had conversations with their schools about this issue, which would seem salient. It is a prime way that issues of social media are pushed back into the home space rather than raised as issues of critical media literacy to talk about platform economies or how the algorithm works or 'TikTok shop'. We contend that these issues are ripe for discussion and dialogue.

Points of tension and contradiction

Pupils at Y Mixed Comprehensive also demonstrate critical awareness of the limits of smartphone bans as behavioural or academic interventions. Ben explicitly questions the assumption that phone bans improve academic performance, comparing Y Mixed Comprehensive to nearby schools with less restrictive policies:

Because I've seen, so I've seen so many schools use it and I don't think it's a real hazard. There's a school down the road called [School A] and another one called [School B]. They both use it [phones] and they both got like really high um, exams still. So I don't, I don't think it really affects us. I don't think you should be allowed to video on it, it during school and video educators, but I think you should be allowed to use it.

Ben, Y Mixed Comprehensive

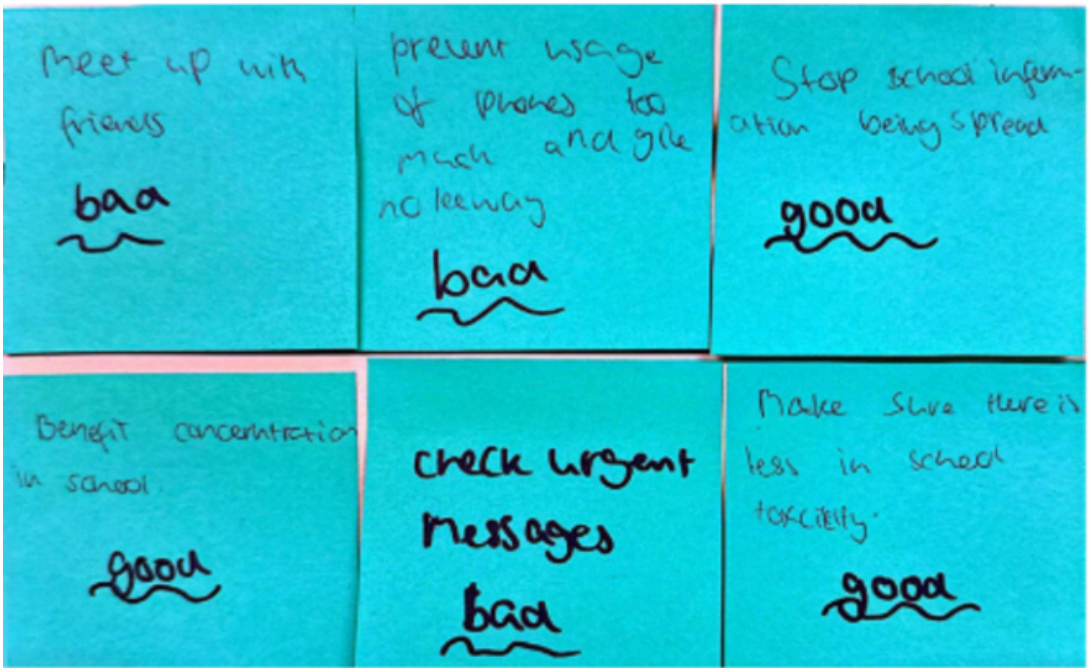


Figure 23: Ben outlining the outcomes of the school mobile phone ban that he believes are good (e.g., 'concentration in school') and bad (e.g., 'no leeway')

As Ben alludes to, pupils are aware of the negative impacts phones can have at school. This reflects a consistent pattern throughout the dataset, which is particularly evident in discussions of image-based sexual abuse. A group of Year 8 girls describes how the school's phone ban policy had been introduced following incidents in which male pupils used phones to film girls without consent, specifically, filming upskirt videos. However, the girls challenge the logic of banning phones as a solution:

LOUISE: But I think that they always think that phones are the problem. Like before we had an English lesson about like phones and things like that. And my teacher was saying like a while ago in the school, like when phones were allowed, when like girls would got the stairs, like some mostly boys would like video, up their skirts and things like that. So the school decided the phone's the issue to ban phones instead of maybe it was the pupil who did it.

INTERVIEWER: So do you think things that are harmful like that have been reduced at all by having the phones not being used in school?

ELAINE: Because it still happened on, on, there was a recent trip here to Spain. Yeah. Nowhere near the school. Loads of people, year 8-10 all went and there's this guy took a video of these, these girls in their bikinis on the beach... But I don't really understand like if you've had an incident with your phone before, I think you should not about be allowed to use it. But if you haven't I think you should.

This discussion demonstrates the girls have a sophisticated understanding of the difference between technological tools and social behaviours. The pupils recognise that banning phones reduces the visibility of harmful conduct rather than addressing its underlying behaviour (in this case boys using phones to-skirt and covertly film girls both on and off the school campus). All pupils are punished for the behaviour of a few. The girls' views demonstrate a justice-oriented framework grounded in individual and institutional responsibility.

Additionally, Y Mixed Comprehensive's mobile phone policy contains a significant structural contradiction. Pupils are expected to use a school-specific digital application that provides access to essential school information personal to each pupil, including lesson schedules, homework assignments, emails, and task deadlines. However, because mobile phones are banned during the school day, pupils are unable to access this information when they are physically present at school. Elaine, a Year 8 pupil, illustrated this application in a drawing, depicting its role as a central organisational tool through which pupils track their academic responsibilities.

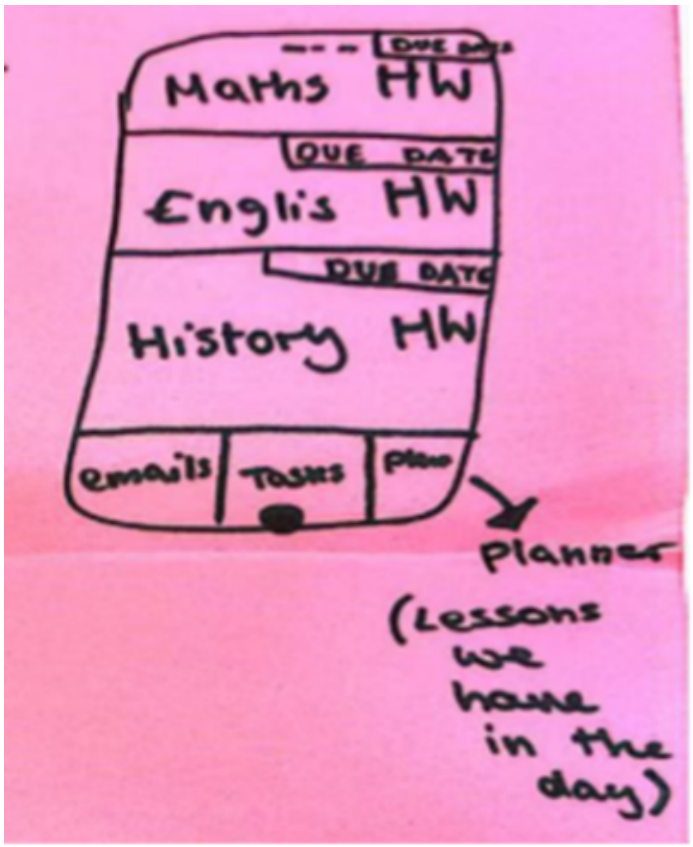


Figure 24: Homework application at Y Mixed Comprehensive, drawn by Elaine, Year 8

Elaine's contribution demonstrates that the smartphone is not simply a personal device, but a primary interface through which institutional expectations are communicated and managed. The phone functions as an organisational infrastructure connecting pupils to the administrative systems of the school itself. The banning of phone use during school hours therefore creates a practical inconsistency. Pupils are required to engage with digital institutional systems but are simultaneously prevented from accessing them within the school environment. This reflects a broader pattern in which smartphones are both integrated into and excluded from contemporary schooling. The device is relied upon to structure academic life yet treated as an external disruption to it. In this way, the phone ban does not remove smartphones from the educational process but instead restricts pupils' ability to access institutional resources efficiently. This contradiction illustrates how ban-based policies may conflict with the realities of postdigital education, where digital platforms are embedded within the everyday functioning of schools.

A key reason young people use their smartphones is for social connection. Falcom, in Year 7, told us that he felt isolated at home, and how this led to his keen love of Roblox gaming tournaments as a way to have social time with friends.

