

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

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|---|---|-------------------|----|
| 1. How old is your child (or children)? | | Responses | % |
| | 4-6 years | 224 | 26 |
| | 7-9 years | 200 | 23 |
| | 10-12 years | 183 | 21 |
| | 12+ | 262 | 30 |
| | | Total: 869 | |
| 2. At what age do you believe it is appropriate for a child to have a smartphone? | | Responses | % |
| | Under 9 | 2 | <1 |
| | 9-11 | 92 | 12 |
| | 12-14 | 395 | 54 |
| | 15 or older | 248 | 34 |
| 3. How concerned are you about the impact of smartphones on your child's: Mental health (e.g., anxiety, self-esteem)? | | Responses | % |
| | Very concerned | 423 | 57 |
| | Somewhat concerned | 270 | 37 |
| | Not concerned | 44 | 6 |
| 4. How concerned are you about the impact of smartphones on your child's: Social skills (e.g., face-to-face interactions, friendships)? | | Responses | % |
| | Very concerned | 344 | 47 |
| | Somewhat concerned | 295 | 40 |
| | Not concerned | 98 | 13 |
| 5. How concerned are you about the impact of smartphones on your child's: Sleep habits? | | Responses | % |
| | Very concerned | 273 | 37 |
| | Somewhat concerned | 268 | 36 |
| | Not concerned | 196 | 27 |
| 6. What do you believe is the most significant challenge associated with smartphones for children? | Thematic Analysis of Responses: Challenges of Smartphones for Children The responses reflect deep parental concern over how smartphones impact children's mental health, social skills, safety, and academic performance. A recurring suggestion is that schools and parents should collaborate to enforce boundaries, educate children on responsible phone use, and delay exposure to social media. | | |
| | Appendix 1: The detailed analysis of responses, with examples. | | |
| 7. Does your child currently have a smartphone? | | Responses | % |
| | Yes | 370 | 50 |
| | No | 366 | 50 |
| 8. If yes, how do they primarily use it? (Tick all that apply) | | Responses | % |
| | Social media | 211 | 23 |
| | Messaging friends/family | 327 | 34 |
| | Games | 224 | 23 |
| | Schoolwork | 142 | 15 |
| | Other | 51 | 5 |
| 9. Do you set any boundaries on your child's smartphone use? | | Responses | % |
| | Yes – we have specific rules e.g. time limits and content restrictions | 221 | 55 |
| | Somewhat – we monitor usage informally | 140 | 35 |
| | No – we do not set boundaries | 39 | 10 |
| 10. How often does your family have "tech-free" times or spaces (e.g., during meals or before bedtime)? | | Responses | % |
| | Daily | 522 | 74 |
| | Weekly | 63 | 9 |
| | Rarely | 99 | 14 |
| | Never | 26 | 3 |
| 11. Do you agree with the principle: "No smartphones before Year 9"? | | Responses | % |
| | Strongly agree | 360 | 49 |
| | Agree | 171 | 23 |
| | Disagree | 202 | 27 |
| | Strongly disagree | 4 | 1 |

