

Well informed

## Do bans on smartphones in schools improve mental health?

What the early evidence suggests about the effect on students

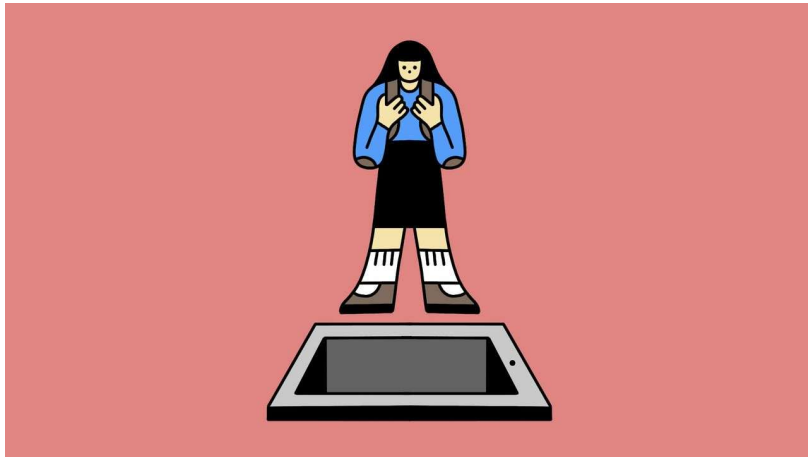


Illustration: Cristina Spanò

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France has not allowed smartphone use in primary or secondary schools since 2018, claiming that it would help children focus, reduce their social media use and mitigate online bullying. The Netherlands initiated a similar ban in January 2024. Hungary followed suit later that year. Legislators in Britain are considering similar measures. The key question facing them is whether banning smartphones in schools offers any benefits to mental health.

That there is a problem seems clear. In 2021 America's surgeon general compiled a report revealing that persistent feelings of hopelessness climbed by 40% among American high-school students between 2009 and 2019. The number who seriously considered killing themselves went up by 36%. What makes these findings all the worse is that 48% of mental-health problems (like depression and anxiety) that emerge during adolescence will plague people for the rest of their lives.

It is tempting to connect these trends with the increased availability of smartphones, but establishing a causal connection is difficult. Part of the problem is that smartphones contain multitudes. Using a smartphone to solve crosswords or read the news may well have markedly different psychological effects than intensive social-media use.

Children are no less varied. The brain undergoes profound changes during puberty, meaning that any research on the effects of smartphone use needs to consider the developmental age of the children being studied as well as their precise smartphone habits.

No studies have got this specific. Those that have come close, however, reveal that unfettered access to social media on smartphones during puberty, especially at critical moments when the brain is changing, may cause problems. One study, led by Amy Orben at the University of Cambridge, asked 17,409 people between the ages of 10 and 21 how satisfied they were with their lives and how much they used social media. The findings, reported in 2022 in *Nature Communications*, show that girls who increased their social media use over the course of a year were significantly less satisfied with their lives if the increase took place when they were between 11 and 13. Boys showed the same trend when increases took place when they were 14 or 15 years old.

How much of this will change by banning phones in schools is unclear. In a paper published in the *Lancet* in February, Victoria Goodyear at Britain's University of Birmingham compared the mental well-being of students in schools that implemented restrictive smartphone policies with those with relaxed policies. She also

monitored overall screentime. Her results show that, while those who spent more time on a smartphone overall did have a decline in mental well-being, there was no difference between the two groups. She and her colleagues argue that setting up policies at schools alone is simply not enough.

Researchers are trying to paint a complete picture with both hands tied behind their back. According to Dr Orben, social media companies routinely refuse to give independent researchers access to detailed data on the behaviours of their users. This forces researchers to rely on less accurate proxy measures, like overall screentime. It also means that children playing educational games are being put in the same analytical bin as children who are on social media. A more nuanced picture of the effects of smartphones needs to be painted. ■