

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 & Educator's Guide: Starting the phone-free school conversation



Having open conversations around the role and use of technology within a school community helps ensure that it is being used in ways that **support learning, encourage balance, and protect wellbeing**. By asking the right questions, parents can better understand their school's approach to screen time, digital tools, and online safety and privacy, and play an active role in shaping a healthy relationship between education and technology.

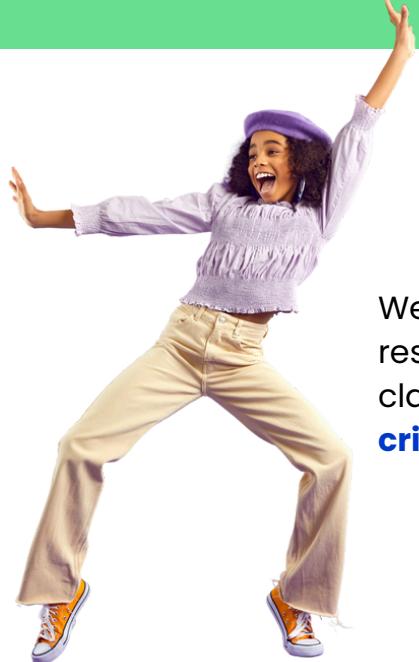
This guide provides a framework for parents and educators to have constructive, informative, and balanced discussions about the implementation and maintenance of phone-free school campuses.

What is a "smartphone-free" school?

A smartphone-free school requires learners to securely lock away their personal electronic devices - including smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, and gaming devices - making them inaccessible throughout the academic day. The school should also have a clear policy on managing earbuds, AirPods, and Bluetooth-connected headphones when they are needed for educational technology. Clear and appropriate consequences should be in place, and consistently enforced.

About Smartphone Free Childhood South Africa

The Smartphone Free Childhood South Africa (SFC-SA) movement supports a **slow-tech** and **low-tech** approach to childhood - and an intentional, informed approach to the use of technology in education.



We believe technology can be a powerful tool for learning when used responsibly, with clear boundaries and thoughtful integration into the classroom. **However, it should never replace human connection, critical thinking, creativity and socio-emotional development.**

That's why at SFC-SA we emphasise collaboration between families and schools, ensuring that decisions around technology use are mindful, transparent and inclusive.

At the **heart of our approach** is a focus on learner **wellbeing, safeguarding**, and creating a **balanced digital environment** where children can benefit from innovation without being overwhelmed by it.



By working together, we can promote responsible digital learning that supports healthy development, protects children, and prepares them for the future.

Join the Movement!



- [**Sign the Parent Pact**](#)
- [**Sign up as a Phone-Free School**](#)
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The impact of smartphones in classrooms



Children (including adolescents) are in a critical stage of development – physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral/spiritual. The research highlights that excessive and unsupervised screen use during this period can lead to physical issues like **poor sleep, weight gain, and vision problems**, as well as developmental problems such as **reduced social skills, lower academic performance, attention difficulties, and increased risk of anxiety and depression**.

It can also negatively impact cognitive development, increase exposure to risks like cyberbullying, grooming and sextortion, and reduce time for essential activities like active play, outdoor time, and face-to-face interactions.

When it comes to smartphones in classrooms, the research shows a number of impacts:

Academic Performance and Cognitive Function:

Distraction and Reduced Focus:

- **Decreased Attention:** Notifications (even when silenced) activate the urge to check the device, leading to frequent task-switching (averaging 3-4 times per hour in lectures), and significant loss of concentration.
- **Cognitive Drain:** The mere presence of a smartphone, even when turned off, has been shown to reduce available cognitive capacity for complex tasks ("Brain Drain" effect).
- **Lower Grades:** Numerous studies correlate non-academic mobile device use in class with lower academic achievement and poorer test scores, with the impact often being greater on low-achieving students.



Impaired Deep Learning and Critical Thinking:



Cheating:

- **Over-reliance on Quick Answers:** Students prioritize rapid information retrieval over independent problem-solving and critical analysis, potentially decreasing long-term retention.
- **Note-Taking Quality:** Students using phones during lectures often record significantly less information and score lower on recall tests.
- Phones facilitate easier sharing of answers and access to unauthorized information during exams and assessments.

Social and Psychological Well-being:

Mental Health and Anxiety

- **Increased Anxiety and Stress:** Constant connection fuels Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and a persistent feeling of needing to check notifications.
- **Sleep Disruption:** Screen time, especially before bed, disrupts sleep patterns, leading to fatigue and decreased class attention.

