

Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the government's evidence for the Education Select Committee inquiry on Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing. It addresses the specific questions raised in the inquiry terms of reference, outlining current evidence and existing Department for Education (DfE) policies and approaches for children and young people. Contributions from the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT) are also included.
2. We have considered screen time to constitute the time spent interacting with screen-based devices, whether at school or outside. Studies do not necessarily use the same definitions, but this will include mobile phones, other wireless and touch screen devices (e.g., tablets and laptops) and often TVs and video games.
3. **Section 1** provides a summary of our understanding of the evidence on the impact screen time usage can have on children's development and educational outcomes and their behaviour and concentration.
4. **Section 2** provides contextual information on the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people and an overview of the evidence on screen time impact.
5. **Section 3** sets out the government's approach to keeping children safe online, including:
 - How digital safety education is covered in the curriculum.
 - An assessment of the effectiveness of digital safety education.
6. **Section 4** sets out existing measures and guidance to support schools and parents in managing screen usage for children.
7. **Section 5** provides information on:
 - DfE policy and guidance on the use of mobile phones and screens more widely.
 - Current approaches being taken by schools.
8. **Section 6** sets out the framework for the use of technology as an academic tool within schools and provides information on Oak Academy.
9. A number of Departments have responsibility for policies in this area and work closely on this issue.
 - DfE sets the framework for policies on the use of technology, including mobile phones, in education settings. DfE also has a role in protecting children online and through statutory safeguarding guidance and supports schools to keep children safe.
 - DHSC is responsible for policies on mental health and wellbeing more broadly.
 - DSIT leads on the Online Safety Act, which aims to make sure the UK is the safest place in the world to be online.

SECTION 1 – How screen time supports and impacts child development, outcomes, concentration and behaviour

10. Research into the links between screen time and child development, including the impact on educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing, is a growing area. There are still many uncertainties about the relationships, and research challenges include the difficulty of demonstrating the direction of causation and keeping pace with changing technology and practices. Existing literature and public or media discussion sometimes conflates screen time with mobile phone usage and both with social media. Although clearly linked, each area is different. Challenges in synthesising evidence also arise due to studies measuring and defining “screen time” differently and using differing outcome measures and populations.
11. DfE has reviewed the academic research evidence highlighted below on phones and social media on education and attainment (see [annex A for full list of references](#)). This was approached robustly through the searching of academic journals databases but was not a systematic review. The evidence should therefore be seen as indicative rather than comprehensive.
12. Research by Ofcom (2023) suggests that around one in five children aged three -four have their own mobile phone. This increases gradually up to age eight, where one in four have their own phone. By age 12, almost all children own a mobile phone.
13. Research has found associations between high levels of screen time/ mobile phone use and attention difficulties in young children. There are questions over causality, for example, the attention problems may lead to higher screen time/mobile use. Some studies suggest the relationship is bidirectional (i.e., both attention difficulties leading to increased screen time/ phone use and increased screen time/phone use leading to attention difficulties) (Jourden et al,2023).
14. While the evidence is somewhat mixed, research has found small negative associations between time on phones and social media and attainment, although ascertaining causation is a challenge. In addition, many of the studies identified focus on higher education where students may be freer to use their phones (thereby potentially limiting applicability to school contexts/younger children) (e.g Kates et al, 2018; Sunday et al,2021; Amez et al,2023, Dontre et al,2021).
15. Research suggests that the use of mobile phones in classroom/study context has the potential to be distracting for the individual student because of the challenges of multitasking on the phone or between the phone and different tasks and fear of missing out on messages and notifications (Dontre et al,2021). Phones can also be distracting for others in the class (DfE, 2023).
16. A small number of studies identified explore the potential impact of school mobile phone bans on attainment. Two studies (one in UK and one in Spain) found that school bans of mobile phones are associated with improved grades (Beland and Murphy,2016; Beneito and Vincente-Chirivella, 2022) and one study from Sweden found no effect (Kessel et al (2019).
17. The evidence highlights the importance of considering the type of engagement with screens and context in which they are used. There is a small amount of evidence of the potential benefits of mobile phones in education (for example in supporting self-directed study or through engagement in classroom activities (e.g. Rashid and Ashgar, cited in Dontre et al 2021). Wider technology including tablets and specialised software can have positive impacts on education, depending on how it is used and in which context (EEF,2021, OECD,2023). Assistive technology

for SEND children can improve a variety of outcomes related to independence, educational outcomes, and quality of life (Edyburn, 2020).