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

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| 12. What challenges might you face in delaying smartphone use until Year 9? | Thematic Analysis of Responses: Challenges of Delaying Smartphone Use The responses reflect significant parental concern regarding the social, emotional, and practical challenges of delaying smartphone use before Year 9. Many parents worry about peer pressure, social isolation, and the emotional toll of feeling left out, while others highlight safety concerns and the need for communication when children travel independently. Some suggest alternatives, such as basic phones for emergencies or stricter parental controls. Additionally, the increasing reliance on smartphones for schoolwork adds to the complexity of delaying access. A recurring suggestion is that a collective approach—where schools, parents, and policymakers set unified boundaries—would help reduce peer pressure and promote responsible smartphone use. Appendix 2: The detailed analysis of responses, with examples. | | |
| 13. Do you agree with the principle: “No social media before 16”? | | Responses | % |
| | Strongly agree | 414 | 56 |
| | Agree | 223 | 30 |
| | Disagree | 99 | 14 |
| | Strongly disagree | 1 | <1 |
| 14. Do you support a “phone-free school” policy? | | Responses | % |
| | Yes | 652 | 88 |
| | No | 85 | 12 |
| 15. What types of activities or support could encourage your child to engage in more free play and independent learning? | Thematic Analysis of Responses: Free Play and Independent Learning The responses reflect a strong parental desire to encourage free play and independent learning through physical activity, creative outlets, and structured social engagement. Many emphasise the need to reduce children's reliance on screens and suggest that schools should shift away from digital homework to promote more hands-on learning. Parents also stress the importance of accessible extracurricular activities, community involvement, and consistent boundaries on technology use. A recurring theme is that both schools and parents must work together to create an environment that prioritises real-world interactions, skill development, and a balanced lifestyle. Appendix 3: The detailed analysis of responses, with examples. | | |
| 16. If large numbers of parents voluntarily signed themselves and their child up to a register of commitment to the Four Principles, do you think this would help you delay your child entering the smartphone world? | | Responses | % |
| | Yes | 480 | 67 |
| | No | 235 | 33 |
| 17. What kind of guidance, resources or incentives would help you feel more confident in signing up to a register of commitment to the Four Principles? | Thematic Analysis of Responses: Guidance, Resources and Incentives The responses indicate that parents seek greater clarity on the Four Principles, with research-based evidence and resources to explain their benefits. A key concern is the need for widespread commitment to avoid peer pressure and social isolation, with many advocating for government legislation or school-wide bans to make the policy effective. Parents also highlight the importance of alternative communication options and structured activities to replace smartphone use. Additionally, incentives such as activity vouchers or school-based rewards could encourage participation. A collective effort from parents, schools, and policymakers is seen as essential for successful implementation. Appendix 4: The detailed analysis of responses, with examples. | | |
| 18. Are there any other thoughts or suggestions you'd like to share about supporting children in a smartphone world? | Thematic Analysis of Responses: Further Suggestions The responses reflect deep parental concerns about the impact of smartphones on children's mental health, safety, and social development. Many advocate for stronger education on digital risks, both in schools and for parents, as well as stricter regulations on social media access for young people. Schools are seen as key players in enforcing smartphone restrictions, with calls for phone bans and reduced digital homework. Parents also stress the importance of providing alternative activities to keep children engaged offline. A recurring theme is that adults must lead by example, setting clear boundaries and limiting their own screen time to foster healthier habits in children. Appendix 5: The detailed analysis of responses, with examples. | | |
| 19. Would you attend a future Parent Forum to view and discuss the data from the survey and contribute to the next steps of a potential collective action project for the Chiltern Area Partnership schools? | | Responses | % |
| | Yes | 433 | 61 |
| | No | 282 | 39 |

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

Appendix 1:

A Thematic Analysis of Responses: Challenges of Smartphones for Children

1. Social Media and Peer Pressure

Many responses highlight the negative impact of social media on children, particularly in terms of:

- Peer pressure to own a smartphone (feeling left out if they don't have one).
- Social comparison leading to low self-esteem and unrealistic expectations.
- Influencer culture, which sets unrealistic lifestyle and appearance standards.
- Cyberbullying and online harassment, which extend beyond school hours.
- FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), making children feel pressured to be constantly online.

Example responses:

"Peer pressure—because peers will have a smartphone, this will make it harder for parents to not agree to one for their child."

"Social media – peer pressure, online bullying, and being exposed to content not suitable for their age."

2. Mental Health and Well-being

There is a strong concern that excessive smartphone use is contributing to:

- Anxiety, depression, and stress in children.
- Addiction to screen time, making it hard for them to focus on other activities.
- Instant gratification culture, reducing patience and emotional resilience.
- Sleep deprivation, due to late-night phone use and blue light exposure.

Example responses:

"Screen addiction and not finding satisfaction elsewhere in life outside of the instant gratification of constant phone use."

"Mood swings, social bullying, and unrealistic expectations due to social media."

3. Exposure to Inappropriate Content

Another major concern is children having unrestricted access to:

- Adult content (pornography, violence, gambling, extreme views).
- Misinformation and fake news, leading to confusion and distorted worldviews.
- Predators and online grooming, as children may engage in unsafe online interactions.

Example responses:

"Kids at a very young age have access to everything with a touch of a button, and all of this is not healthy knowledge."

"The ability for strangers to have access to my child."

