



**SMARTPHONE
FREE CHILDHOOD**

Smartphones: the new frontier in parenting

Stranmillis Parent Presentation 2025



IN TWO DECADES, EVERYTHING'S CHANGED

2004



2004

Nokias ruled



2024



2007

The first iPhone launches



2008

Apple app store opens



2012

4G launches in the UK, enabling internet everywhere



2024

89% of 12-year-olds own a smartphone, permanently connected to the internet via 4g/5g



PARENTS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

94%

of primary school
parents think
smartphones
are harmful

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496
people, April 24

70%

of parents believe
smartphones
negatively impact
family life

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24

33%

of parents of children
with smartphones
have cried over their
child's phone
obsession

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24



“I honestly wish my other two children never had them”

“We have older children who we bought smartphones for at the start of first year. I am keen to wait til fourth year before buying for our younger child”

“I would love to use mine less”

SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025
(210 respondents)



YOUNG PEOPLE WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

67%

of 16-18 year olds
think smartphones
are harmful

Parentkind poll, 2024

1 in 5

of 16-18 year olds
have felt “life is not
worth living” due to
social media

Parentkind poll, 2024

50%

of teens say they are
“addicted” to social
media

Millennium Cohort Study, 2024



“My child has said they prefer going out with friends who don’t have phones as they play better, other children with phones sometimes don’t engage and don’t want to play with my child but just sit on their phone”

SPS Parent

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025

UK British Standards Institution Study released this week revealed:

- Nearly 70% of 16-21 year olds feel worse about themselves after spending time on social media.
- 50% would support a “digital curfew” restricting access to certain apps and sites past 10pm.
 - 46% said they would rather be young in a world without the internet altogether.

YET SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM



25%

of 5-7 year olds
in the UK own their
own smartphone

89%

of 12 year-olds
in the UK own their
own smartphone



SOURCE: OFCOM Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes April 24



EVERYONE'S GOT ONE BECAUSE EVERYONE'S GOT ONE



Most parents believe smartphones are harmful, yet almost all children have them by Year 7



Because resisting peer pressure becomes almost impossible when children's social lives migrate online

The powerful network effects of smartphones and social media mean parents and young people feel like they have no choice



“1st year got phone after transfer test, I felt pressure from other parents, who in hindsight I wouldn’t necessarily take parenting advice from on other topics. Also, pressure from my child who felt all their friends would or had got a phone. Still feel I should have stuck with my gut on it”.

“The pressure comes around P7”

SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025



“My concerns are around when my child goes to secondary school will they need a phone for schoolwork etc? I have heard that they do in many schools?”

SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025

Schools are adapting for the children that don't have smartphones as they grow in number, reacting to parents and changing bit by bit. Make your voice heard at open days, ask about their phone policy. More and more schools are becoming phone free.



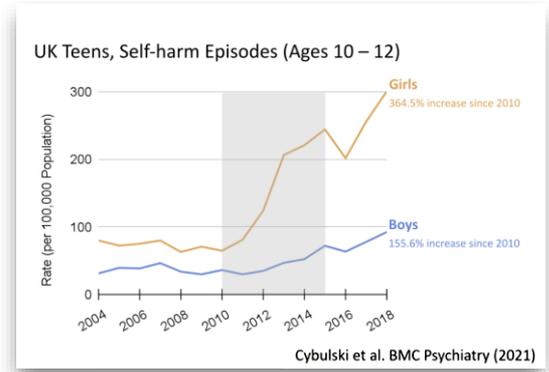
**So what exactly
is the problem?**



SMARTPHONES ARE FUELLING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and even suicide among teens have all dramatically spiked globally since 2010 – when children started getting smartphones.

A 2023 global study of 27,969 young adults from Sapiens Labs showed that the younger they got their first smartphone, the worse their mental health today.



