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Dear Families

Thank you to all those who were able to attend our Smartphone Free Childhood talk last week. We are very grateful for the time you gave and for the meaningful discussion and thoughtful questions that followed. These provided valuable insight for both parents and staff, and it was clear that many people appreciated having a supportive, non-judgemental space to explore what can be a challenging and emotive topic. For families who were unable to attend, we wanted to share a summary of what was discussed, including some of the striking data that was shared and the next steps we are considering as a school.

The current picture:

We began by looking at how smartphone use in the UK is starting at increasingly younger ages. Current data states that:

- 1 in 3 children aged 6–7 now have a smartphone.
- The average age a child receives their first smartphone in the UK is 9 years old.
- By the end of Year 6, the majority of children have constant access to the internet, anywhere and at any time, once they leave primary school.

We then discussed the growing concern around children having smartphones. This concern is being raised by healthcare professionals, parents, teachers, young adults and children themselves. There is a strong sense that no one is particularly happy with the current situation.

It was also identified that the main beneficiaries of this system are technology companies, who are projected to make around \$40 billion in 2025 from marketing to under-18s.

The dilemma for parents and carers:

A key theme of the evening was how this situation can leave parents and carers feeling stuck in an impossible position. On one hand, giving a child a smartphone can feel like handing over a product that is designed to be highly addictive and linked to difficulties with mood, focus and relationships. On the other hand, choosing not to give a smartphone can bring worries about social isolation friendship groups - particularly when starting secondary school - and balancing children's growing independence with safety. This can leave parents, young people and society feeling as though we are in a lose-lose situation.

Smartphone Free Childhood – what it aims to do:

We then explored how the Smartphone Free Childhood movement came about in response to these concerns. Its key aims are to:

- Delay smartphones until age 14
- Delay social media until age 16
- Provide children with a phone that cannot access the internet or app stores
- Use a shared family computer for children's internet access
- Use Bluetooth or GPS trackers rather than smartphones if families wish to track their child's location

We are committed to delivering education of the highest quality that supports and challenges all pupils to learn and progress in a secure and happy environment.

We discussed how this approach might work in our own community and identified some of the challenges, including the need for communication and consistency across local primary and secondary schools so that families feel supported rather than isolated.

Research and data that made a strong impact:

One part of the evening that resonated strongly with many parents was the data and research shared, including:

- Teen anxiety and depression have risen sharply over the past 15 years.
- Up until around 2010, self-harm rates were relatively stable. After this point they increased significantly, particularly among girls. This timing closely matches when smartphones became normal for young people. While smartphones are not the only cause, many academics have studied this rise and there are few credible alternative explanations that fully account for the trend.
- The average 12–15-year-old spends 4–6 hours per day on their phone. Over a week, this equates to around 35 hours, which is almost a full-time job.
- The average teen receives more than 237 notifications a day, making sustained focus and downtime extremely difficult.
- There is strong evidence suggesting that the more time a young person spends on a smartphone, the higher their risk of depression. Research indicates that for girls, around 5 hours per day on a smartphone is associated with a 40% likelihood of clinical depression.
- More than half of 13-year-olds report having seen violent or pornographic content online.
- In secondary schools with effective smartphone-free policies, students achieve 1–2 GCSE grades higher on average.
- It is increasingly common for children to be pressured into sending nude images, or to be sent images they did not want to see. 90% of girls and 50% of boys report having received explicit images they wish they hadn't.
- A child is 60 times more likely to be groomed or sextorted online than to be abducted by a stranger on the streets. This typically happens on platforms where children already are, such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and even Roblox.

Wider change and community support

We also discussed how governments are beginning to respond. For example, Australia has banned social media for under-16s, and some countries are enforcing strict smartphone-free school policies. However, the reality is that the UK is currently behind, and even if national policies were introduced now, they would take years to implement. Our children and families need support now. This is where the Smartphone Free Childhood movement aims to help by bringing communities together so families can delay smartphones and social media together, reducing the fear of being “the only one”. Families can do this by signing the Parent Pact, which is a shared, non-legally-binding commitment between parents. Through the Smartphone Free Childhood website, families can see how many parents have signed up in different regions, schools and even classes. In Oxfordshire alone, over 13,000 schools have signed up and over 150,000 parents have joined the movement.

How we can support children at home:

We also shared advice for families, whether children already have smartphones or not:

- Take an interest in what your child is doing online and keep conversations open. Be curious rather than critical.
- Set clear boundaries, such as keeping phones out of bedrooms, having screen-free meals, using time limits on apps and delaying social media for as long as possible.
- Model healthy habits yourself by reflecting on your own phone use. Consider putting your phone away during family time or leaving it in another room.



- Set up parental controls. While far from perfect, they are essential if your child has a smartphone. It was noted, however, that these can be bypassed in a number of ways (e.g. factory resets, VPNs, proxy servers, memorised passcodes or hidden apps), so ongoing supervision and conversation remain vital.

Further information and staying connected

There is a wealth of further information available on the Smartphone Free Childhood website, and the slides from our Fir Tree talk have been uploaded to the Computing Curriculum page of our school website. These can be found by following: School Information > Curriculum > Computing, then scrolling down to "Smartphone Free Childhood Parent Talk 2025 Slides". This is where you will also find the references for the data/statistics mentioned above.

Once again, we really value your support and encourage families to talk to us if you would like further guidance or discussion. If you would like to connect with like-minded parents within the Fir Tree community, we recommend joining our Facebook group, which is a supportive space to share advice and experiences. If you would like to join the Fir Tree Smartphone Free Childhood WhatsApp group, the link can be found here:



WhatsApp



Facebook

With warm wishes,

Mr Knight, Headteacher
Mr Wilcox, Assistant Headteacher
Miss Lloyd, UKS2 Phase Lead
Miss Hutchins, LKS2 Phase Lead