

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Parents, Carers and Guardians

Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

private.office@education-ni.gov.uk

3 September 2024

Dear Parents, Carers and Guardians,

SUBJECT: GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS ON PUPIL USE OF PERSONAL MOBILE PHONES AND OTHER SIMILAR DEVICES DURING THE SCHOOL DAY AND POTENTIAL PILOT PROGRAMME OF INHIBITING DEVICES

Today, my department published new guidance for schools which recommends that pupils do not use their personal mobile phones or other similar devices, during the school day and that these devices should not in normal circumstances be brought into primary schools. I wanted to write to you directly to explain why my department is taking this approach.

There are growing concerns about the impact of smartphones on children and young people's development. This includes being exposed to violence and sexual content, the risk of online bullying, the potential to effect sleep and the impact on their social skills. I know many of you are worried about the time young people spend on their phones and some of the content they may be viewing. It is a particular concern that they may be missing out on real life experiences with their family and friends.

I have considered a number of recent reports. These include the following:

- The National Behaviour Survey (2021-2022) found that 29% of secondary school pupils reported mobile phones being used without permission in most of their lessons.
- Data from Office of National Statistics (2020) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10-15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.

- Research by Ofcom has found that older children in the UK are more likely to be bullied on a screen than in person.
- A global study of nearly 30,000 young adults found a link between the age a child received their first smartphone and their mental health in young adulthood.
- 45% of students across OECD countries feel anxious if their phones are not near them.
- A report from the Children's commissioner published in 2023 indicates that nearly a third of young people will have viewed pornography by age 11.
- The [Growing Up Online](#) study by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College presented evidence that many children and young people are spending much greater amounts of time online (as much as seven hours per day during weekends and holidays and four hours or more on a school day).. The impact of this high usage, as reported by the young people and confirmed by their teachers, was a growing trend for pupils to come in to school "wrecked" or "in a complete state" or with their "heads down... sleeping" in class.

In school itself, there is growing evidence that phones can distract children from learning and that limiting access to mobile phones during the school day can have a positive impact on academic engagement and achievement. Schools that have introduced such policies have found a range of positive outcomes, including reduced bullying, an overall reduction in social media usage, increased healthy play, reduced distraction and improved academic attainment.

Many countries across the world are increasingly taking steps to limit phone use at school, including both England and the Republic of Ireland, as well as many European countries. These changes can make the world of difference in our classrooms. I want our children to be able to concentrate in school and to enjoy break and lunch playing, having fun and socialising with their friends.

I am also aware that our children and young people live in a digital world and need to learn to use technology safely and responsibly. Our schools have a key role in supporting our children to become digital citizens and digital workers of the future and in enabling them to have the knowledge and skills to access technology and to use it safely, keeping themselves, their personal information and their money safe. This is extremely important, and I want to reassure you that it is an essential part of the school curriculum.

We know that technology - when used well - can have a valuable role in supporting learning. It has a range of potential benefits - particularly for older children - including

digital textbooks and class notes, submission of homework, allowing feedback on pupils' work and allowing access to pre-recorded online lessons. Many schools have invested in technology such as tablets, iPads or laptops to support learning and teaching. Such devices will often have restrictions on internet or other applications.

Today's guidance recognises the essential role of technology in society but aims to support our children to get the most from their school day. It is our job as adults to keep our children safe; guide them in using technology appropriately and to support them to become happy and well-rounded individuals.

As a parent, I understand that many of you, particularly those with post-primary children, will wish them to have access to mobiles for safety reasons travelling to and from school. I want to reassure you that the guidance sets out a range of approaches to limiting phone use during the school day and highlights that travel is an important consideration. In addition, schools are also asked to ensure tailored approaches dependent on the particular needs of individual pupils, for example those with medical conditions or Special Educational Needs.

In order for you to support your child(ren) and help them to understand the risks of excessive use of mobile phones and the benefits of having a break from devices during the school day, you may wish to familiarise yourself with some of the evidence and concerns noted above. You may also wish to utilise resources provided in the Safer schools App [Home - Safer Schools NI](#), funded by my Department, and/or the Safeguarding Board's Online Safety Hub [SBNI Online Safety Hub](#) that I wrote to schools in April about and asked to be shared with parents and children.

These are important issues for us to consider as a society. By working together as government, schools and parents we can ensure our children have the very best opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul Givan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P' and a horizontal line underneath the name.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education