Smartphone survey: Full report for St John the Baptist Primary School

October 2024

Authors: St John the Baptist Primary Smartphone Free Childhood Campaign group, a subgroup of the St John the Baptist Primary Parent Council

Key Findings

- 14.8% of parents / carers from across the school years reported their child currently has a (smart)phone. Pupils reported an increase in ownership of a functional smartphone with 45% of P5, 66% of P6 and 84% of P7s, reporting having one.

- Over half of parents / carers who have not given their child a phone are being asked by their child for one.

- Parents / carers have mixed views on phone use, but many reported concerns, and several reported instances of bullying.

- P5-7 pupils reported that they or a friend had a range of experiences with smartphones, including: 52% using a phone to help with their homework, 65% had seen videos that inspired them, but also 23% reported they or a friend had fallen out with friends due to texts, 33% used the phone in the middle of the night, and 22% had a photo or video of them taken without their permission.

- Over half of parents / carers wanted more information on relevant topics.

- **77.9% of parents / carers (and a further 13.1% were not sure) would be supportive of a voluntary pact for parents and carers '*to withhold smartphones from children – at home, in school, everywhere – at least while children are pupils at St John the Baptist primary school*'.**

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Background

Lots of us have been thinking about children and smartphones.

In Scotland there has been a cry for improved guidance re phones. On the 19 June 2024 the Scottish Government received the petition to consider 'PE2106: Prohibit mobile phone use in Scottish schools'. As of 23 August 2024 this petition had over 5000 signatures (including some from parents / carers within the school). Jenny Gilruth, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, committed to refreshing the 2013 guidance on phone use in schools. The new guidance 'Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools was published on 15 August 2024[1].

Elsewhere in the UK a campaign around smartphone free childhoods was launched earlier in the year[2], due to concerns about the negative impacts on children of having a smartphone at a young age.

Within St John the Baptist Primary School we were keen to understand what parents / carers and pupils thought; and if there would be an appetite for a supportive pact, enabling parents / carers to combat the peer pressure for their child to have a phone at a younger age.

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[1] 'Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools: https://www.gov.scot/publications/mobile-phone-guidance-scotlands-schools/

[2] https://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk/about

What we did

To better understand the views of parents / carers and pupils:

- A survey was sent to parents and carers,
- P5s, P6s, and P7s were asked to complete a pupil survey in class
- 'Phone audit', the school reviewed the number of phones handed in on a single day, to get an understanding of the scale of pupil phone ownership.

More details of what we did can be found in appendix 1.

The results of the surveys and audit are reported below, answers are grouped by topic area, and we have highlighted whether the responses were from parents / carers or P5-7 pupils.

Who responded

Parents / carers survey: Parents / carers were invited to complete one survey per child within the school or nursery, however we know of instances where parents / carers filled one form for all their children at the school. There were 122 responses. There are currently 339 pupils at St John the Baptist Primary School; so a response rate of 35% for pupils (excluding the nursery).

There was a good spread of results throughout the school (Figure 1), although low uptake in the nursery, with fewer than 5 responses. Responses related to 64 male and 58 female children.

Figure 1: Which year is your child currently in?
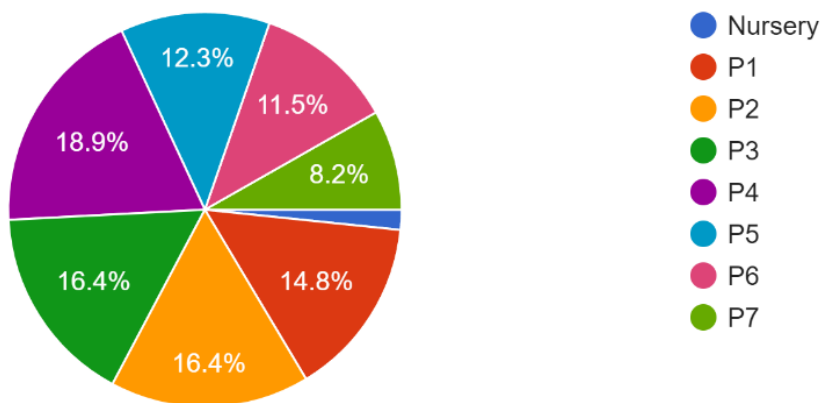
Pupils survey: Pupils in P5, P6 and P7 were given the opportunity to complete the survey. There are currently 135 P5-7 pupils and 120 responded, 42 P5s, 35 P6s and 43 P7s; so, a total response rate of 89%, with a roughly even split between boys and girls.

Who has a smartphone

The pupil survey, parents / carers survey and phone audit each asked about smartphone ownership amongst pupils.