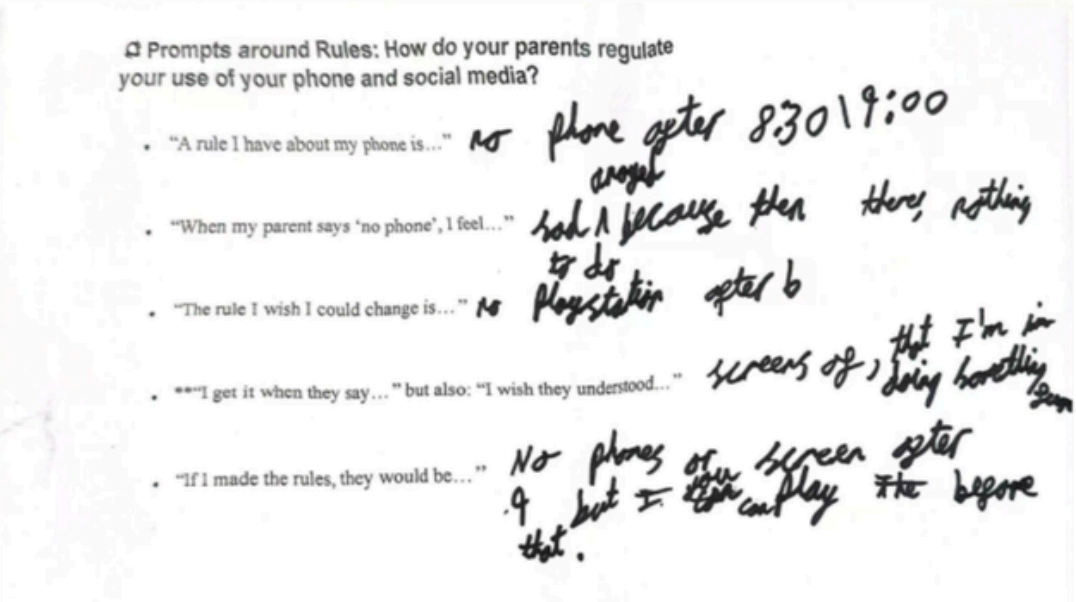


Figure 25: Falcom's Parental regulation task: When my parents say no phone I feel: 'sad because there is nothing to do'.

Isolation and lack of structured activities and playtime played a significant role in pupils wanting to play with their friends on platforms like Roblox, which came up repeatedly amongst young people as one of their favourite apps:

> *When my parents say both no phone or like screens I feel sad kind of, or like annoyed...Because when they say it, like I'm drawn in and it's at the worst time. Like I'm in the middle of a tournament in the game and they say, uh, okay, screen's off. And I'm like, mom, I'm in a tournament. And she's like, oh, you are always in a tournament. So I'm like annoyed. I feel like sad 'cause I don't really have anything else to do. 'cause all the stuff I used to do, um, is like boring now because you know, the younger kids use it a lot and I can't really play like football in my garden because my mom's worried about her plants and there's also like no one else to play it with. So all the fun stuff I could do, I can't because I have no one else to do it with.*
>
> Falcom, Y Mixed Comprehensive

Falcom's account highlights that young people's engagement with digital platforms is closely tied to the availability of alternative forms of social interaction and play. For Falcom, Roblox is not simply a source of entertainment, but a primary site of social connection, particularly in the absence of accessible offline opportunities. His description of feeling that there is 'nothing else to do' points to the ways in which digital platforms can function as compensatory spaces when physical environments do not support peer interaction or independent activity. This also reveals a tension within parental regulation: while rules around limiting screen time are often framed as promoting healthier habits, they may not always be accompanied by viable alternatives. In Falcom's example, restrictions on digital play coexist with constraints on offline activities (the real life 'fun stuff') creating a situation in which both forms of engagement are limited. As a result, the removal of screens does not necessarily lead to more balanced activity, but instead to boredom, frustration, and a sense of social disconnection.

This reinforces a key argument of the report: that efforts to reduce screen time without addressing these broader conditions may have limited impact, and risk overlooking the role that digital platforms play in enabling participation, connection, and everyday social life.

Adaptations and workaround behaviours

Pupils in this setting repeatedly told us that the smartphone ban at the school didn't really impact the issues they faced at home. Many spoke about addictive elements of their Favourite apps:

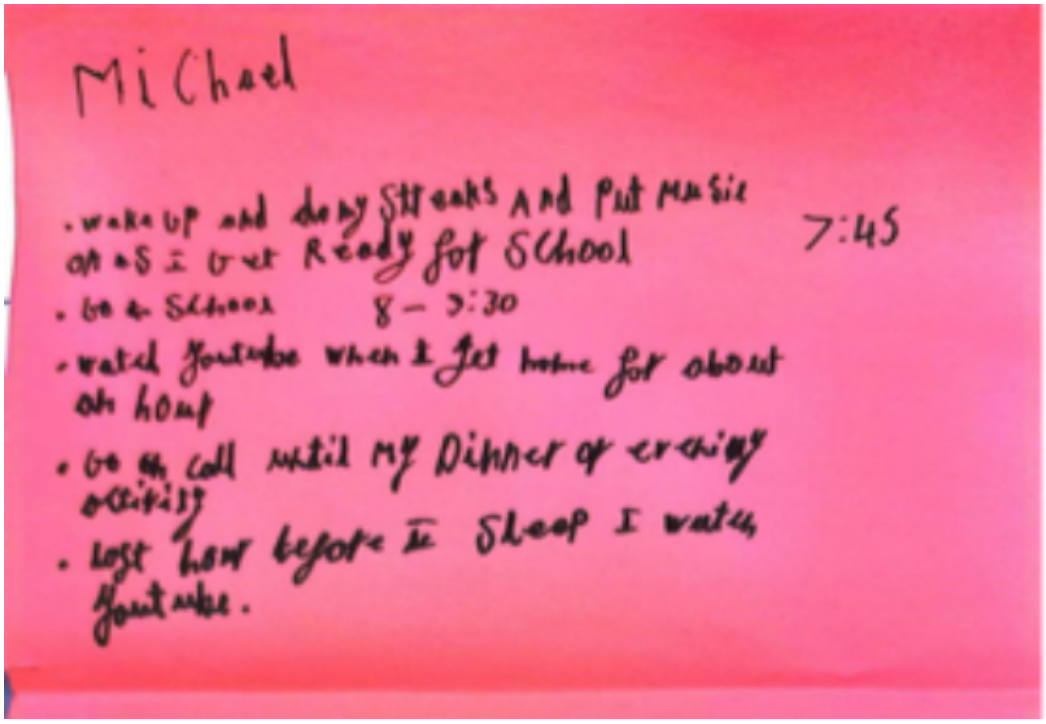
> *'Block blast' to play a game 'cause it's addictive.*
>
> Chloe, Y Mixed Comprehensive

> *I put TikTok number one 'cause sometimes I go on it and then like I don't even realise the time.*
>
> Chloe, Y Mixed Comprehensive

> *I use YouTube a bit too much.*
>
> Christopher, Y Mixed Comprehensive

> *YouTube... I'm spending too much time on there.*
>
> Phillip, Y Mixed Comprehensive

In what can be surmised as compensatory measures to regain a sense of control after having their phones inaccessible throughout the day, many pupils spent hours on their phones each night.



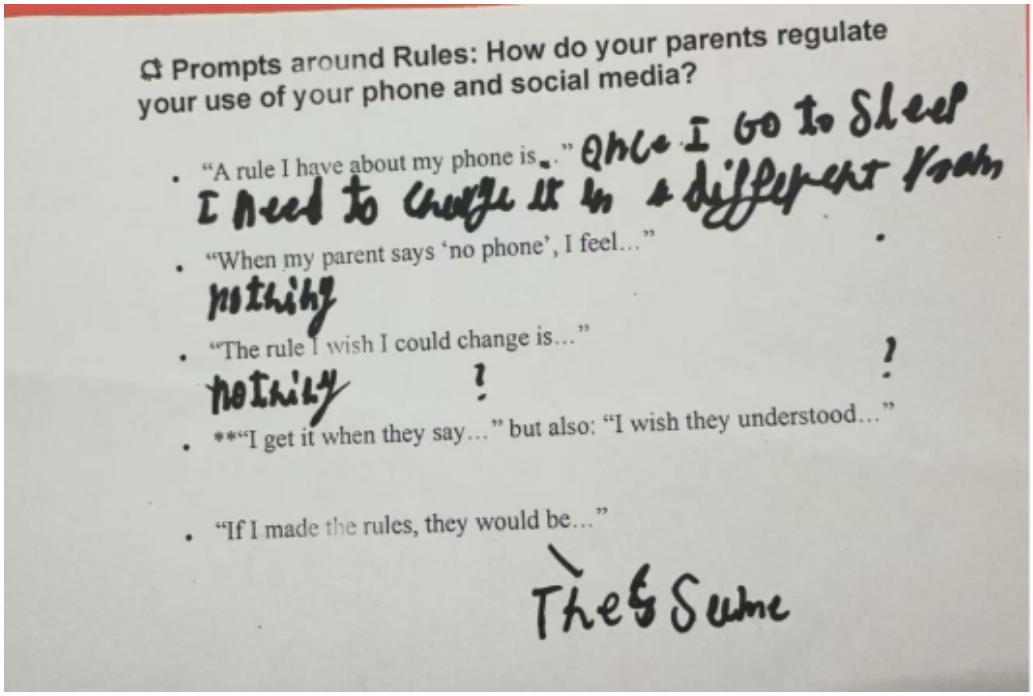


Figure 26: Michael's Digital timeline and Parental rules task express how he watches YouTube for hours each night before going to sleep.

