

Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.



A Parent's Guide: Establishing Parent Pacts in your child's primary school

Introduction

Maybe you've come across *The Anxious Generation* by Dr Jonathan Haidt, followed **SFC-SA** online or in the media, or simply feel, like many other parents, that giving a child early and unrestricted access to a smartphone can limit their growth, creativity, and well-being.

You want your child to enjoy a full, playful, and grounded childhood. You understand that postponing smartphone access is important, but it can feel daunting, especially when faced with your child's fear of missing out and the pressure from peers.

At SFC-SA, we call this the parent's position of **LOSE-LOSE**.

We either

Hand our children a product which all the evidence tells us will do them harm - in the short and long term

Or we...

Put our foot down and risk alienating them from their friends - at a crucial period in their social development!



The key is recognising that this journey does not have to be taken alone. **SFC-SA** is here to support you and other parents, as you set boundaries for a **Smartphone-Free Childhood**.

This guide is designed to help you start conversations with your child's friends' parents, showing that together, families are stronger. By signing our **Parent Pact**, you stay connected and aligned as the movement grows within your child's grade or school community.

Building a local support network to uphold your family's choice to delay smartphones is simpler than it seems, and it can be one of the most meaningful steps you'll ever take to protect your child's development, curiosity, and well-being!

Step 1 - Start the Conversation

A parent network can begin with just one email, one text, or a conversation with another parent:

"Are you worried about when or whether to give your child a smartphone?"

Chances are, the answer will be a clear "YES!" Even before children reach high school, many homes experience conflict over screens, whether it's TV, gaming, YouTube, social media – or simply the pressure to use a parent's phone. Parents are often unsure about the **right age** to hand over a device, and many are quietly waiting for someone else to start talking openly about these challenges that we are all grappling with.

By sharing your own concerns first, you create space for honest, supportive conversations, and from there, a community of like-minded parents can start to grow.

This is how a movement begins – with a single conversation.

One question asked, one concern shared. Momentum builds as like-minded parents and caregivers start asking the big questions and, more importantly, recognise their own power: **the power to protect childhood, to preserve its wonder, and to safeguard the innocence that is so easily lost in a screen-filled world.**

Each conversation strengthens the network, and together, families can create a community that stands firm for a healthier, more grounded childhood for all children.



Step 2 - The Working Group



At this stage, it's a good idea for you and your new parent network partner to invite a few more families to join you, forming a small working group.

Start with the parents of your children's closest friends, as you likely already have their contact details. Take a deep breath and be brave. Send a simple email, or if you're feeling confident, give them a call!

If they're not quite ready to join, ask whether they know another family who might be interested and if they are open to a follow up chat after they've thought about it.



Step 3 - Create Your Parent Network

Once you have your working group in place, it's time to put your heads together and start shaping your parent pact network. And honestly, what better excuse for a coffee or lunch and a proper catch-up?

Google Form

Some parent pact networks start and grow through a (concise) Google Form which can be used to capture the level of interest in and support for a slow-tech, low-tech approach by parents in a school community.

Questions could cover the level of concern around screen related impacts including:

- Time suck, exposures, addictions
- Family time and dynamics
- Attention, concentration, learning
- Sleep, development
- Friendships, relationships, social skills

WhatsApp Group

Other parent pact networks may be initiated through a WhatsApp group. Here's our suggested wording to start the conversation with interested parents:

Hi there! Have you heard of Smartphone Free Childhood South Africa? It's an NGO, part of a global movement focused on safeguarding childhood – not anti-tech, but it advocates for age-appropriate, mindful tech use. Their mission is to protect child and teen mental health by delaying access to smartphones and social media, supporting smartphone-free schools, and promoting safe, intentional digital learning. Their core message is: "Slow-tech, low-tech until their brains are ready! You can find out more here: [LINKTREE](#) Watch this video on Instagram showing how to [Join the Movement](#)

The **Parent Pact** allows parents in your school community to make their commitment to delay smartphones until high school, through the SFC-SA website.

It is especially helpful if your school community does not have parents or educators that are ready to take an active leadership role. Parents simply make an online pledge by finding their province, child's primary school and grade. Only the child's first name and first letter of the surname is used for privacy purposes. The platform connects parents in the same school and grade through monthly update emails, so that they are able to connect with each other for support and solidarity. It helps remove the pressure and isolation many parents feel in making a decision around a smartphone – because when we stand together, the decision becomes easier, and no child feels left out or alone.



