# Primary schools in St Albans adopt smartphone ban to improve children's wellbeing



In a concerted effort to curb the impact of smartphones and social media on young children, 33 primary schools in St Albans, Hertfordshire, have taken a pioneering step by adopting a joint policy to remain smartphone-free and urge parents to delay giving their children such devices until at least the age of 14. This initiative was implemented in May 2023 and represents a significant grassroots movement to address growing concerns about the negative effects of digital technology on children's social interactions, wellbeing, and attention spans.

Matthew Tavender, head of schools at Cunningham Hill primary schools, highlighted the challenges the schools faced before the policy was introduced. While smartphones were rarely heard during school hours, their influence outside the classroom was causing problems that then spilled into the school environment. Addressing these outside-of-school impacts was the primary motivation behind the decision. “We were dealing with the fallout on Monday morning,” Mr Tavender explained. He noted that issues stemming from social media, particularly WhatsApp, were a major source of conflict among pupils, with large groups including many children outside the school community contributing to bullying and inappropriate exchanges involving violent and racial comments.

A significant reduction in smartphone ownership among pupils has been observed since the policy's introduction. A pre-Christmas check in 2023 revealed that only seven per cent of year 6 pupils—a group aged 10 or 11—now have a smartphone, a dramatic decrease from 68 per cent the previous year. Mr Tavender described improvements in attention, social interaction, and physical activity: “Our older children, who would have had a smartphone but now don’t – their attention is much better. There is a definite improvement in their relationships. They talk more, play more, whereas a lot of our year 6s were quite sedentary before.”

National research findings underline the prevalence of smartphone ownership among children. Ofcom's 2022 report indicated that 59 per cent of children aged eight to 11 own smartphones, and this figure almost becomes universal at secondary school age. The trend extends to younger children as well, with approximately one quarter of five-to-seven-year-olds reported to have smartphones. Additionally, YouGov data shows that close to a quarter of children aged eight to 15 spend over four hours a day engaged with screen-based devices.

Parents and educators note a range of behavioural effects linked to smartphone use. Graham Dill, a parent at Cunningham Hill and private tutor, discussed the challenge of maintaining focus among older children who often appear distracted post-smartphone exposure: “They need that task to go right immediately or want other stimulation if it is too boring. With one boy, it’s a constant default to take his phone out of his pocket and it is a constant reminder - no, put the phone away.” Mr Dill welcomed the school’s decision and expressed optimism that the smartphone-free policy would be easier to maintain if upheld from a young age. He also spoke about his children recognising the negative mood swings associated with excessive screen time.

The movement is gaining momentum beyond primary schools, with parent ambassadors aiming to influence local secondary schools to adopt similar stances. Paul Drummond, deputy head of Queens Park Community School in London and parent of children attending secondary education in St Albans, shared insights from his school’s approach. At Samuel Ryder Academy in St Albans, students may bring phones but cannot use them during lessons or for personal reasons on campus. Meanwhile, at Queens Park, phone policies are stricter: years 7, 8, and 9 students are barred from having phones on site, and restricted usage is imposed on older pupils. Mr Drummond noted that since banning phones for younger secondary students, the school environment during breaks has become noticeably happier with reduced safeguarding issues and bullying.

A University of Birmingham study published in February 2024 suggests that while phone bans in schools are widespread—99.8 per cent of primary schools and 90 per cent of secondary schools have some form of restriction—banning devices alone does not improve academic performance or wellbeing. The researchers advocate for a comprehensive approach combining restrictions with education on responsible and discerning phone and internet use.

Mr Drummond emphasised the importance of educating children about media literacy. “We spent 20 minutes discussing the news story, where it came from. We talk about misinformation, reliability and the importance of developing an opinion and political engagement,” he said. This approach aims to equip children to navigate digital information critically.

The subject has recently been thrust into national discussion following Netflix's documentary series Adolescence, which explores the complex effects of social media on young people. The series centres on a tragic incident involving a 13-year-old boy’s engagement with harmful online communities. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has expressed support for the series’ educational use but does not endorse government-mandated phone bans in schools, which he described as “completely unnecessary.”

Nevertheless, Mr Tavender supports stricter action at the national level. “If the government were to say we are banning phones then it would make it very easy to get that message across, because that is just the way it is,” he said. He argued against the current “postcode lottery” system allowing some schools tougher regulations than others and called for a nationwide ban similar to models in other countries. Meanwhile, Mr Dill concurs with calls for top-down initiatives to complement grassroots efforts: “I think rather than bottom up it needs to come from top down, but I guess we won’t see that until we have enough people from the bottom raising their hands and saying they want things done,” he stated.

In addition to restricting smartphone use, Cunningham Hill is promoting increased outdoor play as part of its overall strategy to improve children's wellbeing. The combined efforts seen in St Albans reflect a growing acknowledgment among schools, parents, and experts of the need to balance digital engagement with healthier social and physical activities for children.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/social-media-st-albans-school-ban-phone-children-b2730745.html> - This article supports the claim that primary schools in St Albans banned smartphones and urged parents not to provide them until children are at least 14 years old. It highlights the benefits observed, including reduced smartphone ownership among students and improved social interactions.
* <https://stalbanstimes.co.uk/st-albans/st-albans-headteachers-call-for-under-14s-smartphone-ban/> - This source corroborates the initiative by St Albans primary schools to call for a ban on smartphones for under-14s, aligning with the efforts to minimize digital exposure among young children.
* <https://www.computerweekly.com/feature/Schools-go-smartphone-free-to-address-online-harms> - The article discusses how schools, including those in St Albans, are implementing smartphone-free policies to mitigate the negative impacts of online harms on students. It touches on the broader trend of schools adopting such policies.
* <https://beintouch.org.za/2024/06/04/the-smartphone-tipping-point/> - Although not directly about St Albans, this article discusses the benefits of smartphone-free initiatives in schools, noting reduced social media drama and increased engagement in physical activities.
* <https://stalbanstimes.co.uk/st-albans/beaumont-proposes-total-ban-on-smartphone-use-across-school/> - This news highlights how some secondary schools in St Albans are also considering total smartphone bans during school hours, reflecting a broader movement to limit digital distractions.