

Let’s talk: raising kids in the smartphone era


We’re all trying
to do the best for
our kids

In two decades, everything's changed

2006 → 2026



2006

Nokias ruled… texts, calls & snake



2007

The first iPhone launches "A computer in our pocket"



2012

4G UK launch, internet always available, everywhere



2020s

Explosion of short-form content & AI powered algorithms



2026

Smartphones have transformed society… and childhood

Smartphones have become ‘normal’ for kids



Age 12

90%

of children have a smartphone



Age 9

Average age

a child gets a smartphone in the UK



Age 6-7

1 in 3

children have a smartphone

OFCOM 2025

Nobody has been happy with the status quo



94%

of **primary school parents** think smartphones are harmful

PARENTKIND POLL 2024



33%

of **parents of children with smartphones** have cried over their child's phone obsession

HMD POLL 2024



87%

of **teachers** agree for teens the negatives of smartphones outweigh the benefits

TEACHER TAPP SURVEY 2025



67%

of **16-18 year olds** think smartphones are harmful

PARENTKIND POLL 2024

We all want the same for our children



Happy today

Enjoy a happy, healthy childhood



Thriving tomorrow

Grow into confident, capable adults



Safe always

Stay safe as they explore the world

We all want the same for our children



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Safe always

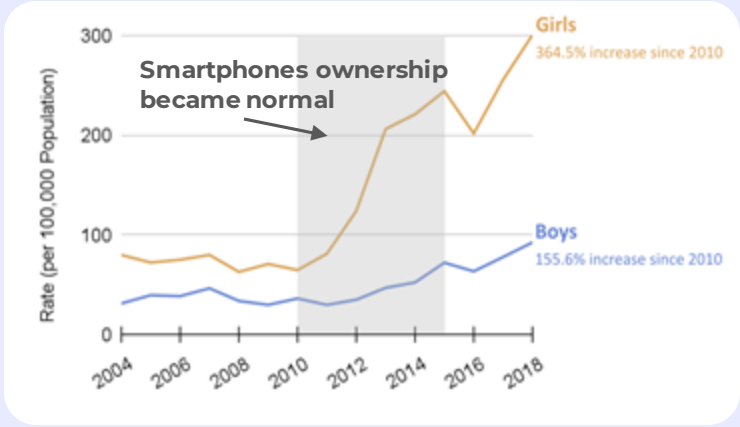
Stay safe as they explore the world

Smartphones make this all harder – and the data shows it

Happy today

We've been facing a teen mental health crisis

UK 10-12 year olds, self-harm episodes



Cybulski et al, 2021

Smartphones increase the likelihood of mental illness

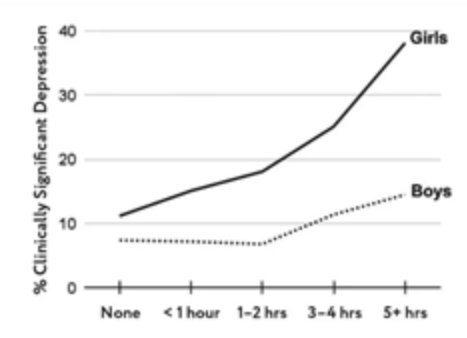
Happy today

3x

Depression risk & 2x anxiety risk

Among teens with problematic smartphone use

King's College London, 2024



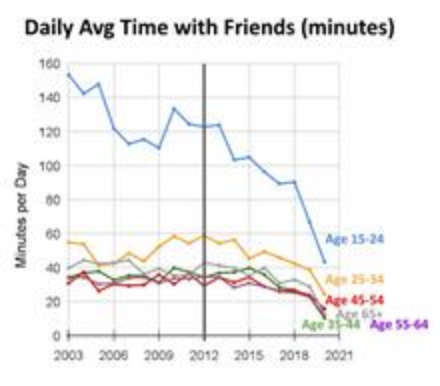
Millennium Cohort Study

Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones displace real world activities & connection