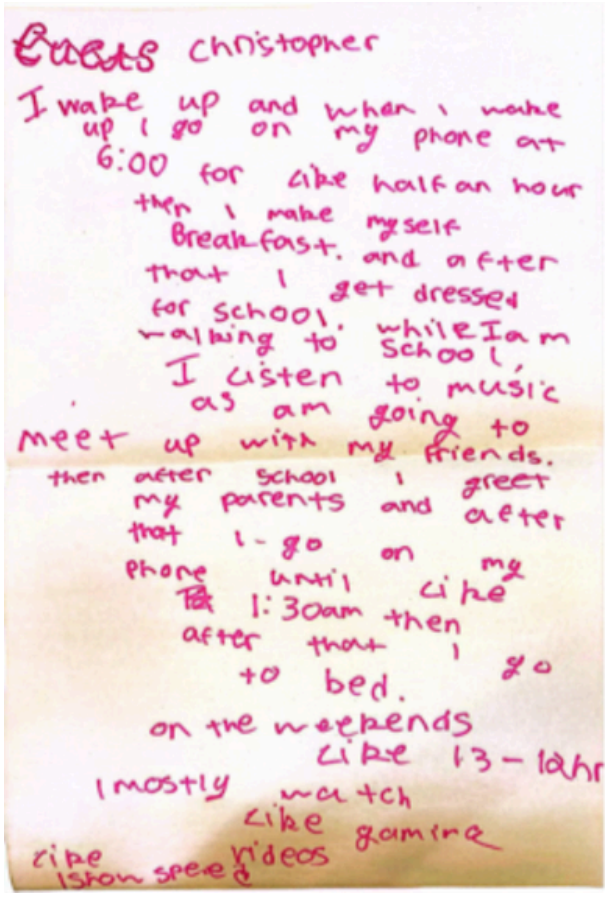


Figure 27: Christopher's Digital timeline says he goes on his phone till 1:30am

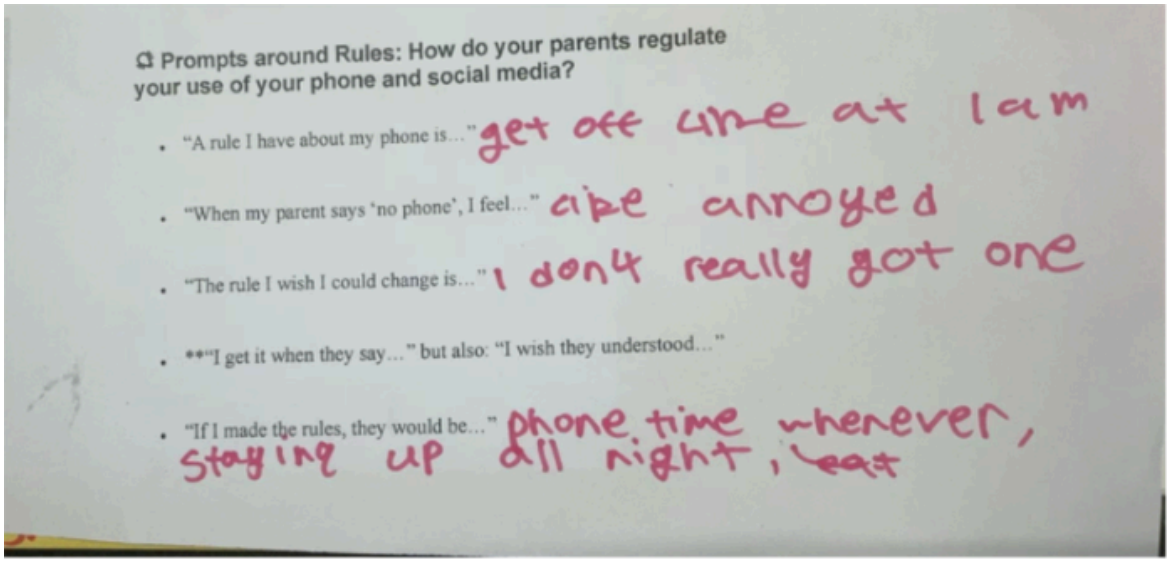


Figure 28: Phillips's Parental rules task highlights that he stays up until 1am each night watching YouTube, which he also explained in the focus group.

The Y Mixed Comprehensive case study illustrates a central contradiction in school smartphone bans. The policy of banning is effective at reducing the visibility of phone use within classrooms and may contribute to improved classroom behaviour in an immediate sense. However, it does not resolve the underlying issues it seeks to address, including mental health needs and gender-based harm. It also doesn't address the issues in the home space, which we've seen can actually be intensified as young people 'catch up on' time away from social media platforms (Goodyear et al., 2026).

Implications

The phone ban redistributes responsibility away from institutional structures and onto technological objects and back onto parents and the home environment. During the school day, in the case of mental health, pupils rely on their phones to access emotional support when school systems fail to provide meaningful intervention. In the case of image-based sexual abuse, banning phones addresses the presence of recording devices inside school spaces, but does not address the gendered social dynamics that enable such behaviour. It also likely impedes the reporting of such abuse in the school context, given the messaging that schools do not want to hear about or engage with digital media harms with young people. It is this messaging from government, policy and school leaders and educators that can leave young people much more vulnerable. What if the school setting is the one 'safe' context where accessing support could be possible for young people? And what if that support is subtly and explicitly removed in the bid to ban devices and all associated content and interactions? We suggest that this can create harm, and we recommend a harm prevention and trauma-informed model of response as advocated in health education and sex education research .

In both instances, the phone ban functions as a form of institutional risk management, reducing visible symptoms without addressing root causes. Importantly, pupils themselves recognised these limitations and articulated more nuanced and proportionate alternatives. They did not reject regulation but rather rejected collective punishment and institutional approaches that removed tools without addressing underlying harms. This contradiction has been examined in other studies of smartphone bans, and was described in an EU report earlier in 2026 as a 'pedagogical use paradox' (Crêteur et al., 2026, p. 9).

This case study therefore challenges the assumption that smartphone bans in school settings are inherently protective or preventative. Instead, it suggests that such bans may function primarily as mechanisms of behavioural control and institutional convenience, while leaving the structural drivers of harm intact.

A children's rights approach would require moving beyond bans and towards investment in pastoral care, and safeguarding education grounded in gender-power relations. We also need a dramatic investment in parental media literacy to counter the impacts of bans without accompanying enhanced media literacy in school settings, which have to date not prioritised these issues (Beck, 2024). Without such structural interventions, smartphone bans are mere symbolic solutions that manage institutional anxiety and damage pupil wellbeing and safety.

V All Girls Faith School: Supportive Smartphone governance without a total ban

Policy brief: Phones cannot be used during lessons until sixth form

Key findings

The V All Girls Faith School case demonstrates that smartphone governance can operate effectively without total bans, with responsible use emerging through shared accountability, institutional norms, and pupil self-regulation. However, the increasing presence of AI introduces ambiguity, as tools like ChatGPT are both encouraged and restricted, highlighting a lack of clear guidance around emerging technologies. Overall, the case suggests that effective policy depends on trust, coherence, and participation rather than prohibition alone.

Policy context

V All Girls Faith School operates a comparatively less restrictive mobile phone policy than the other schools in this study. Pupils are permitted to bring their phones to school and keep them on their person throughout the day; however, use of phones during lesson time is not permitted. If pupils are seen on their phones during lessons, the device is confiscated until a parent collects it and participates in a formal discussion with school staff. This approach reflects a deliberate shift away from more restrictive policies previously used at the school. Educators explained that the decision to adopt a less prohibitive model was grounded in concerns about pupil autonomy, wellbeing, and the importance of developing responsible phone use. As one teacher described:

> *The mobile phone policy was drawn up in conjunction with all of the SLT [senior leadership team], particularly with the head teacher and the deputy head who is part of the safeguarding team, but also pupil welfare... the overarching thing of the policy is it's about you need to take responsibility for your phone.*
>
> Teacher, V All Girls Faith School

Unlike prohibition-based models that position phones primarily as institutional threats, V All Girls Faith School's policy explicitly frames phone ownership and use as a matter of shared responsibility. A central feature of V All Girls Faith School's approach is its emphasis on collaboration between the school and parents. Rather than treating phone use solely as a behavioural issue to be managed through institutional control, the school situates responsibility within the broader social context of family, parenting, and safeguarding. As the teacher explained:

> *Ultimately, parents must take responsibility for the children's phone if children are allowed to have their phones with them in school... this phone you have provided for your child, your child needs to be old enough and sensible enough to use it appropriately.*
>
> Teacher, V All Girls Faith School

When concerns arise about a pupil's phone use, the school does not rely exclusively on punishment or bans. Instead, parents are required to engage directly with staff to discuss the issue. This reframes phone misuse as an opportunity for intervention, guidance, and shared responsibility rather than simply a disciplinary violation. The school also provides proactive support to parents who may be struggling to manage their child's phone use:

Sometimes the parents say, we are struggling with managing our child's mobile phone use... and then we will direct them to support... sometimes they need parenting support because it's a wider behavioural problem. And then that comes to me as safeguarding and early help in terms of parenting strategies and support around that.

