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'We wanted to change the norm on smartphone use': grassroots campaigners on a phone-free childhood

Most UK children have their own phone by the age of 11. But what if we didn't give them one? A group of parents wants their kids to enjoy a phone-free childhood - and their numbers are growing



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Last year, Daisy Greenwell and Clare Fernyhough, longtime friends who have eight- and nine-year-old daughters, began having drawn-out conversations about smartphones. Rumours were swirling that children in their daughters' classes were asking for their own and both Greenwell and Fernyhough were apprehensive about the knock-on effect. If their daughters' friends owned smartphones, wouldn't their daughters eventually demand them, too? And what might happen then? Talking to the parents of children who already owned smartphones only helped to increase their concern. "They told us about kids disappearing into their screens," Greenwell said recently. "They don't want to hang out with family any more. They don't want to go outside." A local teacher told Greenwell he was able to speak with his daughter only when the wifi was turned off. "And these are the *lighter* problems," she said.

Neither Greenwell nor Fernyhough wanted to buy smartphones for their children until they turned 16 (preferably they wouldn't own them until much later). But they could feel pressure mounting. In the UK, 91% of 11-year-olds have a smartphone - it became common remarkably quickly for children to be given a phone when they began secondary school - and 20% of children own them by the time they are four. (The average age for a UK child to receive their first smartphone is around nine.) With grim acceptance, secondary school parents told Greenwell, "It's the worst, it's so, so bad, but there's no choice" - they couldn't find a way to prevent their children from having something all of their friends already owned. Both Greenwell and Fernyhough felt trapped; for their daughters, secondary school loomed on the horizon. "We thought, 'What can we do about it?'" Greenwell told me. "Shall we *not* get one? But what if everyone else gets one and our children are the only ones without?"

One day in February, the pair set up a WhatsApp group to support each other in their decision to delay smartphone access for their children. “We were like, ‘Let’s just invite people who really care about this,’” Greenwell said. Greenwell lives in Suffolk; Fernyhough lives in Hampshire. WhatsApp was in part a way to stay in touch regularly despite their geography. But soon a vague plan for action arose out of their conversations: they would agree not to buy smartphones for their children, while trying to gently convince other parents to do the same. “We wanted to change the norm on smartphone use,” Fernyhough told me. “Even if it was going to be just a small group of us.”

▲▲ *It’s awkward at the school gates; it can seem as if you’re judging parenting choices*

A few days later, Greenwell posted to Instagram about the plan, while her husband, Joe Ryrie, had dinner with friends. That evening, the WhatsApp group filled with parents similarly anxious about their children’s impending smartphone use. By the next day, the group had maxed out at 1,000 participants, many of whom neither Greenwell nor Fernyhough knew personally. Within a few weeks, more than 60,000 people had joined or created similar local groups, and Greenwell, Fernyhough and Ryrie decided to transform their initial conversations into a campaign group, the [Smartphone-Free Childhood](#) (SFC). “What we started to find out from the WhatsApp groups was that everyone felt so lost,” Fernyhough told me. “They were like, ‘What do we do? How do we cope with this? We’re so glad you’re here!’” On the campaign website, the trio wrote, “We’re now more determined than ever not only to provide solidarity and support for parents navigating these stormy seas, but to use the voice of our community to push for far tougher regulation on tech companies - and solve this problem for good.”

I joined an SFC WhatsApp group a couple of months after the campaign first went viral. By that point, more than 100,000 people had accessed the community; some 900 other members are in the group I joined, though that number ebbs and flows. Every day, the group rumbles with tips: how to discuss a smartphone-free childhood with other parents, how to create a “parent pact” (an agreement made by parents to delay smartphone ownership), how to encourage head teachers to implement effective smartphone bans. (There are so many tips I sometimes feel the urge to mute the chat.) Nearly all the messages I read are underpinned by a parental anxiety, a feeling of hopelessness, and an upset at the relinquishing of parental control that mirror my own: I have an eight-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter and I, too, am concerned about giving them a portable device connected to the internet. A typical WhatsApp message boils down to, “I don’t want my child to have a smartphone. What should I do?” I’ve found myself asking the same question.

▲▲ *One in 10 children have seen pornography on their phone by the age of nine*

For a long time, the problems that came from children using smartphones were little understood. But over the past five years studies have shown worrying links. Smartphone use can

lead to social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction, according to the psychologist Jonathan Haidt. That can be harmful for adults, but it can be worse for children, whose developing brains are little-guarded from apps designed by tech companies to hold and monetise their attention, who have “the least willpower and the greatest vulnerability to manipulation” online, and who, Haidt writes in *The Anxious Generation*, his third book, have since the advent of smartphones begun “wandering through adult spaces, consuming adult content and interacting with adults in ways that are often harmful”.

Haidt believes the smartphone, when paired with social media, is responsible for a youth mental health crisis that has been spiking multinationally since the early 2010s. Other factors, including the Covid pandemic and the rise of mental health awareness campaigns, have also contributed. (The more adolescents understand about their mental health, the more likely they are to report problems.) Still, the consensus remains that smartphones and social media, while offering some benefits, including the access to safe online spaces, are broadly damaging to children, and that not enough is being done to protect them online. (The US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, has called for warning labels to be added to social media platforms. “Adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms,” he wrote recently.) Haidt would like smartphones banned for children under 14 and for it to be illegal for under-16s to use social media. Similarly, Greenwell, Fernyhough and Ryrie believe children under 16 should not be allowed unrestricted smartphones.

