



Smartphones and schools Parent survey report

Brighton & Hove

APRIL 2026

Executive summary

- 81% of **all respondents** would support a fully smartphone free policy at their school (91% for **primary schools**)
- 68% of all respondents said a fully smartphone free policy would make them **more likely** to choose that school
- 63% of those who have not given their child a smartphone report that a fully smartphone free policy **would influence their decision** on when to give a smartphone
- 59% of parents who have already given their children smartphones **wish they had waited until their child was older**

Too many children are experiencing **serious safeguarding harms**:

- 19% have sent or received inappropriate images
- 14% have experienced online bullying
- 12% have seen violent material
- 7% have seen pornography
- 6% have seen self-harm or suicide content.

A total of 2,666 responses were submitted representing children from a wide range of ages.

Background - evidence of safeguarding harms and why we must do more

The UK government recently introduced new guidance on mobile phones in schools and states all schools should be mobile phone-free environments by default. Each school should have a policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones and other smart technology throughout the school day, including during lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime (1). Ofsted chief inspector Sir Martyn Oliver has given his full backing to school leaders to ban phones in schools and their inspection teams will have an increased focus on this from 1st April 2026 (2). The UK prime minister has said he will be bringing in stronger protections in the coming months and 'all options are on the table' (3).

There is an overwhelming body of evidence highlighting the serious harms posed to children by smartphones and whilst it is beyond the scope of this report to cover all this research in detail, some of the key publications and accounts will be referenced (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14), (15), (16). The majority of the risks posed by smartphones, which do not apply to 'brick' phones (phones with no internet, photo or video function), are due to the fact they give children unlimited access to the internet and everyone else on the internet access to those children. Combining this internet access with photo and video capability creates a safeguarding disaster.

A recent tragic case which highlights this very clearly is that of Alexander McCartney, a man in his 20s from Northern Ireland. In 2025 he was convicted of 185 online sexual offences against children from across the world who he approached mainly through Snapchat. Authorities believe there were actually 3,500 victims but didn't have the resources to investigate each one. Out of all these victims only four reported it to the authorities (17). 2023/24 saw the highest number of reported cases of online sexual communication with a child, with 48% of recorded cases taking place on Snapchat (18). Rob Jones, Director General (Operations) at the National Crime Agency recently said: 'The response to the continual child sexual abuse threat cannot be one for policing alone - a whole system approach is the only way to protect children effectively' (19).

As well as the safeguarding concerns smartphones are addictive by design and so children (and adults) find it extremely difficult not to be distracted. Allowing this source of distraction and disturbance in schools means many children, not only those with smartphones, struggle to focus in their lessons and experience regular disruption.

Over the past two years the public awareness of this issue has increased significantly and there is a growing demand from teachers, healthcare professionals and parents to better protect our children from these harms.

For nearly 20 years now various prime ministers have acknowledged the internet is not safe for children and have promised to make it safer without much success. In 2008 Gordon Brown launched the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) (20) following the Byron review (21). In 2013 David Cameron said he would do '...whatever it takes to keep our children safe' and introduced a so-called 'filter mandate' (22).

In 2019 Theresa May published the Online Harms White Paper which introduced a statutory duty of care to protect children (23). In 2023 Boris Johnson passed the Online Safety Act (OSA) which provided Ofcom with powers to impose more significant fines (24). And now, in 2026, Keir Starmer is launching a public consultation on the issue of children's online safety in relation to smartphones and social media (25).

There are multiple independent reports highlighting the very serious harms smartphones pose to children. Here are just a few of them:

- In 2021, Ofsted published a report titled **Review of sexual abuse in schools & colleges**. This report found that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send 'nudes' (naked or semi-naked pictures), are much more prevalent than adults realise. Nearly 90% of girls and 50% of boys said being sent explicit content happens a lot or sometimes. The report recommends that schools act as though sexual harassment is happening even if they don't have specific reports (16).
- In 2022, Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner and a former headteacher, published a report titled **Digital childhoods: a survey of children and parents**. It reported girls as young as 9 years old describing strategies they employ when online strangers ask where they live. 75% of children aged 15-16 years old report being sent a beheading video. Children with free school meal status were more likely to see every type of harmful content (10).
- In 2023, Internet Matters produced their report **Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World** which found 85% of active social media users had potentially harmful experiences online and overall children were experiencing fewer of the positive effects on their wellbeing. It also highlighted how 9 to 10-year-old girls were experiencing more negative impacts on their social and physical wellbeing. Furthermore it found children with disabilities, mental health issues, SEND or those from families with financial difficulties experience more negative effects across all measured dimensions (15).
- In 2024, the Education Select Committee report titled **Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing** concluded there was overwhelming evidence suggesting the harms of social media outweigh the benefits for children. Children in care, young carers, children in poverty and children with additional needs are more susceptible to online harms (26). It also recommended a statutory ban on phones in schools in 2025 if the non-statutory guidance was not sufficiently effective.

In September 2025, Emma Daniel, the Brighton & Hove Council Cabinet member for Children, Families and Youth Services, declared full support and encouragement to parents to delay giving smartphones, and to schools to go smartphone free (27). In their publication they encourage parents to support the Smartphone Free Childhood organisation which has been raising awareness of the evidence of the serious safeguarding risks smartphones and social media pose to children (28).

In 2026 Britain's senior doctors started to ring the alarm bells even louder. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, representing 23 medical royal colleges declared a 'public health emergency' in regard to the issue of screen time and harmful online content.

This followed an 'extraordinary meeting' with GPs, paediatricians, A&E doctors and psychiatrists sharing their testimony of 'horrific' cases and experiences. One A&E doctor described treating a girl bleeding profusely after her boyfriend used knives during a sexual encounter, a practice they had seen online. The girl tragically died from her injuries. Another doctor shared that strangulation is now a common feature of sexual behaviour and some children are growing up thinking this is normal. A professor specialising in ADHD said children with this condition are particularly at risk. "There's a lot of content that offers addictive reward responses. We shouldn't be putting children in harm's way asking them to use tech safely when adults can't." A psychiatrist described how she is seeing 'atrophy of spatial memory' as people rely on apps to navigate and lose the ability to manage without them. An optometrist shared that he is seeing increasing volumes of younger children needing glasses due to excessive screen time (29).

It must be said that the harm associated with smartphones for children is **not the sole responsibility of schools** and schools alone cannot be expected to improve the situation. Parents, government, sports clubs, public transport, hospitality, healthcare and all areas of business must take responsibility for protecting children and ensuring there is not an expectation for children to have a smartphone to access their services.

