



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Keeping Childhood Smartphone Free

A guide for parents and parents' associations who wish to engage with their school community regarding internet safety and access to smartphones for primary school children



November 2023

Foreword from Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD



Every day, a million children in Ireland attend schools across the country.

For the vast majority, school represents a safe space, a secure environment where growth, both mentally and emotionally, is nurtured in a caring atmosphere. It is a place where social skills develop and the bonds of friendship are forged for life.

Visiting schools is one of the best aspects of my role as Minister for Education, for the immense opportunity it offers to meet with children and young people, school staff, and parents. I know that school is not just a meeting place for children- it is also a natural meeting place for parents, teachers and the broader education community. It is where community decisions are debated and taken.

I know from my visits to schools, particularly primary schools, that smartphones and their risks are a very significant topic of conversation in school. Very many schools have either totally banned or significantly restricted their presence within schools. This is an important step, but the reality is that students are only in school for a portion of their time. Parents, staff, and indeed students are deeply concerned by the issue of smartphones outside of school hours.

As always, communities have responded to this challenge and in recent months I have been deeply impressed by initiatives such as the “It takes a Village” initiative in Greystones, Co. Wicklow where students, parents, and schools have come together to say that their children will not have a smartphone until the end of 6th class. This has been a voluntary, ground-up initiative which has centred on open discussion, education, and wellbeing in its broadest sense.

I want to support more parents and schools in taking this step to take collective action around smartphones in their community. That is why I am today launching these guidelines, which provide a framework for parents and schools to have these conversations with their children and with each other. I have also provided funding to Webwise, a national body that provides advice and support to parents around safe behaviour online. Webwise will now be offering information sessions and webinars for parents and schools through our Education Centre network, which are based throughout the country.

Several resources are available to teachers, parents and guardians wishing to learn more about how they can communicate with children and young people around their use of smartphones and other technology and help to keep them safe. A wide range of material is available for teachers, students and parents through the Webwise Internet Safety Programme.

Ultimately, these guidelines represent just one piece in our overall response. They are designed to start and inform conversations, in addition to all the other resources we have made available. I hope that they are of use to as many school communities as possible, and I look forward to continuing to work as always with everyone across the education sector to deliver the best possible outcome for the children and young people in our care. The use of mobile devices and smart phones is now a part of the lives of children and young people. While this is often positive, concerns have been identified including some risks associated with the misuse, abuse and possible overuse of these devices and the various associated technologies particularly for younger children.

Purpose of this guide

Significant concerns have been raised about the potential negative consequences of smartphones for children.

- US Surgeon General Dr Vivek Murthy indicated in a recent advisory that “children are exposed to harmful content on social media, ranging from violent and sexual content, to bullying and harassment. And for too many children, social media use is compromising their sleep and valuable in-person time with family and friends. We are in the middle of a national youth mental health crisis, and I am concerned that social media is an important driver of that crisis – one that we must urgently address.”
- The recent Global Education Monitoring report funded by UNESCO warned that “the use of technology is associated with negative impacts on physical and mental well-being and increased susceptibility to online risks and harms, which affect academic performance in the long term”.

As such, this guide has been prepared for parents of primary school age children who wish to come together to support their child/ren’s online safety through creating a voluntary agreement around the use of smartphones and other devices.

It is recognised that schools have an acceptable use policy in place regarding the use of the internet and digital technologies within the school, including online and offline usage.

It is important that parents are aware of how to keep their children safe online and the supports that are available. This resource has been developed to support parents in this regard: <https://www.webwise.ie/download/78727/>.

An essential resource for parents and parents associations is also the website, www.webwise.ie

Age of Digital Consent

It is important for parents to be aware that in Ireland, the Age of Digital Consent is 16.

- The digital age of consent is the minimum age a user must be before a social media or internet company can collect, process and store their data.
- The digital age of consent is higher than the age you need to be to create a social media profile on platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram or TikTok.
- For the purposes of data collection teenagers between the age of 13 and 16 years old must have parental permission to sign-up to social media services. Most social media platforms and services have a minimum age requirement, for the majority of these services it is 13 years old and some are set at 16 (WhatsApp). Therefore technically, children under the age of 13 should not have a social media account. However, parents should be aware that it is quite easy for children to bypass those age restrictions by claiming that they are older than they are when setting up an account.