3x

Teens with problematic smartphone-use are twice as likely to have anxiety and three times as likely to have depression

King's College London, 2024

1 in 5

UK 16 to 18 years olds say that their social media has made them feel that 'life is not worth living'

Parentkind Poll, 2024

53%

The number of children referred to emergency mental healthcare in England has soared by 53% in three years

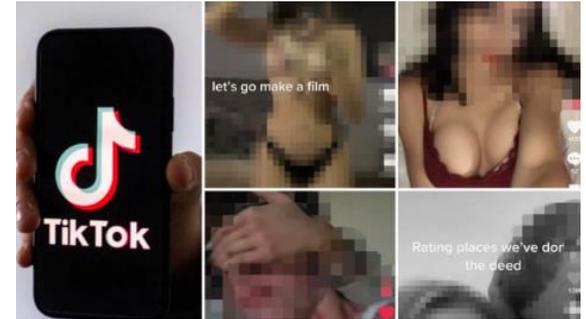
Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024



SMARTPHONES EXPOSE KIDS TO HARMFUL CONTENT

Having unrestricted access to the internet in your pocket creates a gateway to extreme content and viewpoints that we'd never dream of exposing children to in real life.

Hardcore pornography, extreme political views, sexualised and violent imagery, trolling and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders have become part of the fabric of modern childhood.



51%

of UK 11-13 year-olds
have seen hardcore
pornography online

British Board of Film Classification Report, March 2022

90%

of girls and 50% of boys say they
are sent unwanted explicit
content

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools, 2021



“My 13 yo doesn’t have any social media on her phone, but forwarded YouTube and Snapchat reels are a problem”.

“I am a teacher and I honestly feel parents are extremely ignorant to the dangers mobile phones bring to their children. I wish more honest examples of how children have used their mobile phones would be discussed publicly”

SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025

SMARTPHONE APPS ARE ADDICTIVE BY DESIGN

Tech companies spend billions on making apps and devices as addictive as possible because ‘maximising engagement’ is the fundamental objective of their business model.

So it’s little wonder that many children are routinely ‘spending six, seven, eight hours a day on social media – often more’ (Ofcom, 2024).



46%

of teens say they use their phones “almost constantly”

Pew Research Centre, Aug 2022

35 hours

per week is the average time British teens now spend on their smartphone

University of Birmingham, 2025

2 in 3

of 11-17 year olds ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ find it difficult to put down their phone

Common Sense Media, 2023



“It distracts my first year from school work, family life, you can see the addictive behaviour watching the short videos and would be worried about the content being consumed as much as we try to lock, restrict etc. The interest in skin care for example at such a young age and the need to buy these expensive products due to being influenced by the marketers”

SPS Parent

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025

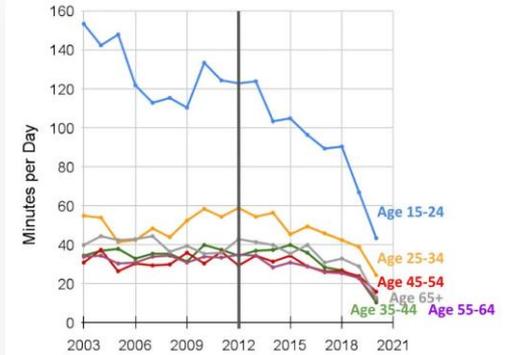


SMARTPHONES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING CHILDHOOD

Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world activities and connections that are crucial to healthy childhood development.

The opportunity cost to childhood is profound. The average UK 12 year-old now spends over four hours per day on their smartphone, displacing the kinds of activities that have shaped childhood for millennia.

Daily Avg Time with Friends (minutes)



43%

of US teenagers waking minutes are spent on screens

Gitnux Marketdata Report, Jan 2024

30%

Since 1975, the daily average time children spend playing outdoors has fallen by 30%, while screen-based activities have risen 23%

Zach Rausch - Mullan 2019

65%

The daily average time that teenagers spend with friends has plummeted by 65% since 2010

American Time Use Study



“When kids are on their phones all day, it’s not just what they're doing on the phone that matters — it’s what they’re not doing. They’re missing out on crucial experiences that help them grow into healthy adults.”



Dr Jonathan Haidt

Professor of Social Psychology, NYU



SADLY, WE COULD GO ON



SLEEP

Bedtime use of smartphones doubles children's risk of poor sleep



BULLYING

84% of bullying now takes place on a device



DISTRACTIONS

On average teens are bombarded by 237 smartphone notifications a day



ARGUMENTS

55% of parents say their child's smartphone use causes big family arguments



ROAD SAFETY

Mobile phone distraction is a major cause of road accidents involving children



CRIME

500 children a day were mugged in 2020 in the UK, almost all for smartphones



It's little wonder that many of the people who created this technology keep it away from their kids

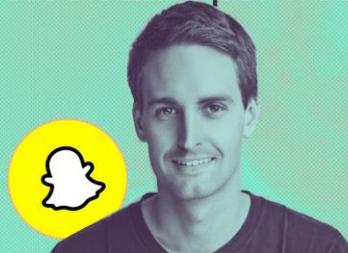
STEVE JOBS

“We don't allow the iPad in the home. We think it's too dangerous for them”



EVAN SPIEGEL

Grew up without a TV and credits his own success on that tech restriction. Limits his kid to 1.5 hours screen time per week



BILL GATES

Didn't allow his 4 children smartphones or their own computers until they were 14





Parents are in an impossible position

BECAUSE OUR 'CHOICE' ISN'T REALLY A CHOICE AT ALL



Either we...

