

'It went nuts': Thousands join UK parents calling for smartphone-free childhood

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More than 4,000 parents have joined a group committed to barring young children from having smartphones, as concerns grow about online safety and the impact of social media on mental health. The WhatsApp group Smartphone Free Childhood was created by the former school friends Clare Fernyhough and Daisy Greenwell in response to their fears around children's smartphone use and the "norm" of giving children smart devices when they go to secondary school. "I've got a seven- and nine-year-old. Daisy's got kids of a similar age and we were both feeling really horrified and worried and just didn't want them to have smartphones at 11, which seems to be the norm now," Fernyhough and Greenwell hoped the movement would embolden parents to delay giving their children smartphones until at least 14, with no social media access until 16. But what they expected to be a small group of friends who help "empower each other" has turned into a nationwide campaign after the group reached the 1,000-person capacity within 24 hours of Greenwell uploading an Instagram post to promote it. "We were completely surprised by this," Fernyhough said. "It just went completely nuts." The pair encouraged people to create local groups to cope with the demand. "Before our eyes, within half an hour, there were 30 local groups that sprung up across the whole country and that is just expanding and expanding," said Fernyhough. The group, converted into a community to allow more people to join, now has about 4,500 members. Smartphones expose children to a "world that they are not ready for" because they can access pornography and content on self-harm and suicide, which can have a detrimental impact on their mental health, Fernyhough said. "It struck me that they just don't need one. They don't need a smartphone at that age. A brick phone can do everything that they need." Ofcom research found that 91% of children in the UK own a smartphone by the time they are 11 and 44% by the time they are nine. "We thought we had an extreme view and that's why we wanted to have solidarity with each other, but what we've realised is that, actually, it's like we've lifted the lid on something here by mistake and people really need to talk about this and a lot of people have been feeling like us but not feeling they could talk about it," Fernyhough said. Esther Ghey, the mother of Brianna Ghey, called earlier this week for a complete ban on social media access for under-16s, and said more people will have mental health issues unless tech companies take action to restrict access to harmful content. Brianna was murdered on 11 February 2023 and her mother believes she was vulnerable after spending so much time online. The goal is to change the norm, Fernyhough said, so that when children come to the end of primary school, the class "bands together and says, 'Let's all delay until at least 14.' That means all the kids from your primary school go on to secondary school with a critical mass of peers who are doing the same thing", reducing peer pressure. "We don't want our kids to turn up in secondary school as the only one," said Fernyhough. "That's a nightmare

and no one will do that to their child. But if 20%, 30%, even 50% of kids are turning up with parents making that decision, they are in a much better position. “They can live their childhood as they should do, focus on their learning and enjoy the real world without having to spend their life scrolling, which we all know is not good for them.”