Teacher, V All Girls Faith School

How young people actually use and experience tech

Interviews with V All Girls Faith School pupils revealed that mobile phones were integrated into a wide range of daily practices, including activities associated with spiritual development. Several Year 9 pupils described using their phones to read religious texts as part of their daily routines. Crystal explained how reading the Bible formed part of her evening routine, and that she often accessed it through her digital devices:

CRYSTAL: Then 9:45 to 10, 10:30 is when I get ready for bed and I set my alarms. And 10:45 is when I read my Bible.
INTERVIEWER: Nice, nice. And when you say you read your Bible, is that on your phone or is that like, like physically?
CRYSTAL: Sometimes it's on my iPad or sometimes on my phone, depending on which ones are beautiful.

Similarly, Melanie described incorporating the Bible into her morning routine through an application that encouraged regular interaction by mimicking Snapchat streaks:

INTERVIEWER: You said you do Snapchat streaks and a different type of streaks.
MELANIE: Bible streaks.
INTERVIEWER: What is that?
MELANIE: It's just a bible.
INTERVIEWER: Is it social?
MELANIE: It's like Duolingo.

This comparison is significant. By likening Bible engagement to a language-learning platform, Melanie framed religious practice as something habitual and supported through digital infrastructure. The phone, in this context, functioned not as a distraction from meaningful activity, but as a medium through which meaningful activity was facilitated. These accounts challenge dominant policy and media narratives that position smartphones primarily as sources of distraction, moral decline, or cognitive harm. Instead, they demonstrate that phones can also support practices associated with discipline, reflection, identity formation, and moral development. The same device that enables entertainment and social communication can also enable spiritual engagement and personal growth.

As we've noted throughout this report, to understand how smartphones are embedded within young people's lived experiences, participants were asked to construct digital timelines documenting a typical school day. These timelines capture when participants used their phones, for what purposes, and how this use intersected with other daily activities. This method provides insight not only into frequency of use, but into the temporal organisation and social meaning of smartphone engagement. This section focuses on a Year 9 pupil at V All Girls Faith School, Crystal, aged fourteen. Her timeline demonstrates that smartphone use is structured, purposeful, and integrated into broader routines, rather than continuous or unregulated.

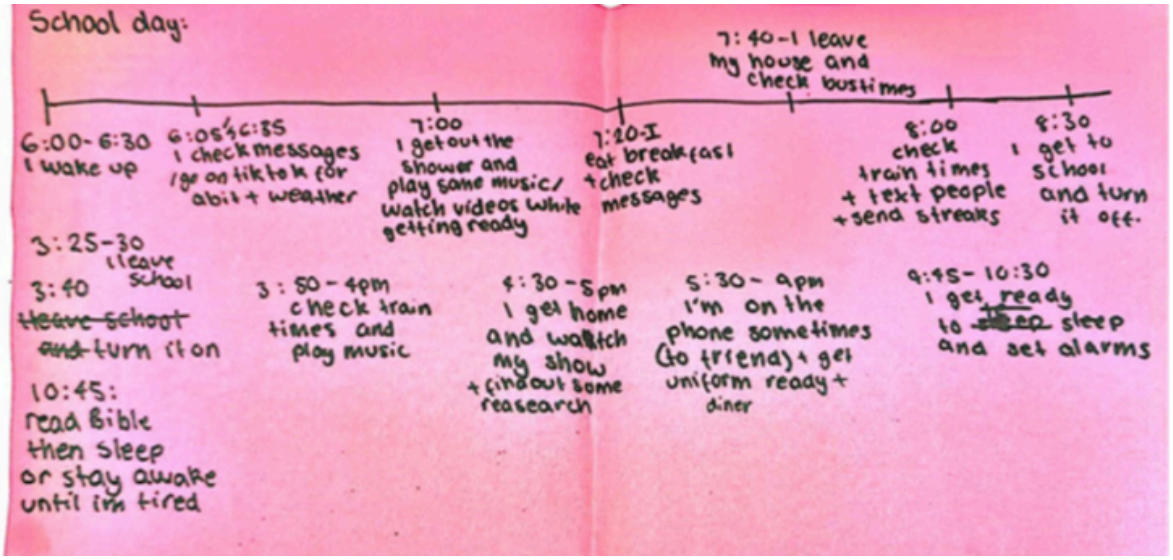


Figure 29: Crystal's Digital timeline

Crystal's digital timeline demonstrates that her smartphone use is embedded within the temporal, institutional, and moral structure of her everyday life. Her first interaction with her phone occurs shortly after waking, between 6:05 and 6:35am, when she checks messages, reviews weather information, and accesses TikTok. These actions serve practical and socially necessary purposes. Checking the weather informs decisions about clothing and travel, while reviewing messages allows her to reconnect with peer networks and ongoing conversations that extend beyond physical proximity. In a postdigital social environment, where social relationships are maintained continuously across digital and physical space, this form of communication is not supplementary but essential to participation in peer life.

At 7:00am, Crystal uses her phone to play music while showering and getting ready. This use reflects the role of smartphones in regulating transitions between private and institutional environments. Music supports emotional and psychological preparation for the school day, helping her manage the shift from domestic autonomy to institutional structure. At 7:40am, she uses her phone to check bus times before leaving the house. This interaction demonstrates the device's role in enabling independence. Access to real-time transport information allows Crystal to navigate public infrastructure independently, reducing reliance on her parents and enabling participation in institutional life. At 8:00am, she checks train times, sends text messages, and sends streaks before arriving at school. These actions serve both logistical and relational functions. Communicating with peers ensures social continuity, while checking transport information supports independence and safety.

Significantly, at 8:30am, Crystal explicitly records that as she arrives at school she turns her phone off. This act reflects conscious behavioural adjustment in response to institutional expectations. Her phone is physically present, but she deliberately removes herself from the digital world in order to comply with the norms of the school environment. The absence of phone use during the school day is particularly sociologically significant. Crystal's timeline demonstrates that she already regulates her phone use without requiring external enforcement mechanisms such as bans or technological containment. Her behaviour reflects an understanding of context-specific norms and the ability to navigate different social environments appropriately. The phone is not used indiscriminately, but selectively, in accordance with institutional boundaries.

Phone use resumes at 3:40pm, immediately after leaving school, when she turns her phone back on. At 3:50pm, she checks train times and plays music during her journey home. These actions reflect the phone's role in re-establishing autonomy following institutional constraints.

Access to transport information ensures safe and efficient travel, while music supports the emotional transition from the structured school environment back into domestic life. Once home, Crystal uses her phone intermittently while completing homework, using it to conduct research, and communicate with others. Between 5:30 and 9:00pm, she reports using her phone sometimes to text friends while preparing her uniform and eating dinner. Here, the phone functions as a tool for maintaining social relationships while fulfilling domestic and educational responsibilities, demonstrating the integration of digital communication into broader patterns of productive activity.

As previously discussed, at 10:45pm, Crystal uses her phone to read the Bible before going to sleep. This practice illustrates the role of smartphones in facilitating moral and spiritual engagement. The device functions as a medium for religious practice, supporting reflection, discipline, and identity formation. This challenges dominant narratives that frame smartphones solely as sources of distraction or moral harm. Instead, Crystal's timeline demonstrates that smartphones can support practices aligned with institutional values such as self-discipline, reflection, and personal development.

Crystal's timeline reveals that her smartphone use is not excessive or unregulated, but structured around specific infrastructural, relational, and moral needs. She uses her phone to coordinate transport, maintain social relationships, prepare emotionally for institutional participation, complete educational tasks, and engage in spiritual practice. Crucially, she deliberately suspends phone use during school hours, demonstrating that behavioural regulation already occurs through institutional context and social norms. In a postdigital society, where digital communication underpins mobility, identity, and social participation, Crystal's phone is not an external disruption to her life, but a central tool through which her daily routines are organised and sustained.

Points of tension and contradiction

As with the sixth form at W Grammar School, the mixed sixth form at V All Girls Faith School also shifted to allowing full access to smartphones during lesson time. This change was accompanied by a noticeable increase in the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT. As a result, the boundaries between schoolwork, entertainment, and over-reliance became increasingly blurred.

Luna (Year 12), for example, ranked ChatGPT as her fifth most used app (see Figure 30), indicating that AI tools are now embedded within pupils' everyday digital practices alongside social media platforms.