Give our children access to a product that we know to be harmful.



Or we...

Risk alienating them from their peers at a crucial stage of their development.

IT'S A LOSE-LOSE; FOR PARENTS, FOR CHILDREN & FOR SOCIETY

LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

BUT PROPER REGULATION OF BIG TECH WILL TAKE YEARS, AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE



**The solution is to
work together**



1. Create a community of support to exchange ideas and help

2. Agree as a group of concerned parents to delay giving our children smartphones

3. Seek alternatives - classic phones until 14 – reduces stress

4. Speak, support and inform your children on the why

Saying no can feel impossible when you're acting alone. Acting collectively makes it infinitely easier.



This is what Smartphone Free Childhood is all about.

It's a growing movement of 300,000+ parents in the UK who are coming together to support each other in delaying access to smartphones and social media for their children.

Technology has immense benefits, and young people should be able to enjoy the opportunities it creates – when they're ready and when it's safe to do so.



OUR RECOMMENDED APPROACH

- Simple phone until at least 14
- Delay social media until 16
- Internet & WhatsApp access via a shared family computer
- Track with an Airtag if you want to know where they are



SMARTPHONE



SOCIAL MEDIA



SIMPLE PHONE



FAMILY COMPUTER



PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T THE SOLUTION

- Even the most tech-savvy parents struggle to manage parental controls
- Some apps require updates to hundreds of settings to make them age appropriate
- Even if your child's phone has parental controls, their friends may not so they may be sent inappropriate content regardless

47%
of teens with
controls in place
say they have
bypassed them

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

And teens find
multiple ways to
bypass controls:

