

## **WHO WE ARE**

We represent a group of Jersey parents coming together under the banner of a global grassroots movement called '**Smartphone Free Childhood**', with over 370 Jersey parents and 300,000 members in the UK. Support, however, is much broader than our WhatsApp community group of 370 Jersey parents, with many more people of all ages echoing our concerns. This is our response to the CEHA Scrutiny Review "What protection do children in Jersey have from online harms".

We will explore what the problems are with today's digital world, exploring some evidence of harm children and families have experienced, here in Jersey and further afield. We will also attempt to offer some solutions to this unprecedented problem: how to protect society's most vulnerable from an ever-evolving digital dimension of extraordinary global data sharing.

## **WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?**

**As parents, we are desperate for support. How many more children need to suffer abuse, bullying, self-harm, addiction and even worse, for serious action to be taken?**

When we first started giving smartphones to children, we didn't understand their impact. Over the last few years, smart device technology has evolved at a terrifying speed and the content too easily accessible by children and young people is absolutely horrendous, as are the addictive apps and algorithms embedded into the design of these devices.

**Looking through recent newspapers alone is enough to crystallise any parent's worst fears.**

The news coverage on the most watched show on Netflix, *Adolescence*, is comprehensive and highlights some of the devastating repercussions of un-supervised smartphone and social media use:

*The Guardian: "On a cultural level, it's about cyberbullying, the malign influence of social media and the unfathomable pressures faced by boys in Britain today. Male rage, toxic masculinity, online misogyny. This isn't just all-too-plausible fiction. It's unavoidable fact...It's a cautionary tale about getting teenagers off screens and engaging with real life again."*

Recently, in the BBC's annual Richard Dimbleby lecture, Sir Gareth Southgate, the former England football manager, attacked the "toxic" effects of social media and called for young men to be taught belief and resilience: "boys need role models not gaming and porn".

The Times reports on links between the rise in rape culture in primary schools and the unhealthy culture online. The charity Everyone's Invited carried out a survey of primary schools in the UK: they report that the overwhelming majority of teachers surveyed said pupils under the age of 9 are watching pornography and using misogynistic, violent and sexist language in the classroom and playground. It also includes anonymous testimonials from pupils between the ages of 5 and 11 of rape culture, groping and inappropriate touching. The article says "the collective howl of pain across 1 in 12 primary schools is harrowing" and is "the state of our children in 2025".

*The Times: "The National Police Chiefs' Council warns there has been a 400% increase in child sexual abuse and exploitation (from 2013 to 2024). It's hard to understand how this has escalated so fast, but Soma Sara, who set up (the charity) Everyone's Invited puts the blame firmly on online culture. "Few children appear to be learning this increasingly misogynistic, abusive behaviour from their parents or the adults around them," she says. "But if just one kid in the class has a phone, they all have access to a world of porn and violence. Go into any cafe or on public transport and seven year-olds are scrolling on tablets, it is insanity. It is giving them direct access to the most extreme content possible with a click of the finger."*

Furthermore, The Times reports that "police chiefs are calling for children under 16 to be banned from social media to protect them from online violence, misogyny and extremism that is "fuelling and enabling" crime...last year there were 10,000 arrests in the UK involving online child sexual exploitation, double the number over the previous twelve months"

*"Sarah Crew, chief constable and National Police Chiefs' Council lead on rape and serious sexual offences, said "young people are by their nature vulnerable and [social media] gives those perpetrators who would want to do harm a really direct channel...as the adults in society we need to protect our children, it's our responsibility to come together. I think it is a crisis, like Covid, where all parts of the state and society and the voluntary sector came together and said 'right this is a problem'." The brutal murder of Brianna Ghey by fellow teens, energised by toxic social media harm, is just one of many examples that our young people are not just being shaped into victims but also perpetrators of violence.*

*"Dame Lynne Owens, deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and former head of the National Crime Agency, said parents often assumed children were most in danger when they left the house, "but actually the current truth is our children are less safe online in their bedrooms"...there is also a rising national security threat posed by the radicalisation of young people through social media. A fifth of those arrested for terrorist offences last year were children; one in eight investigated by MI5 were under 18." How much police time do we want taken up investigating children enticed into preventable exploration of violent crimes, through content pushed to them by addictive algorithms on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat? Sadly, this avenue also leads to tragedy: last year two young men, Southport killer Axel Rudakubana and Luton murderer Nicholas Prosper, fuelled on a diet of extremist material too easily available on social media platforms, enacted their violent fantasies.*

Similar stories are played out in the domain of online pornography and the vast catalogue of paedophile porn, so easily available online for any curious teenager: infamous Pornhub has no robust age-verification systems; algorithms push violent and paedophile porn with impunity, ruining lives of young and old men alike. Even with OFCOM's recent age assurance guidance for providers of pornography content, porn is still just a click away for adults and children alike.

The Times shares a sad story: "My teen son, the porn addict: 'please, mum, can you help me'." "At home we had strict boundaries in place and parental controls on the smartphone we bought him when he was 14. And I thought the Online Safety Act protected children from pornography. Yet there were workarounds and young people's grasp of technology provided a "devil's playground", as my son describes it. A playground they were able to access on their iPads in school. "The problem is, Mum," Dom said, "adults can't solve the problem. You're all technologically illiterate compared with primary-school kids. If the government wants to eradicate porn from kids' screens, it needs to enlist the help of a child tsar, about 14 or 15. By that age, everyone is using it."

## **EVIDENCE OF HARM**

**There is a growing body of evidence linking smartphone use with a huge array of serious harms.**

Smartphone use correlates with anxiety, depression and loneliness and is a gateway to pornography, cyberbullying, grooming, violence, unrealistic body images and extremist misogynistic content.

Evidence shows levels of anxiety and mental health issues have shot up since 2012, correlated with the rise in smartphone use and social media. Teens with problematic smartphone use (PSU) are three times more likely to have depression (Kings College London, 2024) and the younger a child is given a smartphone, the worse their mental health is today (Sapien Labs study of 27,000 young adults, 2023). UK teen girls self-harm episodes have increased by 365% from 2010 to 2021 (Cybulski et al, BMC Psychiatry, 2021); and 'cyber trauma' is real, often requiring extensive treatment and only sometimes is recovery successful (sadly one view is enough to traumatise).

Tech companies intentionally make their products addictive, because the more time we spend on them, the more data they harvest and the more money they make. "Big Tech isn't showing kids what they want to see, it's showing them what they can't look away from" (Cant Look Away film) *"Behind every screen on your phones, a thousand engineers have worked to make it maximally addicting. Children are particularly susceptible to this kind of manipulative design"* Aza Raskin, co-inventor of 'infinite scroll', turned campaigner.

Research also shows, smartphones negatively affect academic performance (children at schools with effective smartphone bans yield GCSE's 1-2 grades higher) and many children show signs of behavioural addiction to their devices, even acting as a gateway to other addictive substances and behaviours (Nagata et al, Current Opinion in Paediatrics, 2025). What may start off as seemingly harmless gaming and online "play", can open the door to online coercion or grooming, as well as lead to PSU and yet further down the road to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography addictions.

Smartphones are also experience-blockers, distracting our kids from engaging with the real world, re-wiring their brains and robbing them of their childhood. Children may be quieter with a smartphone in their hand, but they are losing the ability to play and interact "in-real-life" IRL. Youth leaders speak of having to teach modern kids "how" to play. Whilst hyper connected online, children are lonelier and more nervous about in-person interactions than ever before.

Tech bosses in Silicon Valley have admitted, they won't allow their own kids to have smartphones, such is the harm they pose! *Steve Jobs famously said about his children "we don't allow the iPad in the home; we think it is too dangerous for them" and Bill Gates didn't allow his 4 children smartphones or computers until they were 14 years old. Mark Zuckerberg, may push Meta/Facebook/Instagram to other children but certainly not his; they are not allowed social media nor excessive screen use for entertainment.*

Tech Giants send their children to one of the many tech-free schools in Silicon Valley – they are fully aware of the addictive design embedded in smart devices and gamified learning apps and social media platforms. Digital equity used to look like "give every child a device and free access to the internet", but now the privileged that once used to chase the latest digital device, are seeking to minimise the addictive influence of 'smart' devices over their lives and maximise real life learning, play, experiences and relationships.