Parents / carers survey: Of the 122 responses from parents / carers of children across the age ranges, 101 (82.8%) reported their child not having a phone, fewer than 5 reported having a watch with phone function. Only 18 (14.8%) parents / carers reported their child having a phone, of which 10 reported the smartphone was without a sim card or had limited functionality or had restricted apps. Of the 18 parents / carers reporting their child having a phone, the majority of children were in P6 or P7.

Phone audit: If a child brings a phone into school, the school's policy is that they should hand in their phone at the start of the day, to be returned at the end of the day. The number of phones handed in on one day are recorded in table 1. No phones were handed in from P1-4 pupils, very few from P5-6 and 50% of P7s submitted a phone on the day the audit was carried out.

Table 1: Audit of phones submitted to school

Year group(s)	Number pupils in year group(s)	Number of phones submitted
P1-4	204	0
P5 & P6	89	less than 5
P7	46	23

Pupil survey: Table 2 highlights the phone ownership of the 120 P5-P7 pupils. There was an increase in reported ownership of a fully functional smartphone (with a sim card, all functionality online, or apps of choice) by year group; with 45%, 66% and 84% of P5, P6 and P7, respectively reporting owning a fully functioning smartphone.

Table 2: phone ownership

Phone ownership	Number of P5 - P7	Percentage of the 120 respondents
No phone	24	20%
Watch with phone functionality	6	5%
Phone, with no internet or without a sim card or limited functionality or restricted apps	12	10%
Smartphone with a sim card, all functionality online or apps of choice	78	65%

There are different levels of phone ownership reported between parents / carers from across the school and P5-7 pupil responses, and the phone audit. However, both surveys and the audit highlights higher phone ownership in the upper years.

The low number of phones that were collected in phone audit suggests either children are not bringing their phones into school, so not using them for the journey to and from primary school, or are not handing them in, thus going against school policy.

Who is asking for a smartphone

Parents / carers survey: Of the 101 respondents reporting their child doesn't have a phone, 56 (55.4%) reported their child is asking for a phone. When asked to consider when they might get their child a phone 34 respondents said during primary school, but 57 said they would wait until afterwards (Table 3).

Table 3: When respondents, whose child did not have a phone, thought they might get them one

When do you plan to get your child a phone?	Number of parents / carers reporting
P6	9
P7	25
S1	41
S2+	16
Don't know	10

Interest and reaction to a supportive pact

Parents / carers survey: When all 122 respondents were asked to consider if they would **"be supportive of a voluntary pact for parents and carers to withhold smartphones from children – at home, in school, everywhere – at least while children are pupils at St John the Baptist primary school", 95 (77.9%) said yes,** and a further 16 (13.1%) were not sure, but interested to find out more (Figure 2). 11 of 18 respondents whose child already had a phone (although not necessarily a smartphone) were supportive of the pact.

Figure 2: Would you be supportive of a voluntary pact for parents and carers to withhold smartphones from children – at home, in school, everywhere – at least while children are pupils at St John the Baptist primary school?
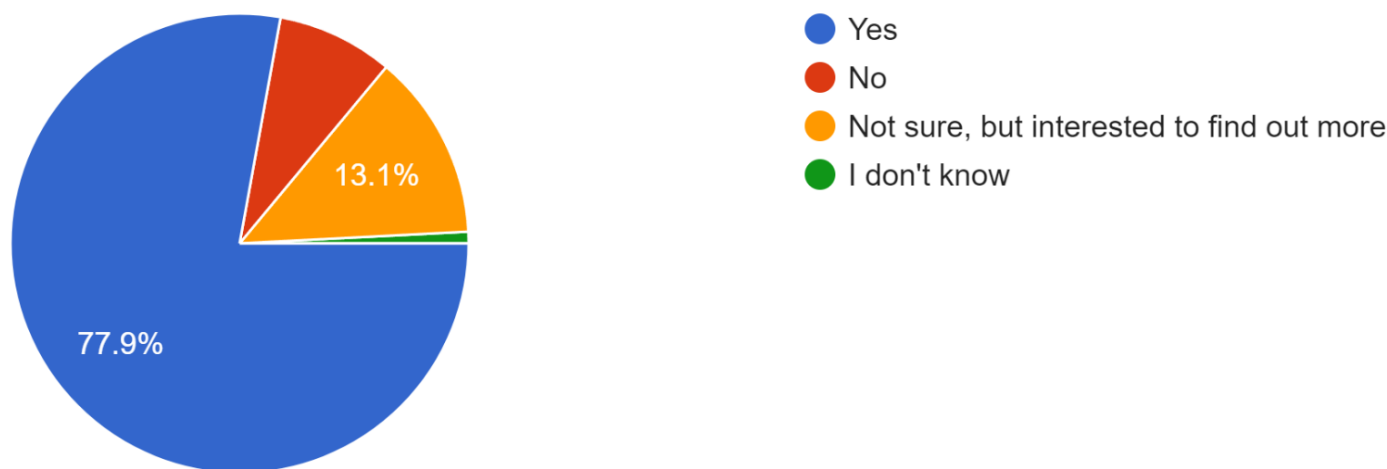
Pupil survey: P5-7s were asked how they would feel if the majority of the children in their year didn't have a smartphone, table 4 highlights their thoughts. There were a mixture of views to this hypothetical question, with 17 (14%) reporting they would feel better as they can use their time for other activities, but 23 (19%) reported they would feel disappointed as it would restrict contact with their friends.