Suggested steps to creating a Voluntary Agreement

Primary school parents' associations who wish to promote engagement around pupils' use of smartphones and other technologies may wish to follow these steps:

- **Identify Group Leaders:** The parents' association could consider setting up a sub-committee to lead on work in this area.
- **Review and Research:** The sub-committee might like to start with a reflection on how children in the school are using smartphones and other technologies and whether parents may be interested in having a voluntary agreement in place.
 - This reflection may include consultation with parents and children. A sample letter to parents, which can be used in gathering the research, is included below. You may find an online survey tool helpful for this, alternatively.
 - [The National Parents Council have developed a guide](#) that is intended to support a discussion between parents and their children about device use. This may help parents ascertain the views of their children around the best possible approach to a potential agreement around the use of smartphones and other devices. It may also help to inform the development of a family agreement about internet safety and the use of devices.
 - Useful tools and guidance for parents and carers on supporting their child/ren's online safety are also available from [Webwise](#), [ISPCC](#) and other organisations.
 - Webwise will also be providing information sessions and seminars for parents, staff, and school community members who are interested in online safety through local Education Centres.

Following the research, the steps below can be taken if parents are interested in adopting a voluntary agreement:

<p>Examine Potential Points for Inclusion</p> <p>Based on their research with parents and children, the sub-committee can begin examining key points which they may wish to include in a draft voluntary agreement.</p> <p>The Webwise Acceptable Use Policy Guidelines may provide a useful resource at this stage</p>	<p>Draft Voluntary Agreement</p> <p>With key points identified, the sub-committee could lead on drafting up a voluntary agreement. This may include, for example, times when smartphones are allowed to be used and times when they are not. Draft agreements may also, for example, reference that smartphones or technologies are allowed to be used for educational purposes only.</p>	<p>Circulate and Consult</p> <p>The draft voluntary agreement should be circulated to the whole school community to give everyone an opportunity to input into the final draft. The agreement should then be amended as appropriate.</p>	<p>Communicate</p> <p>Following consultation, the proposed approach should be put before the Parents Association for ratification. Once ratified, parents and guardians, as well as children, school staff and the Board of Management should be informed. Parents should communicate and explain the agreement to their children.</p>
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If / when a draft agreement is in place, the following steps can help to ensure it can be successfully adapted and beneficial to everyone involved:

Monitor: The implementation of the voluntary agreement should be monitored to help identify any overlooked or additional issues which may arise. Parents' associations may find it helpful to follow up with parents on a yearly basis or more often to help to decide on any amends which may be needed.

Educate: Parents' associations can play a key role in their school communities by supporting parents to learn more about how they can help to keep their children safe online and when using smartphones and other technologies. For example, parents' associations may like to signpost parents to Webwise, which provides a range of helpful content and resources in this area. The [Webwise Parents Hub](#) provides guidance and practical information for parents on key issues of children's online safety.

Webwise also provide free, scripted, Internet Safety Talk for Parents presentations that can be used by primary schools who may wish to host parent internet safety evenings and promote collaboration with parents regarding online safety for children and young people.