Performing a factory reset

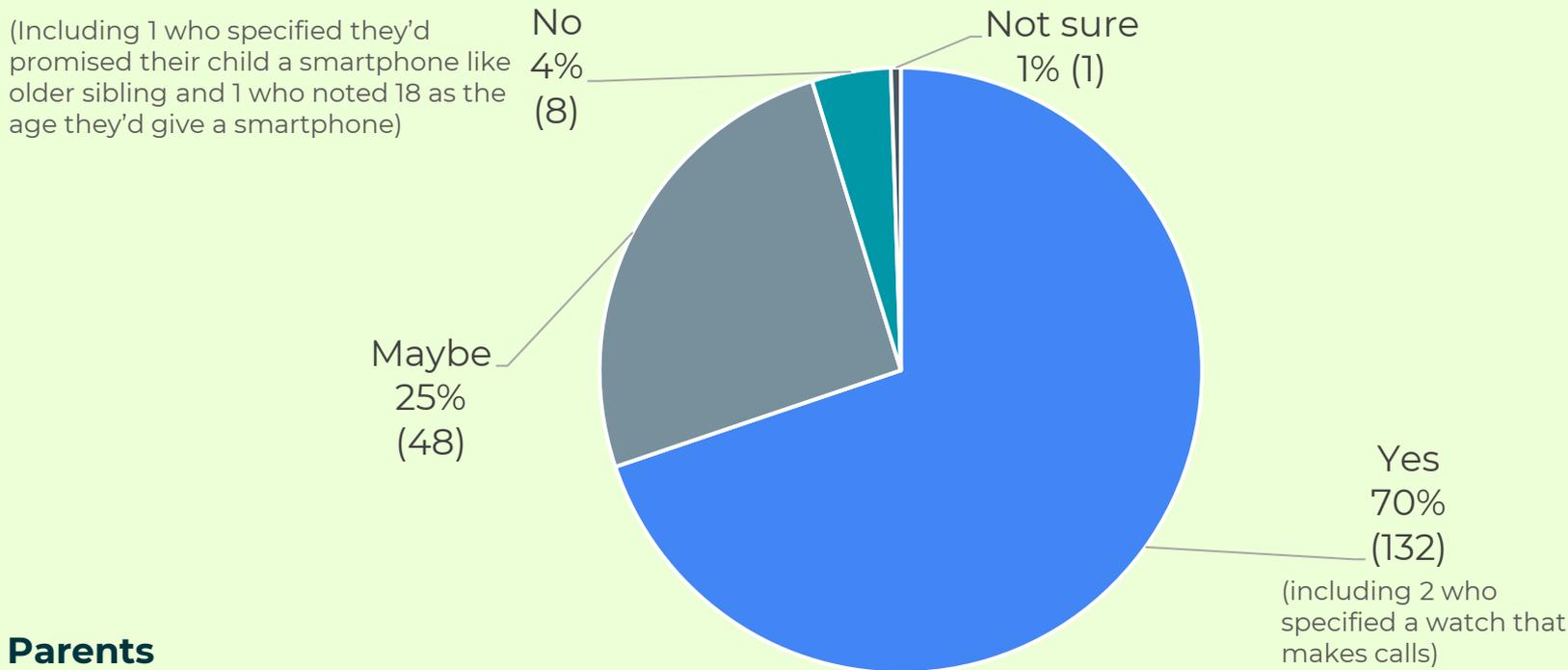
Using VPN software

Hacking the WiFi router

Memorising your passcode



Would you get your child an alternative phone (ie. a brick / simple / child phone) rather than a smartphone as a first step, if others in their peer group did the same?



Lots of options as alternatives to smartphones

Imoo Z1 watch phone £93



Pinwheel ↗

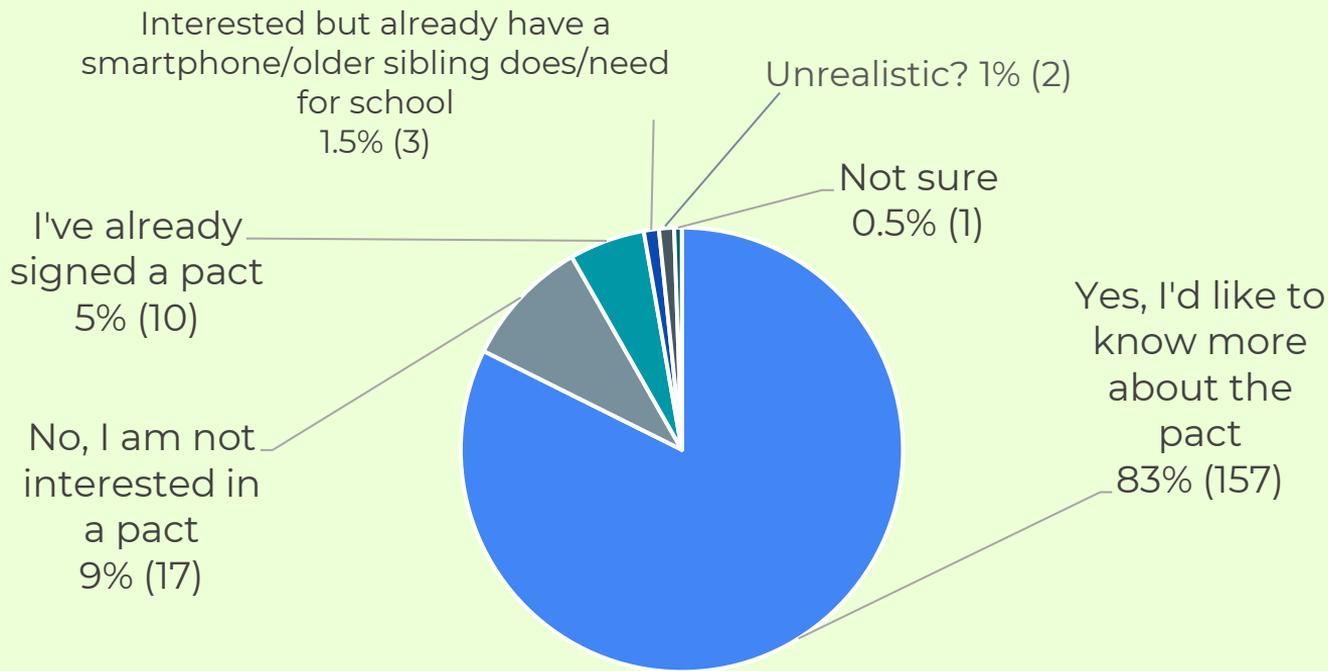
£239 for the Samsung Plus 4 model or £479 Google Pixel 8A model. Plus £13.99 monthly for the Pinwheel Caregiver Portal