Click HERE to sign up!

The Big Yes

In addition to all this, we encourage your schools parent network to organise a program of "in real life" voluntary activities with each other.

Our movement is a positive movement at its heart. We say "not yet" to smartphones in order to say "yes" to so much more: to nature, family, your neighbourhood, genuine human connection, play, creativity, music, art, books, curiosity, self-knowledge, to life!

Delaying smartphones opens up a world of possibilities for our children with their friends: hiking in a local national park, picnicking, enjoying some shopping followed by face-to-face conversation over lunch, a game of soccer in the park, taking an art class together, a trip to the theatre, participation in a "National Tree Day" event, a visit to the zoo, attending a game of footy, and so much more! The possibilities are endless once our kids are freed from distracting hand-held devices!

The program doesn't need to be complicated or burdensome. A super easy and low-cost event is a gathering at a local park on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Everyone can bring a plate of food to share. One family brings their cricket set, another brings a footy and a couple of others a deck of UNO – and you're all good to go!



Especially in the beginning, when your parent network is still busy getting established and finding its feet, you might only like to aim for your first “in real life” event a few months down the track, even six months away. That’s totally fine, but we recommend still setting a date early and letting new members know about it. It will give your new friends something to look forward to and a sense from the get-go that it is going to be a genuine real-world community with a positive outlook.

Toy, Games, Book Library

Some other ways for your alliance to build community is to establish a toy, games or book library among members. The book library can even include books for parents (especially titles about the effects of too much screen-time on children!).

Perhaps the suggested “cost” of borrowing some toys, games or books from another family in the alliance is to bake them a banana cake with your children and have them over for afternoon tea?



Step 4 - Spread the Word

A group of four or five families is a good start, but you’re only just getting warmed up. You want as many families on board as possible – because the more families that join, the more supported you and your children will feel, and the more likely that all families will see their commitments through until highschool.

Your small but determined network will now need to brainstorm about the best way to spread the word to other parents in the school. The approaches you take will be unique to each school community.



Many schools have parent **WhatsApp groups** (either whole-school or grade-specific) and these are excellent forums to initiate conversations more broadly. Here’s a rough script that might get you started:

“Hey Grade 3 parents, I’ve been speaking with Cathy (Olivia’s mum) and Athandile (Thabo’s mum) and we’ve all noticed a lot of media reports lately about the risks of giving our children access to smartphones and social media too early. The research shared by Smartphone Free Childhood, South Africa www.sfc-sfc.co.za shows a real need for parents to consider slow-tech, low-tech decisions to future-proof our children.

We all want our kids to have a full and healthy childhood (with plenty of outdoor play, sport, reading, music, nature etc) but all that good stuff will probably get pushed down the list if they end up addicted to Snapchat or Fortnite. Some surveys show that a lot of teens are now spending more time on their screens than they do sleeping! I know in my own home, battles over screens have already started and I’m not sure if I’m up for another ten years of it.

Is anyone else going through similar struggles and concerned about these issues?”

An empathetic discussion involving a number of parents will hopefully ensue (and with a bit of luck Cathy and Athandile will chime in with some support too).

At some point you can follow up with a message along the following lines:

“There’s a group I’ve been following for a little while called **Smartphone Free Childhood, South Africa** www.sfc-sa.co.za, a community of South Africa parents, educators and caregivers, holding out smartphones for their kids until highschool, and social media until 16. They encourage parents to join regional groups and start up local networks in their own schools: <https://linktr.ee/SmartphonefreechildhoodSA>

Maybe this is something we can do here in our school? Their social media pages have a lot of interesting information on this topic if you’re keen to know some more:



You may want to email an **Information Sheet** to interested parents. We've created a sample for you to use as you wish: [**DOWNLOAD HERE**](#)

The school's parent association is another potential avenue to spread the word. It shouldn't be too difficult to introduce your new alliance to the school community at the upcoming parent association meeting. Remember to bring a bunch of printed Information Sheets to the meeting and hand them out!

Distributing Information Sheets by hand at morning drop off or afternoon pick up might also be an option for you (you should seek the permission of your principal first!). You could also set up a table and rope in a few parents to help chat to other parents about the benefits of standing together in a low-tech, slow-tech approach, and how they can join the SFC-SA movement by signing the school's Parent Pact.