Table 4: If the majority of children in your year didn't have a smartphone how you feel (pupils could tick all that apply)

Response	Number of P5-P7s	Percentage of the 120 respondents*
No different, as I wasn't going to get one anyway	20	17%
Better, I can use my time for other activities	17	14%
Relieved that I no longer feel pressured to get one	14	12%
Disappointed that I can only contact friends during school, clubs, hanging out and via my parents / carers	23	19%
Frustrated as I'd still want a smartphone	20	17%
None of the above	40	33%

*Percentages add to more than 100 as some pupils selected more than one option.

Use of smartphones

Pupil survey: The 120 pupils were asked if they or a friend had experienced a range of things that could happen or you could do with a smartphone (Table 5). 7 children responded 'none of the above' and did not list any further options. Pupils reported both positive experiences, they or a friend having seen videos that inspired them (65%), and negative experiences, such as they or a friend having received a mean message (25%), having had a photo of them or a friend taken without their permission (22%).

Table 5:Have you or a friend experienced any of these things that could happen or you can do with a smartphone (please tick all that apply)

Things that could happen or you can do with a smartphone	Number reporting they or a friend had experienced	Percentage of the 120 respondents
Behaviours related to texts / social media:		
Text friends	100	83%
Sent a mean message	19	16%
Received a mean message	30	25%
Fallen out with friends due to texts	28	23%
Experienced bullying via the phone	17	14%
Contacted someone you don't know	10	8%
Had someone you don't know contact you	34	28%
Behaviours related to photos and videos:		
Taken photos or videos of other people with their agreement	59	49%
Taken photos or videos of other people without their agreement	13	11%
Had a photo or video of you taken without your permission	26	22%
Shared photos of others	38	32%
Seen videos that inspire you	78	65%
Seen things that you wish you hadn't seen i.e. video that made you scared or uncomfortable	27	23%

Things that could happen or you can do with a smartphone	Number reporting they or a friend had experienced	Percentage of the 120 respondents
Altered images of yourself online i.e. used filters	21	18%
Felt low confidence in how you look, because of how other people appear online	14	12%
Using phone results in missing other opportunities:		
Helped with homework	62	52%
Spent longer on the phone than you meant to	44	37%
Used a phone in the middle of the night	39	33%
Felt left out when seeing photos /hearing about other people's activities outwith school via a phone, i.e. a party	27	23%
Using the phone meant that you missed out on doing something else, i.e. playing with friends	16	13%

Parents / carers survey: The parental survey noted that, of the 18 children who had phones their parents / carers reported, 8 were using WhatsApp, 6 snapchat, and fewer than 5 using either TikTok or Instagram.

Use of gaming apps

Parents / carers survey: Of the 122 parents / carers responding, 69 (56.6%) reported their child played any gaming app. The most common gaming apps were Roblox and Minecraft (Table 6):