⬇65%

Reduction in time spent in real life with friends



Since smartphones became common in the 2010s

American Time Use Study

Safe always

Smartphones have increased the risk of online grooming

A child is

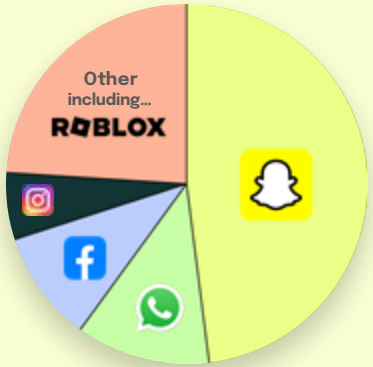
60x

more likely to be groomed online than abducted from the street

NSPCC FOI, 2023/4
(7,062 reported online grooming cases);
Home Office / PACT / CEOP
(116 estimated stranger child abductions 2024/5)

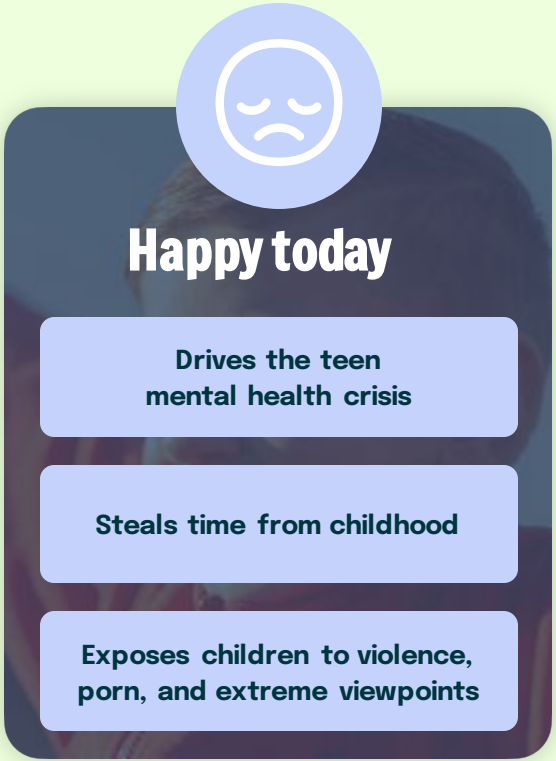
Groomers go where kids are

% of reported incidents



NSPCC 2024

Smartphones make all these things harder



Happy today

- Drives the teen mental health crisis
- Steals time from childhood
- Exposes children to violence, porn, and extreme viewpoints



Thriving tomorrow

- Replaces real-world socialising with screen time
- Disrupts focus, sleep, and concentration
- Undermines academic outcomes



Safe always

- Makes online bullying constant and inescapable
- Enables sharing of nudes with peers and strangers
- Creates widespread risks of grooming and child sextortion

It can feel like an impossible position

Either we...

Give our children a harmful product



Or we...

Risk them being socially isolated



It's a lose-lose: for parents, young people & society

The UK Government is taking bold action

- **A ban on under-16s using major platforms** (YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, X)
- Likely **exceptions**: **music** streaming and **education** (definitions TBC)
- **"Australia Plus" approach also includes:**
  - live-streaming for 16-17 yr olds
  - restricted stranger contact in gaming
  - first curbs on harmful "romantic" AI chatbots
- **Aim:** regulations passed by end of 2026, in effect early 2027



This new law is a huge victory but it needs all of us to make it work

- ☑ **Everyone now agrees** that social media is **not safe** for kids
- ☑ The most **harmful platforms** will be **restricted**
- ☑ **Millions of kids off social media**, even more never exposed to it

- ❌ **Big Tech** will say it's **too hard to enforce**
- ❌ Tech-savvy kids will find **workarounds**
- ❌ The **peer pressure won't disappear**

The law now gives parents backing. ***But we still have to hold the line.***

Social media has only ever been one part of the picture

Once you hand over a smartphone, **parenting gets harder**.

Open internet, group chats, harmful content, AI chatbots, addictive design… all in your child's pocket.

Smartphones are still the gateway to so many risks and potential harms



The moment a child gets a smartphone, childhood changes

They can quickly become the centre of children's lives, shaping:

- Where they **spend their time**
- How they build **friendships**
- Who they **learn** from
- How they **see themselves**
- Who they **become**



Delaying smartphones delays this change

Delaying gives more time for childhood



01. More friendship

More face-to-face conversation and connection.