SECTION 2 – Screen time and children’s wellbeing and mental health

18. Children’s and Young People’s (CYP’s) wellbeing and mental health has declined in recent years. NHS Digital data shows that 18.0% of CYP aged 7 to 16 years had a probable mental health disorder in 2022 compared with 12.1% in 2017.
19. It has been argued that smartphone screen time and the content of social media seen by CYP are contributing factors to the cause of this decline (amongst other factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic).
20. In 2019, [a report by the UK Chief Medical Officers’ \(CMOs\)](#) , which included the previous CMO for England Dame Sally Davies, looked into this issue and concluded that although there is an association between screen-based activities and mental health problems in CYP, scientific research was inconclusive in proving a causal relationship. This remains the case. There are complexities associated with investigating links between online harms and impacts on children's mental health and it is very difficult to infer direct causality between the two.
21. Some research has found associations between high levels of mobile phone/screen and social media usage, and mental health problems and reduced wellbeing amongst adolescents. Longitudinal studies on this generally show very small negative effects, and some suggest that there is little real evidence that mobile phone/social media usage causes reduced mental health and wellbeing at a population level (e.g. Orben et al, 2019, Plackett et al,2023) and that other factors such as family support, or bullying play a greater role (Panayiotou et al,2023). However, this may be different for more vulnerable groups, where a stronger association cannot be excluded.
22. Potential reasons for negative relationships include displacement of sleep and physical activity and being exposed to negative content or cyberbullying (e.g Scott et al, 2019; Viner et al, 2019). This suggests that it is not just about time spent on phones/social media, but what it is used for that is important, as well as potential healthy activities it could displace.
23. Individual characteristics and vulnerabilities may play a role in the impact of social media/phone use on child outcomes, for example, children with existing mental health problems may be more likely to access negative content (Kowalski et al, 2014 cited in Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Research also suggests there are differences across age and gender (e.g. Viner et al, 2019; Orben et al,2022).
24. Data from ONS (2020) suggests that one in five children (19%) aged 10-15 experienced at least one type of bullying behaviour online, and out of them, around three quarters (72%) said they experienced at least some of it at school or during school time.
25. Further research is required to determine whether there is a causal relationship between smartphone screen time and social media content and mental health problems in CYP. The UKRI-funded four-year research programme ‘[Digital Youth: Nurturing Young Digital Minds](#)’ is aiming to examine the mechanisms and direction of effects between exposure to the ‘digital environment’ and young people’s mental health. It also is exploring how everyday digital platforms can be designed to minimise harms to young people and promote resilience to online mental health risks.

SECTION 3 – Digital safety education and curriculum

26. Protecting children online is central to the Government’s online harms agenda, and wider government priorities.
27. The Department for Education does this in a number of ways. The department’s statutory safeguarding guidance ‘[Keeping children safe in education](#)’ (KCSIE) provides schools and colleges with robust information on what they should be doing to protect pupils and students online, including information about different types of abuse and harm. We have significantly strengthened the guidance in the last couple of years and online safety is embedded throughout the guidance, making clear the importance of ensuring a whole school approach to keeping children safe.
28. Amongst other things, the guidance makes clear that schools and colleges should ensure appropriate filtering and monitoring systems are in place to protect children whilst on the school’s digital platform and that they regularly review their effectiveness.
29. On 29 March 2023, the Department published a [set of filtering and monitoring standards](#), to help schools and colleges understand what they should be doing to meet their existing safeguarding duties to keep children safe online.
30. Another key priority is ensuring children have the skills and knowledge to keep themselves safe online. The Government wants all children to leave school with the knowledge, understanding, and skills that enable them to use information and communication technology creatively and purposefully, whilst remaining safe online and becoming discerning consumers of information. Online safety and media literacy is taught through compulsory curriculum subjects such as computing, citizenship and relationships, sex and health education (RSHE).

Existing curriculum

31. In **Relationships Sex and Health Education (RSHE)**, pupils are taught about internet safety and harms and online relationships. This includes content on the implications of sharing private or personal data (including images) online, harmful content and contact, cyberbullying, an over-reliance on social media and where to get help and support for issues that occur online. The statutory guidance is clear that, within health education, pupils should know that although the internet is an integral part of life, they should understand the benefits of rationing time spent online, the risks of excessive time spent on electronic devices and the impact of positive and negative content online on mental and physical wellbeing.
32. The **computing** curriculum covers the principles of online safety at all key stages, with progression in the content to reflect the different and escalating risks that pupils face. This includes:
- how to use technology safely, responsibly, respectfully and securely;
 - how to keep their personal information private;
 - how to recognise unacceptable behaviour;
 - how to recognise inappropriate content; and
 - where to go for help and support when they have concerns about content or contact on the internet or other online technologies.