When they began their campaign, the trio were aware of the harm smartphones might pose to their children. But they were perhaps not aware of the extent, and they have been surprised by anecdotes shared within their community.

“A mother we know told us her son saw pornography aged 10,” Greenwell told me.

“Children are seeing beheading videos!” Fernyhough added.

Greenwell said, “Girls are getting on the tube and being airdropped dick pics. There’s nothing they can do. They’re just girls going to school. And they are initially shocked, and then they find it funny because they’ve become completely used to it.”

The office of Rachel de Souza, the Children’s Commissioner for England, has found that one in 10 children have viewed pornography by the age of nine. De Souza added recently, “Girls as

young as nine told my team about strategies they employ when strangers ask for their home address.” [De Souza’s comments](#) followed a 2022 inquest into the death of [Molly Russell](#), who took her life in 2017, at 14, which concluded that viewing unsafe online content contributed “in more than a minimal way” to her death. In December last year, [Murray Dowey, who was 16](#), ended his life after becoming the victim of a sextortion attempt on Instagram. A week before I met Greenwell, Fernyhough and Ryrie, the National Crime Agency sent a text to schoolteachers across the UK alerting them to a “considerable increase in global [sextortion] cases”.

▲▲ *Head teachers in 30 schools in St Albans declared their schools smartphone free*

Discussing the NCA message, Fernyhough shook her head. “This highlights the mad situation we’re in, the fact we have to tell our children about sextortion.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to *not* put them in that situation?” Greenwell added.

Fernyhough said, “Even if none of that awful stuff happens and for most people, of course, that’s the case, every parent is battling with this now.”

Greenwell, Ryrie and Fernyhough describe this situation as “the new frontier in parenting”. Your child hits 11, Greenwell said, and “you’re just having arguments about it, they want to use it the whole time, you don’t want them to and” - she put her hands together - “there’s a clash.”

“The thing I can’t get my head around is: When did we all collectively make a decision that we want our children to have smartphones at 12?” Fernyhough said. “I feel like we never did. We sleepwalked into this social norm.”

When SFC began, their WhatsApp groups offered solidarity to parents struggling within their own communities and, sometimes,

within their own family units. “It’s really hard to do something on your own,” Greenwell said, “especially if you’ve got a child who is saying, *all day long*, ‘I hate you, you’re making me the social outcast at school.’ That’s powerful. No one wants to make their child miserable.” Ryrie added, “And this is a really awkward conversation to have, particularly with parents at the school gates, because it can seem like you’re judging parenting choices.”

The trio has since expanded their remit to include lobbying for government legislation and tech industry regulation. Last month, head teachers in more than 30 schools in St Albans declared their schools **smartphone-free** and, in a letter, encouraged “all parents to delay giving children a smartphone until they reach the age of 14”. The letter suggested giving children a text/call-only phone as an alternative. Later, a group of secondary schools across the London borough of Southwark announced **similar action**. (In June last year, parents in Greystones, a town in Ireland, made a collective decision to ban smartphones until at least secondary school.) SFC was not involved directly in the St Albans decision but, Greenwell told me, “it happened organically, through the momentum of the movement itself”, and “it will inspire other head teachers and towns to follow suit, kicking off a domino effect.”

▲▲ *We heard that kids with phones no longer wanted to hang out with their family*

Take-up has been less forthcoming elsewhere. In a recent meeting at the NSPCC, Greenwell was disappointed to hear that it, like some other organisations, would not support a smartphone ban. (“Young people want to be able to access the benefits of the online world safely,” Sir Peter Wanless, NSPCC’s chief executive, wrote in April. “Blanket bans for teenagers would punish them for the failures of tech companies to adopt safety by design.”) The NSPCC supports the Online Safety Act (OSA), government legislation, implemented by Ofcom and published last year, meant to regulate online speech and media. Greenwell,

Fernyhough and Ryrie agree that it is the responsibility of tech companies to better regulate access to harmful content across social platform. But they also feel the OSA, whose implementation will not be completed until 2026, “doesn’t go far enough, is happening too slowly,” and that “we need to do more to protect children right now,” Greenwell said.

More might follow the general election. Last month, the House of Commons education committee, a cross-party group of MPs, published a report that supported a total smartphone ban for under 16s as well as a statutory ban on mobile phone use in schools. Prior to the announcement, the SFC’s founders had been meeting with government ministers on both sides of the political divide, a sure sign the group has progressed beyond WhatsApp and into grassroots campaigning. (This is a move Fernyhough describes as “overwhelming” but necessary.) The trio have developed tools to help SFC members lobby for legislation, many of which have been successful. Within two weeks of creating a resource that helped campaigners send MPs a message about smartphone regulation, 20,000 letters were sent. (The House of Commons recommendations “directly reflect our policy asks,” Greenwell told me.)

Both Greenwell and Ryrie now work full time on the campaign, but their motivations remain the same. “Just looking at our daughters,” Fernyhough told me, “who are happy and not really painfully self-aware, the idea that they’re going to be fed pictures every day telling them they’re not good enough in whatever way...” She tailed off. Later, Greenwell added, “We hadn’t realised how much the message needed to get out. How much parents didn’t have a voice. There has been so clearly a need for guidance and resources that we feel like, ‘Well, we can’t not do this now.’”

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