



Phone-free childhood

Karen Pedro, Headteacher of Gayhurst Primary in Hackney – part of the Leap Federation – on why her pupils are phone free

We banned phones for children three years ago following the pandemic. Not just smartphones but all phones. At the time I expected some pushback from parents – particularly those with children in Years 5 and 6 who were walking home alone – but actually, the rule was embraced and accepted by the large majority of parents.

We felt comfortable taking the lead on this issue at Gayhurst. I think schools setting boundaries around phones was something parents desperately wanted. It has helped them to have much clearer messaging for their children that smartphones just aren't appropriate for their age.

This is something that the Smartphone Free Childhood (SFC) movement has really tapped into. That sense of collective action by and for parents has lifted the burden for

so many families who might have felt they were facing this dilemma alone. It is why the SFC grassroots movement has been so successful this year.

What began as a couple of concerned messages between two mums about smartphones in February this year has exploded into a global movement in a few short months. As I write this, the SFC Parent Pact, an online pledge to withhold smartphones from children until they are at least 14, has been signed by more than 50,000 parents with children in nearly 8,000 of the UK's schools. I am proud to say that parents of Gayhurst School pupils have signed the Parent Pact.

“WhatsApp was awful. We had children creating multiple groups and then excluding others... like playground bullying but on a high-tech platform”

Banning phones really helped in terms of the volume of issues we were dealing with in school. WhatsApp was awful. We had children creating multiple groups and then excluding others from those groups. And it was done to such extremes, it was like wildfire, like playground bullying but on a high-tech platform that doesn't shut off. That's just not a way children should be spending their childhood.

By sending children a clear message that they can't have phones in school, it also sets the expectation that issues around phones don't belong in school either. We want school to be a safe space where children can learn and play together in real life.



ABOVE
Taking phones out of school can be a boon for children and their parents

“What began as a couple of concerned messages between two mums about smartphones has exploded into a global movement in a few short months”

I'm sure it helps families to feel that they have our backing. I think many parents have felt trapped in an impossible situation. On the one hand, the fear of giving their children access to a smartphone and all the (now well-documented) problems that come with that, such as harmful content, addictive algorithms and the anxiety merry-go-round of social media. On the other hand, there's a fear of their child being socially excluded if they don't. Establishing very

clear boundaries in school has helped reduce some of the family conflict and the pressure parents and children feel.

We don't just ban phones, we explain why. From Year 4 we talk to pupils explicitly, putting phone use into the context of the school playground – how you wouldn't exclude others in the playground so it's not OK online. And we link the issues around phones to PSHE and wellbeing. We don't just teach e-safety, but also look at phone use in the

context of pupils protecting their mental health. We explain why using something like WhatsApp can be very negative.

We have seen a real shift in the past year and a half – the children can really see the link between being on a phone and their own state of mind. They start to see why it's a negative picture. It's far more common now to hear a child say 'Oh, I've got a brick phone' quite proudly.

For children entering secondary school in Year 7, the peer pressure ramps up even more. In my view, setting boundaries around smartphones in those early secondary school years is crucial, too. The more that parents buy into the idea that children do not have a smartphone until they are 14 the better. **17**

smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk