

2025.01.21

Deputy K.M. Wilson of St. Clement of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding the Children and Young People Survey (OQ.1/2025):

Further to the response to Written Question 212/2024, will the Minister advise whether he has reviewed the responses to the Children and Young People Survey (2024), and if so, what conclusions he has reached in relation to the use of smartphone and social media, and what actions he will be taking to protect children from the harms associated to this technology?

Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central (The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning):

I thank the Deputy for her question. The Statistics Jersey survey, as mentioned in the question, was undertaken between 7th and 18th October 2024; years 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12. Stats Jersey are aiming to publish the final report in the spring of this year. Their website lists an intended date of publication in March. Because the results are not yet published, neither I nor the Minister for Children and Families, who answered the Written Question 212/2024, have reviewed the responses yet.

3.6.1 Deputy K.M. Wilson:

We will await the review. In the meantime, there is a growing body of evidence and, certainly, a lot of content in the media about the important public health issues that are arising as a result of smartphone use. Can he tell us whether or not he is alert to this and minded or has previously had conversations with the Safeguarding Partnership Board and the Minister for Health and Social Services on addressing the public health and safeguarding issues that are so prominent in this arena?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I am very cognisant of the issues. I can speak for schools, because I think there is an important point to be made here. Schools across our Island led the way in, if you like, putting the genie back in the bottle when it comes to mobile phones by not allowing mobile phones in the classroom or in schools. There is some range in which they do that, but schools best know their children. The respite from mobile phones and social media really happens in schools. I remind the Deputy that children spend 15 per cent of their year in schools and 85 per cent out of school. In terms of the Safeguarding Partnership Board, it has not been a specific item on the agenda. It is an interesting one and I certainly will raise that. As a health issue, yes, there does need to be some joined-up thinking. What I will say, is that schools can only do so much in school time. We cannot be parenting children at home. But yes, I would support any action taken to protect children from the bad effects of devices.

3.6.2 Deputy D.J. Warr of St. Helier South:

How does the Minister ensure safeguarding for all children on school sites when some children bring unrestricted smartphones to school?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

As I have mentioned, schools have policies across our estate now of not allowing phones in schools. One school in particular, I can give an example because we visited and spoke to the children - we do actually visit schools quite often - told us very carefully how they have initiated what one could call a complete ban. I do not like that word, because I think it is very negative. Children simply do not have phones in schools. The best way of safeguarding against those issues is simply not to use them. One of the issues was that they had to buy more footballs. I was quite happy to fund that.

3.6.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

I think it is clear that more research is needed into this. Would the Minister agree that there needs to be some guidelines, perhaps from Public Health, that is based on evidence that parents and schools can understand what safe levels of usage are and what is a safe way of using these smartphones? Would the Minister seek to obtain these guidelines and this clarity on what that research is?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I believe they already exist as well. Some work has already happened on that. A document was produced for schools in terms of safe use of mobile phones recently. I was trying to look it up, but I cannot find it in my documents. But I can get that to the Deputy and to the Assembly. But, yes, I agree. In terms of a Public Health issue, I think one of the things to ensure is that as we ... and as I mentioned, there is a genie that is out of the bottle. To control social media is very, very difficult. I think education, working with parents, is one of the most difficult things. Sometimes, as a parent, it is really difficult to say no, but I think that is what we need to try and support. I agree with the Deputy that this issue needs to be taken on board. I will reiterate, and I would say it would be nice at some point in this Assembly if Members were to recognise the work that has gone on in schools, to recognise the support that teachers have given to put that genie back in the bottle. The work they do in saying no to children when sometimes parents are really struggling to do that, I think that does need to be recognised at times.

3.6.4 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I absolutely echo what the Deputy says about the excellent job that our teachers are doing. Could he comment then on specific examples, for example, children who might have autism or A.D.H.D. (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder) and their neurodivergence means that exposure to screens can be extremely harmful? Experts are actually recommending complete abstinence in some of those cases?