Ofcom in the UK reveals shocking stats:

- **nearly every child over 12 in the UK has a smartphone**
- **20% of 3-4 year olds own their own device and 25% of 5-7 year olds**
- **the average child spends around 29 hours a week on their smartphone**
- **1 in 14 children are now spending over 40 hours per week on their smartphone (this equates to a full-time job!)**

These weekly hours add up to years of wasted youth, leaving little time for real world activities, relationships and learning new skills. The opportunity cost for mindless scrolling is huge: musical instruments and sports left untouched in favour of “brain-rot”.

**The UK Children’s Commissioner said half of the 13 year olds her team surveyed reported seeing ‘hardcore, misogynistic’ pornographic material on social media sites, and 90% of girls and 50% of boys say they are sent unwanted explicit content. Since 2019 self-generated CSAM (child sexual abuse material) has increased over 400% in the UK and it is now the predominant form of CSAM, as children are so vulnerable to sextortion.**

Many parents don’t want to give their child a smartphone but feel they have no choice because all their friends have one - no parent wants to isolate their child from their peer group. **We have a collective action problem, which calls for a collective action solution:** when asked, children wish everyone could opt out of social media, as they feel the damage it inflicts, but they don’t want to be alone opting out – they need our collective help!

**Jersey children smartphone and social media usage is as ubiquitous as in the UK, as reported by the Jersey Children and Young People’s Survey Report 2024:**

- **Smartphone ownership:** 63% of year 6 children, rising to 96% of year 8’s
- **Social Media usage:** 53% of year 4 children use social media “at least sometimes”, this rises to 72% of year 6 children and 94% of year 8’s (80% of year 8 girls had at least one social media account in their own name)
- **Social Media impact:** 36% of females felt pressured to look or appear a certain way on social media, compared to 15% of males.
- **Social Media E-safety:** Overall, 37% of young people had sent messages to a stranger online, 20% had lied to their parents about who they speak to online, 22% had changed/removed social media privacy settings to attract more followers, 24% had received a frightening/threatening message (of which 39% of year 12 females), and overall 28% of young people reported receiving sexual photos/videos (51% of year 12 females)
- **Bullying:** overall 17% of young people reported they had been involved in bullying behaviour using mobiles, tablets, online games or social media. 49% of those reported being bullied in the last year had more than 5 hours daily screen time, compared to 34% of those who hadn’t been bullied
- **Screentime usage:** 39% of young people had more than 5 hours of total screen time the previous day, 37% had 3-5 hours of screentime (only 10% of children had less than 2 hours daily screentime). Males gamed more than females: 36% males spent 3 plus hours gaming compared to 13% females.

- **Sleep:** Among young people who got 3 hours or less of sleep the previous night, 55% reporting having more than 5 hours of screen time the day before, compared to 28% of those who got 8 hours or more of sleep

Parents in Jersey have reported:

- Incidents of self harm because of viewing self harm content online
- Eating disorders resulting from viewing unrealistic body images online and groups promoting eating disorders
- Bullying via online chat groups (including iMessage on school iPads)
- Extensive phone use during school time - distracting them from learning (parents receive constant messages when they know children are in lessons)
- Children are using smartphones during break times, including viewing age inappropriate apps (even if parents have signed forms to say they have no such apps). They are missing out on crucial playing and real-life connection with friends.
- Children filming fights between other children and then sharing them virally on social media.

Most parents are afraid to speak out about such issues in case it affects their relationship with their children, or their children's relationships with their peers, or even relationships with their children's school.