02. More confidence

More chances to solve problems independently.



03. More freedom

More space to become themselves.



04. More focus

More attention for learning, reading and creativity.



05. More sleep

Fewer interruptions and better quality rest.



06. More play

More time outdoors, moving and imagining.

But don’t kids need a smartphone to get ahead?



The skills kids need in an AI-powered world:

Social skills
Emotional Intelligence
Resilience
Creativity



How children build them:

Human interaction
Real life experiences
Challenge
Play
... not scrolling.

The most valuable skills will always be deeply human ones

The “tech bros” don’t give it to their kids

STEVE JOBS

“We don’t allow the iPad in the home. We think it’s too dangerous for them.”



EVAN SPIEGEL

Grew up without a TV and credits his own success on that tech restriction. Limits his kid to 1.5 hours screen time per week.



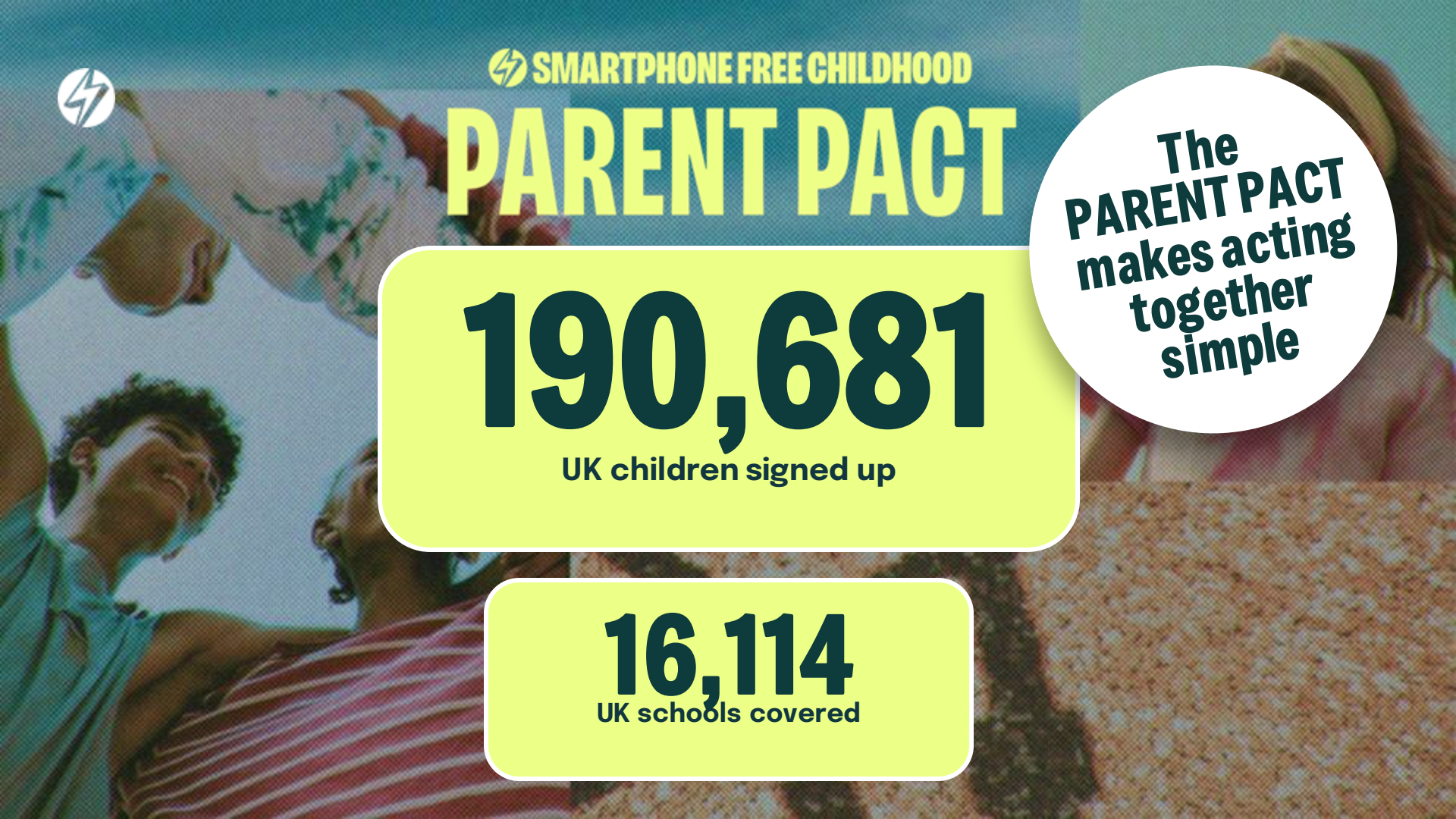
BILL GATES

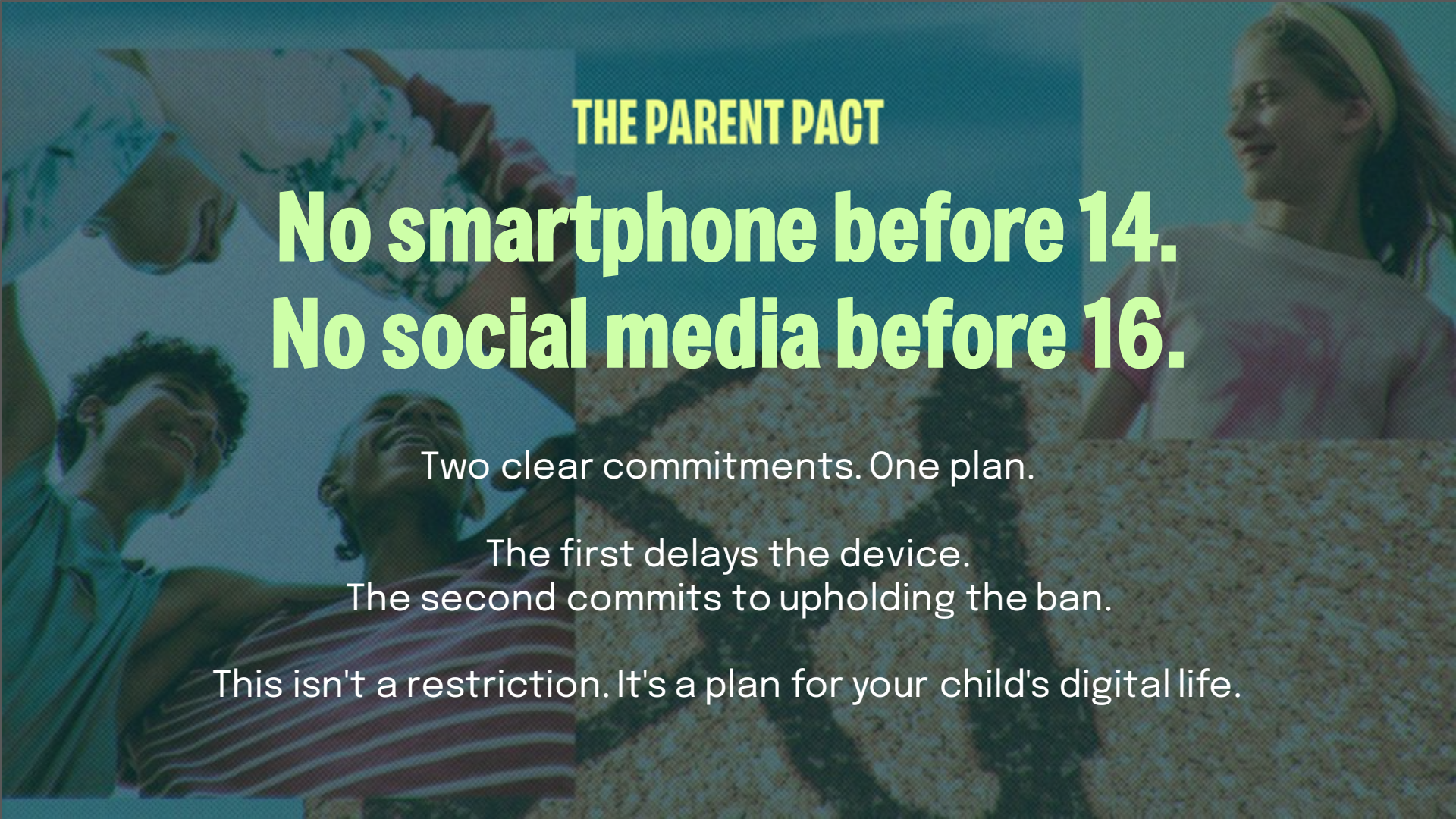
Didn’t allow his 4 children smartphones or their own computers until they were 14.