[11:15]

How will the Deputy ensure that the curriculum can still be delivered to children whose healthcare doctors have recommended that they do not access screens at all?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is nice to speak to someone who is an ex-teacher and used the word “differentiation” because one of the things that we should be doing is ensuring that young people in our classroom are able to access in the best possible way for them. I am very confident that teachers will address those specific issues, depending on the level of need, particularly if a child has a record of need, that should be recorded very carefully on that record of need. Certainly also funding accompanies that. But also, within the Special Educational Needs Register and the recognition within schools, those things should be recorded. We have a balance, and I can remember - I will not say how many years ago - when I.T. (information technology) was the be-all and end-all in schools, and we used to battle for the computer room. I think we have gone much further along, and I think we are at a stage where we have to think about screen time and the effects of that, and the best use of information technology to deliver education for our young people and support them but not do the harms that are becoming more obvious as we go into that world of I.T.

3.6.5 Deputy H.L. Jeune of St. John, St. Lawrence and Trinity:

Of course the harmful effects of screen time has been spoken about but also, as we have seen recently with the rowing back of fact-checking ethics and any moral understanding around social media and the oligarchs that are taking over that space, what will the Minister be supporting the schools in being able to give the tools that our youngsters, but quite frankly also adults, would need to understand when a fact is a fact and when rubbish is rubbish?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I am not sure what power I have as the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning to take on the oligarchs, but I will give it a go. I do agree with the Deputy. I think what we need to do is we need to be very careful at what we are looking at here. I agree about social media and those social media channels, which I share the concerns about the lack of fact-checking. But I.T. in schools is not simply used as social media. That is a separate issue. The delivery of education using very well thought through, very specific and very well-designed pieces of information technology can enhance the curriculum, and we have got to get that balance right. I do not think social media outlets are particularly useful in any form of education, but things such as simulation packages, use of data loggers in science, for example, which are remarkable pieces of equipment, the access to multimedia to open up the whole world of literature and information is useful. It is about that skill and that balancing of those 2 things. But in terms of what we can do with social media, that is a real serious issue. What schools have done is simply take the mobile phones out of schools, which I think is the simplest way to do it.

3.6.6 Deputy H.L. Jeune:

Something has just popped into my head in a supplementary question on this. But maybe the Minister could look into the great work the Greffe does around political education and the work that States Members do when we go into schools that we ourselves could also talk to youngsters about the worry on social media and that way, especially around politics, is manipulated through social media. That is something that we could, as States Members, do when we go into schools and talk about our work there.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I absolutely agree with the Deputy, and I thank Members from across the Assembly for their work with schools, because I know there is a huge amount of that that goes on. I certainly have been myself. I forgot to say, every time I have been in school, which was on numerous occasions last year, and we have talked to groups of young people, the use of social media and mobile phones comes up because I ask them the question, and we start those discussions. I think we need to recognise that there is a growing awareness among young people themselves about the issues that they face. So there was an open door there for us to support young people. How we talk about the validity of information and the validity of sources of information is a very interesting thing and I think it is something that probably is addressed in some subjects, certainly subjects that look at R.S. (religious studies) and psychology, for example, look at the validity of information. But, yes, I would agree that is a really good thing that we could do as States Members. It is not easy but perhaps with the Deputy and with the C.P.A. (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) we could produce a document, if you like, a lesson that Members could take in and use and that might be a really constructive thing to come from this discussion.

3.6.7 Deputy K.M. Wilson:

Thank you to the Minister for his account. I think there is a danger that we constantly engage in describing what is and I wonder if the Minister would be prepared, when he has got the information available to him, to make a specific statement about the interventions he will deliver, specifically as the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, to lead and direct the issues associated or the issues that come out of the findings of the review that has been done? Will he commit to put in a framework around that to monitor the effectiveness of the interventions that he intends to put in place?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

That is not difficult to agree with because I think there are so many interventions that schools are already putting in. I would invite the Deputy to come in and perhaps talk to one of the schools with me. That would be a really constructive thing to do. In terms of the report, yes of course we will take on board the information from important reviews of young people. But yes, absolutely, I think we do need to look really carefully about how we are addressing these issues with young people to get the balance between the unfettered use of social media and mobile phones, but also the education piece, which is to say when you are 18 or 17 and we are not controlling whether you can look at your phone or whether you are at home and we are not controlling from schools when you look at your phone, what is safe around its usage. It does happen in schools already. It does happen in many, many years. We were told that by a group of year 9s, myself and Deputy Alves, who said to us: "Yes, we probably know more about it than you." So it was a really interesting conversation and I would encourage coming to school, that would be a really useful thing to do. But yes, if there are interventions, and I can make a statement of course. I will also say, if you look back at my answers to questions on 11th November and 11th June last year, I have covered this topic quite extensively in this Assembly.