Table 6: Gaming apps that children plays

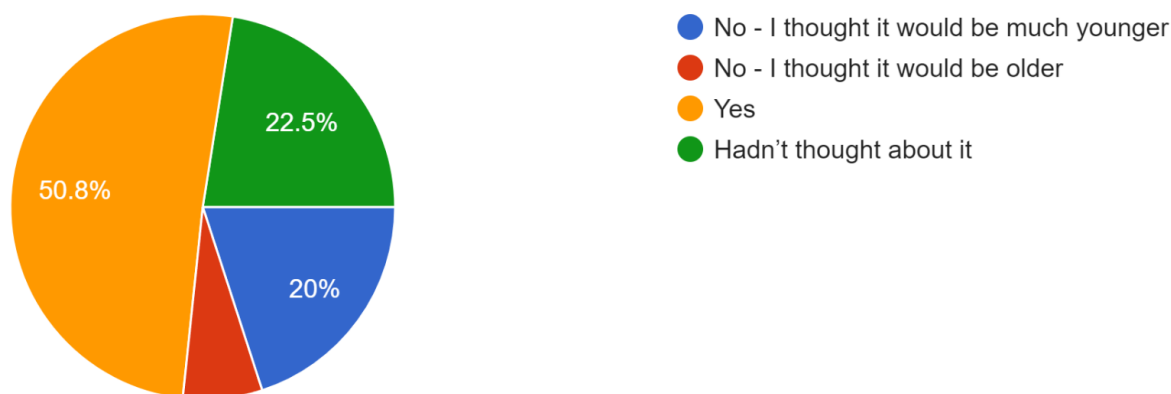| Games played	Number of parents / carers reporting their child playing this game(s)
Roblox	47
Minecraft	34
Fortnite	11
Other games / gaming apps	13

Requests for further information

Parents / carers survey: parents / carers noted interest in attending an event or receiving information about one or more of the following topics:

- Child development in relation to social media and phone usage (68 responses)

- How to teach and support children in using smartphones and social media in a positive way (68 responses)

- Cyber security and safety (64 responses)

- In addition, less than 5 people noted wanting information on online gaming safety.

Pupil survey: Just over half of pupils reported they were aware of age restrictions for social media use (figure 3).

Figure 3: Are you aware that there are age restrictions on social media apps, for example 16+ for Whatsapp, 13+ for Snapchat

- No - I thought it would be much younger
- No - I thought it would be older
- Yes
- Hadn't thought about it

We have added a few links in the reference section at the bottom of the report, and will be looking at how to work with the school to help support parents / carers and children with the information you have requested.

Parents / carers comments

Parents / carers survey: 48 parents / carers chose to leave a comment relating to children and mobile phone use. There were insights provided about concerns parents / carers have in relation to phones, potential benefits of phones, and how parents / carers who have given phones to their children have limited their impact.

Concern around smartphones

Parents / carers predominantly noted concerns that they had around phones. Some parents / carers reported their children having negative experiences as a result of smartphones.

- Experience of bullying, and concerns regarding impact on children's mental health and emotional development, for example:

"We use our phone for contact [only] now due to online bullying"

"[ ] is on one group chat on Snapchat which I monitor and so far I think it has been quite a negative experience for [ ] with other, more phone savvy kids using the chat as a platform to publicly embarrass [ ]/ each other. I think unfortunately this is something they need to learn to manage and navigate, and to be honest I think my [child] has shown resilience I didn't know [ ] had, but I do worry that [ ] may be bottling up the way this group chat is making [ ] feel."

"As a teacher I've had to deal with lots of horrible behaviour on group chats from otherwise lovely children. It happens at home, but impacts on relationships in school"

"I think that society is equipping children with adult technology despite knowing that it is not good for their mental health. I feel that young girls, in particular, are going to struggle with body image and self-esteem issues, being bombarded with distorted and filtered images of perceived perfection and then having such filters available on Snapchat. They will learn to be identified from these distorted images as opposed to reality. I also think social media makes children constantly feel left out and undervalued if their friends are posting constant images of something they are not invited to, or part of."

"It is a worry going forward. While I do own a smartphone as an adult, I am not on any social media. I worry about the pressure it puts on children, particularly girls, and as a mother of [ ] daughters, the whole idea makes me anxious."

- Furthermore, that children wouldn't understand the consequences of their online interactions:

"[children] can take pictures with them and record things. In my opinion they are not of age to do that with the understanding of consequences for their actions."

"Unfortunate events at school or on their way to or from school [can be] are recorded and shared on the internet across different platforms creating a continuous cycle of bullying."

- Concern around physical health e.g. posture and eyesight.

Parents / carers reported feeling children didn't need smartphones, unlimited access to the internet or social media at this age, that they would be happier without them. Furthermore, they reported that phones are a distraction and hamper children's ability to communicate.

Parents / carers reported wider concerns

Parents and carers recognised that phones are a form of screen time and there are wider issues around this. Noting that for other devices such as iPad, children's behaviour was negatively influenced when taking the device off them. Parents / carers requested advice on safety when gaming.

There was also an awareness that access to devices is used as a reward.

