# St Albans school campaign cuts smartphone ownership among under-14s from 75% to 12% in a year



On a bright spring afternoon in St Albans, Yasser Afghen found himself momentarily interrupted by Matthew Tavender, the head teacher of Cunningham Hill Primary School. Afghen had been prepared to check his emails while waiting for his son to finish class but, upon seeing Tavender, he put his phone away and instead took in the tranquil sounds of nature around the school, a seeming contrast to the unfolding narrative around technology and childhood development.

Cunningham Hill Primary, a modest one-storey building from the 1960s, became a focal point for an initiative aimed at combating the perils of smartphone usage among children. Over the past year, Tavender, along with Justine Elbourne-Cload, the school’s executive head, spearheaded a campaign advocating against children owning smartphones before the age of 14. Their efforts culminated in a joint letter to parents and caregivers in St Albans, outlining the negative effects of smartphone addiction on children's development.

The notion gained momentum after Matt Adams, editor of the St Albans Times, publicised the initiative, which garnered both national and international attention. Reports highlighted St Albans' aspiration to become the first city in the UK to enforce a smartphone ban for under-14s, attracting interest from cities as far away as Singapore and Australia.

Despite the ambitious aim, the reality one year on reveals mixed results. A survey from December 2023 showed that 75% of year 6 pupils possessed smartphones; by the subsequent year, that figure had plummeted to just 12%. This decline is echoed across other schools in the city, suggesting a potential shift in parental perspectives regarding smartphone usage. Tavender hopes that as these students move into secondary school, the stigma around carrying a smartphone might grow, akin to the public perception of smoking.

Concerns about youth mental health have been foregrounded in this discourse, particularly with reference to Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Anxious Generation*. Haidt stresses a significant rise in anxiety and depression among adolescents over the past decade, attributing this to the pervasive influence of smartphones in shaping childhood experiences. Tavender expressed alarm over the changing behavioural patterns he observed, including increased cases of inappropriate online content exposure among very young children—some as young as five—highlighting a troubling trend requiring police intervention.

In response to these growing dangers, Tavender sought advice from other educators, leading to collaboration with the Smartphone Free Childhood movement, established to advocate for healthier digital habits among youths. An initial parents' meeting resulted in a surprising turnout, where many expressed a shared determination to resist the pressure to provide smartphones to their children. The community sentiment reflected a burgeoning awareness of the challenges posed by technology.

The letter dispatched by the schools was clear in its call for collective action, urging parents to "reset expectations" around smartphone ownership. It closed with a compelling message about safeguarding children's futures in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Further discussions and meetings revealed an undercurrent of concern among parents about how to instill and maintain healthy boundaries concerning technology. Many of them agreed to become "ambassadors" for the cause, with the aim of extending the initiative’s reach and engaging with fellow parents to adopt the proposed smartphone-free policy.

While the campaign has gained significant traction within the St Albans community, there remain challenges ahead. Secondary schools in the area have yet to collaborate on a unified approach, though many have begun to implement restrictions on smartphone usage during the school day. Although this movement has gained recognition, it questions whether St Albans can be a model for broader change. The initiative, while laudable, has yet to produce a landscape where smartphone visibility among younger children evokes the same shock as other societal taboos.

As the movement continues to evolve, it has sparked interest in other regions. Schools in Southwark have echoed similar sentiments, asking parents to delay smartphone access until children reach more mature ages. In July 2024, notable institutions such as Eton adopted policies restricting smartphone use among first-year students.

Yet, for all the discussions of technological impacts on childhood, everyday realities persist. Many parents still grapple with practical concerns regarding their children’s safety—some have admitted to purchasing phones for practical reasons, emphasizing the balance between safeguarding against potential dangers while ensuring connectivity.

As the discourse around smartphone usage unfolds across St Albans and beyond, it signals a growing recognition of the implications that technology presents for a generation. While the campaign asserts a positive development in public awareness of these issues, the journey towards establishing healthier digital environments for children remains complex, and ongoing discussions suggest that this is just the beginning of a much larger conversation.

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

## Bibliography

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