# SMART Schools+: Social Media and Adolescent mental health – the impact of UK national policy Restrictions on social media use and menTal health

This is a Wellcome Trust Funded Study, led by the University of Birmingham and by Prof. Victoria Goodyear and Prof. Miranda Pallan. This document provides a detailed overview of the study. Further information about the study can be accessed on our website https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/projects/smart-schools.

**What is the aim of the study?** To evaluate the impact of the upcoming UK social media restrictions for under 16s on adolescent mental health and wellbeing. We plan to compare outcomes in adolescents at two time points; before the ban comes into effect (data collection school year 2026/2027) and after the implementation of the ban (data collection school year 2027/2028).

**Who will be involved in the study?**

- Two form/tutor classes (one year 8 class and one year 9 class)
- The form tutors (or relevant class teacher) of the year 8 and year 9 classes

**What will the study involve?**

At each time point (pre- and post-ban):

- Pupils will complete an online survey that will include the following topics; smartphone and social media use, mental wellbeing, anxiety and depression, physical activity and sleep behaviours. Pupils will also be asked to answer questions about their social connections, and this will include connections with other participating pupils in their form group. The survey will also ask pupils their age, gender, ethnicity and postcode. We are asking this information to understand more about the different factors influencing adolescent smartphone and social media use.
- Pupils will wear an activity monitor watch for 7 days that will measure time spent in physical activity and sleep duration.
- Form tutors (or equivalent class teacher) will complete an online survey that will ask them to report on attendance, attainment and classroom behaviour for each pupil. The survey will also ask the tutor to identify if the pupil is eligible to free school meals, is registered as having a special educational need and if English is an additional language. We are asking for this information in order to understand more about pupil characteristics and the differences in school phone policy.

**Where will the study take place?**

- Pupils will complete the online survey during a timetabled lesson in the presence of the class teacher and a member of the research team. Tablets will be provided for students to complete the survey. The survey will take up to 40 minutes to complete
- Pupils will be provided with an activity monitor watch in the same timetabled lesson to wear at home and in school for 7 days
- Form tutors will be sent an online survey and asked to complete this during the school day on a school device. The survey will take up to 30 minutes to complete.

**Are there any further research activities?** Your school may be asked to be a case study school, and this will involve additional data collection in the form of focus group discussions. If your school is selected to be a case study school, a total of 4 focus group discussions will be completed with pupils (2 at each time point; 1 focus group with year 8 and 1 focus group with year 9 pupils). The discussions will take place in your school, last approximately 60 minutes, will be led by a member of the research team and will be voice recorded. The discussions will focus on adolescent phone/social media use, their opinions on the ban, their social connections, and their leisure activities. If you are interested in being a case study school, please contact the research team.

**What are the benefits to taking part?** This study will offer your school the opportunity to play a key role in the development of new guidelines regarding phone and social media use in schools and mental health. You will be provided with free access to resources and materials developed from this study and can request a summary of findings specific to your school related to pupils' wellbeing and uses of smartphones and social media.

**Will the school be provided with compensation for taking part?** Your school will receive £1000 in total for participating in this study (£500 at each time point). Each pupil will be provided with a £5 voucher for taking part (at each time point) and this will be distributed to pupils via the school. If you are a case study school, your school will receive an extra £300 (£150 at each time point).

**What are the risks to taking part?** This study is a natural experiment exploring pupils' current phone/media use and mental wellbeing, and therefore any risk or harm to participants is not expected as a direct result of the research. There is a small possibility that the collecting of data related to physical and mental health may be a sensitive issue for some participating pupils. We have therefore put in place the following measures to mitigate any potential risks to your pupils:

- Within the pupil leaflet and at the end of the survey, pupils will be provided with internet links signposting to further mental health support and information
- At the end of the survey pupils will be provided with the option to complete a mood-elevation task; this is an evidence-based strategy to support mental wellbeing
- The research team will work closely with the wellbeing team (or similar) in your school and follow your school's safeguarding protocols and procedures
- The research team will screen the survey data within 5 working days. As part of the research, pupils will complete a validated anxiety and depression measure, and if a pupil scores above the clinical threshold on this survey, then we will inform your school's DSL, who can put in place support for the pupil.

**Will information be kept confidential?** All information that is collected about your school, teachers and pupils will be kept strictly confidential. This means that your schools', teachers' and pupils' names will be removed from any reporting of the findings. All information will be stored electronically and securely. Only the research team will have access to the data. There may be some instances whereby confidentiality may need to be broken, and this is in the event that a participant in the study identifies a safeguarding concern. If this occurs, the researcher will inform a member of school staff so that they take appropriate action in line with the school's safeguarding policy. Electronic files will be deleted from the system after ten years. Our full school privacy notice, and separate participant privacy notices (including focus groups) can be accessed here birmingham.ac.uk/smart-schools.

**Can I withdraw my school from the study?** Yes. You can withdraw your school from the study. All participants also have the right to withdraw and parents can withdraw their child from the study. If pupils withdraw while they are completing the survey, they can select an alternative task to complete on the tablet so that their withdrawal is not known to other pupils. If the school and/or any of the participants withdraw within 4 weeks of the last point of data collection, all documents and data generated related to the school or a specific individual will be destroyed. The contract, consent and assent will not be destroyed to ensure we remain within legal processes.

**What will happen with the results of the study?** The results will be presented in academic journal papers and at national and international conferences. We will produce blogs, podcasts, videos and infographics targeted at pupils, parents and the wider public to raise awareness and understanding of

the relationship between phone/social media use and mental wellbeing, and these will be made available on our website and sent to your school during and at the end of the study.

**What is expected of the school?**

- The main role of the school is to facilitate the dissemination of documents to parents, pupils, and school staff and to arrange time during the school day for the data collection activities (online survey completion by pupils and school staff and the administration of activity monitor watches).
- For parents, we are asking for opt out consent and this means that parents will only be required to return a letter or contact the school/research team *if they do not wish for their child to take part.*
- When pupils complete the online survey during a timetabled lesson, we ask that pupils are permitted to use their phones for 5-10 minutes to answer questions about screen time. This is to ensure we get an accurate measure as possible for screen time, rather than relying on self-report measures.
- For the 7 days pupils wear the watches, we ask that these can be used within PE lessons, and these are safe devices for this context.
- We ask that teachers monitor the pupil participants behaviours, and if necessary, provide appropriate forms of support e.g. through the school's wellbeing or safeguarding team.
- To facilitate these processes, we ask you to nominate a member of staff to act as a liaison person between the school and the research team.

If you agree for your school to participate, please sign and return the attached school contract as soon as possible. **PLEASE RETURN CONTRACT TO smartstudy@contacts.bham.ac.uk or write to:**

**SMART Schools+ Project Manager**
**University of Birmingham**
**B15 2TT**

For further information about the study, please visit our website https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/projects/smart-schools. If you have a question or would like to speak to someone, please contact us smartstudy@contacts.bham.ac.uk

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**Thank you for considering being involved in the SMART School Study**