Many parents feel that some systems within schools actually encourage children to have a smartphone, for example by using apps for homework, electronic timetables, meeting arrangements and other forms of communication. There is no doubt that schools have an important role to play and are in a powerful position to influence their community. They help to set expectations for families in many ways and most parents will take on board school messaging when making decisions for their own children.

There are of course a number of benefits to smartphones and some school leaders point to these as a reason for not banning smartphones in school. Smartphones bring great convenience for travelling with a digital bus pass, paying for things, using maps to navigate, listening to music, communicating with parents on the journey to and from school and connecting with other people with similar interests. Many of these benefits can be achieved without a smartphone. For example a 'brick' phone for communicating, a bank card for payments, a printed bus pass, a key fob if you want to track (e.g Airtag, Tile, SmartTag), and supervised internet access at school and home to ensure children learn and develop their digital skills.

One smartphone creates risk to all children around them

One child's smartphone in school poses serious risks to all the other children around them. Parents who choose not to give their child a smartphone in order to protect them from online harms should not have to accept their child being exposed to these risks via other children's smartphones in school. Whilst at home of course it is the parent's responsibility to keep their children safe, however during the journey to and from school and especially whilst in school, it is the responsibility of the school to keep children safe. This should

include the prevention of access to harmful and illegal content, as well as other online harms. Schools have a legal duty of care to safeguard children as laid out in statutory guidance titled **Keeping children safe in education 2025 (KCSIE) (30)**. This document makes clear that safeguarding children includes **preventing harm to children both in and out of school, and includes online harms that occur on smartphones**.

As well as the evidence already mentioned there are multiple individual testimonies of children being exposed to sexual, violent and illegal content via smartphones whilst at or on the way to or from school. Here are just a few of them:

- An 18-year-old man called Frazer has recently shared his story of being exposed to a suicide video, on someone else's phone whilst in school, in Year 8. This has caused him serious problems ever since and he has been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (11).
- A recent survey of more than 1,000 boys found that schools are the most popular place where sexual images and videos are being created, according to 47% of boys aged between 12 and 16-years-old. Moreover, 67% of boys have seen sexualised images being shared around school (12).
- A 17-year-old girl named Flossie has shared how she was exposed to horrific videos including pornography, shootings and beheadings, from Year 7 onwards, via other children's smartphones in school and on the bus to and from school. She recalls 'videos were going around all the time' and 'it was impossible for teachers to stop us'. The video that affected her the most was that of one child accidentally shooting and killing another child. This video haunts her to this day (13).

It is impossible for schools to guarantee that children will not be exposed to these harms if smartphones are allowed on site or on journeys to and from school. Given the severity of the safeguarding risks involved, the most effective control measure possible would be to remove the risk entirely, which requires schools to ban smartphones from coming into school.

The decision to provide a child a smartphone is of course a parental one, but the decision to allow smartphones into schools is a headteacher and senior leadership one. All children deserve to be safe in school and prevented from seeing harmful (and often illegal) content, via their own or other children's smartphones.

The increasing awareness of these smartphone-related harms that occur within schools is encouraging more and more headteachers to introduce fully smartphone free (not allowed on site) 'brick phone only' policies. We urge all schools across the city to consider introducing a policy like this to help better protect the children of Brighton & Hove. We hope this survey will provide you with some interesting data and perspectives.

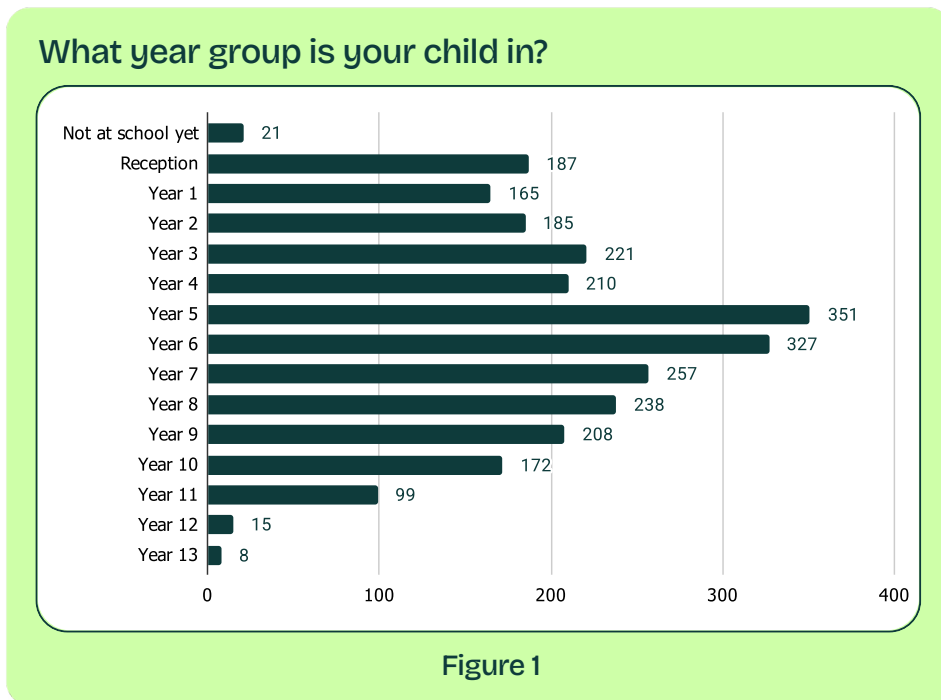
Survey Report

Volunteers for the Smartphone Free Childhood organisation recently published a citywide survey on smartphone policies in schools across Brighton & Hove. The survey was open from 10th February until 28th February 2026. The volunteers asked all primary and

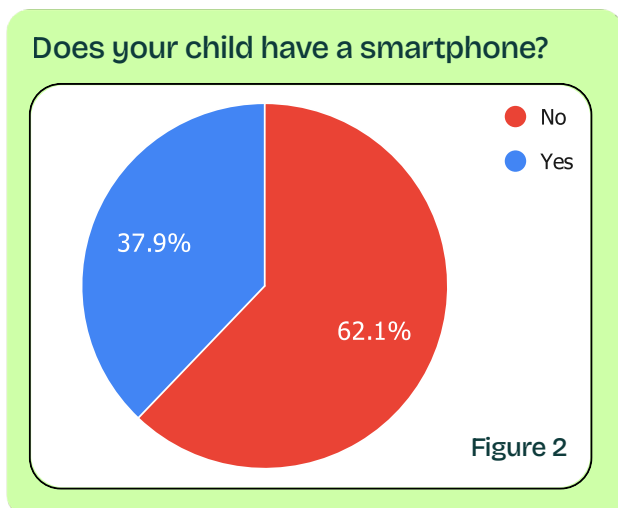
secondary schools to share it with their families both before and after the February half term break, and Brighton & Hove City Council also asked all schools to share it. The aim of the survey was to gather as many responses as possible to better understand parent views on school policy and how that may influence parenting decisions. The following report is an analysis of the results and will be shared with all schools.