33. In **citizenship**, the curriculum is clear that pupils should be taught about safeguarding democracy and a free media to develop informed and responsible citizens, promoting understanding of the role of responsible journalism in democratic society, identifying mis-, dis- and mal- information and countering the effects of negative and harmful news, events and information.

Effectiveness of existing digital safety education

34. We do not have any specific evidence on the effectiveness of digital safety education. We do however have some evidence on parent and pupil confidence in the media literacy and online safety topics pupils had been taught, from the March 2023 Parent, pupil, and learner panel¹. Around nine in ten (88%) parents of year 6 pupils were confident that their child's school had taught them that people should not share personal details or images online that they or others would not want to be shared further. Three in five (58%) parents of year 6 pupils were confident that their child's school had taught pupils to think about whether something found online is true and using other sources to check it. Pupils in year 7 to 11 were also asked about which media literacy and online safety topics they had been taught at school. Over nine in ten (94%) said they had been taught that people should not share personal details or images online that they or others would not want to be shared further. Three in five (59%) said they had been taught at school how to fact check media, by thinking about whether something found online is true, and using other sources to check it.
35. Media literacy was also covered in the November 2022 [School and College Panel Survey Report](#)². This went to primary and secondary teachers and explored the media literacy topics that schools were teaching, how many of the respondents had personally taught media literacy, and their confidence in doing so.
36. In January 2023 we updated the [Teaching Online Safety in Schools](#)³ non-statutory guidance, on how to teach about all aspects of internet safety, not just those relating to relationships, sex and health, to help schools deliver this in a coordinated and coherent way across their curriculum. This guidance is also clear that teachers should help pupils to evaluate critically what they are doing online, why they are doing it, and for how long (screen time).
37. We have also published [teacher training modules](#)⁴ to help teachers identify the core knowledge pupils may be taught as part of RSHE, and to share this through peer training. These have been developed with subject matter experts and teachers. In the 'Internet Safety and Harms' module, the need to ration screen time to avoid risks is specifically referenced.
38. We have brought forward the review of the RSHE statutory guidance and stakeholders will have the opportunity to feed into the process through a public consultation in autumn 2023. Following the consultation, we will decide about new content, including any on digital safety, to be included in final revised guidance which we expect to publish in 2024.

Online Safety Act

¹ [Parent, pupil and learner panel 22/23 March/April wave \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

² [School and College Panel November 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [Teaching online safety in schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ [Teaching about relationships, sex and health - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

39. Beyond the curriculum, the government is taking action to keep users of all ages safe online.
40. The Online Safety Act will address media literacy insofar as it relates to regulated services in several areas. The Act expands on Ofcom's existing statutory duty to promote media literacy under Section 11 of the 2003 Communications Act. The regulator will now be required to raise awareness of how members of the public, including children, can keep themselves and others safe online. Ofcom will also be required to encourage the development and use of technologies that support users of regulated services, including children, to protect themselves and others.
41. Under the Act's risk assessment duties, companies will be required to consider how they can use media literacy measures to mitigate the risks that users face on their platforms.
42. In July 2021, the government published the Online Media Literacy Strategy, setting out our ambition to improve the national media literacy landscape.
43. We have committed to publishing annual Action Plans each financial year until the end of 2024/25, setting out our plans to meet the Strategy's ambition.
44. Through our Year 2 Action Plan, published April 2022, we established two grant schemes, through which we are providing almost £2.5 million in funding for media literacy projects over the previous and current financial years.

SECTION 4 – Supporting schools and parents to manage children’s screen usage

45. Being online can be a hugely positive experience for children and young people but there are concerns about the impact of excessive screen time.
46. The Online Safety Act will require platforms to consider how their service is used, as part of their children’s risk assessment. This will include an assessment of whether there are features that affect how much children use their service.
47. Platforms will then need to assess how this impacts on the level of risk of harm to children and put in place measures to mitigate and manage the risks they identify.
48. In response to public concerns raised with the government about the potential impact of excessive screen time on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, the UK Chief Medical Officers commissioned independent researchers to carry out a systematic evidence review in 2019 on the impact of social media use on children and young people’s mental health.
49. Whilst there is not yet sufficient evidence about the impact of screen time to support detailed guidelines for parents or to set specific requirements on companies, the [Chief Medical Officers’ review](#), referenced in Section 2, provided welcome advice to parents and carers. This sets out how they can manage children’s screen and social media use, and was considered as part of the development of the Online Safety Act.
50. We will continue to support research in this area and ensure high quality advice is available to families.
51. We also welcome efforts from the industry to develop tools to help individuals and families understand and manage how much time they spend online.