"My child last year would get rewarded with iPad time in class rather than a 5 min extra play in the playground"

Potential benefits of phones

Some parents / carers noted the benefits of phones and/or smartphones:

Benefits that can be covered by a brick/retro phone:

- Useful for contacting parents / carers
- Useful for contacting in an emergency
- Enables independence

Specific to smartphone:

- Giving a child the phone in primary school gives the parent time to teach their child skills to handle this technology prior to secondary school
- Cheaper to give old smartphone than buy a new brick/retro phone.
- Secondary school uses this technology
- If children have particular medical conditions the phone could be beneficial

"As parents, it is our responsibility to ensure our children are equipped to manage the world they live in. Unfortunately, that means a huge amount of digital influence that is difficult to ignore, therefore we need to facilitate the appropriate use of devices such a smartphones, as removing these completely will also be doing a disservice to our young people.

My position on this is such that we should be recognising the value of these devices by setting clear boundaries for use, ensuring appropriate behaviours are being followed and that children are clear on what are and are not appropriate online characteristics."

Pressure to have a smartphone

Many parents / carers reported peer pressure as being a big driver in relation to getting their child a phone, this included:

- Their child being pressured to have a smartphone from their peers and to feeling left out;
- Parents / carers getting pressure from their children;
- Within families parents / carers having different views around the issues
- When an older sibling already has a phone;
- An expectation that other children will get phones for Christmas;
- Furthermore, when a phone was given, there was pressure to have certain apps.

As reported above, 77.9% of parents / carers were supportive (and another 13.1% were not sure but interested to find out more) of a voluntary parent pact *to withhold smartphones from children – at home, in school, everywhere – at least while children are pupils at St John the Baptist primary school.* A number of parents / carers commented specifically on the suggested parent Pact. They highlighted:

- Alternatives that are available if parents / carers are wanting to contact their children - smartwatches, brick / retro phones
- There was a feeling that for the pact to be successful it needs community commitment
- Several parents / carers commented they were happy to delay phones until later than S1

"*I would rather my kids didn't get smartphones until they are well into high school but feel I would need to get them one much sooner if all their friends were. Would love for this pact to be in place to resolve that for me*"

Suggestions on how they manage their child having a smartphone

Parents / carers reported key actions they had taken to regulate their children's phone use:

- Monitor phone use
- Limit time on phone and the time of day that it can be used
- Limit what the child can access
- Limit who the child contacts

"I also think there should be agreed time restrictions - some kids are calling the group Snapchat at 2am!"

Next steps

In support of these findings, our next step as a working group is to launch the parent pact within the school. We are also looking at how to work with the school to help support parents / carers and children with the information they have requested.

References and useful links

For more information about the risks of smartphones and benefits of delaying children having a smartphone please see:

A global study produced last year found a strong link between the age a child first starts using a phone/tablet and their mental health as young adults (you can read the summary report here and full report here).

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/02/teacher-smartphone-children-mental-health-internet

Example of smartphone delay success: The Town That Banned Children's Smartphones - 11/04/2024 (youtube.com)

For information on online safety:

NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) .https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

Parent club: https://www.parentclub.scot/topics/online-behaviour-safety

Education from the national crime agency, has a range of information and games for kids to understand more about online safety: https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/

https://www.internetmatters.org/

https://www.getsafeonline.org/personal/article-category/safeguarding-children/

Guidance for Scotland's schools:

 'Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools: https://www.gov.scot/publications/mobile-phone-guidance-scotlands-schools/

National Campaign around Smartphone Free Schools:
https://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk/about

Appendix 1: What we did - more details

Parent and carers survey:

The survey was sent to parents and carers of children at St John the Baptist Primary School and St John the Baptist Nursery. The survey was adapted from the questionnaire contained within the Smartphone free Campaign resource pack.

It was sent via the schools parentportal and via the Nursery's learning journal app, paper copies were also available via the school office. The survey was launched on 5 September 2024, advertised further via WhatsApp parent groups, and at curriculum evening on 11 September 2024. The survey closed on 22 September 2024.

Pupil survey:

Comments from the parents and carer survey highlighted the importance of getting a pupil voice, which we and the school agreed with. The school guided the working group on how best to get a pupil voice and reviewed the survey. The pupil survey design was informed by the responses to the parents and carers survey.

On 7 and 8 October 2024 P5, P6 and P7 pupils were given the opportunity, in class, to complete the anonymous pupil survey. Teachers were provided with useful links in case the survey resulted in questions, and pupils were advised that if answering the survey made them feel uncomfortable, to please discuss it with their teacher, Miss Parker, or Mrs Currie.

Phone audit:

At St John the Baptist Primary, if a child brings a phone into school, the school's policy is that they should hand in their phone at the start of the day, to be returned at the end of the day. To get a fuller picture of how many children bring a phone to school, the school reviewed the number of phones that were handed in on 20 September 2024.