Results

A total of 2,666 responses were submitted representing children from a wide range of ages as shown below (figure 1). 62% (1,644) of responses were from parents of children in primary school, 36% (973) from parents of children in secondary school, and the remaining 2% (49) represent children who are not yet in school, recently left school or the question was not answered.



38% (1,009) of respondents indicated their child already has a smartphone and 62% (1,656) do not. One person did not answer the question.



Responses from parents whose children already have a smartphone

Of those children who already have a smartphone the most common age at which the child was given a smartphone was **11 years old**, as shown in figure 3.

What age was your child when you gave them their smartphone?

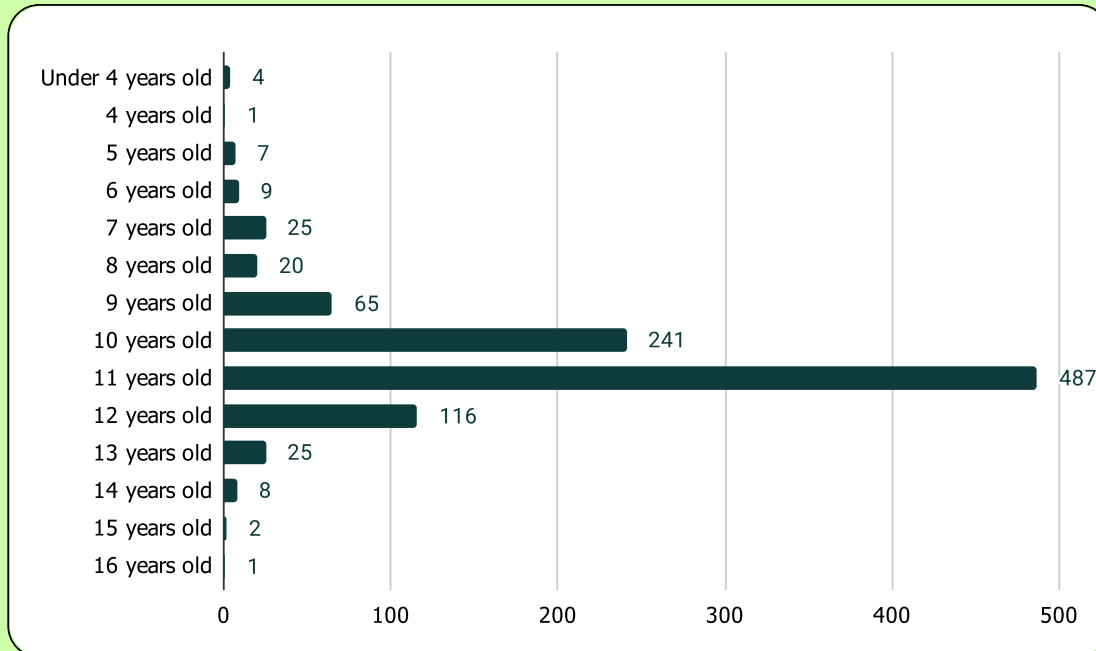


Figure 3

58% of these parents reported they felt under pressure to give a smartphone at an earlier stage than they would have liked (figure 4) and when asked, 'do you ever wish you had waited until they were older to give them their first smartphone', 59% said yes (figure 5).

Did you feel pressure to give your child a smartphone at an earlier stage than you would have liked?

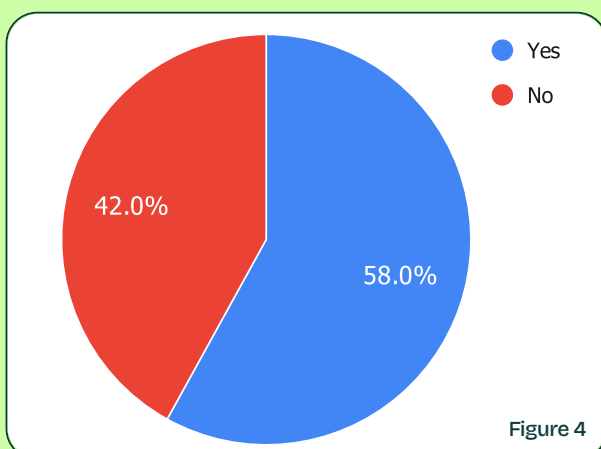


Figure 4

Do you ever wish you had waited until they were older to give them their first smartphone?

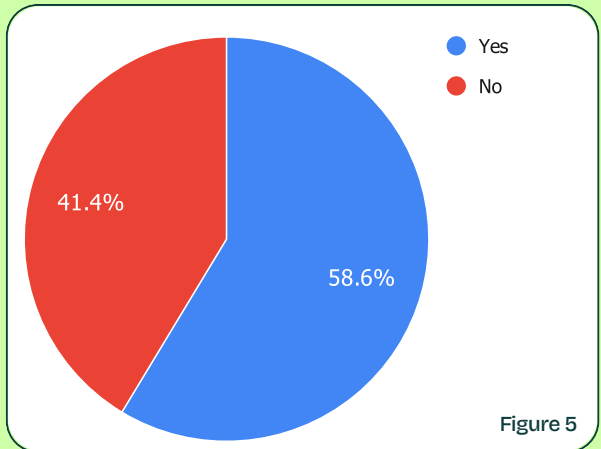
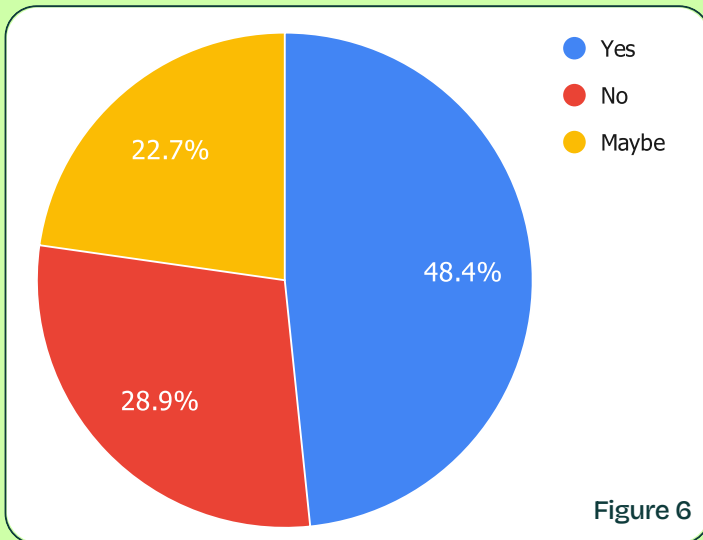


