

Why we paused on the mobile phone ban

This month, The University of Birmingham published a study in [the Lancet](#) that found *'There is no evidence that restrictive school policies are associated with overall phone and social media use or better mental wellbeing in adolescents'*. They found that banning phones in schools made no impact on student behaviour, learning or wellbeing. In the [BBC report](#) about the study, a government official acknowledged that *'More robust evidence is needed to reach clear conclusions on the impact of smartphones on children'*. For those of us who have argued that banning phones is not based on good evidence, the study provides a helpful corrective, or at least a pause, in the rush to judgment.

How did we get to this place? Any conversation about mobile phones provokes fierce opinions. There's a hive-mind quality to our acceptance that - like drinking alcohol - the smartphone is fine for the adults but absolutely not OK for the children under a certain age. And we all know that, like most things in life, phones are potentially dangerous in excess: it's obvious that spending too much time on the phone instead of one's school work leads to poorer grades and so to reduced opportunity; or that late-night scrolling will mean that one gets less sleep and so is less well over the longer-term. Like much of the debate, this feels true in our bones, but can also drift into assumption and folklore.

But this is all very unreliable. The longitudinal data is far too limited to make a causal determination about the long-term life-impacts of using phones or social media. And there is not, and never will be, a control group to measure against. The debate is not grounded in science; it's social science, which has much looser bonds of truth.

In this approach, there certainly are correlations, and the most celebrated public case for a correlation between phones and poorer mental health was made by Jonathan Haidt in his book *'The Anxious Generation'*. But [not everyone agreed with Haidt](#). His arguments were often made with [over-simplifications](#) and, crucially, Haidt had other chestnuts in the fire: he also claimed that a generation has been changed - for the worse - by a safety-first culture that does not allow children to play and take risks, as he would have done as a child.

Haidt can read like the familiar argument about the world being better when he was younger; that our children are being changed, for the worse, by a range of new social and technological norms. And here is the lure of the argument, because we all ache with fear of something that might take our children away from us, to a world we cannot understand. But that doesn't make the argument correct.

Of course it's more complex than banning phones or social media, which have become the twin lightning rods for all that is wrong. Online, it seems, all of the norms of social cohesion - of morality, truth, civility, justice, etc. - are moving beneath our feet. How can anyone not be changed by contact with the Internet? It opens a door through which genuinely appalling individuals can walk into our children's worlds: we see, in our school, the adverse impact of Andrew Tate's deeply unpleasant, violent, misogyny on naive 13/14 year old boys who are searching for models of masculinity. We then have to undo this toxicity in Personal Social Education classes. But those boys didn't discover Andrew Tate because we failed to ban phones in school.

Sometimes, the phone debate can touch a raw political nerve: some will feel that government legislation will infringe on their choice as parents; others will demand that legislation is absolutely necessary for their children's safety. And it really doesn't help that, daily, we have to watch Elon Musk revelling in his self-appointed role of cartoon villain, while Mark Zuckerberg follows his lead and removes fact-checking from Meta. Choose your own villain if you like, but banning phones in school will not keep these people away from your children.

In our more reflective moments, we all know that restricting our child's access to the online world can only last so long. At some point, they will need to be taught the digital skills to prosper in the world, and this includes knowing how to use the Internet safely and purposefully; at some point, socially, not having a phone might just make their child an outsider in their peer group.

We also know, despite our worries, that in many instances the Internet has fuelled positive social justice campaigns, or profound political change, that has made the world objectively better. So, how worried should you be?

Should you be cautious about your child and mobile phones? Absolutely. Should you try to learn more about it and the impact it has? Absolutely. Is the mobile phone uniquely responsible for the ills of the world? Of course not. Should we still have technology in schools? Yes; I think you would want us to prepare your children for the world they must live in, including the digital workplace and how to manage social media.

Please be reassured that all good schools already have robust policies to ensure students do not use their phones in the classroom. All good schools will ensure students are focused on their school work and fulfilling their potential. And these policies are effective because schools have the freedom to make those choices, based on their values and philosophy, their resources, and the community's needs.

In our school, we do not ban phones. This is because a key part of our job as school leaders is to ensure students can access technology safely, and to their long-term benefit in the world, as responsible digital citizens. Parents rightly expect us to teach these digital skills, technical and social. And governments certainly expect it - that we deliver into society citizens with high levels of digital literacy, to compete for jobs that increasingly function online and across borders. In this narrative, we need to understand and use technology for our mutual benefit, not ban it.

It's time to have a little more nuance and flexibility in the debate. Banning phones in schools will change little; it is a noisy, visible panacea that gives the illusion of control and yet does not address the deep social changes that technology brings to our lives. Let's recognise the complexity of the world and the dangers of weighty solutions built upon such fragile understanding.