

Are play-based childhoods being replaced by phone-based childhoods and is the impact beneficial? What can be done?



Children are most likely to thrive when they have play-based experiences in the real world.

In face-to-face real time play, children learn to tune into and synchronise emotions with others. They learn about how groups operate and which peers to copy; 9-14 year old is a critical time for this social development. Play helps children build emotional resilience as well as physical resilience.

Safetyism is an experience blocker. Since the mid-90s, we have become more alert to dangers and more protective. It has reduced opportunities to grow by discovery. This has limited opportunities to develop self-reliance through setbacks, failures, shocks and stumbles. The focus on safety has made it harder for children to learn to care for themselves, to overcome anxiety and to manage risk.

Smart phones are another experience blocker – once introduced they push out non-phone based experiences. Experts connect smart phone access to the recent sudden decline in young people's mental health and write about 4 resulting foundational harms and:

- Social deprivation
- Sleep deprivation
- Attention fragmentation
- Addiction

There is evidence to suggest that social media harms girls more than boys and that it causes anxiety and depression in both. The social media trap snares more girls than boys. It lures them in with the promise of connection and communication, but the quality of interaction is low and there is less time for real time connections with a small group of friends. Girls are more affected by visual social comparison and perfectionism and bullying behaviour between girls is more prevalent online than in person.

Boys are in greater danger of withdrawing from the real world. The addictive nature of screen time appears to cause declining mental and physical health. This makes it easier for them to retreat to their bedrooms rather than doing the hard work of maturing for the real world. Access to porn makes it easier to satisfy desires without having to develop skills that would help them make transition to adulthood too. The absence of social norms and rules in the online social world can breed feelings where the point of life is unclear.

Our job as parents and school is to create a protected space where children can let their minds explore, not to tell children how to play but give them the toys – We can't make children learn but we can help them learn. It is best if we can provide more and better experiences in the real world and fewer and better experiences on screens. There is a growing realisation that giving children smart phones exposes them to things that their brains aren't yet developed enough to deal with which can cause a host of problems, from triggering anxiety and eating disorders, to opening the door to cyberbullying or sexual predators.

The introduction of the smart phone has had a massive positive impact on our lives, and they are not going away so when is the best time to get a smart phone? The research indicates during primary school age is too early. Currently children can't have smart phones in school at Great Wood, but some bring them to school so that they can be independent on the journey home and they drop them off at the office during the day.

We'd like to propose two things for Great Wood:

- From January 2028 children who are being encouraged to get home independently will be allowed to drop off basic phones at the school office, but not smart phones.
- Children won't mind not having a smart phone if other children don't have one. We encourage parents to talk with each other about it and to agree not to give their child a smart phone, at least not at primary school. We'd like you to support a parent pledge for pupils to be smart phone free while at Great Wood.

Let us know your thoughts by completing the survey [Are play based childhoods being replaced by phone based childhoods? \(2026\) – Fill in form](#) by October 31st.

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