Figure 5

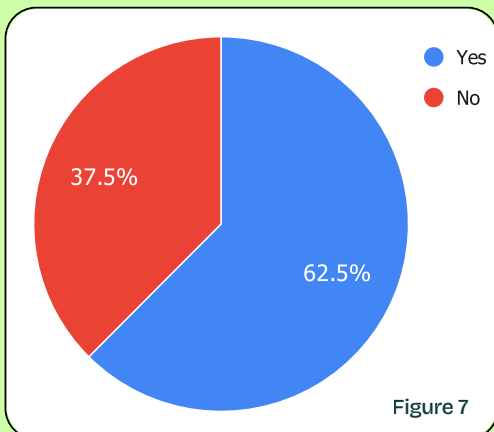
Furthermore, when asked if they would have considered delaying giving a smartphone if they were not allowed to be taken into school 48% answered yes, 23% maybe and 29% no.

Would you have considered delaying giving your child a smartphone if they were not allowed to bring them into school?

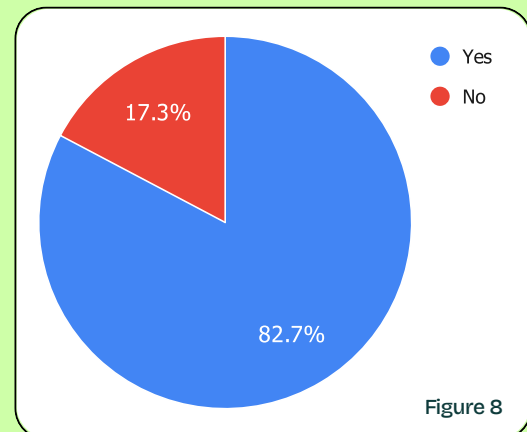


62% of parents who have given their child a smartphone are concerned about the amount of time their children spend on their smartphones (figure 7) and 83% are worried about the content their child might be exposed to via their smartphone (figure 8).

Do you feel concerned about the amount of time your child spends on their smartphone?

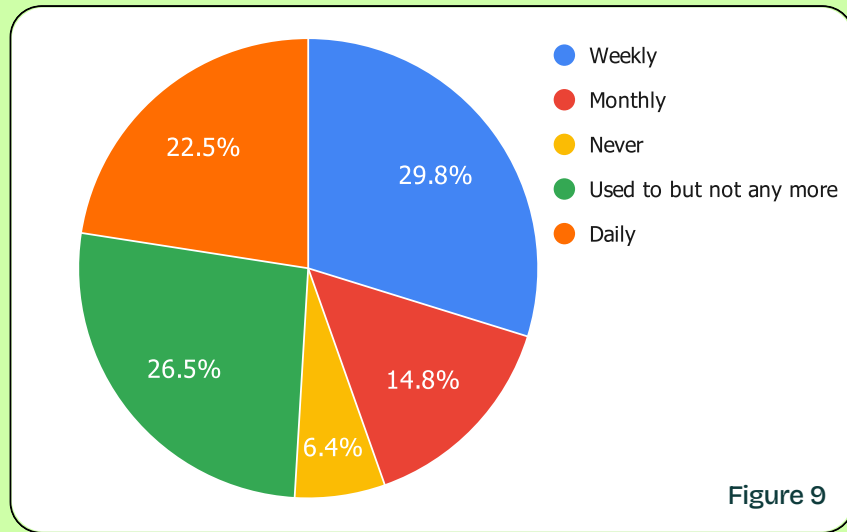


Are you worried about the content that your child might be exposed to via their smartphone?



In regards to parental monitoring, 52% monitor their child's smartphone daily or weekly, and the remaining 48% monitor it monthly or less (figure 9).

Do you monitor any of their messages, internet history, gaming interactions or other content on their smartphone?



76% of parents whose children have smartphones reported their children had experienced at least one of a range of common problems:

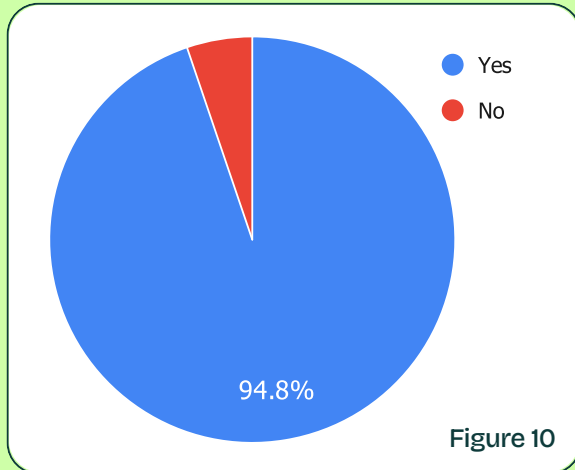
- 57% excessive screen time
- 50% reduced interest in reading
- 35% reduced interest in hobbies / clubs
- 19% receiving or sending inappropriate images
- 17% sleep problems
- 14% online bullying
- 12% violent material
- 7% viewing pornography
- 6% self-harm or suicide content
- 5% disordered eating content.

For parents who have already given their child a smartphone, 37% said it was a source of disagreement on a daily or weekly basis, 6% answered monthly and 57% said very occasionally or never.

Responses from parents whose children do not have a smartphone

95% of parents whose children do not have a smartphone are worried about the content their children may be exposed to via other children's smartphones (figure 10).

Are you worried about the content your child might be exposed to via other children's smartphones?