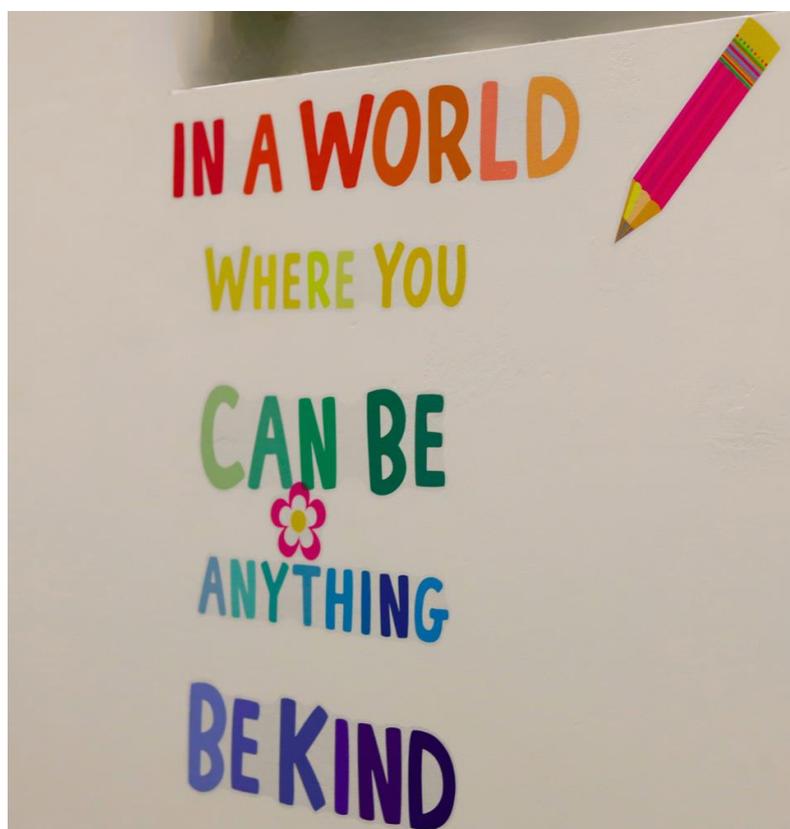


Photo: The walls of St Kevin's N.S. Littleton, Thurles Co. Tipperary

Top 10 tips for schools

Based on the experience of the eight Greystones primary schools where parents have collectively agreed not to buy smartphones for their children until the end of sixth class. These are tips only for consideration and may need to be changed depending on local circumstances.

Team work makes the dream work: you may wish to reach out to other schools in the area to see if they are interested in pursuing a joined up approach.

Ask the school's parents' association to survey parents for their views on collectively agreeing not to buy smartphones for their children until the end of sixth class

Consult with the children on the school's student council (if the school has one) about the positives and negatives of smart phone ownership. This allows the voice of the child to be heard and the children may also discuss it with their parents when they go home.

The parents' association can then circulate a voluntary smartphone agreement to parents individually and ask them if they want to sign up (for example, by letter or by an online survey). It is suggested that Parents Associations will only advise the school the number of parents that have signed up to the agreement and that individual details will not be passed on to the school. The school will only be told that for example, 23 out of 25 children in a particular class will not be getting smartphones while they are in primary school. This is important in order to respect the fact that each family has the right to decide whether or not their children have access to the internet or a smartphone.

The new voluntary agreement should be ratified by the parents' association and by the school board of management

The agreement could be displayed publicly on school grounds (e.g. on the school door/information area).

If the agreement is part of a joined up approach with other schools in the area the agreement regarding the approach to smartphones signed by, for example, all the schools in an area could be sent to all parents in the area.

Local schools can consider launching the new policy collectively at a community event featuring parents, school children, local politicians, GPs, sports clubs etc to build community support for it.



Schools can roll out the voluntary smartphone agreements at the time of their choosing but they should be aware that there are different pressure points during the school year for parents to buy smartphones for their children in primary school. One is Christmas and the other is summertime, when parents of fifth class children can feel pressure to buy smartphones for them before they go into sixth class.

The voluntary agreement does not affect basic mobile phones (with no internet access or apps) that children may have or need to arrange to be collected from after-school activities.

Sample letter to parents / guardians

These letters are a guide only and parents' associations may decide to conduct an online survey to gather this data.

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Re: Smartphone voluntary agreement – research questionnaire

The use of smartphones and other technologies is now a feature of daily life for people of all ages. As you are likely aware, however, they can particularly expose primary school children to a number of risks – including cyberbullying and encountering harmful content.

In response to this, a number of school communities have agreed to not provide their child with a smartphone until they finish sixth class.

The parents' association respects each family's right to decide whether or not their children have access to the internet or a smartphone, and as such we are first seeking to establish if there is interest in exploring this as a measure. To find out more, you can read resources available here: <https://www.webwise.ie/parents/>.

We recognise that as part of the school's education programme some pupils have supervised access to technology to support their learning. This allows our children access to online educational resources that can greatly enhance their learning experience. This is separate to the voluntary agreement that is being proposed. Access to and use of the internet during the school day is outlined in the school's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and any proposed voluntary agreement would not interfere with this.

It is important to help inform the approach that parents or guardians answer the questions in the survey below and return it to the school. Parents or guardians should seek the views of their children as to the approach also.

1. Do you think your primary school aged children should own their own smartphone?
2. Do you want to be part of a voluntary agreement regarding smartphones for your children?
3. Are there ways we could support you to better support your children to navigate the online world more safely?

Yours sincerely,

Parents' association

Sample sign-up form template

Parents' Association Smartphone Agreement

School Name: _____

Please review the attached Parents' Association Smartphone Agreement and if you wish to be part of it please sign and return this form to the school.

Name of Student: _____

Class: _____

Parent/Guardian:

As the parent or guardian of the above student, I have read the parents' association agreement regarding smartphones and I wish to be part of the proposed approach

I do not wish to be part of the proposed approach.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

The parents' association respects each family's right to decide whether or not their children have access to the internet or a smartphone and there is no obligation to return this form if you do not wish to do so.