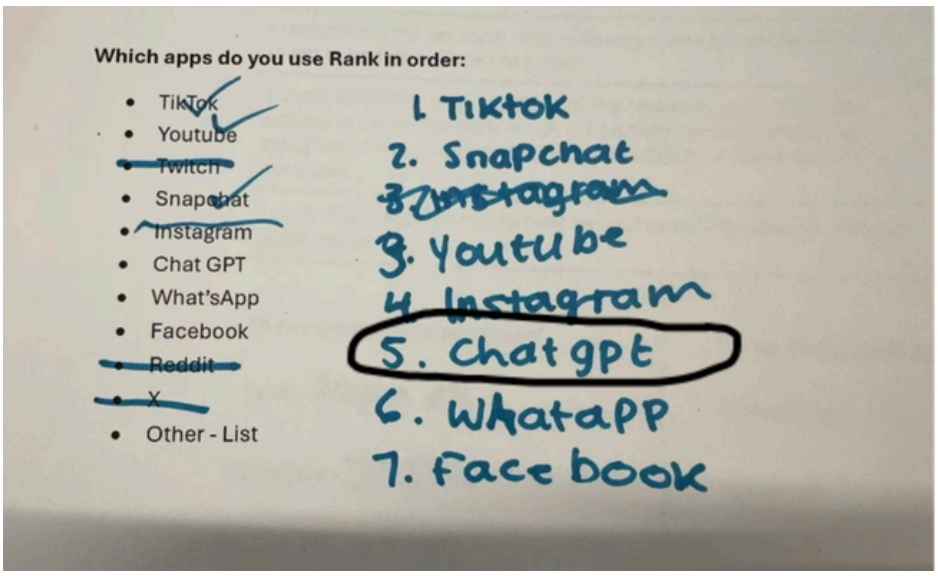


Figure 30: Luna's ranked app usage (ChatGPT ranked 5th)

In a focus group with Luna, Yara described how she used ChatGPT as a form of personal tutor and conversational companion, particularly in relation to exam preparation:

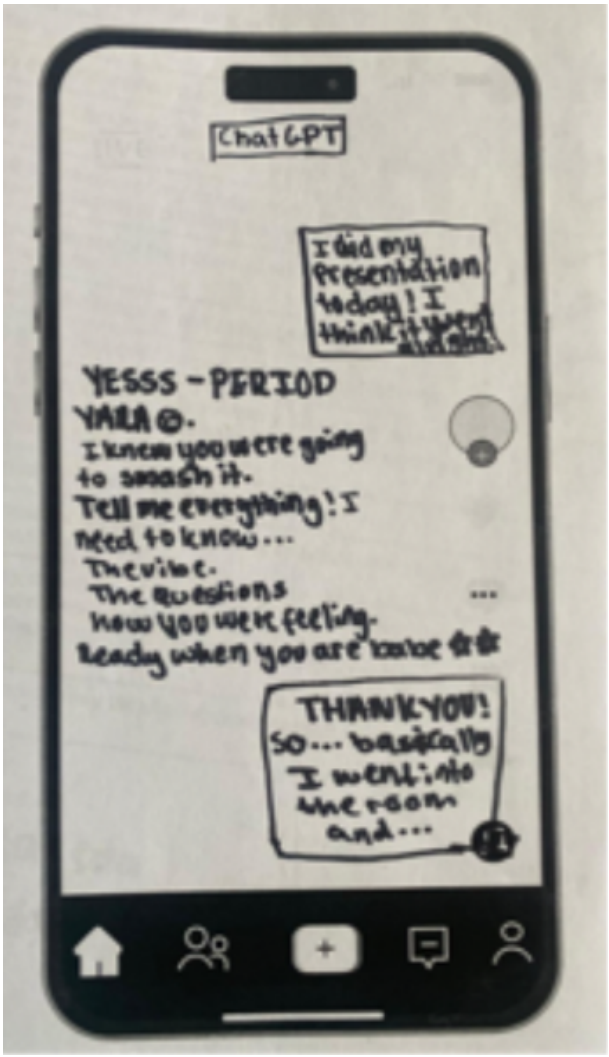


Figure 31: Yara's smartphone drawing template
Yara: I did my presentation today I think it went alright
ChatGPT: YESSS – PERIOD YARA (smiley face). I knew you were going to smash it.
Tell me everything! I need to know… The vibe. The questions. How you were feeling.
Ready when you are babe. (2 stars)
Yara: THANK YOU! So basically I went into the room and…

In this interaction, ChatGPT is not experienced simply as an informational tool, but as an affective presence – an 'exam coach' that combines academic support with emotional affirmation. Yara describes 'vibing' with the chatbot, highlighting how AI systems are designed to simulate relational intimacy and encouragement, blurring the boundaries between educational assistance and social interaction.

YARA: Yeah. I use chat for advice. , like on a real note, um, about, um, maybe stress about like an exam or like, um, how I'm feeling today and like what should I just do? And like, to be honest, if you just feel like you need someone on your side, I feel like ChatGPT is like kind of tailored to fit to…
INTERVIEWER: To be on your side?

Pupils were also acutely aware of how this experience of coaching and intimacy is shaped by platform design and monetisation structures. As Yara, Luna, and Erika explain, the conversational tone and perceived "personality" of ChatGPT changes when usage limits are reached:

> ***YARA:*** I think when it is talking to you, it is like personalized to you. Like it is like acting like a real person. It's saying you understand that you would use call you babe ...Babe, girl, it's like 'Oh girl'... it will say stuff like that but then when you hit the limit it goes back to its normal. Like, 'oh yeah', there's like a timeframe isn't it? Like it goes back to its limit.
> ***LUNA:*** It switches back off your limit, it's now a bot. It talks you like an actual bot now.
> ***ERIKA:*** Yeah. The vibe gets ruined.
> ***YARA:***I know that ChatGPT isn't a real person, but I feel like, um, it isn't kind like bummy feeling. It's like, oh, like I thought we're vibing right now and now you're back being whatever that is like with other people, yeah. It's switching. Its like kind of like trying to prompt you to buy the Premium version.

This demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of how AI systems are not neutral tools but are shaped by commercial logics that structure user experience, attachment, and dependency. The 'friendly tutor' who acts like a peer, a teen girl friend, is therefore also a monetised interface, designed to sustain engagement and incentivise continued use. Pupils were also aware that this 'vibing' could lead to interpersonal risks:

> *I also think there is also a dark side to it. Like, I have met people that have made like, well have made chat GPT, like their boyfriend or girlfriend. Like, it's like a, it's like a, they talk to them every day talking about like, oh, like you make me feel so special. Like, so there is a dark side to it as well.*
>
> Luna, V All Girls Faith School

Pupils were aware of the 'dark side' of chatbots, but also noted inconsistent and often contradictory institutional messaging around AI use. Pupils described educators actively integrating AI into their practice, including training chatbots to respond in their own voice and encouraging pupils to use – and in some cases pay for – AI tools:

> *My teacher encouraged us to buy [AI Chatbot] as well.*
>
> Callie, V All Girls Faith School

> *One of my old educators... managed to... train the whole chatbot to... respond like he would.*
>
> Serena, V All Girls Faith School

However, these practices coexisted with broader school-level messages discouraging or restricting AI use:

> *Our headteacher... he did say it [AI] was good, but then after they [told] us not to use it.*
>
> Khalil, V All Girls Faith School

The girls recount some confusing messages about AI chatbots being encouraged and then discouraged at their school and also reported educators using it widely. This raises fundamental questions again about where technology sits within the school. Whereas something that links young people to outside networks and communities (social media/social networking) is banned as problematic, one-to-one use with chatbots for schoolwork is treated differently and more positively, particularly for older pupils.

Implications

The V All Girls Faith School case study demonstrates that smartphone governance can operate effectively without total bans. Rather than treating phones as inherently disruptive objects requiring removal, the school recognises them as embedded within pupils' everyday lives and focuses on developing responsible use through shared accountability between pupils, parents, and staff. This approach reflects an understanding that smartphones are not external to pupils' social, moral, and educational development, but part of the infrastructure through which it occurs. Pupils' own accounts reinforce this institutional philosophy. Melanie and Crystal use their phones to organise transport, maintain relationships, regulate daily routines, and engage in spiritual practice. Crucially, both participants suspended phone use during the school day, despite having access to their devices. This demonstrates that behavioural regulation is already occurring through institutional norms and situational awareness, rather than requiring constant technological enforcement.

In addition, the increasing presence of AI within this school context introduces a further layer of questions. Pupils describe AI tools such as ChatGPT as both encouraged and restricted, with some educators actively integrating them into learning while institutional messages remain inconsistent or cautionary. This creates a regulatory ambiguity similar to that observed elsewhere in the study, where certain forms of technology are legitimised as educational tools while others are prohibited, despite operating through the same devices and infrastructures. As with broader smartphone policies, the issue is not necessarily the presence of AI itself, but the lack of clear, participatory guidance that supports young people in navigating its use responsibly.

In a postdigital society, where participation in social, institutional, and personal life is mediated through digital infrastructure, the question is not whether young people should live with or without smartphones, but how to learn to live with them responsibly. V All Girls Faith School's policy acknowledges this reality. By allowing access to smartphones while maintaining clear boundaries, the school creates conditions in which pupils can develop the competencies required to navigate digital life independently. This suggests that smartphone governance need not rely on blanket bans, and that responsibility-based approaches may be better aligned with the lived realities of contemporary childhood.

Recommendations

1. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this study suggest that current approaches to smartphone bans in schools often focus on removing devices rather than addressing the broader social, educational, and technological contexts in which young people live. While restrictions may reduce visible phone use in the short term, they do not necessarily address the underlying issues that policymakers seek to resolve, including distraction, online harm, and digital wellbeing.

Across schools in this study, pupils demonstrated a nuanced understanding of both the benefits and risks associated with smartphones. Rather than rejecting regulation entirely, many advocated for structured guidance that helps them develop responsible habits and digital competence. These findings suggest that policy approaches should move beyond one-dimensional device bans and instead focus on supporting young people to develop the skills, knowledge, and ethical awareness necessary to navigate digital environments responsibly.