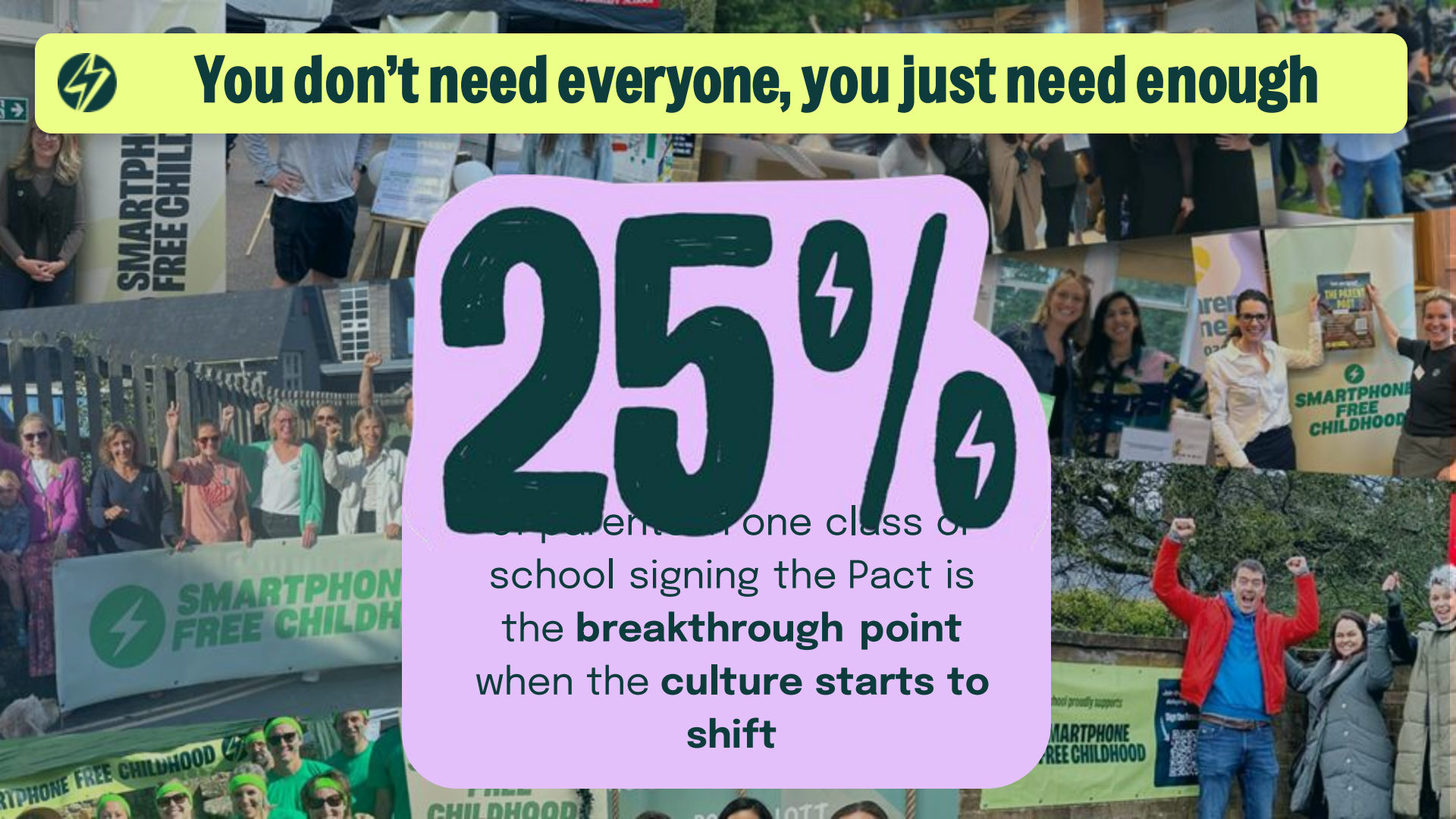
But how can we fight the peer pressure?


