# St Albans primary schools lead smartphone ban to protect children’s wellbeing



In St Albans, Hertfordshire, a group of 33 primary schools, including Cunningham Hill Primary School, have collectively taken a pioneering step to tackle the growing impact of smartphone and social media use among children. Since May last year, these schools have declared themselves smartphone-free zones and urged parents to refrain from giving their children smartphones until at least the age of 14. This initiative comes amid mounting concerns about the harmful effects of smartphones and social media on young pupils’ wellbeing, behaviour, and academic focus.

Matthew Tavender, head of schools at Cunningham Hill, highlighted that the problem had not been children using phones during school time, but rather the pervasive influence of social media outside the classroom and its spillover effects into school life. “We were dealing with the fallout on Monday morning," he said. “In the past ten years that smartphones have been around, I’ve not heard one in school. But what we were seeing was the damage smartphones were having outside of school, and the impact of that inside.”

The results have been notable. By the end of 2023, a check-in revealed that just seven per cent of Year 6 pupils at Cunningham Hill owned smartphones, down dramatically from 68 per cent the previous year. Mr Tavender observed improvements among older children who no longer possessed phones: “Their attention is much better. There is a definite improvement in their relationships. They talk more, play more.” He described earlier problems stemming from the use of WhatsApp groups, which often included large numbers of children beyond the school, leading to bullying, inappropriate language, and sharing of violent or racially charged content. “We were having a number of our Year 6s talking about Andrew Tate, and certainly some of the boys revering who he was,” he added.

A broader reflection of this digital culture is found in nationwide research. Regulator Ofcom reported that 59 per cent of children aged eight to eleven own smartphones, with ownership almost universal by secondary school age. Some primary school children as young as seven or eight already have their own phones, a trend seen at Cunningham Hill. Social media usage is also increasing, with a YouGov poll last year revealing that 23 per cent of children aged eight to 15 spend over four hours daily on screens.

Parents at Cunningham Hill are actively involved in the smartphone-free initiative. Graham Dill, whose 10-year-old son will soon enter Year 6, expressed hope that most pupils by that stage will not have smartphones. As a private tutor working with teenage pupils, many of whom are anxious or have behavioural challenges, Mr Dill noted the struggle that smartphones pose to concentration and emotional regulation: “It affects their concentration and their ability to take some deep breaths and be present on a task.” He praised the school’s approach and the role of parent ambassadors in maintaining the smartphone ban. He also spoke of the social pressures his children face around online gaming like Fortnite and recognised that they are becoming aware of the “low mood” associated with extended screen time.

The smartphone ban movement is now looking beyond primary schools, with parent ambassadors seeking dialogue with secondary school headteachers to encourage similar restrictions. In some local secondary schools, policies vary; for instance, Samuel Ryder Academy permits students to bring phones but restricts usage during lessons and personal use on site. Meanwhile, Queens Park Community School in London, where deputy head Paul Drummond works, enforces a stricter ban on smartphones for students in Years 7 to 9. Mr Drummond noted a significant decrease in safeguarding and bullying issues since the ban and described the school’s environment as “a much happier place” at break times.

While smartphone bans in schools are widespread—the vast majority of primary schools and 90 per cent of secondary schools have some form of restriction—research by the University of Birmingham suggests that standalone bans do not, by themselves, improve pupils' academic performance, wellbeing, or overall phone usage. The study advocates that bans should be part of a broader strategy to reduce phone use among students.

Mr Drummond has also called for education to accompany restrictions, highlighting his school’s weekly tutorials that discuss current news stories with pupils, fostering critical thinking about misinformation and encouraging political engagement. “The bottom line is that if someone has access to the internet they can look at anything they want to really,” he said, emphasising the need for discernment alongside access.

The issue of children’s digital engagement has been intensified by national debates following the release of Netflix’s series Adolescence, which explores the effects of exposure to misogynistic online communities and was based on a real-life tragic event involving a 13-year-old schoolboy. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has supported the series’ use in schools but opposed a government-mandated phone ban, describing such action as “completely unnecessary.”

Nevertheless, Mr Tavender advocates for clearer government intervention. “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 told The Independent. He expressed concern about the current inconsistency across schools, which leads to a “postcode lottery” of policies. “It should be a national decision like in other countries, to ban phones and social media for children. From an education point of view, we are crying out for that support.”

In the meantime, Cunningham Hill and other local schools are expanding efforts beyond phone use, promoting outdoor play and activities to encourage children to spend more time outside rather than online.

Mr Dill shares this broader view on the issue, believing that while grassroots movements have had some success, political leadership will be required to bring about significant nationwide change. “I think rather than bottom up it needs to come from top down,” he said, “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.”

As digital engagement for children continues to rise, the coordinated efforts in St Albans offer an example of how schools and communities are confronting the challenges posed by smartphone use, with a focus on reducing harm and enhancing pupils' educational experiences through both policy and parental involvement.

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> - Supports the initiative by St Albans primary schools to ban smartphones and highlights Matthew Tavender's observations about reduced smartphone ownership and improved behavior.
* <https://gardenfields.herts.sch.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Smartphone-letter-from-St-Albans-Heads.pdf> - Corroborates the joint statement by St Albans primary headteachers declaring schools smartphone-free and urging parents to delay smartphone access until at least age 14.
* <https://stalbanstimes.co.uk/st-albans/st-albans-headteachers-call-for-under-14s-smartphone-ban/> - Details the campaign by St Albans headteachers for an under-14 smartphone ban, reflecting broader community and parental involvement in the initiative.
* <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023> - Ofcom's annual reports typically include statistics on children's smartphone ownership, aligning with the article's claim about 59% ownership among 8-11-year-olds. Note: URL is illustrative; exact report link may vary.
* <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/school-mobile-phone-bans-have-minimal-impact-on-results-study-finds> - University of Birmingham study referenced in the article, which found standalone phone bans do not significantly improve academic performance or wellbeing.