Social Isolation and Interaction Quality

- **"Phubbing" (Phone Snubbing):** Prioritizing online interaction over face-to-face communication, leading to missed opportunities for collaborative learning and building interpersonal skills.
- **Cyberbullying:** Smartphones provide the primary platform for cyberbullying, allowing harassment to persist and escalate beyond the physical school grounds.



While technology can offer important educational benefits, these are outweighed by the documented risks when use is not tightly managed and monitored, age-appropriate, and purpose-driven.

SFC-SA believes that schools and parents should work together to limit personal device use during the school day and ensure that any technology integrated into learning is done under **direct supervision, within a closed and secure system, and in balance** with traditional, hands-on, and social learning experiences.

Exploring the benefits of phone-free schools

The use of smartphones in schools is a strategic decision that needs to be made at school board or SGB level in the interests of the school community. If a school decides to implement a phone-free school policy, it requires foresight and planning to implement and maintain the vision and strategy.

These are the primary positive impacts a phone-free campus could have on learners and the school environment:

Area	Potential Benefits
Academic Focus	Reduced distraction in class, leading to improved concentration and higher quality of learning (especially for deep work).
Social-Emotional Development	Encourages in-person social interaction, reduces digital comparison/FOMO, and helps students develop better attention spans.
Mental Health & Well-being	Decreased exposure to cyberbullying during the school day, reduction in overall screen time, and less stress/anxiety tied to constant notifications.
School Environment & Safety	Eases the burden on teachers to manage phone use, minimizes cheating with phones during assessments, and reduces the potential for phone-related conflicts or recording without consent.



Addressing the challenges of phone-free schools

Some of the challenges to be taken into account when implementing and maintaining a phone-free policy include:

Area	Potential Challenges
Parent/Student Communication	Concerns about emergency contact between parents and students during the day (e.g., forgotten lunch, unexpected doctor's appointment).
Implementation & Enforcement	Difficulty for staff to consistently enforce the policy; need for storage solutions (e.g., pouches, lockers); potential for policies to feel overly punitive.
Equity & Access	Potential challenge for students who may rely on a phone for translation or for necessary medical apps/reminders (though exceptions can be made).
Parental Buy-in	Resistance from parents who feel they lose a sense of control or immediate access to their child; need for clear communication on the "why."
Student Readiness	Dealing with potential student pushback and ensuring they understand the rationale and rules clearly.

Implementation and Maintenance

Some of the practical solutions to make a phone-free policy effective, sustainable, and fair include:

Challenge	Potential Strategy/Solution	Who's Responsible?
Emergency Contact	Establish a clear protocol for parents to contact students/school: Parents call the main office; students use an office phone if needed.	Administration/School Office
Enforcement & Consistency	Use a structured system (e.g., Yondr pouches, sign-in locker) and implement progressive disciplinary actions that are communicated clearly to all.	Teachers/Administration
Medical/IEP Exceptions	Create a formal process for students who require a device for documented medical needs or as part of a formal educational plan.	Administration/School Nurse
Parental Communication	Host information sessions before implementation, provide data on the benefits, and offer clear Q&A opportunities to build support.	Administration/Parent Group
Student Buy-in	Integrate lessons on digital citizenship, attention/focus, and the benefits of face-to-face interaction into advisory or health classes.	Teachers/Counsellors

Monitoring

It is important to monitor the benefits of keeping smartphones out of classrooms, to support and sustain the culture change.

The team at the Tech and Society Lab at NYU Stern in partnership with the Stanford Social Media Lab, has developed the Toolkit for Assessing Phones in Schools (TAPS).



This is a free, accessible, and standardised set of surveys designed to help schools evaluate the impact of phone-free policies.

Starting the Conversation

Whether it is parent or school-led, to begin this journey, it's important to approach the conversation in a **spirit of partnership** rather than confrontation. Schools are navigating rapid changes in education and technology, often with limited resources and competing priorities. By showing openness, curiosity, and appreciation for the efforts of educators, parents and caregivers can set the stage for constructive dialogue.

The aim is not to challenge or criticize, but to **build a shared understanding of how and whether smartphones on a school campus impact on learners' wellbeing, safety and privacy**. These guiding questions are designed to help you prepare, listen, and collaborate, in the best interests of the learners.

Prepare to Partner:

 **Review school device and safeguarding policies.**

 **Ask your child or the learners at your schools about their experience.**

- How, when and for what are smartphones used at school?
- Do you think they create a distraction in class, or during breaks?
- Do you think they stop learners from engaging more fully with each other?
- How would you feel if they were not a part of the school day?