As parents, we are in an impossible position: either we give our children a smartphone, with all the known harms; or we protect them from those harms by not giving them a smartphone, but risk isolating them from their peers at a crucial time in their development. However, even when parents choose to not give their children a smartphone, once on school grounds, they are not protected from seeing inappropriate content on someone else's smartphone in the playground. *Where is the equity and safeguarding in the school environment if parents who want to shield their children from harmful content and addictive apps by not giving them a smartphone, cannot be sure that another child will not share such content or addictive technology with them on school grounds?*

**We are not Anti-Tech. We are Pro-Childhood.**  
**Childhood should be a Time to Create not Consume.**

Children should be using technology, not it using them. We believe children don't need constant access to a smartphone. To be genuinely digitally literate does not require continuous and distracting access to Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat. Our goal is to allow them to experience the innocence of childhood and to delay exposure to social media and smartphones for as long as possible. Schools that use social media channels to communicate with pupils undermine parents and children who are trying to navigate away from the addictive harm embedded into social media.

As parents we would like to see a scientific assessment of potential harms and benefits of using Educational Technology in schools before rolling it out: it's becoming harder and harder for us to control tech use at home when schools mandate the use of gamified dopamine-flooding apps such as Times Tables Rock Stars (children spend more time choosing their avatars than learning times tables!). What starts as 'just homework', quickly morphs with a 'quick flick across' into something else, acting as a gateway into unhealthy addictive tech. *When schools stop forcing Ed Tech on pupils/parents, they can go back to holding parents responsible for their children's tech use!*

### **TESTIMONIALS FROM JERSEY PARENTS ON OUR GROUP:**

"My daughter started self-harming at the age of 9 in response to bullying on a group chat on an iPad. At that time we removed the iPad and we got our little girl back for a while. She then moved schools and within a week of having a school iPad (we have told her she will never have a phone of any variety), she started self-harming again.

This has escalated to suicidal plans and ideation in response to negative comments on group chats. In addition, she has been targeted on social media by a suicide-encourager. We have had the worst experience of devices and social media, aside from my daughter actually killing herself which of course terrifies us every second of every day".

"We have just disposed of our 11 year olds smartphone, it's been a tough weekend and a challenging ride to come through but we are 100% sticking with it, as we have seen such a decline in her mental health and general well-being (as a result of the smartphone)".

'I have been hesitant to share, knowing it will upset my daughter, who has asked me not to make things worse. However as a parent, I feel compelled to speak out about the harassment and bullying she has faced. Last night, she received prank calls from a group of (name of school omitted) kids making cruel, weight related comments, she's also been tarred about her race. To make matters worse, I've learned that during school hours she has received messages mocking her, including a photo of her being circulated to ridicule her. These deliberate and persistent actions have left her deeply distressed. Bullying of this nature is incredibly harmful. This behaviour is happening within a year group where one girl has already been hospitalized for anorexia - an alarming reflection of the pressures and cruelty some children face".

"I am not overly concerned about my own children's use of smartphones as having read the evidence, they will not be getting their own phone until they are 14 at the earliest. I am however deeply concerned about Jersey's young people and the cohort leaving school now who have had these devices and addictive apps for the past 4-5 years. In particular having observed an 18 year old on work experience in my office last summer. I had a bit of sympathy when the individual was playing on their phone instead of doing the online training sessions but this quickly evaporated when they were invited to join a conference call with a top barrister in London on an interesting point of law. Rather than bringing a pad of paper to take notes they brought their phone and were busy tik-tok swiping on it during the call. Even more concerning was when they were invited for a coffee with a team member. Rather than make eye contact and chat while waiting for the lift, their head was down, playing on their phone. Given this individual should have been there trying to impress a potential employer I found the phone addiction both sad and concerning. If this is the state in which our bright young people (the island's future workforce) are leaving Jersey's top secondary schools then what future is there for Jersey PLC??".

"My husband just told me the following - 2 girls were on his bus yesterday aged between 12-14. They didn't make eye contact and sat next to each other and they had the same school uniform on. He said they didn't even say hi, but sat shoulder to shoulder the entire journey on their phones, got off and walked to school without a word. He said there were another dozen kids on the same bus, and the bus was entirely silent. I always remember the bus being raucous and fun - you mixed with kids from different schools - now it's silent and lonely. He said it was eerily quiet and depressing".

'Both my older kids were at (school name omitted) and we did end up buying them phones due to the peer group pressure. It was our biggest nightmare, it caused major bullying issues with group chats and mental health issues, from looking at various social media apps they watched and the constant FOMO. We have a third daughter who is 9 and we have made a very costly decision to keep her at (school name omitted) till she is 14 as we know there is a complete ban on phones and she knows she won't need one at all'.