SECTION 5 – Screen usage, including mobile phones, policies and practices in schools

Introduction

52. Although there can be benefits to the use of mobile phones in school, feedback from school leaders suggests that risks such as lost teaching and study time, low level disruption, distraction and bullying outweigh these. This is in addition to the findings outlined in section 1 of this evidence paper.
53. The Department has recently announced its intention to produce new non- statutory guidance which will back head teachers in restricting mobile phone use throughout the school day, including at break times, to tackle disruptive behaviour and online bullying.

Existing policy and guidance

54. The Department’s existing policy on mobile phones reflects the risks associated with their presence in schools, while maintaining the autonomy of head teachers to ultimately decide whether to allow mobile phones and other smart devices into school.
55. The [Behaviour in Schools guidance](#)⁵, (2022) is clear that risks include bullying, distraction and classroom disruption which, in turn, can lead to lost teaching time. This guidance encourages head teachers to consider restricting or prohibiting mobile phones to reduce these risks.
56. The [Searching and Screening guidance](#)⁶, 2022, provides schools with relevant advice on searching and confiscation. The guidance refers to searching for, and confiscating, mobile phones if they are prohibited within the school rules (under the Education Act 1996).
57. The DfE School Snapshot Survey (Winter 2019)⁷ is the most recent data the Department holds on school mobile phone policies. This found that that among secondary schools, 16% had outright bans, 33% had strict non-use policies, 48% permitted regulated use at specified points in the school day and 3% did not respond. In Primary schools 16% had outright bans, 59% had strict non-use policies, 2% permitted regulated use and the remaining respondents said this was not an issue as the pupils were too young.
58. Schools restrict mobile phone usage in a variety of ways, as shown by the following selected published policies:

Witham St. Hughs Academy (L.E.A.D. Academy Trust), primary. East of England

Pupils in years 5 and 6 are permitted to bring phones into school if they travel to or from school without parents. However, on arrival, devices must be handed to their teacher for safe storage. To mitigate the risks of distraction, disruption, bullying and abuse, mobile phones remain under teacher supervision until the end of the school day. Exceptions are permitted for medical or personal reasons which can be established following agreement with parents.

⁵ [Behaviour in schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Searching, screening and confiscation in schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ Department for Education (2020) *The School Snapshot Survey: Winter 2019*. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903647/3_Support_for_Pupils_6104.01_Winter_2019_.pdf, accessed 04/07/2023.

Carmel College (Bishop Hogarth Academy Trust), secondary. North East

Mobile phones must not be used inside the building; use of mobile phones and/or earphones without permission is deemed “unacceptable behaviour” under the school’s [behaviour policy](#). However, there is no published requirement for a phone to be kept in a locker or safe, instead remaining in the pupil’s possession. If a student is seen using their phone inside, without direct permission from a member of staff, the phone is confiscated until the end of the day. Mobile phones are listed as a prohibited item, for which pupils may be searched.

Before leaving a classroom during a lesson, phones must be handed to a teacher to ensure it is not being used while away from lessons.

St Gregory’s Catholic Science College (All Saints’ Trust), secondary. London.

Students are not permitted to have or use mobile phones in school, including when travelling to and from school. If a mobile phone is seen on site, it is confiscated by the teacher and held in the school safe for collection by a parent. If this is not a first incident, the mobile phone may be retained for longer and parents will be asked to attend a meeting.

New guidance

59. New non-statutory guidance on mobile phone use in schools will make clear that the use of mobile phones should be restricted throughout the school day. This guidance will ensure that head teachers and members of staff have backing from the department and practical advice to restrict mobile phones from schools, to ensure that schools are a calm, safe and supportive environment in which to learn and work. This will provide head teachers with the support to communicate a stronger stance with their pupils and parents.
60. Reports from sector experts suggest that many schools with exemplary behaviour cultures are already enforcing strict bans on the use of mobile phones and clear guidance from the Department will allow all schools to take this approach and ensure greater consistency.
61. We recognise that, in some cases, it may not be suitable for particular pupils to be without a phone, or other smart device, for the entirety of the school day. Schools have a legal obligation under the Equality Act 2010 to support individual pupils who are disabled with reasonable adjustments, making sure they can benefit from what the school provides in the same way as a pupil who isn’t disabled. A school must not discriminate against a disabled pupil because of something that is a consequence of their disability. Where a disabled pupil has an identified need that requires use of, or regular access to, a mobile phone, tablet or other screen-based device in the classroom, the school needs to consider whether it is reasonable to permit that for the pupil. Similar considerations will apply where a pupil has a special educational need that is supported through the use of a screen-based device, for example specialist software to help a pupil with dyslexia to access the curriculum. Some pupils may also require their phones for medical reasons, such as insulin monitoring for pupils with diabetes.
62. The new guidance will list examples of specific cases in which we expect reasonable adjustments or exemptions to be made. Each school will be responsible for making sure that they adhere to the Public Sector Equality Duty and Equality Act 2010.
63. Whilst the new non-statutory guidance will focus on mobile phone use, we recognise the potential risks to pupils of using other personal devices, such as tablets, during the school day.

