Our Children and Smartphones
PaJeS Parents & Carers Wellbeing event
by Dr Gemma Handelsman and Beth Kerr

We want the best for our children.
We are trying our best
We are struggling with the pace of change
We can change our minds
We are all different
We are working towards better, not perfect.

Current context (Sept 2024)

Earlier this year, Jonathan Haidt's book 'The Anxious Generation' and the grassroots parent movement Smartphone Free Childhood amplified the conversation about Our Children and Smartphones.

In the UK nearly 1/4 3-5 years old have their own mobile phone, and almost all 12 year olds (Ofcom, April 2024). On average 12 year olds are spending approximately 4 hours on their phone per day (House of Commons Committee report, May 2024).

4 HOURS *per day!*

Government and tech companies are starting to listen, but cogs turn slowly:
- Online Safety Act (2023) - to be implemented by end of 2025
- Ofcom's approach to implementing the Online Safety Act
- Mobile phones in schools, DfE Guidance (February 2024)

The Problem

For some summaries of the evidence presented:

- Papaya Parents - The Evidence
- SFC - The Problem
- SFC interview with Jonathan Haidt (1 hour YouTube video) March 2024

If you'd like to know more about the research see our references at the end of the handout.

PORNOGRAPHY VIOLENT AND EXTREME CONTENT. *Once seen, can never be unseen.*

237 NOTIFICATIONS PER DAY

Bullying used to end at the school gates

Things your kids aren't doing when they're scrolling
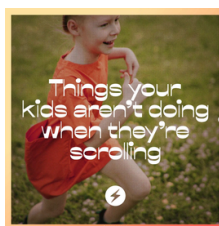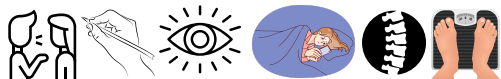
SFC Instagram post, 20 February

"The first generation of children who were given smartphones in primary school are now adults. We now know for every year younger they were given smartphones by their parents, the worse their mental health is today."

PaJeS
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Digital Wellbeing

"And when we're talking about child development, I think erring on the side of caution is better. Regulate and restrict first, and then open things up if you find evidence that it's not harmful"
(Sarah-Jane Blakemore, Prof of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience, Cambridge University)

'A state of satisfaction that people achieve when digital technology support their intentions'

Google

What can you do to strive towards digital wellbeing for you and your family?

Something to try	Next steps
Start with prioritising the **contributors to physical & mental health, including downtime.** **Link** these to the development of skills and goals for the future.	**Evaluate** these with your child and support any if they aren't working for them (e.g. not seeing friends enough, not getting enough exercise). **Explain** how they relate to the development of skills and achievement of their goals.
Think about your child's thoughts, feelings and behaviour through a **developmental lens**, and explain this to them to help them to make sense of the way their mind and body are connected.	**Value** the pre-teen years, when **your influence** will be greater and you are not competing with the effects of significant cognitive and emotional changes to the brain.
Move away from the concept of 'trust' and 'willpower', and support your child with **consistent digital boundaries.**	**Explain** persuasive design techniques to your child. **Establish** boundaries directly related to the contributors to health - e.g. sleep, eating.
Be a role model! Children will copy your digital habits. Be kind to yourself too!	**Pick something to try.** Use the focus modes on your smartphones, change your notification settings, buy an alternative alarm clock and prioritise face-to-face interactions.
Keep learning and stay curious. This a topic that continues to evolve and we need to keep up.	**Talk** to others, **follow the conversation**, join your school's SFC whatsapp group.
How can others help you along your journey? Find a **community** that works for you.	Consider a **Parent Pact** or **Safer Internet Pledge.** Talk to your friends and family.

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Questions to reflect on...

1. **Self-evaluate -** Am I happy with how smartphones are used in our home and by my family? What skills would I like my children to be learning?
2. **Prioritise something** - What one idea could I try out tomorrow?
3. **Acknowledge the challenges** - What will be the things that stop me making a change?
4. **Consider solutions** - What could I do when those challenges appear?
5. **Stay curious** - What would I like to find out more about? How do I learn best - do I need a book, a podcast, a social media account to follow?
6. **Keep communicating** - What conversation could I have tomorrow with my children, with my partner or co-parent?

Be prepared to get it wrong, and try again!

For further information and advice:

Websites
- Smartphone Free Childhood, including their guide on how to talk to other parents about this topic and their Parent Pact and school whatsapp groups
- Papaya Parents - helping families to thrive in the digital age; safer internet pledge; family contracts and other solutions by parents for parents.
- HMD's The Better Phone Project
- Common Sense Media - rating and reviews parents trust; family tech planners
- A guide to discussing technology choices with your primary schooler (Wait Mate, August 2024)
- Internet matters - how to manage screen time for under-5s
- Digital Wellness Institute
- Centre for Humane Technology

Books
- The Anxious Generation (Jonathan Haidt, 2024)
- The Real Science of Screentime (and how to spend it better) (Pete Etchells, 2024)
- Inventing Ourselves - The Secret Life of the Teenage Brain (Sarah-Jane Blakemore, 2018)
- The Incredible Teenage Brain (Hohnen, Gilmour & Murphy, 2019)
- How to have incredible conversations with your child (Hohnen & Gilmour, 2021)
- The Whole-Brain Child, Siegal & Bryson, 2012

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Further references

Harmful content	• Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges (Ofsted, 2021) • BBFC Research into Children and Pornography (Sept 2019) • 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young People and Pornography, (Children's Commission, Jan 2023)
Grooming	• Sexual abuse imagery of primary school children 1,000 per cent worse since lockdown (Internet Watch Foundation, Jan 2023) • Under 10s groomed online 'like never before' as hotline discovers record amount of child sexual abuse (Internet Watch Foundation, Jan 2024) • National Crime Agency issues urgent warning about 'sextortion' (April 2024)
Cyber-bullying	• Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), WHO/Europe, March 2024 • Children and parents: media use and attitudes report, Ofcom, 19 May 2022) • Self-harm, suicidal behaviours and cyberbullying in CYP: Systematic Review John et al, 2018) • Association of screen-based activities and risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviors among young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies (Chen et al. 2024)
Mental Health	• Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, (NHS England, 21 Nov 23) • Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Wellbeing Outcomes (Sapien Labs, May 2023) • 'The Anxious Generation' (Jonathan Haidt, 2024)
Academic distraction	• The effects of smartphone addiction on learning: a meta-analysis (Sunday, Adescope, Maarhuis, 2021) • Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing (House of Commons Education Committee, May 2024) • Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use, Common Sense media, 2023) • Disconnect: The Case for a Smartphone Ban in Schools' (Policy Exchange, 2024
Addiction	• Is Social Media Addictive? Here's what the science says (The New York Times, Richtel, Oct 23) • Prevalence of problematic smartphone usage and associated mental health outcomes amongst children and young people: a systematic review, meta-analysis and GRADE of the evidence (BMC Psychiatry journal, 2019)
Opportunity cost	• Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Wellbeing Outcomes (Sapian Labs, May 2023) • US trends in social isolation, social engagement and companionship 2003-2020 (Kannan & Veazie, March 2023)
Physical Social & Emotional Development	• DMU research suggests 10-year-olds lose sleep to check social media (Shaw, 2022) • Cambridge University Study - teaching empathy • Harvard Happiness Study • World Economic Forum - Skills of the Future