smart SCHOOLS

SMART Schools Study Newsletter, Issue 2: February 2025

The findings from the main SMART Schools Study have now been published

Welcome to the latest newsletter from the SMART Schools Study. We are thrilled to announce that the findings of our main study have now been published in The Lancet Regional Health Europe, and are available to view <u>here</u>. Once again, we'd like to thank all of the schools, teachers, and pupils for their involvement in the Smart Schools Study, and for making this valuable research possible!

Who was involved in this research?

The newly published paper reports on the data collected via pupil and teacher surveys, and from the pupil worn accelerometers. There were 30 schools involved in the research, 20 schools that adopted a restrictive smartphone policy (phones not allowed at any point during the school day) and 10 who had a permissive policy (phones allowed at break/lunch or in certain zones). There were 1227 pupils included in the analysis.

What did we measure?

The outcomes reported on in this paper are the pupils':

- Mental wellbeing, anxiety, and depression
- Physical activity and sleep
- Educational outcomes:
  - Attainment (English and Maths)
  - Disruptive classroom behaviour

Scan here for full article!

Key findings:

- *Just* banning smartphones in school is not enough to tackle the negative impacts of phone and social media use.
  - There was **no difference in the outcomes** outlined above for pupils who attend schools that ban the use of phones compared to pupils who attend schools that allow phones during recreational time.

- One possible explanation is that **school phone bans did not lower the overall time adolescents spend on their phones**.
  - They **did lower in-school use in restrictive schools** by a small amount of time, but not enough to change their overall level of use.
  - Among all students in both permissive and restrictive policy schools, **smartphone use was on average between 4-6 hours per day.**

- We found a **connection between increased time spent on phones and social media and several negative outcomes**, including:
  - Worse mental health and wellbeing
  - Less physical activity and poorer sleep
  - Lower educational attainment, and a greater level of disruptive classroom behaviour.

Implications:

- These findings suggest that reducing the time adolescents spend on their smartphones is an important focus, however, we need to do more than focus on schools alone, and consider phone use within and outside of school.
- In addition, we need to consider how behaviours that influence wellbeing are also influenced by increased phone and social media use, such as: sleep and physical activity.

Other news:

Additional publication available: School Smartphone Policies: How secondary schools rationalise, design, and implement their smartphone policies

As part of our research, we collected data from our participating schools' policy documents, and these were analysed alongside survey data obtained from the pupil, teacher, and SLT participants. This publication is available <u>here</u>.

Overview of findings:
- The majority of schools restricted phone use during the day, although approaches varied (see table below). In permissive schools, phone use was permitted at lunch and break, whereas in restrictive schools, phones were to be turned off and stored in bags throughout the day.

	Policy Category	Number of Schools
Permissive policies	1: Phones are allowed to be used at any time during the school day	1
	2: Phones are allowed to be used at school during certain times/in certain areas	9
Restrictive policies	3: Phones are not allowed to be used at school but are accessible to pupils (e.g. stored in bags)	16
	4: Phones are not allowed to be used at school and are inaccessible to pupils (e.g. stored in locked pouches, in lockers, or handed in at reception)	4

- Almost two thirds of schools (63%) allowed the use of phones at school for educational purposes, with the teachers permission (100% permissive schools, 45% restrictive schools).
- In school policies, smartphones were positioned as being beneficial for pupils' safety, learning, and communication. Restricting smartphone use aimed to improve attainment, behaviour, and safeguarding.
- Policies were mostly designed by the SLT, with pupils rarely consulted.
- Differences were found between pupils and teachers regarding their level of support for the rules, and also between pupils at permissive vs restrictive schools. Pupils in permissive schools were more likely to believe that pupils at their school support and follow the rules.

Implications:
- This study provides evidence to inform the development of robust guidance for schools on how they can design and implement phone use policies.
- There is a need to reconsider top-down approaches to the development of school phone policies, and provide schools with the autonomy to co-design approaches with students to enhance acceptability and compliance.

What's next?

In addition to the findings reported in this newsletter, we still have plenty more to come.

An integral part of our data collection included focus groups with the teachers, pupils, and parents at 7 of our participating schools, which allowed us to look in more depth at how adolescents use their phones, both in the home and school environment, and the influence of phones on their social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. We are currently preparing this data ready for publication.

We also collected data to enable a health economics evaluation of school phone policies. This analysis compares the costs and benefits of each of the phone policy types (restrictive vs permissive) for the schools involved in our study, to determine which may best represent value for money. This data is almost ready for publication.

We will be back in touch when more of our findings are ready to be shared with you. In the meantime, please keep up to date with our progress by following our account on X (@Smart_SchStudy), and reading our news and blogs on our website.

Resources:
We will be preparing training materials, resources, and guidelines for schools to use, and will let you know when these are available.

Future Research:
We are planning to do some further work around adolescent phone and social media use and mental wellbeing. We will be back in touch with participating schools regarding this research. If you are from a school that did not participate, but would like to express an interest in future research, then please get in touch with us via email.

Publication Links:
- School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study
- Secondary school smartphone policies in England: a descriptive analysis of how schools rationalize, design, and implement restrictive and permissive phone policies
- Safeguarding in adolescent mental health research: navigating dilemmas and developing procedures

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