Reaching for the Stars!

11th September, 2024

Dear Parents and Carers,

Mobile Phones and Screen Time

I am writing to all parents, but particularly the parents of our upper Key Stage 2 pupils, at the beginning of the school year to outline our policy on mobile phones and our rationale behind it. Our current policy, as stated in the children's planners (page 22 in EYFS planners & page 20 in KS1 & KS 2 planners) is as follows:

Mobile Phones and Electronic Devices Policy
Under no circumstances should mobile phones be brought into school by pupils (unless express permission has been granted by the Headteacher).

The rationale behind this policy is a very simple one: we wish to protect our children's childhood for as long as possible and to keep our children safe. We strongly believe that primary school children do not need a smartphone and we are determined to hold the line on this issue, despite increasing pressure year-on-year to reverse this.

Technology presents many incredible benefits and opportunities, but how best do we navigate it at this critical stage of pre-teen development? Given that 97% of 12-year-olds in Britain own a smartphone, we know this can be a controversial subject and there is no definitive answer – every parent wants to do what is best for their child. Ultimately, it remains a personal decision for each family and household. However, there is a growing body of research showing a clear link between the age a child receives their first smartphone and mental health issues in young adulthood. The harms from excessive smartphone use, as we know, are wide-ranging – from reduced self-esteem to disrupted learning, bullying, grooming and addiction. In addition, there is also the huge 'lost opportunity' cost: the things children and teens are **not** doing because they are on their devices.

A survey of 13–18-year-olds, recently published by BBC Bitesize and 5Live, has produced some insightful data and comments which are worth looking at. Whilst our children at primary school aren't of that age yet, the habits and behaviours that we support them with now will certainly shape the coming years. The link is here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2024/50-percent-of-teenagers-feel-anxious-without-their-smartphones-a-survey-for-bbc-suggests

We recognise that this is a very difficult subject and that there are many opinions on this issue. Our role is not to lecture parents, or to try to tell you how to parent. We understand and know ourselves the very difficult position that parents are put in as the pressures and the demands placed on all of us increase every year. Children want to be like their peers and fit in with perceived social norms, whilst many parents worry about the safety of their children and feel more reassured if their child has a phone on them. It may feel like an impossible task to go against the tide, but growing evidence suggests that the tide is well and truly turning:

- In 2024, 77% of parents of primary age children back a smartphone bans for under-16s;
- 83% of parents say that smartphones are harmful to children;
- 96% of people think that the minimum age for social media should be 16 rather than 14.

Over the Summer, there have been some encouraging signs that this issue is being take more seriously by governments and network providers. Ireland is powering ahead in protecting children from smartphones. The Irish Medical Association has called for the 'overwhelmingly destructive' devices to be treated as a public health emergency and Ireland is set to ban smartphones from schools under new government plans. Similarly, the president of France, Emmanuel Macron, is trialling a 'digital pause' approach in 200 French schools, which could be rolled out nationally in January, after a report that he commissioned concluded that there was, 'a very clear consensus on the direct and indirect negative effects of digital devices.' Finally, the UK's largest network provider, EE, has issued advice to parents recommending no smartphones for under-11s.

In his book, The Anxious Generation, Jonathan Haidt addresses the question of what parents can do in a world in which the government is not doing enough, and tech companies are trying to keep children hooked. He makes four suggestions:

- No smartphones before 14;
- No social media before 16;
- Phone-free schools;
- More outdoor play and age-appropriate risk-taking.

Our Position

At Davyhulme Primary School, we firmly believe that children at primary school age do not need to have a mobile phone in school. This is something that we have always believed and we make our firm stance on this issue clear to parents when choosing the right primary school for your child. We see ownership of a mobile phone as very much 'a rite of passage' as children move on to secondary school. For many parents, this firm stance actually proves helpful in resisting the need to give in to children's demands for a mobile of their own at an increasingly young age. Feedback from many of our parents has been that school's firm line on this issue has supported them in not giving in to their children's pleas by stating that mobile phones are not allowed in school, therefore when you leave primary school, we may consider this then.

As outlined above, our rationale for this firm stance is very simple: we wish to protect our children's childhood for as long as possible; keep our children safe, and try to resist the increasing pressures and demands placed on us as parents and as educators. As advocated by the smartphone free childhood movement, we believe that childhood is too short and too precious to be spent on a smart phone! Whilst there is no doubt of the huge benefits of mobile phones and social media, there are also many negatives, and this is something that we must take seriously in order to protect our children.

I have to be honest with you, as a school, our experience of children and mobile phones is not a positive one. A large proportion of my staff's time, certainly in upper Key Stage 2, is taken up dealing with complaints from parents and pupils about unkind comments that have been posted on social media out of school hours. Whilst our policy is not to involve ourselves in things that happen outside of school, on many occasions my staff have had to intervene as problems have continued throughout the school day that have started on social media in children's homes. Over the years, some parents have also contacted school to report concerns about posts on social media and have expected my staff to deal with the fall out. I can only ever base my judgements on my lived experience, and from some of the unkind posts and messages that I have seen which have been reported to me, I would argue that many children are not emotionally mature enough to deal with social media and all that it entails. There is a reason why most sites/apps have a minimum age limit, however poorly this is enforced by the owners of these sites. Another issue linked to mobile phones in schools is the safeguarding of our pupils: we have experience of pupils who have smuggled their phones into school and taken illicit photos of other children, including in the toilets, and then posted the images on social media. Some of our pupils are not allowed to have their image shared on social media for safeguarding reasons, but there is no awareness of this amongst pupils who choose to break the rules. We have also had instances of children looking at inappropriate websites and sharing these with their peers, both before and after school. Again, this has to be followed up and dealt with by the teaching staff which distracts from their main priorities: teaching & learning and looking after your children's welfare.

As educators and parents, it is imperative that we remain vigilant and proactive in addressing this issue. While technology undoubtedly offers numerous benefits, it is crucial that our children's mental wellbeing and social development are not compromised. This is why we as a school will continue to stand firm on the issue of mobile phones. We will continue, as we always have, to use technology in a positive way in the classroom, and to teach our children about how to use social media/the internet responsibly and safely so that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate this for themselves as they become young adults. I encourage you to engage in open discussions with your children about responsible technology use and to set appropriate boundaries regarding screen time, including time on iPads, gaming and using mobile phones

We recognise that parents understandably worry about children making their own way home from school. In addressing this issue, one parent recently said, 'I, personally, would be less worried about my child if they didn't have a smartphone zapping their attention at road crossings!' An interesting thought. I would suggest that if parents are concerned about the safety and well-being of pupils walking to and from school, particularly in Year 6, then perhaps they should still be supervised until they move on to secondary school?

You may be aware of a growing movement of parents committed to a 'Smartphone Free Childhood' who have received a lot coverage in the press recently in their efforts to trigger a national conversation about the age in which we give our children smartphones. I have included some links below which I hope will be of interest to you.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to share your own views or discuss this further. It is important that we try to have an open and honest dialogue on this challenging issue as we try to navigate our way through this together.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for considering its contents.

Yours sincerely,

K. Brookes

Ms. K. Brookes

Headteacher

A Smartphone Free Childhood

Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Wellbeing Outcomes 2023

Mental Health Insights from Dr Victoria Dunkley