'In terms of tech literacy and civil liberties I do not see how this justifies the requirement for 'personal' smart internet enabled devices. A shared home family device solves this. Plus, it strikes me that school offers plenty of opportunities too. As for logistics, simply not giving smart internet enabled devices to children is the simplest approach to this problem. It is the one aspect of the equation that we as parents can actually control. I think that collective action and normalising the mindset and sentiment of this group is the best hope we have'.

'In the last 6 months I have observed my nephew all but disappear into his new iPhone. He is 10. Less than 6 months ago if we were out together, he would have been drawing, playing and running about with my sons. Now, if he has his phone he barely interacts and when I look at what he is doing, it is 'doom scrolling, i.e. watching endless streams of videos of drivel and nonsense. He has no ability to determine truth and fact from fiction and misinformation and he can't pull himself away from addictive algorithms'.

"We have pre-teen children at a local fee-paying primary school. Despite the eldest having been offered a place at a local selective secondary school with good academic standards we have taken the difficult and costly decision to turn down the place solely due to the unrestricted access to smart phones from year 7 onwards during the school day and over reliance on screens for teaching. We are not anti-tech but a balance should be struck and children under 16 don't need access to a smartphone during the school day. We have no certainty that our child will get a place when they are older and the costs for all three children are significant which impacts our lives. We however feel fortunate to be able to make this choice. Many other islanders can't'.

"I have seen the same issue played out in schools, especially the secondary setting, where during break and lunch, kids of 11 upwards have stopped interacting and are sat isolated on their phones. The impact on their physical and mental health is well documented and while I appreciate it is more difficult to ban children from having smartphones entirely, you at least have an ability to make sure these addictive and damaging devices have no place in schools'.

"I have a step daughter who has just joined (year and school omitted) and is regularly sending video messages (not sure on which app) on her phone at break times with her friend. We all know how addictive phones can be even for adults, so relying on 11 year olds to self-police, especially if all those around them are on their phones, is asking too much in my view'.

'My child won't be getting a smartphone until they are way older, but I think we just want to turn the culture and attitude around towards phones. I guess eventually if there is enough public pressure the big tech companies have to start taking responsibility for the content of social media and addictive algorithms...it may even become something equivalent to smoking in years to come. Who knows'.

'My son has started to notice how smart phones have impacted his friendships. No more mucking about in the back of the car on play dates, as they are scrolling YouTube shorts; not as up for

playing at youth club for the same. When he asked them to 'play footy' friends thought he was referring to online games not (outdoor actual) footy. He's seen stuff that makes him uncomfortable and it can't be unseen. He's 10 and he sees the impact".

"We were becoming increasingly aware of how easy it was for young teens to stumble on harmful content online (Google, YouTube, or social media like Snapchat, which is so popular with Jersey teens), so we reversed our parental decision and took our son's smartphone away from him just before his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. Without this mini-computer in his pocket, we thought he would be safe from seeing harmful content on school grounds, especially as he was at a school with a strict 'no see no hear' phone policy: but he was not. Our son may not have a smartphone but his peers at school do, and the school don't control what is on them and how they are accessed. So one morning in the school playground before the school day formally started, our son was shown a beheading video on a friend's phone – granted it was just the beheading of a cow, not a human and probably not a Jersey cow, but violence nonetheless and within the 'safe' confines of school."

"The tech industry has brought together the smartest minds of this century to create apps and algorithms designed to create addiction, a particular problem for children and adolescents whose prefrontal cortex hasn't developed yet. But instead, we are calling this a parenting problem".

"I don't get why schools aren't jumping on board. Purely from a selfish point of view, school results rise and there is less turnover of staff. Without even taking the children's health into consideration (which the school should be) this is win-win for schools". (Referring to a complete ban of smartphones in schools).

"Having 3 children aged 10,12 and 14, I've seen first-hand the downsides of children having access to phones and social media. Even if we can put this message out to Jersey families and schools, regardless of banning phones, hopefully parents stop giving their young children phones and social media apps beyond their years and encourage them to play age appropriately. Let kids be kids".