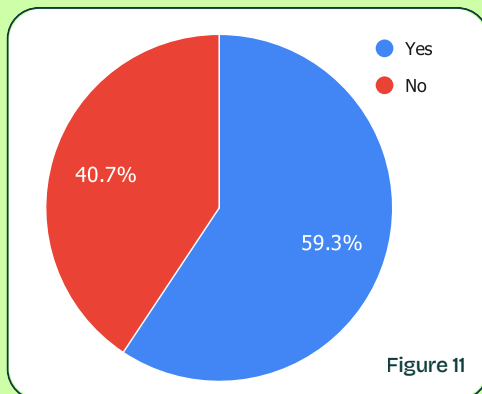


33% of these parents reported their child had already experienced a range of safeguarding harms, via other children's smartphone:

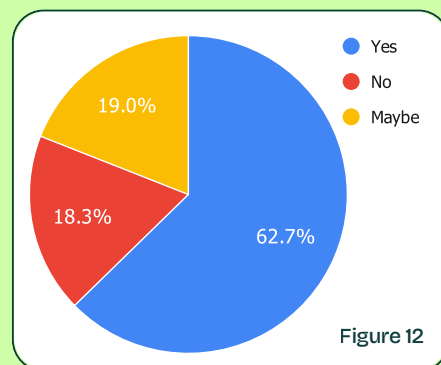
- 10% violent material
- 9% sending or receiving inappropriate images
- 8% online bullying
- 4% disordered eating content
- 2% pornography
- 2% self-harm or suicide content.

59% of these parents feel under pressure to provide a smartphone at an earlier stage than they would like (figure 11). When asked, 'if your child's school had a policy that did not allow smartphones on site would this influence your decision on when to give a smartphone', 63% answered yes, 19% maybe and 18% answered no (figure 12).

Do you feel under pressure to give your child a smartphone at an earlier stage than you would like?



If your child's school was fully smartphone free (not allowed on site) would this influence your decision on when to give your child a smartphone?

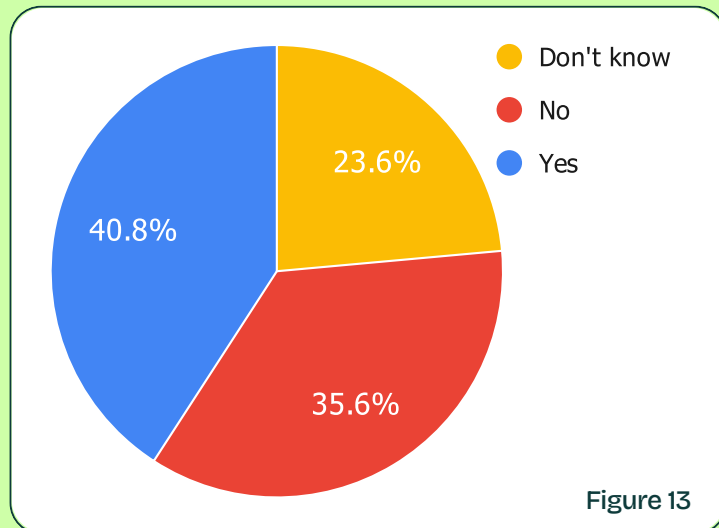


Questions on school policy - completed by all respondents regardless of whether child has smartphone or not

There is a wide range of school policies across the city, including fully smartphone free (not allowed on site), handed in, lockable pouches, 'not seen or heard' and being allowed to use during break or lunch times. 48% of respondents said they were happy with their current school policy, 31% said they were not happy, and the majority of the remaining respondents did not know their school policy.

When asked if they thought their child had been disturbed during a lesson by anyone's smartphone, 52% said no, 20% said yes and the remaining did not know. However, if you review this response to only include **children in secondary school** (n=973), 41% reported their child has been disturbed during a lesson, 24% don't know and 36% say no (figure 13).

Do you think your child has ever been distracted or disturbed during lessons, either by their own smartphone or another child's smartphone? (*All secondary schools)



Furthermore, responses to this same question from those children in **secondary schools with a lockable pouch policy** (n=231) showed a very similar result. 38% answered yes, 23% don't know and 39% say no (Figure 14).

Do you think your child has ever been distracted or disturbed during lessons, either by their own smartphone or another child's smartphone? (*Secondary schools with lockable pouch policy)

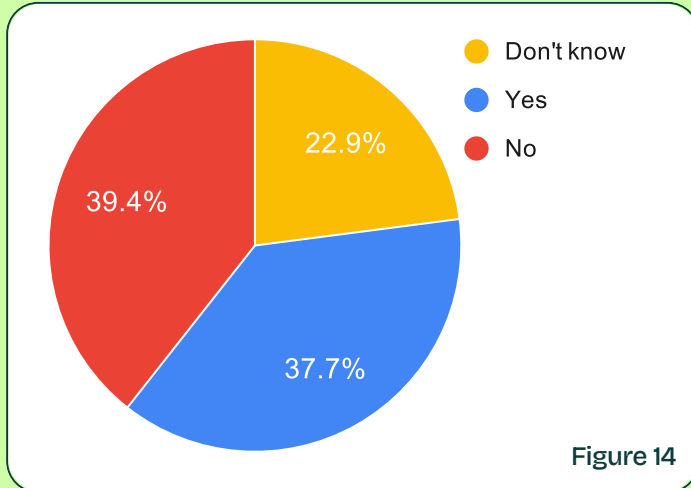


Figure 14

When asked if a school having a fully smartphone free policy would make them more or less likely to choose a school, 68% answered more likely, 24% neither and 8% less likely (figure 15).

Would a fully smartphone free policy make you more or less likely to choose a school? (All respondents)