If enough of us agree to delay
giving smartphones
the peer pressure reduces.
Acting alone can feel impossible,
but together we're powerful.


SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD
PARENT PACT
The PARENT PACT makes acting together simple
190,681
UK children signed up
16,114
UK schools covered

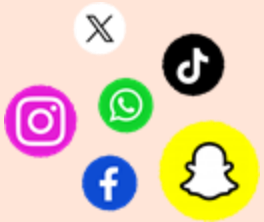

THE PARENT PACT
No smartphone before 14.
No social media before 16.
Two clear commitments. One plan.
The first delays the device.
The second commits to upholding the ban.
This isn't a restriction. It's a plan for your child's digital life.

You don’t need everyone, you just need enough



of parents of one class of school signing the Pact is the **breakthrough point** when the **culture starts to shift**

This isn't anti-tech, it's pro-childhood

Delay smartphones until at least 14	Delay social media until at least 16	A simple phone to stay in contact	Shared access to a family computer	Alternative trackers (or go without)
				
SMARTPHONE	SOCIAL MEDIA	SIMPLE PHONE	FAMILY COMPUTER	TAGS OR GPS

What if my child already has a smartphone?

Take an interest & have open conversations

Set clear boundaries

- No phones overnight
- Screen-free meals
- App time limits
- Delay social media

Review your own smartphone behaviours

Invest in parental controls & monitor constantly

Parental Controls are important but not the solution

Most kids don't have parental controls

58%

of teens say they have never had parental controls

Parentkind Poll, May 2024

If you have them, invest time understanding how kids get around them

47%

of teens with controls have bi-passed them

Parentkind Poll, May 2024

- Performing a factory reset
- Using VPN software
- Hacking the router
- Memorising your passcode
- Using a proxy



How to talk to your child about this?



10 minute video for 7-12 year olds

Smartphonefreechildhood.org

For age 7-12



The Battle for your Time: a compelling Ted Talk for teens

TEDx / YouTube

For age 10-16



The Amazing Generation by Jonathan Haidt

Penguin

For age 8-11



The Healthy Selfie: A guide for teens on self-worth in the digital age by Dr. Susie Davies

The Healthy Selfie

For age 12-16

The angle that works best: *"Tech companies stealing their time"*

And if you're looking for an alternative to a smartphone or have other questions



Sign the Pact and join your school Whatsapp Group



Answers to every question



Find alternatives to smartphones

Visit: smartphonefreechildhood.org

Get involved in the movement!



Become an Active Supporter

Be part of the team engaging parents in this school



Become a School Organiser

Play a role in leading the conversation in each school



Help to drive change beyond your school

Join the team driving change in other schools in your area

If you've ever felt the urge to do more, to contribute to something greater, to be part of the conversation and to help shape the future for our children and society, this is it!

Lisa - SFC Regional Leader, Dorset

Scan here

The risks and harms haven't gone away



- Drives the teen mental health crisis
- Steals time from childhood
- Replaces real-world socialising with screen time



- Disrupts focus, sleep, and concentration
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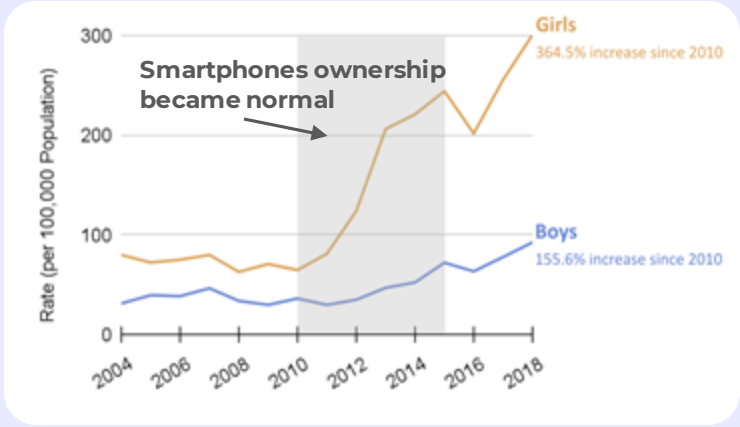