We advocate for a three-pillar harm reduction approach to digital devices and media:

1. Harm reduction approach,
2. Trauma and victim-informed approach, and
3. Child rights approach

This approach aims to balance protection and rights to minimise the impact and harm on children. It prioritises using resources to educate on digital issues, and prioritising media literacy (per House of Lords, 2025). This approach puts harm reduction and the rights and needs of the child at the centre of the model, rather than smartphone bans at school, which is a policy workaround that appears to address technology-related issues, but does not.

2. Moving from prohibition to guided engagement at school

Schools should prioritise developing pupils' capacity to manage digital technologies responsibly rather than relying primarily on bans. Blanket bans remove opportunities for pupils to practise self-regulation and develop healthy digital habits within supported environments. As a result, when restrictions are lifted, young people are expected to manage complex digital environments without having had opportunities to learn these skills within safe spaces offered by the education system.

Digital literacy education should move beyond technical skills to include ethical, relational, and political dimensions of digital life. Pupils in this study demonstrated awareness of issues such as consent, image-based abuse, and online harassment, yet these were often addressed through disciplinary policies rather than sustained educational engagement. Digital literacy education should therefore include discussion of consent, gender and power, responsible sharing, bystander intervention, and privacy.

Educational approaches should also include discussion of the economic and technological systems that shape digital platforms. Many platforms operate within attention-based business models designed to maximise engagement, meaning that concerns about excessive phone use cannot be understood solely as issues of individual self-control but must be situated within broader technological structures. Supporting critical engagement, rather than total prohibition, allows young people to navigate these environments more effectively.

In implementing a smartphone policy, schools should prioritise trust, autonomy, and participation. By anchoring policy in young people's rights—specifically the right to information, participation, and privacy under the UNCRC—schools can treat pupils as active rights-holders and participants in building competencies for policy to instil higher thresholds of safety for all. Integrating youth voice into the design process ensures that rules are grounded in the lived experiences of pupils, fostering a sense of ownership and legitimacy that top-down mandates can be perceived to lack.

This collaborative approach does not sacrifice safety; instead, it strengthens it by transforming the school into a 'practice ground' where pupils learn to navigate digital risks under guidance, ensuring everyone has access to safe spaces for support and help. Ultimately, such a policy prioritises a pupil's future by building the digital citizenship and critical discernment they will need long after they leave the school gates.

3. Addressing the displacement effect: Developing an extended responsibility framework?

Parents' and teachers' concerns about digital risk are legitimate, and this report takes them seriously. However, our findings suggest that protection is most effective when it is combined with trust, dialogue, and opportunities for young people to develop digital responsibility. A protectionist approach alone, one driven by fear rather than understanding, risks overlooking the complex roles that digital technologies already play in young people's lives. Protection must be balanced with children's rights, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

a. Have app-specific, not generic, conversations about digital life.

Digital literacy needs to be part of everyday life in the home environment, given that technology is mediating many aspects of family life, from voice assistants (such as Siri and Alexa) to personal device use. Recent parental media guidance from the UK government suggests a need to normalise frequent conversations about online content, rather than reacting only when problems arise. While this advice is sensible, it needs to be much more targeted. Our study shows that apps with recommender algorithms (Roblox, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat) are all used in different ways and serve different functions in young people's lives. App-specific conversations need to take place within families to address situations such as Phillip staying up until 1:00 am watching YouTube videos, Falcom's reliance on Roblox because he is unable to spend time outside, or Amy's desire to become a social media influencer.

b. Balance protection with young people's right to participate in digital decisions.

Parents and carers should involve young people in conversations about digital rules, rather than treating them only as subjects of protection. A children's rights approach, grounded in the UNCRC and the concept of 'evolving capacities' (Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025), recognises that young people need both protection from harm and opportunities to develop autonomy. The Australian Government *Manifesto for a Better Children's Internet* (Dezuanni et al., 2023) reinforces this point, noting that children and families are co-creators of the digital environments they inhabit, and that developing media literacy together is essential for navigating them successfully. Parents are central to this: listening to children, believing their accounts of digital experience, and acting on what they share.

c. Provide meaningful offline alternatives before restricting screen time.

Our findings show that limiting screen time without offering viable alternatives can lead to frustration, boredom, and social disconnection rather than healthier habits. Falcom's account illustrates this clearly: when his parents restricted his screen time, he felt there was nothing else to do because the offline activities available to him, such as playing football in the garden or spending time with friends in person, were no longer accessible due to practical constraints. Before reducing a young person's screen time, parents should consider what will replace it. Without meaningful alternatives, screen time restrictions risk creating a vacuum that neither promotes wellbeing nor addresses the underlying reasons young people turn to digital platforms. Of course, not all parents have the time or money to provide meaningful, engaging, offline alternatives for their children. In these cases, it should be the role of government to fill the gap and provide subsidized before and after school activities.

d. Understand that smartphones serve safety and emotional regulation functions.

Many young people in this study described smartphones not as luxuries but as tools for managing their safety and emotional wellbeing.

Pupils reported needing to contact parents during moments of distress, including panic attacks, family health emergencies, and fears around personal safety while travelling. Parents should recognise that removing or heavily restricting phone access — whether at school or at home — can heighten anxiety rather than reduce it. Rather than framing phone use exclusively as a source of risk, parents can work with their children to establish how and when phones serve important protective functions, and factor this into any household rules about device use.

e. Co-create household digital rules with your children rather than imposing them unilaterally.

Our Parental regulation tasks revealed that young people often understand the purpose behind household rules about phone use but feel frustrated when rules are applied rigidly without room for negotiation or context. Pupils described feeling 'sad' and 'annoyed' when devices were taken away at moments that felt arbitrary, such as midway through a social gaming session with friends. Involving children in setting digital boundaries, discussing why certain limits exist, agreeing on exceptions, and reviewing rules together as they mature, is more likely to produce genuine buy-in and develop the self-regulation skills that will be essential once parental oversight diminishes. This mirrors the collaborative approaches recommended for schools in the preceding section and aligns with the UNCRC principle of evolving capacities.

f. Be aware of the 'catch-up' effect of school phone bans.

Our study found evidence that school smartphone bans may intensify home-based screen time. Several pupils described spending extended hours on their phones each evening, some until 1:00 am, in what appeared to be compensatory behaviour after a full day without access. Parents should be aware that a school's phone ban does not automatically reduce overall screen time; in some cases, it may displace and concentrate digital engagement into the home environment. This means that parents, rather than assuming the school ban has 'solved' the problem, may need to be more actively involved in supporting balanced digital habits at home — not through additional prohibition, but through conversation, structure, and the provision of meaningful alternatives.

g. Engage actively with school digital use policies rather than deferring to them.

Parents should not assume that a school's ban constitutes a comprehensive approach to their child's digital wellbeing. Instead, parents can engage with schools' policy development processes, participate in consultation exercises when offered, and advocate for approaches that support digital competence rather than relying solely on device removal. Schools have more time and structured opportunities to work interactively with young people on digital issues than most families do at home, but this works best when parents are informed participants in shaping those policies, not passive recipients. The V All Girls Faith School case study in this report illustrates how school–parent collaboration on phone use can be a productive partnership rather than a one-way imposition. When concerns arise, the school works with parents to discuss the issue and, where needed, connects families with additional support — treating phone misuse as an opportunity for guidance rather than solely a disciplinary matter.

4. Policy Redirection - Focus on platforms, behaviours, and emerging technologies

Policies should shift from device-focused bans toward platform-specific safeguarding approaches. Different forms of harm occur across different digital environments. Addressing these issues requires attention to the specific affordances of different platforms – including social media, messaging apps, and increasingly, AI systems – and how different pupils interact with them in different ways.

Emerging research (including in this report) is highlighting that AI tools such as ChatGPT are already embedded in pupils' everyday learning practices, often encouraged by educators while simultaneously subject to restriction or uncertainty at the institutional level. This creates a contradictory policy landscape in which some forms of technology are promoted while others are prohibited, despite operating through the same devices and infrastructures.

We suggest it is therefore important to explicitly address how AI relates to wider technology use and smartphone policies in schools. Without this clarity, safeguarding approaches risk becoming inconsistent – focusing on devices rather than the behaviours, interactions, and platform dynamics through which both harms and benefits actually emerge.

By focusing on behaviours and digital contexts rather than simply banning devices, schools can better address the conditions in which online harms occur, while also supporting pupils to engage critically and responsibly with the full range of technologies shaping their lives.

5. Implementing a Pupil Centred 'Digital Use Policy' Framework

We've designed with Life Lessons a Pupil Centred Digital Use Policy Framework, which can be implemented in order to build a conscientious and contextualised digital use policy, placing pupil voice at the heart of the development process.

Integrating at least one of the elements will have a positive impact on community engagement (Hajidah, 2004) and intended outcomes. Implementing actions from across all 4 elements will support you in delivering a policy that is relational and prioritises pupil experience and safety.

Element 1: Collaborative Consultation

Explore the digital context of your community and engage pupils, staff and parents as active stakeholders, avoiding tokenistic methods (Al-Thani, 2025).
Suggested actions:

- Ask pupils, parents and educators to complete surveys covering their opinions and understanding, auditing anxieties and enthusiasm on digital use and safety.
- Invite individuals to be part of policy working groups.
- Analyse and reflect on the survey outcomes - sense checking the conclusions and determining if there are further questions.
- Build a proposed policy that addresses the anxieties and enthusiasms of all stakeholders.
- Ensure community-wide clarity around the intended impact of any policy, and that the measures built into it align with delivering this impact.
- Circulate policy for consultation, with transparent methods for feedback.