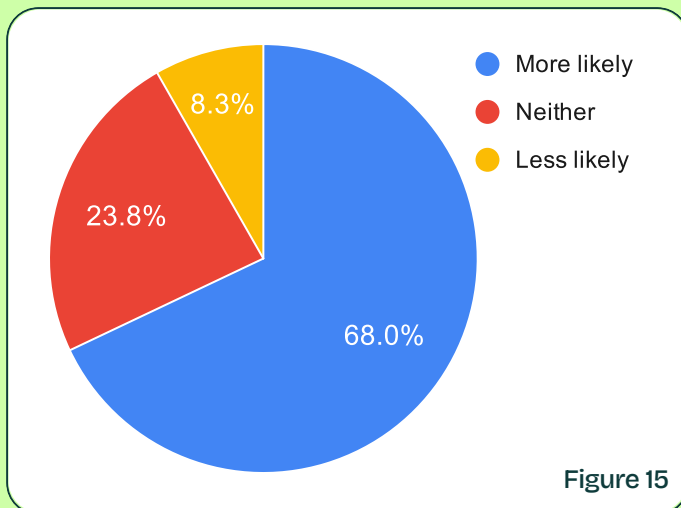
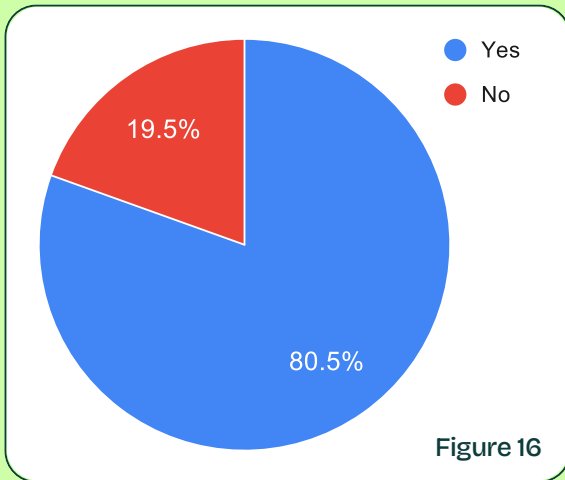


Figure 15

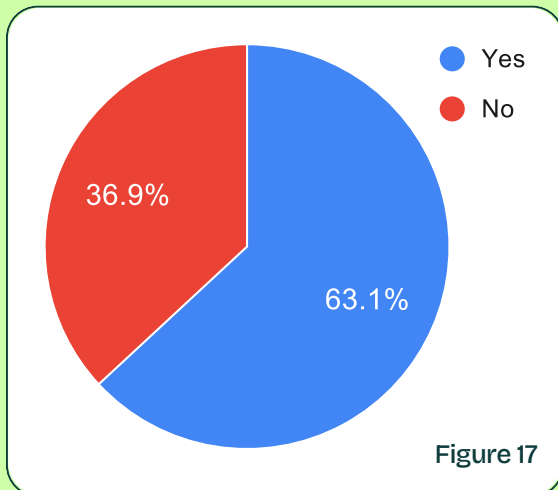
When asked if your school brought in a fully smartphone free policy would you support this, 80.5% said yes and 19.5% said no (figure 16).

If your school brought in a fully smartphone free policy (not allowed on site) would you support this? (All respondents)



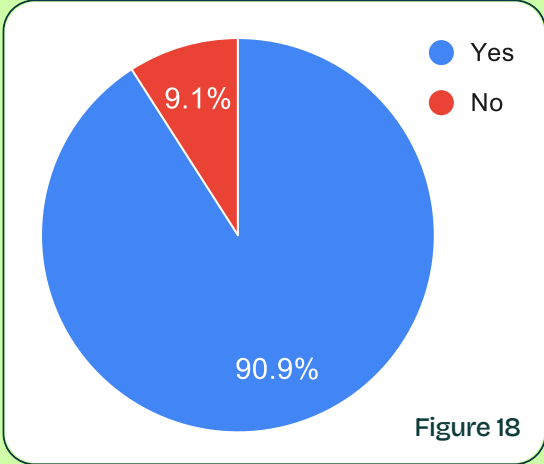
For **secondary school** respondents only (n= 973), the support for a fully smartphone free school policy is 63% (figure 17).

If your school brought in a fully smartphone free policy (not allowed on site) would you support this? (Secondary schools only)



For **primary school** respondents only (n=1,644), the support for a fully smartphone free school policy rises to 91% (figure 18).

If your school brought in a fully smartphone free policy (not allowed on site) would you support this? (Primary schools only)



Our interpretation

Safeguarding concerns and why parental monitoring is not enough

The vast majority of parents who responded to the survey are worried about the content their child will be exposed to via smartphones. For parents who have already given their child a smartphone, 83% feel worried, and for those who have not given a smartphone, 95% are worried about content they will see on other children's smartphones.

Despite this level of worry, for parents who have already given their child a smartphone, only half (52%) monitor their child's smartphone at least weekly, with the remaining half (48%) checking it monthly or never at all. One explanation for this is that parents have extremely busy lives and simply don't feel they have the time to monitor their child's smartphone regularly. It may also be that monitoring their child's smartphone closely would cause such a significant level of conflict that they judge it to be too damaging to their parenting relationship. Others may feel their child will benefit from developing an increased level of privacy and independence, so despite their worries about safety, choose not to monitor. Many parents feel they are in an impossible position.

Some parents may rely upon technological parental control settings and believe their child will be safe on their smartphone, however this isn't borne out in the evidence which demonstrates far too many children being exposed to serious harm. Many children are tech savvy and find their way around parental controls. There are plenty of guides for how to switch off or override parental controls that can be accessed with a quick internet search or look on YouTube. Nonetheless, even if one child's phone is fully secure, that child will not be protected from harmful content accessible on other children's phones. Technological parental controls of course have their role, but alone they are unlikely to be sufficient. The greatest parental control measure available is to withhold a smartphone until they are old enough to understand and manage the potential risks and consequences, but for too long this option has felt impossible for parents due to the overwhelming peer pressure and culture that exists, and this is reinforced by schools allowing smartphones on site.

The problems with smartphones in secondary school - a critical developmental window

For those children who already have a smartphone, 85% of them were given it at 11-years-old or younger, with nearly half (48%) given it at 11-years-old. This age corresponds to a critically important moment in a child's development as they transition from primary to secondary school. Children of this age are at the early stages of puberty which has a transformational effect on their emotional, physical, psychological and social well-being. They still have an immature brain that is not fully developed. The prefrontal cortex, the area with significant responsibility for complex reasoning, decision making, impulse control and emotional regulation does not fully develop until early 20s. The brain of an 11-year-old is highly susceptible to the addictive and divisive design of social media algorithms, and exposure to harmful and violent content during these formative years risks the child suffering lifelong trauma.

During this critical period parents feel significant pressure for their child not to be left out, which likely contributes significantly to the decision-making in regard to smartphones. For those who have already given a smartphone, our survey showed 58% felt pressure to provide one earlier than they would have liked. For those parents whose children do not yet have a smartphone, 59% feel pressure to provide one earlier than they would like. Despite the serious concerns parents have in relation to smartphones, it seems they may feel more concerned about their child being ostracised and bullied for being the odd one out. All humans, adults and children alike, do not typically want to stand out from the crowd.