- Modern, reliable kid phones with built-in parent management
- Device is designed to grow with your child, to meet their experience and maturity level.
- You can create a contact safelist, monitor texts and calls and set schedules for when contacts and apps are available.
- No web browser or social media apps, but hundreds of other vetted apps available, which you can choose to add when your child is ready, including banking, Google Maps, Spotify and Citymapper.
- Inbuilt GPS locator





Would you be interested in joining a voluntary parent pact? The pact brings families together to agree to wait until age 14 before getting their child a smartphone, helping reduce the peer pressure.



SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025



“The more parents stick together on this, the less peer pressure there will be and for our children’s mental health, this is a must! ”

“We can only change the status quo by standing up to the pressure”

SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025

And it's not just Stranmillis PS.

We're working collectively with other South Belfast schools and more and more meetings like this are happening throughout NI and beyond now.

The background is a collage of images with a dark teal overlay. It includes a person on a bicycle, people in a field, and a person with arms raised.

In your groups discuss:

1. What is your biggest takeaway from what you've heard?

2. What are 3 things we can do as parents and as a community?

“A family computer and a basic phone gives the best of both worlds. They don’t need the internet in their pockets”

“It’s good for children to be bored sometimes, that’s when they get creative. I’ll think before giving them a screen”

“Every notification is a distraction. P7s do not need a group WhatsApp”

“We’re all addicted to our phones, how can we expect kids to manage?”

“We need to model better phone use to our children”

“Secondary schools are adapting, moving away from needing phones as more kids come to school without them. Ask about phone policy at open days”

“Legislation is slow. Parents can act now”

“Would like tips to reduce phone use for me and my older children”

“I wish this community was here before I bought my older kids a phone”

“Struck by teens regretting getting a phone and some now moving to a Nokia”

“Teach kids not to make fun of kids without smartphone”

“Eton give their first years brick phones, tech leaders don’t give their kids devices”

SPS Parents

Some points from group discussion, May 2025



THE PARENT PACT

makes collective
action simple



The Parent Pact helps parents agree to delay with others in the community. The more of us who sign, the more powerful it becomes.

www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk

Step 01.

Select your region & child's school



Step 02.

Sign the Pact to delay until age 14



Step 03.

View results for your region, school & class



National (UK)

136,778

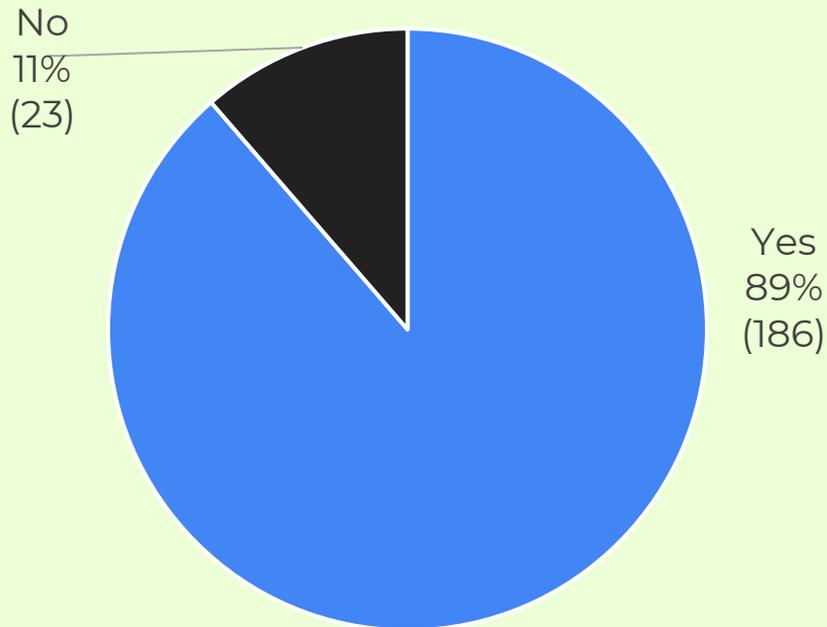
CHILDREN

13,533

SCHOOLS



Would you be interested in additional support and information for parents on this topic from your school, for example workshops / talks / emailed information?