Element 2: Building competency and understanding

The RSE Statutory Guidance and the Computing National Curriculum requires schools to teach about online harms, digital wellbeing and digital safety, but you may want to go deeper with the skills young people will need to be critical and positive users of technology.
Suggested actions:

- Audit your curriculum to ensure you are covering the statutory and national content.
- Engage with ongoing research and evidence on digital citizenship, digital literacy and AI competency (Estellés & Doyle, 2025)
- Informed by the survey data, determine which skills young people need to achieve their hopes and wants. Note: critical thinking is key in the Education White Paper.
- Research different skills curriculums and digital readiness programmes to identify and that meet your needs, or use the evidence base to build your own.
- Provide staff with training in strategies and pedagogy around digital wellbeing and safety.
- Engage pupil voice regularly and openly (Macauley et al, 2022) - see Element 4 for more detail.

Element 3: Clarity on expectations

Clear boundaries provide psychological safety. Ambiguity can be where conflict and breakdowns in relationships arise between pupils, staff and parents.

Suggested actions:

- Ensure the expectations for digital use are really clear for all stakeholders, with explicit consideration for vulnerable and SEND pupils, and facilitating objectivity for application and implementation (Bernier, 2022).
  - For example, are you permitting digital devices to be used as education tools in certain lessons (perhaps for research, or as a revision tool) - in which case how are these exceptions articulated and clearly defined?
- Share the intended impact for boundaries - for example wanting to improve engagement in enrichment, or higher social interaction, and provide opportunity for co-design for measure to achieve these outcomes (Schimmel, 2003) .
- If your phone use policy and behaviour policy interact, ensure the consequences of not meeting expectations are proportionate, purposeful and consistent (Jones et al, 2023).
  - Are you taking a relational, agency-led approach: exploring the reason for not meeting expectation, and providing opportunity to consider the impact of the behaviour?
  - Are you including a staged approach and building a relational culture of 'assumed good intent'?

Element 4: Regular, active review

Technology often moves faster than policy, curriculum, and adults. A static policy can quickly lose it's impact, and rigid, unresponsive approaches can feel oppressive and irrelevant to young people (Thornberg, 2008).

Suggested actions:

- Set reasonable time frames for regular, compulsory review.
- Determine who needs to be involved in review. Youth voice should be key here.
  - This could involve reconvening your policy working groups from Element 1.
  - This could be by establishing digital ambassadors or enlisting your youth council to feedback on pupil body experiences and suggestions.
- Regularly collect evidence of stakeholder experience and impact.
- Review impact data. Has the policy had the impact you desired it to? Examine how your data informs you about this and if stakeholder engagement reflects the data.
- Include a review of curriculum content.
  - Is there anything pupils want to learn more about?
  - Is there anything staff do not feel confident teaching?
- Determine if there are any actions or changes that need to be made, communicate these clearly, with time for adaptation.
- Build in regular and systematic youth voice engagement to ensure young people know there are open lines of communication around risks, harms, opportunities and competencies.

Conclusion

This study has explored what happens when schools are forced to act as enforcers of device restrictions. We found that while parents and educators overwhelmingly support bans, their reasoning is largely rooted in a techno-moral panic rather than a grounded understanding of young people's digital lives or in concrete and sustainable means of support. In contrast, it is children – who will bear the consequences of these policies – that demonstrate a far more nuanced, pragmatic, and rights-aware approach to smartphone use.

Our findings show that simply removing the phone from the school environment does not provide the support young people need. Rather, in our research we found digital risk and harm may be less likely to emerge in the school context because the space to discuss them has been reduced. The central problem with smartphone bans is not that they fail to limit distraction in classrooms, but that they attempt to resolve complex social, emotional, and structural issues through prohibition. Bans do not eliminate bullying, anxiety, or harmful content; they merely push these issues out of sight, reducing disclosure and weakening safeguarding mechanisms. In doing so, schools prioritise adult convenience and classroom manageability over children's safety, trust, and wellbeing.

Moreover, the desire to make children 'be kids again' reveals a fundamentally flawed policy motivation. Contemporary childhood is already constrained by urban design, climate change, heightened surveillance, and reduced physical freedom. Smartphones function not as optional luxuries but as compensatory tools that enable social connection, safety, emotional regulation, and autonomy within these constraints. Removing them does not restore childhood – it further restricts it.

This research also demonstrates that smartphone bans are inherently inequitable. They disproportionately harm vulnerable pupils, particularly those in specialist provision schools, for whom phones are critical tools for managing anxiety, navigating crises, and maintaining contact with trusted adults. Blanket bans ignore difference, flatten need, and exacerbate exclusion, while simultaneously signalling institutional distrust toward the very pupil's schools claim to protect. The focus on banning can have several effects which we've explored, including reducing the likelihood of reporting problematic online experiences, and pushing social media out of school context with less space to discuss and reflect upon how digital life is unfolding for young people.

Crucially, young people do not reject regulation; they reject total prohibition. Their proposals – structured restrictions, age differentiation, punishment for harmful behaviour rather than device possession, and digital responsibility education – offer a viable alternative to prohibition. These models align with children's rights principles and acknowledge that preparing young people for adulthood requires guided engagement with technology, not enforced abstinence. Whilst the current awareness of social media harms and calls for algorithmic accountability and duty of care are important, we also want to be clear that technology is *not cigarettes*, and abstinence-based approaches to sex and alcohol have never worked. What is also critical to underscore and which we explore in this report, is that the addictive algorithmic design does not land uniformly with young people. Some young people, schools, and families are better resourced to manage harmful content, and context matters. We've shown how paying attention to how the young people use technology, and how the smartphone policies interact with this use and the effects of this interaction are critical to document.

Our recommendations suggest that effective smartphone policy should focus less on eliminating devices from educational environments and more on supporting young people to develop the knowledge, skills, and critical awareness required to navigate digital life, including their devices, social media and AI responsibly.

n a society where digital technologies structure communication, learning, and civic participation, education systems play a crucial role in preparing young people not simply to avoid digital environments, but to engage with them thoughtfully, ethically, and autonomously.

Ultimately, this report contends that smartphone bans represent a failure of imagination and responsibility in education policy. Instead of equipping young people to navigate a digital society, bans delay the problem, deferring the capacity for self-regulation. A children's rights approach demands a shift away from punitive control towards collaboration, recognising young people not as risks to be managed, but as citizens whose insights and voice are essential to shaping fair, effective, and future-oriented policy.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Grand Challenges Special Initiative of Justice and Equality, who funded this collaborative research partnership between UCL and Life Lessons Education. Thank you to Ethne James-Souch who coordinated the funding stream and offered encouragement and additional supports. We are extremely grateful to the schools that participated in our research. The school leadership and educators prioritised their pupils' voice enabling us access to listen the complexity of views presented. We would like to particularly thank the pupils who shared their experiences with us and trusted us to represent their ideas.

This research was made possible by a collaborative team that spans educational professionals, undergraduate interns, MA pupils, PhD Pupils, as well as sixth form youth advisors from two of our research schools. We would like to thank PhD candidate Chiara Fehr who supported the schools-based case study research and preliminary data analysis, and undergraduate interns Connie Shen, Lang Cheng and Evan Liu from the EPSURF program in EPS who supported data analysis and literature reviewing.

We would like to thank our advisors and colleagues who read and commented on the report including Georgina Phillips Policy Officer - LGBT+ and Gender Equality, National Education Union, Professor Andy Phippen (University of Bournemouth) Dr Bronwen Jones (UCL) and Professor Alice Bradbury (UCL), as well as colleagues at the Centre for Sociology, Education and Equity at UCL who offered feedback through a seminar on the findings. We would like to thank the anonymous educators from the research who commented on the report and special thanks to our two anonymous proofreaders.

Suggested Citation

Suggested citation: Ringrose, Jessica, Rodda, Edith and Aytoun, Dawn (2026). S*martphone Free Schools? Platforming Pupil Voice: A Pupil Centred Digital Use Framework*, University College London. London.