- We've created some thought-provoking, **interactive posters** to help you spark the conversation: [**DOWNLOAD HERE**](#)
- We also have flyers you can print and distribute: [**DOWNLOAD HERE**](#)



Whichever methods you employ to spread the word, appreciate that many parents have already given their children smartphones and might feel a little unsettled or confronted by your message at first.

Ensure that your approach is **gentle, inquisitive and compassionate - never judgemental!** Our movement does not seek to disparage or criticise other parents. Rather we seek to inform and empower, with all of us learning as we go!

When talking to other parents we recommend highlighting that smartphones:

- Are designed to hook children in and be used habitually
- Give children dopamine hits that have them return again and again
- Impact their development and social skills
- Shorten their capacity to focus and learn
- Change the physical architecture of their brains
- Distract children from deep reading and comprehension
- Make it harder for children to rest and sleep
- Get in the way of younger children's playtime and older children's sports/exercise activities (and contribute to childhood obesity)
- Shrink quality family time

- Inhibit the formation and nurturing of real-world connections and friendships
- Lower children's self-esteem (by forcing them to compare themselves to fake/unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards)
- Increase stress in children by pressuring them to maintain a curated online image
- Escalate their risk of anxiety and depression
- Are difficult to manage and filter
- Create an easy gateway to inappropriate and harmful content
- Facilitate bullying
- Expose children to sexualised content
- Expose them to sextortion
- Increase the risk of child predation.

Some parents might already know and agree with all the above but aren't so clear as to why building an alliance of school families is important.

If you get the chance to explain why it matters, share that delaying with other families is beneficial for children because they get to see that they are not the only ones in the school (much less in the world) without a smartphone.

FOMO is very real for children so reducing their isolation (or their perception of it) is critical.

A Parent Pact network is also helpful for parents because it allows us to see, in a very focused way, that there are indeed many families just like ours who have decided to delay smartphone use.

We might be in the minority, but we are not alone! We can take comfort in knowing that we are not the only "mean" parents around. We give strength to each other and draw strength from each other to help our families all stay the course over the coming years.



Step 5 - Engage Your School

If you're lucky enough to have a principal who is up to date on the emerging science and the conversations taking place around the world on the "great rewiring of childhood", you will be at a very significant advantage. If he/ she is as passionate about this issue as you are (some principals really are), and is even prepared to champion your new school alliance, well, you've hit the jackpot.

With your principal's support, you will be able to spread the word broadly: via the school newsletter, the school website, the school social media pages, assemblies and other events where parents are present.

Other parents are also more likely to be open to hearing your message if they see that the principal is on board.

Of course, all this has to start with a face-to-face meeting where a small group of parents introduces the alliance to the principal and requests his/her support.

The meeting might go something like this:

- Inform the principal that a group of parents at the school have recently come together to delay smartphones
- Explain why establishing a school Parent Pact network is important
- Explain that his/her position of leadership in the school community means that he/she has significant influence over the attitudes of parents on this matter.
- If he/she too is concerned about the shift from a play-based childhood to a phone-based one, would he/she consider raising awareness of this issue in the school as well as promoting the Parent Pact?
- Would he or she consider preparing a guide for the school community recommending that parents across the board delay access to smartphones?
- Acknowledge that schools are busy places and that teachers and principals have a lot on their plates.
- Reassure the principal that the alliance is - and will remain - a parent-led and parent-run initiative. It will not create any new administrative burdens on the school.
- If anything, it might make for a more happy, relaxed and attentive student population - and teachers' work easier in the long run!

Other great points of contact at your school are the deputy principal, head of wellbeing or pastoral care, grade coordinators, SGB or board members.

Now, if ultimately the school is unable or unwilling to support your Parent Pact network, don't be disheartened. Whilst the school's formal support is a very "nice-to-have", it certainly is not a "must-have". Your alliance is **parent-led** and it will find success and achieve great things either way!

Frequently Asked Questions:



I would like to give my child a retro phone. Can my family still be in a member of SFC-SA?

Absolutely! If your child's phone is a "starterphone" used for calling and texting only (ie. the phone is a tool and not a pocket-sized poker machine), you can most definitely still be part of the school's parent pact and What's App community.



What if my child needs a phone for safety reasons?

We acknowledge that for some families a phone is an important safety tool. A smartphone opens up a whole new world of danger, however. For this reason, we urge parents to consider a starterphone instead.

If GPS tracking functionality is important to your family, there are also voice/text/GPS smartwatches on the market that meet the needs of safety-conscious parents. Have a look on our website for our suggestions – [**COMMUNITY CORNER**](#)



What if my child already has a smartphone?