4. Decline in Social Skills and Real-world Engagement

Many parents express worries about:

- Children preferring virtual interactions over real-life conversations.
- Loss of face-to-face communication skills, leading to social awkwardness.
- Reduced imaginative play, as children rely on digital entertainment.

Example responses:

"They are losing the ability to engage in real conversations or enjoy the present moment without looking at a screen."

"Social isolation for those kids without smartphones, balanced by the problems of overuse."

5. Academic Distraction and Reduced Attention Span

Smartphones are seen as a major distraction from:

- Homework and studies, leading to lower academic performance.

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

- Concentration issues, due to fast-scrolling apps like TikTok shortening attention spans.
- Dependency on smartphones for basic tasks, reducing problem-solving skills.

Example responses:

"They cannot see the negative effects of using it. They only see that their friends have one and they are fun."
"Damage to concentration spans and the potential harmful impact on self-esteem and mental well-being."

6. Parental Control and Boundaries

Many parents struggle with:

- Enforcing screen time limits, as children resist restrictions.
- Monitoring content consumption, since children find ways around parental controls.
- Setting fair rules, especially when other parents allow unrestricted phone use.

Example responses:

"That they see us doing everything on our phones and struggle to understand why they're restricted to screen times and certain apps."
"If all their homework is set on apps, if all their class communication and birthday party invites are done via apps... then it seems we don't get a choice – they HAVE to have one."

7. Safety and Security Concerns

There is widespread anxiety about protecting children online, particularly regarding:

- Cyberbullying and trolling, which can be emotionally damaging.
- Unwanted contact with strangers, posing a threat to safety.
- The risk of sharing personal information, leading to privacy issues.

Example responses:

"Keeping them safe online—predators disguised as students, online trolling, and the exposure to unsafe content."
"The dangers of social media/unlimited access to communication."

Appendix 2:

Thematic Analysis of Responses: Challenges of Delaying Smartphone Use

1. Peer Pressure and Social Isolation

Many responses emphasise the strong influence of peer pressure and the social impact of not having a smartphone before Year 9, including:

- Feeling left out if all their friends have one.
- Risk of being bullied or teased for not having a smartphone.
- Complaints of unfairness when peers are allowed phones.
- Pressure on parents from other parents who permit early smartphone use.

Example responses:

"Peer pressure—if all their classmates have one, they will feel left out."
"Other children having them causing upset and feelings of things being 'unfair'. "
"Peer pressure from other children and parent guilt that they feel like they're missing out."

2. Safety and Communication

A large number of parents cite safety as a key reason for allowing smartphone use before Year 9:

- Needing a phone for emergencies when travelling to and from school.

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

- Being able to track their child's location.
- Using the phone for school transport, such as digital bus passes.
- Contacting parents if plans change or in case of delays.

Example responses:

"For me it's more of a safety aspect. I think once your child goes to secondary, they should have a phone."

"Peer pressure, if kids are walking to school alone they should have a phone for safety."

"I feel children should have a phone when they start secondary school for safety reasons but not be allowed them in school hours."

3. Parental Control and Alternative Solutions

Some parents suggest compromises or alternatives to manage smartphone use responsibly:

- Giving children basic phones (non-smartphones) for calls and texts only.
- Using parental controls and screen time limits to restrict access.
- Providing access to digital resources via other devices like tablets or laptops.

Example responses:

"No challenges except emergency calls—so a normal mobile without a screen is the best option."

"Dumb phones would be more appropriate, so contact is possible but limited apps."

"We use parental controls, limit screen time to 1 hour per day, and restrict apps."

4. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and Emotional Impact

Many parents worry about the psychological effects of delaying smartphone use:

- Fear of being left out of social circles and online conversations.
- Feeling different or excluded from group chats and activities.
- Potential resentment toward parents for enforcing restrictions.

Example responses:

"FOMO and the child feeling left out and different."

"The fact that my child already has one, so taking it away may cause frustration."

"Other kids having them and ours being left out, teased, uncool, projecting the frustration back at the parents, hating our decision, and losing trust."

5. Education and School Requirements

- Several responses highlight how schools are increasingly integrating smartphones into learning:
- Homework and school apps requiring smartphone access.
- Teachers assigning work through online platforms.
- Need for research and educational resources.

Example responses:

"Teachers only setting primary school children homework that must be done on apps!"

"They seem to need a smartphone for school homework from Year 7."

