



Mary, Mother of Hope Schools Littlepace, Dublin 15.

Mary Mother of Hope Schools Smartphone Free Voluntary Code

The use of smartphones and other technologies is now a feature of daily life for people of all ages. While smartphones offer numerous advantages, they can expose primary school children to several risks including cyberbullying and encountering harmful content.

In schools we see directly the negative impact on children of smartphones/devices and social media usage. There is an increasing amount of national and international evidence to support the case for delaying its introduction until children are older. Links to some examples of this evidence are available in the appendices.

In response to the various concerns of childhood smartphone use, parents in several school communities across Ireland have agreed not to provide their child with a smartphone until they finish Sixth Class. Many schools and organisations have come together to create a charter for all primary school pupils. The 'Gen Free' charter asks parents not to buy their child a smartphone or allow them on social media until they leave primary school. It calls for our primary aged children to be:

Gen Free - Free from smartphones, Free from social media and Free to be kids.

In December 2024, Mary Mother of Hope Parents Association and the junior and senior schools conducted a parent survey of smartphone and social media use by children in primary school. Results of the Mary Mother of Hope Schools survey found:

- 93.1% of parents felt that primary school children should not own their own smartphone.
- 96.6% of parents felt that primary school children should not have access to social media.

As a result of this survey, the Parents Association with the support of the junior and senior school staff and Board of Managements are introducing a '**Smart Phone Free Voluntary Code**'. The '**Smart Phone Free Voluntary Code**' is one in which as many parents as possible in Mary Mother of Hope Schools voluntarily agree to delay purchasing or providing a smartphone and access to social media until their child has finished their time in primary school.

It is hoped that collective participation in this voluntary code will provide parents and guardians, who are concerned about their child having personal access to a smartphone, with a tool to help address the risks of smartphone use.

Collective parental agreement to hold off on purchasing smartphones will reduce peer pressure and support parents in saying no. Parents will also have data as a tool to respond to the possible pressure from their children, for example "82% of 3rd class parents have opted in to the "Smartphone Free Voluntary Code".



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There are many benefits for children in delaying smart phone/social media usage and these are outlined below:

Enhanced Social and Emotional Development:

Delaying smartphone ownership can foster better social and emotional development in children. They can learn essential face-to-face communication skills and build stronger interpersonal relationships without digital distractions.

Exposure to unwanted, negative behaviours by others is also reduced. Online content and social media use can affect the mental health of young people through increased anxiety and stress, cyberbullying, self-harm, disordered eating and suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, social media allows children to communicate with their peers in ways which can cause hurt and harm to others and many children do not understand the potential impact of their actions.

Improved Concentration and Academic Performance:

By postponing smartphone usage, children can focus on their studies, leading to improved academic performance. Reduced screen time can enhance concentration and critical thinking skills.

Reduced Screen Time:

Delaying smartphone ownership limits a child's exposure to excessive screen time, reducing the risk of negative effects such as sleep disturbances, decreased physical activity and cyberbullying.

Safer Online Experience:

Young children are more vulnerable to online risks including the spreading of misinformation through online channels, negative effects on body image through social comparison and the lack of age verification.

Delaying smartphone access allows parents/guardians to educate children about responsible internet use and gradually introduce them to digital technology in a controlled environment.

Parent-Child Bonding:

Without the constant distraction of a smartphone, parents/guardians and children can engage in more meaningful activities together, strengthening the parent-child bond.

The Age of Digital Consent

It is important for parents to be aware that in Ireland, the Age of Digital Consent is 16 years of age. It is important also for parents to adhere to age ratings on apps and on the video games their children play. Please see the **Children's Data and Parental Consent Publication** in the appendices

Parental Controls

Parents should make full use of the available parental controls on any device they give their child access to. Parental controls are available on most Internet-enabled devices including computers, smartphones, tablets and gaming systems. Parental controls can help reduce the risk of your child encountering inappropriate content when they are online



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What about children who already have a smartphone?

It is a parent/guardian decision as to whether it is appropriate to continue allowing their child to have access to a smartphone/device. Some parents/guardians may wish to consider pausing current smart phone access if appropriate for their child. However, the Parents Association and schools would encourage all parents/guardians to review the age-appropriateness of any apps that children may be using including Snapchat (current minimum age is 13), Tiktok (current minimum age is 13), and WhatsApp (current minimum age is 13).

Mary Mother of Hope Schools remain mobile phone and smart device free – children should never have a personal smart device in school, including smart watches.