Headteachers will continue to be able to impose restrictions on the use of these devices as they consider appropriate.

64. The introduction of new guidance will further support schools to add mobile phones to a list of prohibited items, if they choose to do so in order to ban phones from the school site.
65. Alongside the non-statutory guidance for schools we will be publishing advice for parents outlining the risks of using mobile phones in schools. This is separate to the advice contained in the [Chief Medical Officers' review](#) which sets out how parents and carers can manage their children's screen and social media use.

SECTION 6 – Managing screen use as an academic tool and use of external digital sources for educational and classroom activities.

The use of technology in schools

66. Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is broad and balanced, and which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.
67. It is up to educational establishments to decide what technology they need to meet their requirements in relation to their educational contexts and circumstances and we do not actively back or mandate individual products or tools.
68. Technology works best as a tool used by great teachers. It is not a catchall solution to educational challenges and the use of technology including screens and devices in the classroom should be informed by evidence and best practice. The Department is working to establish a strong evidence base for effective use of technology and embed this evidence across the school system, so that it is easy for schools and families to use the best products at the right time.
69. We want to create an environment where all schools and trusts can use technology to improve access to education and outcomes, reduce staff workload, and run operations more efficiently. The Department is developing digital and technology standards on laptops, desktops and tablets to support schools to buy and use devices that meet their needs. We are also developing a digital service to support senior leadership in schools with planning for technology and are working with schools in Blackpool and Portsmouth to expand the testing of this tool.
70. The DfE conducted research into the use of technology in schools which found that the majority of schools have devices available for pupils and teachers.

[Education Technology \(EdTech\) Survey 2020-21 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Metric	EdTech 2020-21	
	Primary	Secondary
School has laptops available for pupils	86%	94%
School has tablets available for pupils	88%	58%
School has desktops available for pupils	60%	95%
Have laptops, but for less than 10% of pupils	29%	35%
Have tablets, but for less than 10% of pupils	29%	45%
Have desktops, but for less than 10% of pupils	40%	3%

Laptops fit for purpose to some extent (headteachers*)	96%	96%
Tablets fit for purpose to some extent (headteachers*)	95%	89%
Desktops fit for purpose to some extent (headteachers*)	96%	98%

*Data from responses to the headteacher version of the EdTech Survey

Oak National Academy

71. During the pandemic, many schools relied on high quality lessons and resources developed by external providers such as Oak National Academy to support with the delivery of remote learning.
72. Based on Oak's platform analytics, during the pandemic Oak's online lessons and resources were accessed over 150 million times, by an average of 78k users every day, and in 2021/22, on average 32k teachers and 170k pupils used Oak National Academy resources each week.
73. Building on its success in the pandemic, Oak was established as an arm's length body on 1 September 2022, working independently of Government and collaboratively with the education sector. Oak works with teachers across the country, giving them and their pupils access to free, optional, and adaptable high-quality digital curriculum resources. Oak aims to support teachers to improve curriculum delivery, reduce workload, support improved pupil outcomes and continue to provide a remote education contingency.

Annex A – Research literature (note not all studies are cited in the summary)

Section 1 - How screen time supports and impacts child development & outcomes and contextual information

Government publications and grey literature

Anti-Bullying Alliance (2022) *Bullying, School experiences and wellbeing*. Available at: [Pupil bullying, wellbeing and school experiences in schools in England 2022.pdf \(anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk\)](https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/pupil-bullying-wellbeing-and-school-experiences-in-schools-in-england-2022.pdf), accessed 30/06/2023.

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[The Guardian \(2023\) School phone ban: Queensland to give parents two terms to prepare for new rule for students, Friday 7th July 2023, School phone ban: Queensland to give parents two terms to prepare for new rule for students | Queensland | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/07/school-phone-ban-queensland-to-give-parents-two-terms-to-prepare-for-new-rule-for-students), accessed 10/07/23

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October 2023