# St Albans primary schools slow smartphone use among children under 14



At 3.12pm on a sunny spring afternoon in St Albans, Yasser Afghen looks to his iPhone, intending to scroll through emails while awaiting his son's dismissal from year 1 at Cunningham Hill school. However, he soon finds himself conversing with Matthew Tavender, the school’s headteacher. This school, a modest one-storey 1960s building with 14 classrooms, has become an unexpected centre for a movement aimed at limiting smartphone usage among children.

About a year ago, Tavender collaborated with Justine Elbourne-Cload, the school's executive head, to address the inflation of smartphone usage among children. They sent a detailed letter to parents in St Albans arguing that the addictive qualities of smartphones were adversely affecting children's development. They appealed to parents to consider delaying the provision of smartphones until their children turned 14, marking a significant stance against the proliferation of technology in everyday life.

Among the recipients of this letter was Matt Adams, editor of the St Albans Times, who subsequently published an article that garnered national and international attention. The story, which highlighted St Albans' aspirations to become the first smartphone-free city for children under 14, resonated globally, drawing interest from parents and educators alike in countries such as Singapore, Australia, and South Africa.

Despite aspirations, recent data suggests that St Albans is not yet a smartphone-free haven for the under-14 demographic. In a survey conducted by Tavender in December 2023, 75% of year 6 students had smartphones. However, just a year later, this figure plummeted to 12%. Similar trends have emerged at other primary schools throughout the city, resulting in renewed hopes that this movement could extend into secondary education as well.

Amidst this backdrop, Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation*, has been cited by Tavender, who noted a considerable uptick in adolescent mental health issues over the last decade. Tavender expressed concerns regarding the changing landscape of childhood experiences, referencing incidents that now involve law enforcement—issues that previous generations of educators rarely encountered. For instance, he described challenges stemming from children sharing inappropriate images, drastically altering the dynamics of school life.

Reflecting on the broader changes observed in school dynamics, Tavender reported a rise in body image anxiety and shorter attention spans among young students, prompting alternate teaching methods. Referred to as “TikTok brain,” this phenomenon has influenced how educational content is delivered, necessitating shorter and more engaging sessions due to students' diminished focus capacity.

The push for a notable shift in smartphone culture gained momentum after Tavender came across a campaign advocating for "brick" phones—devices that restrict to basic communication. Consulting with proponents of the Smartphone Free Childhood movement, he organised a meeting for parents that saw unprecedented attendance. This was a clear indicator of heightened community interest in addressing smartphone-related issues.

At the meeting, Tavender conveyed the perspective that the prevalent use of smartphones has created a cultural expectation that undermines childhood. He framed the discussion around the potential dangers associated with platforms such as WhatsApp and highlighted decade-old practices that were once unfathomable in the realm of primary education. His rationale resonated strongly with parents, many of whom expressed a willingness to delay granting their children smartphones until age 14.

In the wake of this meeting, the St Albans primary schools consortium distributed a letter encouraging parents to collectively resist the pressure to provide their children with smartphones, likening this to a communal protectorate over their children's futures.

The movement has captured substantial support within the region, with many parents pledging to delay smartphone access for their children. The local response has been predominantly supportive, rebuffing notions of being anti-technology whilst acknowledging the importance of suitable age-appropriate access to technology.

In marked contrast, secondary schools in the area have been slower to adopt the coordinated approach espoused by primary school leaders, although most now enforce restrictions on smartphone usage. Nevertheless, Tavender's initiatives at the primary level may potentially influence future policy decisions at the secondary level.

While recognition of the potential perils associated with smartphone use appears to be growing, concerns remain over the practicality of enforcing such a movement. Many parents still see the necessity of smartphones for logistical reasons, such as ensuring communication with their children during after-school hours.

As schools across the UK and beyond begin implementing similar strategies to regulate smartphone use among their students, there remains a palpable tension surrounding the impact of technology on youth culture. St Albans' initiative serves as a case study in community-led efforts to foster healthier childhood experiences in an increasingly digital world.

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

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