"School systems such as homework, timetables, classwork, languages all seem to use apps which the children need to connect to."

Appendix 3:

Thematic Analysis of Responses: Free Play and Independent Learning

1. Outdoor and Physical Activities

Many responses highlight the importance of outdoor play and physical activities to encourage free play and independent learning. Suggestions include:

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

- Sports clubs (football, swimming, martial arts, team sports).
- Outdoor games like cycling, hiking, and playing in parks.
- More accessible and affordable after-school clubs.
- Schools incorporating more outdoor and physical activities into their curriculum.

Example responses:

"Sports clubs and parent involvement. Our children are in football, MMA, squash, dance, and riding clubs."

"Outdoor activities such as bushcraft, beach exploration, and horticulture would help encourage free play."

"More PE during school, affordable after-school sports clubs, and forest school opportunities for all ages."

2. Reducing Screen Time and Technology Dependency

A significant number of parents suggest that limiting screen time is essential for promoting independent play. Key recommendations include:

- Enforcing screen-free time at home and school.
- Restricting smartphone use for children before Year 9.
- Encouraging hands-on, tech-free activities like board games, crafts, and reading.
- Schools reducing reliance on digital homework and online resources.

Example responses:

"Blanket bans on screen time... it was difficult at first, but now our children play and do creative things."

"Schools should stop setting homework on apps and return to paper-based learning."

"Screen-free time immediately increases their imagination, and they play together rather than independently."

3. Creative and Artistic Activities

Parents believe that creative and hands-on activities are crucial for independent learning. Common suggestions include:

- Arts and crafts, including painting, drawing, and DIY projects.
- Music lessons, playing instruments, and group performances.
- Drama and storytelling to improve self-expression and confidence.

Example responses:

"All the money spent on iPads and software should go toward every child learning a musical instrument."

"Craft-based activities like escape rooms, code-breaking, and crochet keep kids engaged and away from screens."

"Drama, music, and role-playing games help build confidence and social skills."

4. Social and Community Engagement

A strong theme revolves around providing more structured social opportunities to encourage free play and interaction. Suggestions include:

- Youth clubs and social groups where children can interact in a structured setting.
- Volunteering opportunities to build responsibility and real-world skills.
- More community-supported free or low-cost activities.

Example responses:

"Youth clubs, scouting groups, and community projects should be more accessible to all children."

"If friends are playing football, they will want to play; if friends are gaming, they will want to game. Social settings matter."

"Children need structured activities like debating groups, drama, and community volunteering to keep them engaged outside of screens."

5. Parental and School Involvement

Many parents stress the need for adults to model healthy behaviours and provide structured support. Suggestions include:

- Parents setting screen-time limits and actively engaging in non-digital activities.
- Schools promoting a balance between academic and recreational activities.

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

- Teachers integrating more project-based learning instead of digital assignments.

Example responses:

"Adults should model less phone use themselves. If all parents enforce the same rule, no child will feel left out."

"Parental involvement is key—spending time together, playing games, and engaging in outdoor activities."

"Schools should shift toward hands-on, practical learning instead of digital assignments and online resources."

Appendix 4:

Thematic Analysis of Responses: Guidance, Resources and Incentives

1. Clear Information and Awareness

Many respondents expressed the need for clear, accessible information about the Four Principles, including:

- A detailed explanation of what the Four Principles entail.
- Research-based evidence on the effects of smartphone use on children's development.
- Statistics and case studies demonstrating the benefits of delaying smartphone access.
- Resources that parents can share with children to help them understand the reasoning behind the policy.

Example responses:

"Clear explanation of why and how to communicate that to a child."

"More concise, easily available information from a reputable source."

"Videos shown to children on the impact of mobile phones, like the recent Dispatches programme."

2. Collective Commitment and Peer Support

A key concern among parents was the need for widespread adoption to prevent social isolation and peer pressure.

Suggested solutions include:

- Schools enforcing a universal policy to remove individual parental pressure.
- More parents signing up together to create a shared commitment.
- Transparency on how many families have signed up to encourage participation.

Example responses:

"If all parents were on board and made a pact, it would make you feel less pressured."

"The more people signed up, the better."

"I think if all of my child's peer group were not using them, it would be much easier to implement."

