

Banning phones in schools is just another ploy to distract us

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Whenever the government talks about the dangers to children of the mobile phone we must picture this phone as a large rock under which a hundred shameful decisions live in darkness. I have concerns about mobile phones, of course I do. I've followed Esther Ghey's campaign to ban smartphones for kids, and how education secretary Gillian Keegan has leapt upon this, with cautious interest. My eldest child will soon be approaching secondary school, and while I'd vaguely assumed that her generation would find phones desperately unchic by the time they came of carrying age, associating them with dull and red-eyed parents, this does not appear to be the case. And the stories I hear from teachers or parents of teenagers sometimes chill me – the ways that bullying mutates online, or how phones exacerbate poor mental health, or teens' sinister, quotidian acts of surveillance. But all these issues, for me, have their roots in the uncomfortable world our politicians have created for us. It makes sense that children might film each other maliciously, or be disrespectful of their peers' privacy when they have been casually surveilled and tracked by both their parents and the state since birth. It makes sense that children find their mental health crumbling in a country where mental health services have been diluted to a homeopathic degree. And it makes sense that a climate of distrust, with its fetishisation and dehumanisation of vulnerable people like Ghey's daughter Brianna, who was murdered in 2023, will filter from mainstream politics into schools and phones. Politicians are using phones and the anxiety around them as a way of distracting voters from the real violence they have helped create – the devices themselves are simply conduits for horrors and paranoias they've cultivated. The government has taken up Ghey's call with the kind of vigour only seen in politics when it costs nothing. This is their new "clap for the NHS", a gesture designed to give the illusion that action is being taken, and to pull focus from profound cruelty and mismanagement. Rather than accepting responsibility for politics that too quickly evolves into abuse, they are taking empty action on the technology that broadcasts it. Gillian Keegan is currently urging schools to ban phones. Only, most schools already have. So this new guidance reads like (as teacher Nadeine Asbali wrote in the Guardian last week) "the government establishing a ban on anyone leaving their front door wide open at night". Schools never allow pupils to have phones in lessons, because it has never made sense to. This is a distraction technique that feels a bit like shining a bright light into parents' eyes. These are people, like me, whose concerns for our children's lives online are only compounded by the knowledge of our own grim relationship to our phones. As Keegan was unveiling her plans to ban phones in schools, the Mirror reported that five Conservative backbenchers could be seen looking at their screens. Later, as the treasury minister discussed the recession, the business minister sat on the frontbench next to him checking her emails. And I feel for them! If I were there it would take every last centimetre of effort not to do exactly the

same. We all know the siren call of a small, hot phone – we know how it steals time, leads us to spread disinformation, invites scammers, complicates desire. But we also know how it can guide us through a life, both literally, with jazzy maps and dating apps and endless information, and in more ephemeral ways – here is a place to communicate, play, perform, build an identity. It is tempting to dampen our adult anxiety about technology by banning phones for our children, but this is not just impractical, it lacks nuance and empathy. Surely it is a matter of understanding and educating, rather than this grim fear and blunt force. There are a thousand ways to live online. There are shopping centres there, and art galleries, and schools, and cats. If adults learned to approach the internet and social media more seriously, rather than with one eye half-closed, if we were prepared to acknowledge its benefits as well as interrogate our own guilt or terror (the most common solution offered to cure our “addiction” being a “digital detox”, and the banning of phones altogether), we would be in a far better position to teach the next generation how to navigate it. It’s a shame such a complex and emotive subject can be steered like this; that important conversations (like tech’s financial incentive to keep children on social media) will be trampled over by politicians looking for quick fixes and diversions to avoid exposing themselves as the problem. It’s sickening, actually. This government has long been happy using trans lives for political gain. Now, by jumping on Esther Ghey’s appeal, they are using trans death to shift focus from their own bigotry. Email Eva at e.wiseman@observer.co.uk or follow her on X [@EvaWiseman](https://twitter.com/EvaWiseman)