If you previously permitted your child to have their own smartphone, it is okay as a parent (motivated by your love and concern for their wellbeing) to change your mind!

Of course, the conversation will need to be sensitive to your own child's situation, but in a Parent Pact, it helps to be able to share with your child that you know of other families in their own class/grade/school who have considered this issue and have concluded similarly that it is better to wait.

If you think your child may be clinically addicted to their smartphone, then the SFC-SA movement might be appropriate for your family down the track. But as a first step, you should seek professional medical help and follow the advice of your medical professional about the best way to reverse course and break your child's addiction.



My child is just starting school. Should I wait to establish an alliance?

The earlier you start these conversations and build your local network, the better.

The older your child gets, the greater the number of his or her classmates that will own a phone, and the task of pulling those families back into a Parent Pact becomes that much harder.

So we reckon the beginning of primary school is perfect (and Pre-Primary is even better)!



Why do you draw the line at the end of Grade 7?

It's certainly not because smartphones suddenly become beneficial for our children in Grade 8!

In fact, we secretly (not-so-secretly) hope that every family who joins the SFC-SA movement continues delaying smartphones for their children right through until the end of high school!

Having said that, we don't want to overwhelm parents of Pre-Primary/Prep children with a request to make a 10-plus year commitment.

Since most children receive their first smartphone before they commence high school, we've landed on Grade 7 because it is something of a challenge, without being too daunting. Parents are then free to re-assess for themselves at the end of Grade 7 - and we hope most do continue on the "delay" path. But even if some parents meet only the Grade 7 commitment, then their children have in the very least won a few priceless extra years of childhood.



What about tablets and laptops? Shouldn't they be delayed as well?

We focus on smartphones because other devices don't sit in the palms of our children's hands 24-7. They don't fit in their pockets, beckoning them every few minutes with a buzz or a ping as smartphones do.

Smartphones are relentless and exhausting, actively working to never allow your child rest. Even when not being used actively, smartphones aim to frame the backdrop of every childhood experience.

They don't give up at night either, when the smartphone is easily hidden under bed sheets and robs your child of precious sleep.

Having said that, we are concerned about and promote the **mindful and careful use of tech** in families and for education – and the proper **safeguarding** of these devices, which in itself is an incredibly hard challenge!

We know that delaying smartphones will not solve every screen and tech-related problem for your family. But it does go a very long way and makes your job of managing all the other stuff (tablets, gaming, laptops and other screens) a whole lot easier.

What happens if I change my mind after making the commitment to delay?

If you wish to exit your alliance at some point in the future, no doubt a few people will be sad to see you go, but they will also respect your right to do so. Email info@sfc-sa.co.za to change or have your details removed.

Does “delaying” mean we don't need to educate children about online harms?

Education is still crucial and by the time children receive their first smartphone (whether in Grade 8 or later), we want them to be as ready as possible to contend with algorithms, predators, bullies, sextortionists, beauty filters, the “like” button and other persuasive design elements.

It's an ongoing and continuous conversation and mentorship approach, keeping in mind that the prefrontal cortex (where executive functioning skills like impulse control and planning sit) is only fully developed around age 25!

Parents should challenge cyber safety educators who do not actively champion delaying smartphones as an eminently sensible first line of defence – and find out why they are more interested in band-aid solutions than in prevention.

If your school's cyber safety educator is not an enthusiastic proponent of delaying smartphones in your school's community, please contact us and we will aim to help you with more science, research and resources to convince them.



Does SFC-SA have oversight over a local Parent Pact network?

SFC-SA is building a register of school-based parent pacts that are signed through our website. We have also created Whatsapp community in which local school groups can be set up: [LINKTREE](#) Watch this video on Instagram showing how to [Join the Movement](#)

Each local school Whatsapp group is independent and responsible for its activities and membership.

The role of SFC-SA is to connect parents and educators around the country and to give them a sense of a shared mission and community.



I still have questions. Can I speak with you?

Yes, absolutely! We're more than happy to help and answer all your questions. Please send an email to info@sfc-sa.co.za and provide a contact number for us to call you.

To assist and support the sparking of conversations around delaying smartphones, we have compiled –

- **An Information Sheet – [DOWNLOAD HERE](#)**
- **Interactive posters – [DOWNLOAD HERE](#)**
- **Flyers – [DOWNLOAD HERE](#)**

Join the Parent Pact because – together, we are stronger!

