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Approaches to children's smartphone and social media use must go beyond bans

Supporting the healthy development of children requires an approach to smartphone and social media use underpinned by age appropriate design and education, argue Victoria Goodyear and colleagues

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Children commonly use their smartphones to access social media, play games, and interact with others, accounting for the majority of overall screen use, particularly in the 8-17 age group.[1] Most recently, banning or restricting children's (under age 18[2]) access to smartphones and social media has grasped the attention of policy makers, schools, and parents. Several countries, including France, Turkey, Norway, Sweden, as well as regions of the US and Canada, have introduced laws, policies, or guidance for schools to ban or heavily restrict the use of phones in schools.[3] In Australia, new legislation prohibits social media use for children under age 16. In the US, the surgeon general called for warning labels on social media apps.[4] Such restrictions lie within broader narratives that smartphones and social media are not safe environments for children. Moreover, bans are responses to increased public pressure to mitigate the potential harmful effects of smartphones and social media on health, wellbeing, and other associated outcomes—for example, academic performance, disruptive behaviours, and bullying.[5]

There are, however, no simple, one-size-fits-all answers. Although many policy makers, schools, and parents are primed to believe arguments that smartphones and social media are inherently harmful, the evidence about their overall effect on children is not clear cut.[6 7] Smartphone bans have the advantage of being immediately actionable and relatively straightforward to enforce. However, despite positive anecdotal data, we do not have the evidence to establish the types of bans that are effective and what works best for children of different ages.[8 9] A recent evaluation of school smartphone policies in England reported that restricted smartphone use in schools was not associated with benefits to adolescent mental health and wellbeing, physical activity and sleep, educational attainment, or classroom behaviour.[10] In addition, this study found no evidence of school restrictions being associated with lower levels of overall phone or media use or problematic social media use.[10]

Technology-free moments and spaces are nevertheless important for children because increased time spent on phones and social media is generally linked with worse physical, mental, and educational outcomes.[10] However, approaches that focus on simply restricting access to devices can undermine children's rights to technology design and education that will help them thrive as adults in today's world.

Phone bans are temporary solutions

Bans and restrictions have been successfully used for public health issues such as smoking.[11] But smoking is not comparable with smartphone and social media use because the harms from smoking are extensive, clear cut, and by far outweigh the benefits. Prescribing abstinence from all technologies to protect against harms is unrealistic and potentially detrimental in a society where technology use is a practical necessity and confers various benefits, including information access and social support.[12 13] Overall, blanket restrictions are "stop gap" solutions that do little to support children's longer term healthy engagement with digital spaces across school, home, and other contexts[10] and their successful transition into adolescence and adulthood in a technology filled world.

Bans and restrictions are context dependent, and their effects will be highly variable across regions and populations. Families' experiences and perspectives related to screen engagement for their children vary by culture, religion, and socioeconomic circumstances, including internet access and quality, and access to safe and green outside spaces.[14] For some children, such as those who are especially vulnerable to poor mental health, access to certain digital content can result in grave harm.[5 6] However, restricting access can be harmful to other high risk populations, including children with disabilities, refugees, children in conflict settings, rural or indigenous populations, and women and girls.[12] For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, social media can provide access to essential healthcare services, including primary care and HIV surveillance.[12] In Afghanistan, social media provide a "safe haven" where girls can access topics related to women's rights, sexuality, domestic violence, and abortion.[12] In China, studies have found that social media access benefits the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ adolescents.[12]

A more constructive analogy than smoking might be driving cars. In response to increasing injuries and deaths from car crashes, rather than banning cars, society built an ecosystem of product safety regulations for companies (seatbelts, airbags) and consumers (vehicle safety tests, penalties), public infrastructure (traffic lights), and education (licences) to support safer use. Comparative efforts in product safety and education are needed to supplement debates about smartphone and social media bans and to balance the positive and indispensable role

of digital technologies against their potential harms. Similar arguments have been made by others from a rights respecting approach.[9 14]