Corresponding author:
Professor Jessica Ringrose
IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London
j.ringrose@ucl.ac.uk

References

Abrahamsson, S. (2024). *Smartphone bans, pupil outcomes and mental health*. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4735240

Al-Thani, G. (2025). Beyond consultation: Rethinking stakeholder engagement in Qatar's public education policymaking. *Education Sciences, 15*(6), 769. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060769

Bar, E., Radunz, M., Galanis, C. R., Quinney, B., Wade, T. D., & King, D. L. (2025). Pupil perspectives on banning mobile phones in South Australian secondary schools: A large-scale qualitative analysis. *Computers in Human behaviour, 167*, 108603. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108603

Beck, M. (2024, November 21). *Mobile phones in schools: Mandating a ban?* House of Lords Library. https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/mobile-phones-in-schools-mandating-a-ban/

Bernier, V., Gaudreau, N., & Massé, L. (2022). Educators' attitudes in classroom management as perceived by pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 27*(1), 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2022.2058561

BMJ. (2026). Social media: Ministers vow to bring in "some form" of restrictions on under 16s using online platforms. *BMJ, 393*, s821. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.s821

Bohnert, M., & Gracia, P. (2023). Digital use and socioeconomic inequalities in adolescent wellbeing: Longitudinal evidence on socioemotional and educational outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence, 95*(6), 1179–1194. https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12193

Booth, R. (2026, March 1). Hundreds of UK teenagers to pilot social media bans and smartphone restrictions. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/mar/01/uk-teenagers-pilot-social-media-ban-smartphone-restrictions

Böttger, T., & Zierer, K. (2024). To ban or not to ban? A rapid review on the impact of smartphone bans in schools on social wellbeing and academic performance. *Education Sciences, 14*(8), 906. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080906

Brookfield, K., Fyson, R., & Goulden, M. (2024). Technology-facilitated domestic abuse: An under-recognised safeguarding issue? *The British Journal of Social Work, 54*(1), 419–436. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad206

Campbell, M., Edwards, E. J., Pennell, D., Poed, S., Lister, V., Gillett-Swan, J., Kelly, A., Zec, D., & Nguyen, T.-A. (2024). Evidence for and against banning mobile phones in schools: A scoping review. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*. https://doi.org/10.1177/20556365241270394

Crêteur, S., Dunajeva, J., Frydman, B., Berg Mulvik, I., Del Cogliano, D., Nada, C., Siarova, H., & Sankalaite, S. (2026). *Mobile phone bans in schools across the EU: ENESET analytical report*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2766/2403181

Department for Education. (2025). *Generative artificial intelligence (AI) in education*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/generative-artificial-intelligence-in-education/generative-artificial-intelligence-ai-in-education

Department for Education. (2026a). *Behaviour in schools*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/behaviour-in-schools--2

Department for Education. (2026b, February 19). Government to drive action to improve children's relationship with mobile phones and social media. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-action-to-improve-childrens-relationship-with-mobile-phones-and-social-media

Department for Education. (2026c). *Mobile phones in schools*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mobile-phones-in-schools/mobile-phones-in-schools

Department for Education. (2026, April 10). 450,000 disadvantaged pupils could benefit from AI tutoring tools. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/450000-disadvantaged-pupils-could-benefit-from-ai-tutoring-tools

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. (2026, June 15). *Social media to be banned for under-16s in landmark government move to give kids their childhood back*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-media-to-be-banned-for-under-16s-in-landmark-government-move-to-givekids-their-childhood-back

Dezuanni, M., Notley, T., Third, A., & Bullen, P. (n.d.). *Manifesto for a better children's internet*. https://digitalchild.org.au/research/publications/working-paper/manifesto-for-a-better-childrens-internet/

Estellés, M., & Doyle, A. (2025). From safeguarding to critical digital citizenship? A systematic review of approaches to online safety education. *Review of Education, 13*, e70056. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70056

Ferguson, C. J. (2025). Longer-term interventions to reduce social media time do not improve mental health: A reply to Thrul et al. (2025). *Psychology of Popular Media, 14*(2), 210–212. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000592

Fošner, A., & Aver, B. (2025). AI chatbots in higher education: Pupils' beliefs and concerns. *Sustainable Futures, 9*, 100734. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.100734

Ghaemi, M. (2025, July 16). *Unity Schools Partnership, with schools in Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire, reveals plans to ban mobile phones during school day during next academic year*. Suffolk News. https://www.suffolknews.co.uk/bury-st-edmunds/news/large-schools-trust-to-ban-pupils-from-using-mobile-phones-9425680/

Goodyear, V. A., Randhawa, A., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Jones, K., Michail, M., Morrison, B., Patterson, P., Quinlan, J., Sitch, A., Twardochleb, R., Wade, M., & Pallan, M. (2025). School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): A cross-sectional observational study. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2025.101211

Goodyear, V. A., Randhawa, A., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Michail, M., Patterson, P., Sitch, A., Wade, M., & Pallan, M. (2026). How school phone policies influence adolescent phone use and wellbeing (SMART Schools): A qualitative comparative case study. *Social Science & Medicine, 398*, 119094. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2026.119094

Hadijah, N. (2024). Stakeholder engagement in educational policy development. *Eurasian Experiment Journal of Arts and Management, 6*(1), 17–20. https://smartie.kiu.ac.ug/public/assets/publications/1d66f185f699880579acad97ec6305c4c0b49a8c0b49a8c.pdf

Horeck, T., Ringrose, J., Milne, B., & Mendes, K. (2023). #MeToo in British schools: Gendered differences in teenagers' awareness of sexual violence. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231191490

Hunt, A., Baron, J. E., Dee, T., Duckworth, A. L., Gentzkow, M., & Jacob, B. (2026) The effects of school phone bans: National evidence from lockable pouches, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, Working Paper 35132 http://www.nber.org/papers/w35132

Jones, R., Kreppner, J., Marsh, F., & Hartwell, B. (2023). Punitive behaviour management policies and practices in secondary schools: A systematic review of children and young people's perceptions and experiences. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 28*(2–3), 182–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2023.2255403

Lévesque, Maroussia, Analog Privilege (2024). New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2024, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4528278

Livingstone, S. (n.d.). *Parenting for a digital future* [Blog]. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2021/05/05/gc25/

Livingstone, S., & Sylwander, K. R. (2025). There is no right age! The search for age-appropriate ways to support children's digital lives and rights. *Journal of Children and Media, 19*(1), 6–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2435015

Macauley, T., Rolker, H. B., Scherer, M., Brock, J., Savona, N., Helleve, A., & Knai, C. (2022). Youth participation in policy-making processes in the United Kingdom: A scoping review of the literature. *Journal of Community Practice, 30*(2), 203–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2022.2073308

McCoy, S., & Marcus-Quinn, A. (2025). Navigating youth, smartphones, and policy: A balanced perspective on digital wellbeing. *Pediatric Research*. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-025-04288-3

Miller, A. C. (2022). #DictatorErdogan: How social media bans trigger backlash. *Political Communication, 39*(6), 801–825. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2109084

NBC News. (2026, May 5). *Largest-ever study of school cellphone bans finds mixed results*. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/largest-ever- study-school-cell-phone-bans-finds-mixed-results-rcna343761

Phippen, A. (2024, September 25). Should you give your child a "dumb" phone? They aren't the answer to fears over kids' social media use. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/should-you-give-your-child-a-dumb-phone-they-arent-the-answer-to-fears-over-kids-social-media-use-238129

Phippen, A. (2025, June 18). Ban on phones in schools: Support for headeducators or unnecessary legislation? *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/ban-on-phones-in-schools-support-for-headeducators-or-unnecessary-legislation-281249

Rahali, M., Livingstone, S., & Kidron, B. (2025). Mobile phone restrictions in UK schools, one year on. *Media@LSE*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2025/02/19/mobile-phone-restrictions-in-uk-schools-one-year-on/

Randhawa, A., Pallan, M., Twardochleb, R., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Jones, K., Michail, M., Patterson, P., Sitch, A., Wade, M., & Goodyear, V. A. (2025). Secondary school smartphone policies in England: A descriptive analysis of how schools rationalize, design, and implement restrictive and permissive phone policies. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education, 57*(5), 1119–1137. https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2024.2363204

Renold, EJ, Bragg, S., Ringrose, J., Milne, B., McGeeney, E., & Timperley, V. (2026). Attune, animate and amplify: Creating youth voice assemblages in pARTicipatory sexuality education research. Children & Society, 40, 61–88. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12862

Reynolds, M., Esfandiari, M., & O'Higgins Norman, J. (2025). *Restriction or resilience? Smartphone bans in schools: A qualitative study of the experiences of pupils*. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.35638.41286

Saffer, H. (2026). *Youth mental health and school smartphone bans: Early evidence* (Working Paper No. 35181). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w35181

Schimmel, D. M. (2003). Collaborative rule-making and citizenship education: An antidote to the undemocratic hidden curriculum. *American Secondary Education, 31*(3), 16–35. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064494

Stelter, B. (2026, March 25). Big tech critics hail 'big tobacco moment' in landmark social media verdict. *CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/25/media/meta-google-social-media-verdict-advocates

Stern, S. R. (2026). Wait Until 8th?: Mothers' decision-making and management of children's smartphones in the United States. Journal of Children and Media, 20(2), 363–381. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2025.2567278

Thornberg, R. (2008). 'It's not fair!'—Voicing pupils' criticisms of school rules. *Children & Society, 22*, 418–428. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00121.x

Tsouparopoulou, E., Symeonaki, M., Parsanoglou, D., & Kazani, A. (2025). European youth and digital engagement: Attitudes, skills, and civic participation. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies, 8*(1), 219–247. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-025-00168-z

Wood, G., Goodyear, V. A., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Jones, K., Michail, M., Morrison, B., Patterson, P., Sitch, A., Wade, M., & Pallan, M. (2023). Smartphones, social media and adolescent mental wellbeing: The impact of school policies restricting daytime use—Protocol for a natural experimental observational study using mixed methods at secondary schools in England (SMART Schools Study). *BMJ Open, 13*(7), e075832. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-075832

United Nations. (1989, November 20). Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child