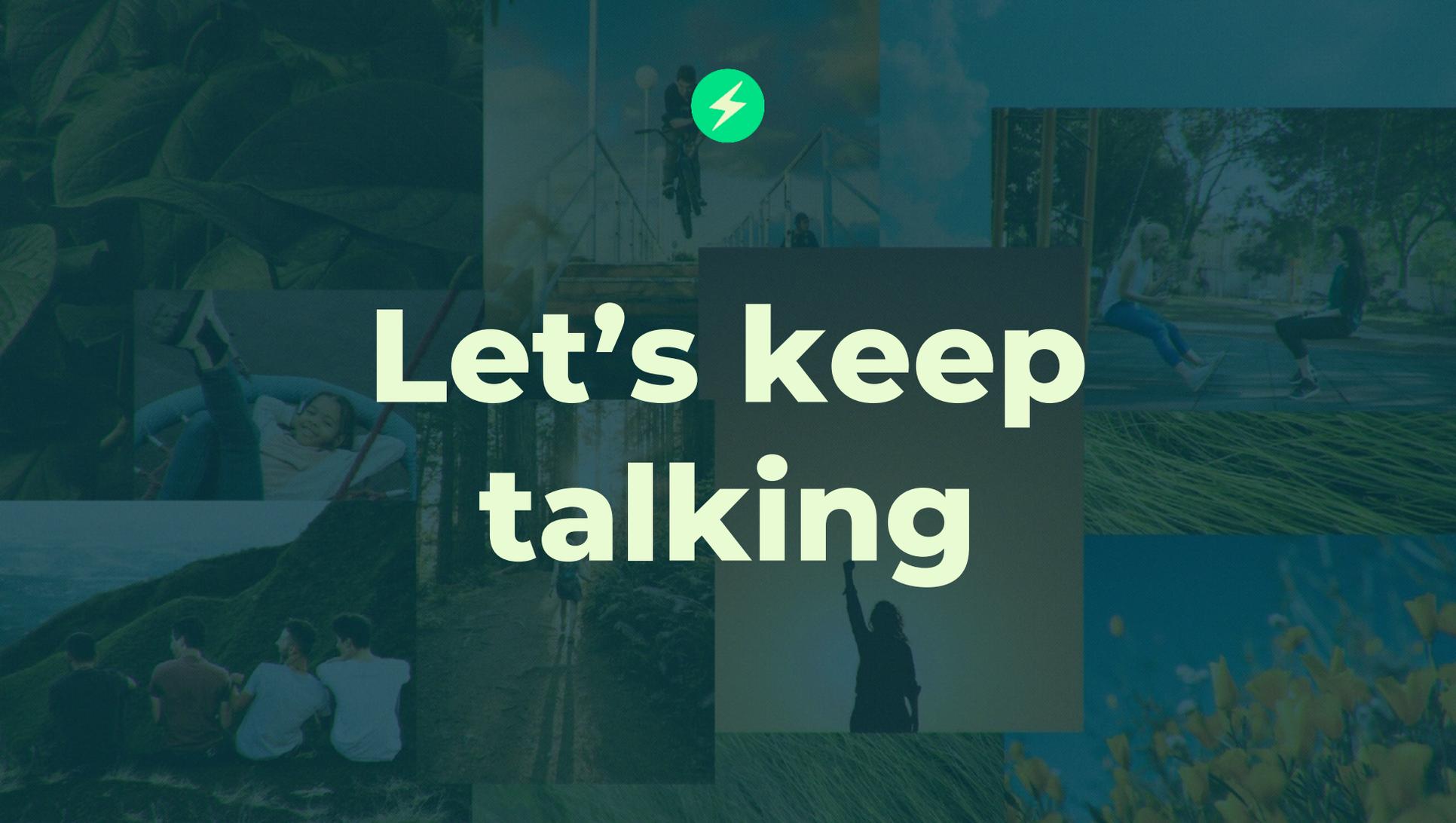


SPS Parents

Stranmillis PS Smartphone Survey, May 2025



**Let's keep
talking**





SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD

www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk

@smartphonefreechildhood



Smartphone Free Childhood is a restricted fund under the auspices of Prism the Gift Fund, Charity Number 1099682.