 **Set positive intentions**

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- We're excited to learn more about how technology supports learning and wellbeing at your school. I appreciate the work teachers do to adapt to technology and stay innovative. How can we work together to support safe and effective learning?

 **Emphasise teamwork and shared care**

- How can parents and educators work together to support safe and mindful technology use by learners?
- How can we ensure that distractions for teachers and learners are kept to a minimum?
- How can we work together to ensure a balance between screentime-based and offline skills development?

 **Clarify the school's views on smartphone use on campus**



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Could you share how your school approaches the use of digital tools and platforms to supplement education?



Explore how screen time and offline time are balanced

- How much school time is spent using screens each day or week?
- How is screentime tracked and managed during lessons?
- What kind of parameters have you set, if any, for screentime for the various grade groups?
- Are there guidelines for balancing online and offline activities?

Ask about digital citizenship education

- How does the school teach safe, responsible online behaviour and awareness about online risks?
- How is AI and emerging technology literacy built into the curriculum?
- How are potential risks and harms managed?



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Teachers remain the heart of education; technology is simply the tool that helps their impact reach further.

Discuss privacy and learner safety

- How does the school safeguard learner data and privacy?
- Which digital platforms collect learner information, and how is that data protected?
- How does the school communicate data usage policies with families?

Address device management and digital safeguarding

- How are devices managed and protected at school?
- What filtering, firewalls and mobile devices management systems are used at school?



Engage, Listen, and Share:

Share your family's approach to tech

- We're committed to slow-tech, low-tech choices and mindful digital habits at home. How can we partner to keep childhood (including adolescence) protected?
- If we have chosen to delay smartphones until high school, and social media until 16+ what solutions can we find to give learners a break during the academic day?

Express interest in future-ready learning

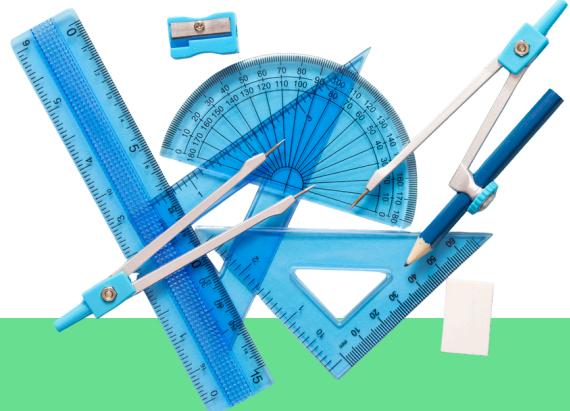
- How does the curriculum build both digital and social-emotional skills?

Offer supportive resources

- Would you be open to exploring SFC-SA research and guidelines with us?

Advocate for transparency and co-creation

- Can families collaborate with the school when reviewing policies?



Stay Connected and Involved:

Get involved in school tech policy and events

- How can parents participate in review forums or parent advisory groups?

Keep home-school conversations going

- We're building safe digital habits at home. Does the school have any resources or tips we can share with our family network?
- Can we collaborate to promote the sign up by parents to the SFC-SA Parent Pact to delay smartphones?
- Is the school willing to sign up as an SFC-SA Phone-Free School?

When Things Go Wrong: Handling Challenges Together

Even with thoughtful planning, issues such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, or data breaches can occur. Schools and families should work together to safeguard learners and respond quickly.

Ask about response policies

- If there is a digital safeguarding issue or data breach, what steps does the school take to protect learners and inform families?

Ensure open communication

- How do learners or parents report digital incidents, and how does the school respond?

Review resolution processes

- What is the process for investigating and resolving digital challenges or breaches?

Emphasise learning and wellbeing

- How does the school support learners and families when things go wrong?

Promote ongoing improvement

- How does feedback from families influence updates to school policies?



In Conclusion

Families and schools can co-create technology experiences that empower every child, both online and offline, by nurturing open dialogue, trust and a shared commitment to learner wellbeing. SFC-SA celebrates these partnerships, reminding us that thoughtful, intentional use of EdTech flourishes when parents and educators work together with understanding, care, and a spirit of collaboration to safeguard the children in their care.

A phone-free schools policy requires a clear vision, support from staff and parents and understanding from learners, sharing of best practices in digital safeguarding, and encouraging staff to model positive digital behaviour.

Let's continue building relationships to support safer, smarter and happier childhoods, one conversation at a time!



For more support, visit www.sfc-sa.co.za or reach out to us at info@sfc-sa.co.za