Rights based approach to smartphone and social media use

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN general comment in relation to digital environments provide a framework for governments and industry to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of all children in digital environments.[2 15] This framework is underpinned by four guiding principles: non-discrimination; acting in the best interests of the child; rights to life, survival, and development; and respect the views of the child (box 1). A rights respecting approach therefore considers the whole of children's lives and opens up ways of protecting children from harm while also approaching the healthy development of smartphone and social media use. Age appropriate design and education are two key levers for implementing an approach based on rights.[2 15]

Box 1: Summary of a rights based approach to digital environments in education[2 15]

Non-discrimination

- Ensure that all children have equal access to digital environments that are meaningful for them
- Provide opportunities for learning to navigate positive as well as negative spaces on social media in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and equality

Best interests of the child

- Ensure the fulfilment of children's rights in education in relation to digital environments
- Ensure children's rights to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through digital technologies
- Protect children from risks and harmful effects of social media, ensuring privacy and online safety

Rights to life, survival, and development

- Create opportunities for growth through digital environments, developing knowledge, skills, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential
- Support and develop knowledgeable and safe use of digital technologies

Respect the views of the child

- Support children's participation and inclusion in local, national, and international contexts in digital environments
- Teach and support children to express their views in digital environments
- Include children in defining the problems of digital technologies and the use of social media, giving due weight to their views and opinions in matters that affect them.

Age appropriate smartphone and social media design

Safety by design in accordance with children's evolving capacities is a key principle within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[15] Consensus is growing internationally that it is necessary to design for children online. For example, the European Union's Digital Services Act and the UK Online Safety Act reflect a clear understanding of the need to ensure children's uses of technology are compatible with their wellbeing. Algorithms that promote "trending" content or apps that use attention and reward grabbing design features to encourage recurrent use are purposefully not supporting the development of healthy tech habits.[16 17] Other age appropriate design features could be used to scaffold and support development. For example, app protective settings could have certain functions on by default, including limited or no notifications or warnings about length of use. In addition, app design features that give users more control could be introduced—for example, settings that help children learn new things, develop new skills, or enjoy playful activities and social interactions at their own pace or interactive features that engage peers and family members such as multi-touch input, turn taking, and family chats.[16 -18]

No legislation for the technology industry is currently fully grounded in children's rights. In 2023, the UK Digital Futures for Children Centre launched guidance, Child Rights by Design, for designers of digital services and products used by children.[18] The guidance outlines 11 underpinning principles for digital innovation to ensure that children's needs and rights are a central consideration in product development (box 2).[18] Guidance such as this is critical to help the tech industry develop a safe and healthy digital ecosystem for children. However, industry often does not take voluntary action to prioritise public health interests.[19] Consequently, legislation is needed that clearly outlines and enforces the responsibilities of technology companies regarding the safety and wellbeing of children in relation to children's rights.[17 18] For example, governments could require technology companies to show how they are delivering on children's full range of rights to support child development and ensure appropriate safeguards in all services and products accessible to them.

Box 2: Principles in Child Rights by Design guidance[18]

- *Equity and diversity*—All children are treated equally and fairly, and support is provided for vulnerable children
- *Best interests*—All children's best interests is the primary consideration in the design of technologies and services
- *Consultation*—Children have been meaningfully consulted and provided the opportunity to freely express their views
- *Age appropriate*—The product is appropriate for children's evolving capacities and/or is adaptable for children of different ages
- *Responsible*—The technology or service is compatible with the laws and policies relevant to children's rights
- *Participation*—Enable children's participation, expression, and access to information
- *Privacy*—Privacy by design has been appropriately considered in product and service development
- *Safety*—Safety by design has been appropriately considered in product and service development
- *Wellbeing*—The product or service should enhance not harm children's mental and physical health
- *Development*—Products and services should enable children's learning, imagination, play, and belonging
- *Agency*—Steps should have been taken to reduce compulsive and exploitative produce features

Legislation in this area is developing, but further work is required to ensure legislation benefits the wellbeing of all children. For example, the EU's Digital Services Act does not sufficiently address algorithmic content personalisation. In turn, the information children access from large online social media platforms can be biased for commercial or political reasons. This can limit children's freedom of choice and adversely affect their decision making processes in ways that infringe their rights and wellbeing.[20]

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Education provided by schools and families

Schools and families can mitigate potential risks and maximise benefits by supporting the development of foundational skills for healthy smartphone and social media use.[13 14] A rights based approach to education entails not only knowledge and skills but the full development and growth of the child (box 1).[2 15] Positive engagement with phones and social media needs to be treated as a life skill that is crucial for the development of personalities, talents, and mental and physical abilities.