Mary Mother of Hope Schools Access to Technology

We recognise that as part of the school's education programme pupils have some supervised access to technology to support their learning. This allows our children access to online educational resources that can greatly enhance their learning experience.

This is separate to the voluntary agreement that is being proposed. Access to and use of the internet during the school day is outlined in the school's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and any proposed voluntary agreement would not interfere with this.

Smartphone Free Voluntary Code

Key points:

1. All information provided is confidential. Any data collected will only be shared numerically by class level and for information purposes only.
2. Each family's right to decide whether or not their children have access to the internet or a smartphone is respected and there is no obligation to join if you do not wish to do so.
3. This is not a solution in itself, to the growing problem but it is potentially one tool which may be helpful to those who wish to avail of it.

How to sign up:

Please indicate your preference to join Mary Mother of Hope Schools' Smartphone Free Voluntary Code on your child's Aladdin's Permission page. *Please complete for **each of your children**.*



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Appendices

Children's Data and Parental Consent Publication

<https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/dpc-guidance/childrens-data-protection-rights>

(Data Protection Commission)

Websites: Parent Information on Cyber-Safety and Protection

- <https://www.webwise.ie/parents/>
- <https://www.cybersafekids.ie/about-us/>

Article and Programme Links re. the Negative Impact of Children Owning Smartphones:

- Irish government officials have expressed concerns about the negative impact of mobile phone use among children in schools. Education Minister Norma Foley has highlighted that mobile phones can disrupt learning and contribute to cyberbullying. She emphasized that even when phones are kept in bags, notifications can interrupt study, creating a continuous distraction. Minister Foley advocates for establishing a culture of non-acceptance of mobile phones in schools to enhance the learning environment.

Additionally, Minister Foley has pointed out that online bullying via smartphones often occurs outside school hours, beyond the school's control. She noted that children can be exposed to violent and sexual content through their smartphones, which no parent would want them to see. Excessive smartphone use can also lead to children missing out on real-life experiences with family and friends.

[gov.ie - Minister Foley launches new plan to encourage parents to avoid buying smartphones for their children in primary schools](https://www.gov.ie/en/news/2024/09/03/1468061-cyber-safety-report/)

- Cybersafe Ireland have released a report highlighting the increasing risks of online harm for children in Ireland. It emphasizes that many parents feel ill-equipped to protect their children from cyber threats. The report reveals that cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and privacy concerns are significant issues. It calls for improved education on digital safety for both children and parents, as well as stronger regulatory measures to safeguard young internet users.

<https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2024/0903/1468061-cyber-safety-report/>

- A growing number of young children, including 24% of 6-year-olds, own smartphones, raising concerns about the negative impacts on their development, such as social deprivation and addiction. Experts suggest delaying smartphone use until at least age 13 and using alternatives like "dumb" phones or GPS watches for safety. Parental supervision, setting clear rules, and using parental controls are essential to ensure online safety. Parents are advised to delay smartphones and engage in open discussions with their children about device use, fostering a supportive community to make the decision easier.

<https://www.cybersafekids.ie/almost-25-of-six-year-olds-have-a-smartphone/>

- Dr. Colman Noctor, a child psychotherapist, discusses the challenges of children owning smartphones, especially in primary school. He argues that children are not developmentally ready for the responsibility of smartphones, citing risks like social anxiety and emotional instability. While acknowledging social



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pressures, he advocates for delaying smartphone ownership until secondary school, highlighting the importance of collective parental action and school initiatives. He also stresses the need for media literacy, teaching children to use technology responsibly and critically. Dr. Noctor believes that a nationwide agreement to delay smartphones would help protect children's social and emotional development.

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/parenting/arid-41374744.html>

- **Richard Hogan: A primary school child has no business with a smartphone.**
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/people/arid-41525444.html>
- **Australia passes Social Media Ban for under 16s.**
For some analysis of this move Professor of Cyberpsychology Mary Aiken.
<https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/22465671/>
- **Swiped: The School That Banned Smartphones**
Emma and Matt Willis challenge a group of Year 8 pupils at the Stanway School in Colchester to give up their smartphones completely for 21 days
<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/swiped-the-school-that-banned-smartphones>
- **The Most Connected Generation is the Loneliest” - Jonathan Haidt**
Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt talks to Brendan about his new book The Anxious Generation which focuses on the effects of the smartphone and social media on young people, how childhood has transformed and what is happening to the mental health of Generation Z.
<https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/22485306/>



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