

# ‘Much easier to say no’: Irish town unites in smartphone ban for young children

Publication Date: 2023-06-03

Author: Rory Carroll

Section: Technology

Tags: Smartphones, Children, Children's health, Ireland, Europe, Mobile phones, Parents and parenting, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jun/03/much-easier-to-say-no-irish-town-unites-in-smartphone-ban-for-young-children>



On the principle of strength in numbers, parents in the Irish town of Greystones have banded together to collectively tell their children they cannot have a smartphone until secondary school. Parents' associations across the district's eight primary schools have adopted a no-smartphone code to present a united front against children's lobbying. "If everyone does it across the board you don't feel like you're the odd one out. It makes it so much easier to say no," said Laura Bourne, who has a child in junior infants. "The longer we can preserve their innocence the better." Schools and parents in the County Wicklow town took the initiative last month amid concern smartphones were fuelling anxiety and exposing children to adult material. It is a rare example of an entire town taking joint action on the issue. The voluntary pact is to withhold smartphones from children – at home, in school, everywhere – until they enter secondary school. Applying it to all children in the area will, it is hoped, curb peer pressure and dampen any resentment. "Childhoods are getting shorter and shorter," said Rachel Harper, the principal of St Patrick's school who led the initiative. Nine-year-olds had started requesting smartphones, she said. "It was creeping in younger and younger, we could see it happening." Previously the schools banned or restricted devices on their grounds but still saw the effect of social media on children who had phones – and how this piqued the curiosity of other pupils. A town-wide policy reduces the chance of a child having a peer with a smartphone and parents can present the code as a school rule, said Harper. "They love it – now they can blame the schools." The initiative has drawn interest from parents' associations in Ireland and abroad and prompted Ireland's health minister, Stephen Donnelly, who lives near Greystones, to recommend it as a nationwide policy. "Ireland can be, and must be, a world leader in ensuring that children and young people are not targeted and are not harmed by their interactions with the digital world," he wrote in the Irish Times this week. "We must make it easier for parents to limit the content their children are exposed to." The Greystones pact stemmed from children showing anxiety levels only partly attributable to Covid-era adaptation, said Harper. Schools circulated questionnaires among parents, leading to a meeting of community stakeholders and an initiative dubbed "it takes a village". Not all parents will deny their primary schoolchildren a smartphone – the code is voluntary – but enough have signed up to create a sense of critical mass, said Harper. "Hopefully down the line it'll become the new norm." Nikkie Barrie, who has an 11-year-old in primary school, said the impact was immediate. "This code makes such a difference to my life. If I know 90% of the class are in agreement, it makes my job easier in saying no." Barrie wishes the pact could be extended to the early years of secondary school given a smartphone's effect on her 13-year-old. "It's been the bane of my life, I've lost my daughter. When technology is involved they sit there like robots engulfed in this world of TikTok or whatever." Jane Capatina, 10, a

St Patrick's pupil, accepted missing out on a smartphone for at least another two years. "I would like one, I'd like to text my friends. But I don't want to become addicted to it." Her eight-year-old sister Rachel approved of the pact. "It's fair if no one can have it." Josh Webb, 12, was stoic at the prospect of his recently acquired phone vanishing into a drawer until he starts secondary school in September. "It's not the end of the world for me. I know some in my class won't like this at all. But we're kids, what can we do?" He recalled the sense of exclusion when he had no phone while some friends did. "They'd be sharing videos with each other and I'd just be watching them." Webb saw value in extending phone use restrictions across all ages. "It would be a good rule but I don't think the adults would be happy."