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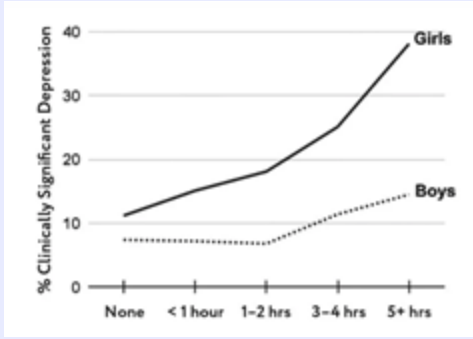
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King's College London, 2024



Millennium Cohort Study





Happy today

Smartphones are designed to be addictive

4-6 hours

Average daily time teens spend on smartphones

Among UK 12-15 year olds; nearly a full-time job

Birmingham University SMART Study, Feb 2025





Happy today

Smartphones expose kids to things they can't unsee

51%

of 13 year olds have seen violent, hardcore porn

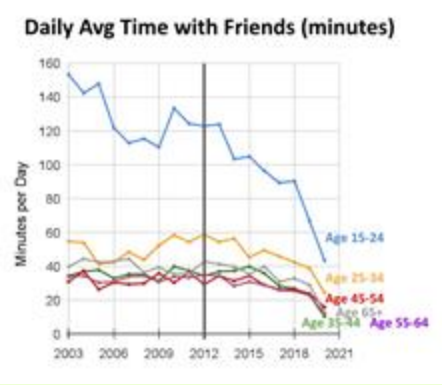
BBFC report, 2022

Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones displace real world activities & connection

↓65%

Reduction in time spent in real life with friends



Since smartphones became common in the 2010s

American Time Use Study

Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones fragment children's attention

237

notifications a day on average

Median average, Common Sense Media, 2023

Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones disrupt sleep – critical to healthy development

1 night / week

heavy social-media users lose one night's sleep each week

UK Millennium Cohort Study, 2019
(11,872 adolescents, age 13–15)

"Our teenagers are truly addicted… The vast majority of teenagers tell me they are **awake until the small hours on their phones.**"

"In 20 years of teaching **I have never before experienced so many instances of children falling asleep** in lessons as now."

Teacher testimonies
shared with SFC, 2025

Thriving tomorrow

Smartphones lower educational attainment

1-2 grades higher

GCSE grades among schools with an effective smartphone ban

Policy exchange: Disconnected 2024

Safe always

Smartphones make bullying harder to escape

24/7

Bullying in children's pockets

Issues no longer stop at the school gate; they can amplify and exacerbate overnight

Safe always

The sharing of under-age nudes is an everyday reality

90% of girls
50% of boys
have been sent an unwanted explicit image

Ofsted, 2021

Safe always

Grooming & sextortion are ever present threats



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pRqyWUbGdw&t=1s

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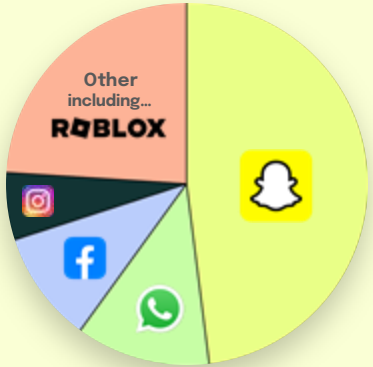
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% of reported incidents



NSPCC 2024

Smartphone-free kids have more chance to



Have happier childhoods

Better mental health
More time for play
More presence



Thrive in the future

Stronger social skills
Better concentration
Improved school results



Be safe as they grow up

Less exposure to harm
Less exposure to predators
Lower likelihood of bullying