It is important to fully consider smartphones from this peer pressure perspective and the various factors that contribute to the parenting decision about whether or not to give their child a smartphone. Although peer pressure to have the latest popular item has always existed in childhood, there is something quite unique about smartphones. If a majority of children in a friendship group receive smartphones, their socialising interactions quickly move online to social media platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok and Snapchat and so those friends without smartphones very quickly experience isolation and worry about being cut-off from these friends. The smartphone becomes the place for daily communication and socialising, replacing face-to-face interactions, and as a result those without feel isolated and so apply further pressure to parents to provide a smartphone. The fact that this challenge typically comes at the same time that children move to secondary school, when children are desperate to make new friendships and feel accepted by their peers, makes this feel nearly impossible for parents to withstand. Experiencing the sadness, worry and fear of a child who feels ostracised as they begin their secondary school journey is too much for the majority of parents to bear.

Schools have the potential to significantly help with this peer pressure element. If schools have a clear and consistently enforced fully smartphone free policy, one that does not allow smartphones on site but does allow 'brick' phones for children to communicate on their journey to/from school, then children without smartphones will not feel so left out and parents who wish to delay giving a smartphone will feel empowered to hold off for longer.

This survey found that for those who have not given a smartphone, 63% said a fully smartphone free policy would influence their decision on when to give their child a smartphone. For those who have already given a smartphone, 48% said they would have considered delaying giving a smartphone if such a policy was in place. Regardless of whether a child has a smartphone, 68% said they would be more likely to choose a school if it had a fully smartphone free policy. This evidence indicates that a school's smartphone policy has a significant impact on a parent's decision-making in regards to smartphones. A fully smartphone free policy (not allowed on site) would likely result in many more parents delaying giving their child a smartphone by significantly reducing the experience of peer pressure associated with smartphone ownership. And this in turn would protect more children from the many smartphone related harms.

Support for schools to go fully smartphone free

Perhaps the most powerful result from this survey is that 81% of respondents, including those who have already given their child a smartphone, would support their school introducing a fully smartphone free policy. Support is even higher amongst parents whose children are at primary school, with 91% saying they would support a fully smartphone free policy. It is also worth noting that amongst responses from those at secondary school, 63% would support a fully smartphone free policy.

Some school leaders push back against the need for tougher policies. They do not want to be seen to be telling parents how to parent and feel they need to be mindful of parent choice. They argue if parents are worried about smartphone related harms they can simply choose not to give their child a smartphone. Whilst true, this position overly simplifies the challenge experienced by parents looking to delay smartphones and does not address the safeguarding risks posed to their child by other children's smartphones at school.

Even if the peer pressure issue is pushed to one side, it is not possible to eliminate the safeguarding risk associated with smartphones if they are allowed on site. Given the potentially traumatising content that children can be exposed to via smartphones, the strongest control measure possible, removal of the risk (smartphone), must surely be the gold standard position. It is important to recognise that one child having a smartphone creates risk to all other children around them, both inside and outside of school. The KCSIE document makes clear that schools have a legal responsibility to protect children, both in and out of school, and smartphone related harms must be considered within this context (11). Preventing these harms must be the priority as opposed to focusing on helping children manage the consequences. *It must not be accepted as an inevitability that children are exposed to smartphone related harms as part of growing up - all children deserve better.*

Smartphone related harms being experienced by children in Brighton & Hove

There is a vast amount of evidence highlighting the harms children experience via smartphones, as referenced earlier in this report. Responses to our survey provide a glimpse into some of the harms being experienced by children in Brighton & Hove and it seems reasonable to assume some of these harms will have been experienced whilst in school. It should be recognised that these harms will likely be an underestimate because the responses come from parents and so only represent harms that their children have told them about or the parent has seen.

Of those who have already given their child a smartphone, 19% report their child sending or receiving inappropriate images, 17% have had sleep problems, 14% have experienced online bullying, 12% have seen violent content, 7% have viewed pornography, 6% have seen eating disorder content and 4% have seen self-harm or suicide content.

As well as these serious safeguarding issues, 57% of respondents feel their children struggle with excessive screen time. This should be considered alongside research from King's College London which found 23% of children displayed problematic smartphone use (consistent with

addictive behaviours) (31) and another study which found those with problematic smartphone use are twice as likely to suffer from anxiety and nearly three times as likely to suffer from depression (32). Given the potential link between excessive screen time and poorer mental health outcomes, banning smartphones from school would give children some much-needed protected time away from their smartphone. This has the potential to help them develop key social skills, build strong relationships, focus on their learning and create a more positive school environment.

This wide array of problems reported by parents with children who already have a smartphone goes a long way to explaining why 59% of them now wish they had waited until their child was older, before giving them a smartphone.

Responses from parents who have not given their child a smartphone provide evidence of harms they have experienced via other children's smartphones and should remind everyone that one child's smartphone is a risk to all other children around them. Amongst these respondents, 10% have seen violent material, 9% have seen inappropriate images, 8% have seen online bullying, 4% have seen eating disorder content, 2% have seen pornography and 2% have seen suicide or self-harm content.

Displacement of reading and physical activity

Another finding from this survey, regarding children who already have a smartphone, is that 50% are less interested in reading and 35% are less interested in hobbies and clubs. This is a huge opportunity cost to children. Physical world behaviours such as reading and attending clubs are so positive for children's development but are increasingly being displaced by addictive social media platforms, designed by attention engineers with one priority, to maximise the amount of time spent on their platforms. There is finally hope that these harms are being better recognised after a landmark judgement in Los Angeles has recently found Meta and YouTube liable for harms caused to a child due to the addictive design of their platforms (33).

This dramatic shift to the online world has been referred to as 'the great rewiring of childhood' by professor of social psychology Jonathan Haidt in his landmark book 'The Anxious Generation'. The research contained within this book provides a compelling argument and evidence base that indicates children's exposure to smartphones and social media are likely to be significantly contributing to the deteriorating mental health measures for children (34). There is an ever-growing body of research pointing to a link between children using smartphones and social media and their worsening mental health outcomes, including this most recent *World Happiness Report* (35).

Distraction and disturbance in schools - pouches are not enough

As well as the serious safeguarding issues this survey also highlights the problem of students being distracted in lessons by smartphones. Amongst responses from parents of children at all secondary schools (n=973), 41% report their child has been disturbed during lessons by a smartphone. Some schools have introduced lockable pouches, hoping that would reduce this problem; however if you review the data for those who attend secondary schools with

lockable pouches (n=231), the rate of disturbance remains very similar at 38%.