5 tips for parents deciding when to get their child a smartphone

If you're worried about giving your child a smartphone but don't want them to feel left out, you're not alone. Many parents are facing the same dilemma. Here are five practical tips to help you decide when—or if—it's the right time.

01. Educate yourself about the issue

Before making any decisions, take some time to understand how smartphones can impact young people's mental health, sleep, and focus. Watching the Channel4 documentary [Swiped](#), on which Dr Chatterjee is the expert voice, is a great start.

02. Have open conversations

Talk openly with your child. Share your concerns, but also listen to how they feel. Explain that this decision is about supporting their health and future, not just enforcing rules. Honest conversations build trust and understanding.

03. Discuss the benefits of being smartphone-free

Help your child see the positives. Without a smartphone, they have more time for hobbies, spending quality time with friends, and building independence. Focus on what they'll gain, not what they're missing.

04. Offer alternatives

If they feel left out or are concerned about not having a particular app, consider letting them use it on a shared family device so you can keep an eye on what they're up to. Or get them a simple phone – there are loads of good options which enable them to keep in touch, without the potential risks of the internet or social media. Check out our guide to the best [simple](#) phones.

05. Sign a Parent Pact with others

The [Parent Pact](#) lets you join a community of like-minded parents waiting until at least Year 9 to get their child a smartphone. See how many others have signed in your child's school and year group, and connect with them via your regional Smartphone Free Childhood WhatsApp group, to reduce the peer pressure.

Delaying doesn't mean forever – it can simply involve waiting a few more years until your child's better able to deal with the digital world, and giving a simple phone in the meantime.

5 ways to help your kids build healthier smartphone habits

Smartphones have been around for barely 15 years, and as parents, we're still figuring out how best to navigate bringing up kids in the digital age. If your child already has a smartphone, it's never too late to help them build healthier habits. Here are five simple steps to support them.

01. Set up parental controls

Use parental controls to limit screen time, block inappropriate content and ensure their device is as safe as it can be. Most phones have built-in options, or you can explore third-party tools for more control.

02. No phones at mealtimes

Set a rule: no phones at the table. This encourages real conversations and helps everyone stay present and connected in real life for regular times each day.

03. No phones an hour before bed

Phones before bed can disrupt sleep. Set a rule that phones go away at least an hour before bedtime. This helps reduce blue light exposure, allowing your child to get a better, longer night's sleep.

04. Take a break

Introduce regular phone-free times, like 'Smartphone Free Sundays' or family outings with no screens. These breaks give everyone a chance to disconnect, recharge, and connect with each other face-to-face.

05. Create tech-free zones

Establish tech-free zones in your home, particularly in bedrooms. Alone at night in their bedroom is where kids are most likely to come to harm via their smartphone, so a no phones in the bedroom rule keeps them safe and promotes better, deeper sleep.

These boundaries help your child build a healthier relationship with tech so that they can thrive at school, with friends and at home.

6 Tips to Spend Less Time on Your Phone

More Connected. Less Distracted.



1

CHECK TIME SPENT ON PHONE

Check how long you spend on your phone each day.

Phone Settings > Screen Time / Digital Wellbeing

2

MANAGE NOTIFICATIONS

Go to Settings > Notifications > App Notifications (sort by most frequent) Manage Notifications by App. Turn Off any non-essential notifications

3

GREYSCALE & DARK THEME

Greyscale removes colour from screen. Useful to wind down at night. (Android > Digital Wellbeing > Bedtime Mode. iPhone - Shortcuts automation > Set Colour Filters - Greyscale) Settings > Display > Dark Theme/Mode (black background, saves battery & easier on eyes).

4

PHONE IN DIFFERENT ROOM

Dinner time, bedtime, playing with kids etc. - it can help to leave your phone in a different room (e.g. the hallway) so it's not so easy to pick it up and be distracted.



5

MINIMALISE YOUR PHONE

Download a Minimalist Launcher to stop opening apps without thinking. E.g Olauncher (free on Android, no ads). Lists your apps in text rather than icons. Press info button to see how long you spend on each app and # of notifications. Nice chance to hide/delete apps you don't want to spend time on.

6

APPBLOCK APP / FOCUS MODE

Block yourself from using the most distracting apps/websites at set times (or set time limits/day). It can be useful to use Appblock for strict blocked times and Focus mode (e.g. in Digital Wellbeing/iPhone Settings) for less strict times as it's easier to interrupt the latter for a short break.) but still a good reminder.