3. Legislative and School Policy Support

Many parents feel a voluntary policy would be ineffective and believe stronger enforcement is needed, such as:

- Government legislation to make smartphone restrictions mandatory.
- Schools banning phones entirely to make the policy easier for parents to follow.
- Aligning school policies with restrictions on digital homework and online assignments.

Example responses:

"It needs to be made legislative for it to work."

"A voluntary policy won't work. Schools should ban phones and ensure homework is not set online."

"If there was a ban on phones for children of a certain age, it would be easier."

4. Practical Solutions and Alternative Communication Methods

Some parents worry about how children will stay connected without smartphones and suggest:

- Alternative communication options, such as basic mobile phones without internet.
- School policies allowing contact with parents in emergencies.
- More activities and structured events to replace online engagement.

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

Example responses:

"Option to have a 'dumb' phone."

"I would want to know how children can contact parents if needed during the school day."

"Providing a way for kids to stay in contact without a full smartphone."

5. Incentives and Positive Reinforcement

A number of parents suggested that incentives could help encourage participation, such as:

- Rewards for children who follow the principles, such as vouchers for sports or activities.
- School benefits if a certain percentage of families sign up.
- A recognition programme for those who commit.

Example responses:

"An incentive for the child to agree to the principles—voucher towards sports gear or a club membership."

"A school benefit if X% register."

"A reward scheme that involves non-tech-based activities, like a family ticket to a National Trust property."

Appendix 5:

Thematic Analysis of Responses: Guidance, Resources and Incentives

1. Digital Education and Awareness

Many responses highlight the importance of educating both children and parents about the risks and responsibilities associated with smartphone use. Key suggestions include:

- Integrating lessons on social media impact and online safety into the school curriculum.
- Teaching children about the addictive nature of smartphones and social media.
- Providing workshops for parents on setting boundaries and using parental controls effectively.

Example responses:

"Put it on the curriculum about the impact of social media on children's mental health. Educate them better."

"Workshops in school to show the impact – pros and cons, but with a focus on mental health."

"Parents need to model the behaviour at home and limit their own phone use too."

2. Stricter Regulations and Parental Controls

A significant number of parents call for stronger regulations and tools to limit children's access to smartphones and social media, including:

- Government legislation to restrict social media access for under-16s.
- Stronger parental control settings, including time limits and content filtering.
- Social media companies being held accountable for enforcing age restrictions.

Example responses:

"Ban apps which have messages that delete (e.g., Snapchat)."

"It needs to be made illegal for children under 16 to have a social media account."

"We need more policies like Australia's, putting the responsibility on tech companies to prevent underage use."

3. Schools Taking a Stronger Role

Many parents believe schools should play a greater role in managing smartphone use and creating a supportive environment. Suggestions include:

- Banning smartphones on school premises or requiring them to be stored in lockers.
- Encouraging more outdoor and social activities to reduce screen dependency.
- Removing the requirement for digital homework to limit screen time.

Guiding Digital Childhoods Survey - Collated Results and Analysis

Example responses:

"No phones should be allowed in school. If it's required for safety, they should be stored in a locker on arrival."

"Don't ask kids to complete homework on electronic devices – they should use paper instead."

"Schools should mandate no smartphones allowed on premises."

4. Promoting Alternative Activities

Parents suggest that children need more engaging alternatives to smartphone use, including:

- Free or affordable youth clubs and extracurricular activities.
- Encouraging participation in sports, creative hobbies, and outdoor play.
- Making non-smartphone options (e.g., basic 'brick' phones) more socially acceptable.

Example responses:

"Encouragement to take part in martial arts, theatre, sports, running, and going to the gym."

"Why can't an old-fashioned brick phone be fashionable again for young people?"

"More activities for young children and teens so they can get involved."

5. The Role of Parents in Setting Boundaries

Many respondents stress the responsibility of parents in managing smartphone use. Suggestions include:

- Setting firm boundaries, such as no phones at meal times or before bed.
- Monitoring children's online activity and discussing online risks openly.
- Leading by example by reducing their own smartphone use.

Example responses:

"Our children are our own. We made the decision to bring them into this world, and it is our responsibility to look after them and protect them."

"I find myself constantly saying, 'You're not allowed it now, you know that' – they are addicted just like us adults."

"Lead by example, prioritise your child over your phone!"