One explanation for this is that many children simply cannot resist the addictive nature of these devices. Children have found ways to avoid the lockable pouch system, such as not locking it at all, putting an old phone in or using pencils or pens to wedge it open - there are many videos online demonstrating how easy this is. Another consideration is that even whilst in the pouch a smartphone can disturb and distract children. Any phone that hasn't been put on silent has the potential to ring or beep when a notification comes through. And even without any notification disturbance, there is research indicating the mere presence of a smartphone creates enough distraction to negatively affect academic performance (36). It may also be that the pouches have only been introduced within the last two years and some respondents may have been answering the question following incidents that took place before pouches were introduced.

Another problem with the pouch system is that it does nothing to help prevent harms during the journey to and from school. There is also an argument to say they contribute to the societal expectation that a child gets a smartphone for secondary school and it becomes another point for potential peer pressure and bullying for those children that don't have a smartphone to put in a pouch.

The implementation of lockable pouches by some schools has been an incredibly important first step in safeguarding children. Our starting point two years ago was one where it was normal for nearly all children to have smartphones in secondary school and they were occasionally being used by teachers during some lessons. Introducing pouches at that time was a groundbreaking and pioneering move. However, our ever-increasing understanding of the risks around childhood smartphone use indicates that we need to go further. We believe a fully smartphone free policy which does not allow them on school sites but does permit a 'brick' phone to facilitate communication and safe travel, should be the standard to aim for.

Some schools have teachers on 'toilet duty' because there are children that spend excessive amounts of time in the toilet on their smartphone, meaning lengthy queues build up. Teachers do not feel it appropriate to go into the toilets and some children have exploited this in order to get their smartphone fix.

Given these devices have been designed to be addictive (or maximise engagement to use tech corporate language) by attention engineers whose primary goal is to keep users on their phones it should be no surprise that many children whose brains have not yet fully developed and have more difficulty with impulse control, find it impossible to resist using their smartphone.

We need a whole community approach

Over the past two years the awareness of serious safeguarding risks associated with smartphones and children has grown significantly, and schools, parents, and policy makers alike are now much better informed. Furthermore Bill Ready, CEO of Pinterest, has become the first big tech leader to show his support for governments to ban social media for under 16s (37). There is a clear direction of travel to try and better protect children from these harms and it requires a whole community approach.

Internet safety experts often talk about the concept of 'layering' when it comes to online safety and this model can be helpful when considering who has responsibility to protect children from smartphone related harms. The most important layer of protection is of course parents - they decide when to give their child a smartphone. Parents need to try and keep themselves as well-informed as possible of the risks and possible control measures, but given the pace of change of technology, generational knowledge gap and busyness of a working parent's life, it is impossible for parents alone to keep children safe.

Arguably, the second most important layer is schools, where children spend a huge amount of time between the ages of 4 and 16 years-old. Government is of course another very important layer and they have recently launched a public consultation on this issue, with a view to tightening up protections, but successive governments since 2008 have talked about making the internet safe for children and nearly 20 years on that has not materialised. Many other public bodies, such as the council, healthcare, leisure facilities, social clubs, sports clubs and all public places have roles to play in protecting children from these harms.

Peanuts and the precautionary principle

Approximately 2% of children in the UK are allergic to peanuts and yet the vast majority of schools ban peanuts (38). There are many nutritional benefits to peanuts but schools have decided the very small risk of a child having an allergic reaction is too great and so do not allow any children to bring peanuts to school. This is a great example of the precautionary principle in action and this same principle should be applied to smartphones. As demonstrated in this parent survey, multiple reports from the Children's Commissioner, the Ofsted report 'Sexual abuse in schools & colleges', the Education Select Committee report and multiple individual case studies, far too many children are being exposed to serious safeguarding risks of smartphones and we feel schools must go further to better protect children whilst under their care.

Prioritise safeguarding - removing smartphones from schools

Over the past six months eight primary schools in Brighton & Hove have introduced fully smartphone free policies, banning them completely from coming into school. Five more primaries have announced they will be moving to this policy in September 2026 and King's School has become the first secondary school to move to this policy for their incoming Year 7 students at the start of the next school year.

We urge all schools across the city to consider introducing fully smartphone free policies that do not allow smartphones (or any personal device with internet, video or photo capability) to come into school. Inexpensive 'brick phones' can facilitate communication before and after school and offer reassurance to parents that children can call for help in case of emergency.

Removing smartphones from schools will cause some level of inconvenience in the short term. Some children have a digital bus pass on their phone, others may rely on maps for navigation and some parents feel nervous if they are not tracking their child. There are solutions to all of these barriers and the short term challenge of resolving these issues seems like a small price to pay to better protect children from the very serious harms they are exposed to via smartphones.

Next steps

Any headteachers interested in learning more about how other schools are moving to fully smartphone free policies please don't hesitate to get in touch by emailing hello@sfcbrighton.co.uk if you feel we could support you.

A comprehensive list of suggested solutions to common perceived blockers can be found on the SFC Brighton & Hove website (39) along with examples of brick phones and detailed instructions for applying for a physical bus pass.

Generation Focus (40), an organisation very closely aligned with Smartphone Free Childhood, has some fantastic case studies and resources that you can use immediately. They also recently held a webinar in which three headteachers share their journey to banning smartphones, explaining how and why they did it and the benefits they have experienced since doing so. The webinar is extremely inspiring and motivating - we would encourage any headteachers interested in learning more to watch it (41).

Limitations

This survey received 2,666 responses which equates to a response rate of approximately 8% of children in schools across Brighton & Hove. We did not collect any personal data regarding age, ethnicity, education, employment or other information and so do not claim this report is scientifically representative of all parents across the city. These are significant limitations of the survey but not things we could have easily influenced. We are a small group of parent volunteers with limited resources. The survey was shared with all schools twice and then schools decided how they shared it with their parents. We did not collect data on if and how schools shared their survey, however we did receive some feedback from parents. It seemed, anecdotally, that schools who sent the survey out as a separate communication received a significantly higher response rate than those who only shared it within a school newsletter.

Conclusions

We urge all schools to introduce a fully smartphone free policy. This will provide better protection from the serious risks, help children focus on their learning and give them more opportunities to build key social skills and meaningful connections with their friends and teachers.

We hope this report provides some helpful information to the city of Brighton & Hove. We urge everyone to take time to reflect upon this information and ask themselves what more they can do to better protect children.

Note: No generative AI tool was used in the creation, analysis, and writing of this survey and report.

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