An agency centred approach to education is one way to develop children's digital skills and strategies, and involves supporting children to have meaningful choice, intentionality, and control over how technology fits into their lives.[21] This approach co-developed with children, educators, psychologists, and experts from various domains has been adopted in education settings in the US based on work at the Centre for Digital Thriving.[13 21] A key premise is the connection between evidence based behavioural and mental health practices with children's experiences of using smartphones and social media.[21] For example, techniques from cognitive behavioural therapy can be used to reduce symptoms of anxiety from other people not responding to read messages (being "left on read").

Education can be approached across three levels: personal, collective, and proxy agency.[13 21] Personal agency involves equipping children with the skills, strategies, and dispositions to help them make informed decisions as they navigate a technology filled world[13]—for example, skills on how to spot or avoid disinformation, awareness of digital design tricks, and strategies to reduce digital distractions. Collective agency involves peer-to-peer learning approaches and children working together to support the meaningful and intentional integration of technology into their lives.[13] For example, teenagers could form pacts to vet photos of each other before tagging or posting.[13] Proxy agency involves the development of rules, policies, technologies, and laws that support agency.[13 21] Schools can be proxy agents by listening to children and by partnering with them to co-design relevant and meaningful device usage policies and learning experiences.[13 21] Parents are also key proxy agents, as they make day-to-day decisions that grant and limit digital access, and this process often starts with phone ownership.[13 14]

Despite its merits, an agency centred approach is not common practice.[13] In schools, the prioritisation of academic performance, teacher knowledge, and the time it takes to engage in meaningful co-design are reported as key barriers to the adoption and implementation of collaborative teaching practices related to smartphone and social media use.[22] The contemporary digital society is also very different from the childhood experiences of many adults, and this has inevitably created challenges for the ways in which policy makers, schools, and parents attempt to provide support to children.[14 22] For example, many parents report that they tend to make decisions about their children's smartphone and social media use based on their childhood memories, and that they struggle with respecting and developing the agency of their child.[14] This suggests a need for appropriate levels of professional support to ensure widespread access to the latest evidence based guidance.[22]

Sustainable action

A rights respecting approach, underpinned by age appropriate design and education, has a dual focus on protecting children from harm and supporting the development of children's digital skills and agency to participate in a digital society. In the longer term, this approach is likely to be more beneficial and sustainable as it is focused on building a safe ecosystem in a digital society. The technology industry is capable of moving quickly on this agenda. However, as profit incentives often over-ride other agendas,[19] new approaches to corporate regulation are urgently required to ensure the technology industry will take action based on children's rights.[18] Public perception about risks, the prioritisation of academic performance, teacher and parental knowledge, skills and readiness, and the lengthy timescales for the development of new legislation, are other potential challenges to the adoption and implementation of the proposed recommendations.[22] Hence, immediate priorities are to improve legislation for the tech industry grounded in children's rights and create professional training and guidance for schools, teachers, and parents to help them be actively involved in the development of children's healthy technology use and in shaping future policies and approaches. Ultimately, there is a need to shift debates, policies, and practices from a sole focus on restricting smartphone and social media access toward an emphasis on nurturing children's skills for healthy technology use.

Key messages

- Bans on smartphone and social media access have been advocated in many countries to protect children from harm despite lack of evidence on their effects
- Bans fail to equip children for healthy use of technology and the focus should shift to a rights respecting approach underpinned by age appropriate design and education
- Schools, teachers, and parents require training and guidance to help them support children's healthy use of technology and shape future policies
- Legislation for the technology industry needs to be grounded in children's rights

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Public involvement: We convened two focus groups—one of adolescents and one of adults from varying backgrounds—and sought their views on use and controls of social media and technology. Their views influenced the core messages in the article, particularly around the important role of parents and family.

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