### **WHAT DO THE WIDER PUBLIC THINK?**

Smartphones have been with us for barely fifteen years, and regulation has not caught up with the pace of change in technology. This is a new frontier in parenting, but there has been a sea change in how the public sees social media and how it impacts young people.

A poll by LBC (UK radio station), commissioned for Online Safety Day in March 2025, revealed:

- **74% of people support raising the age at which you can access social media to 16 (10% opposed)**
- **70% support cigarette style warnings on social media and now make comparisons with drinking, cigarettes and gambling about how addictive it is**
- **Over 50% say social media addiction is worse than drug or alcohol addiction and**
- **66% of Brits support giving tech bosses jail time if they fail to properly protect young people - just 11% are against.**



GEN Z 'The Internet Generation' were also polled and felt the same:

- **62% of Gen Z surveyed say social media does more harm than good**
- **smartphones top their list of negatives for mental health**
- **3/4 of Gen Z Brits surveyed said, based on their own experience, they would keep their kids off social media, for as long as possible**
- **half said they regretted the time they spent on smartphones during their childhood.**
- **50% of teens say they are addicted to social media (Millennium Cohort Study, 2024)**

Teachers are equally concerned:

- **87% of teachers agree for teens the negatives of smartphones outweigh the benefits** (Teacher Tapp Survey, 2025)
- **83% of teachers favour banning devices throughout the entire school day**
- **75% of teachers say the majority of or all their lessons are interrupted by mobile phones** (National Education Association Survey, 2024)
- **NEU Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union**, said he believed a government ban on smartphones in schools would *"assist parents, but also take the pressure off schools". Most schools do have rules in place, but [a ban] would create a uniformity across the school system, which would be very important and ensure that a new culture was developed in which smartphones were not in possession during school time,* he said. He said the UK should consider following in Australia's steps with a social media ban for under-16s, adding: *"We have to view the online world, social media and mobile phones in the same prism as we view the tobacco companies. These are harmful to our young people and they need regulating."*
- **NASUWT General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach**, echoed similar sentiments, saying *"too many young people were addicted to their mobile phones...technology weaponised for entertainment."*

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHILDHOOD**

One way to look at how the introduction of smartphones to older teenagers and adults affects health etc, is to look at how each generation was affected when the technology was introduced. In the early 2010's:

### **Gen X were in their 30's**

They learnt the tech quickly, got sucked into the algorithms, but were able to manage the addictive nature of these new devices and rationalise the content fed to them - small increase in mental health issues.

### **The Millennials were older teens and young 20's**

At the time they suffered more on all health stats compared to Gen X, but the extreme health issues such as self harm, suicide and extremist behaviours and thoughts increased only slightly.

### **Gen Z were children at the time**

They were the first generation to have grown up with smartphones and they have been devastated on all health fronts. Their brains are not ready for such an onslaught of extreme content, they can't rationalise or challenge this content. Gen Z will be defined by this in history.

Health Professionals are particularly worried about social media use in children aged 8-15. This is when the brain is developing its own belief system, independently from core family values. Due to smartphone and social media use, this belief system is, in a lot of cases, being shaped by influencers, which in turn is leading to the horrific health statistics we can now see in young adults. Childhoods lived out, through performance on a digital platform, are either straying into the exploitative territory of child labour or child fame and stardom – neither of which have been well served in history! Furthermore, the Data Privacy rights of the child are also often severely compromised.

According to experts, if you wait until 16-18 years, the pre-frontal cortex of the brain has developed enough that you are able to consider, challenge and rationalise the consequences of what you see and hear. This is why most other addictive substances and behaviours are age-restricted to 18 years of age: alcohol, smoking, gambling and pornography. Other less risky activities are also age-gated: sex, tattoos, films, knives, solvents, sunbeds, lottery tickets, fireworks, matches and driving.

Children are protected from such activities until they reach maturity – they are not expected to practise driving or having sex before they reach the maturity to carry the responsibility of doing so. Learning to drive is a process that starts with road awareness taught rigorously through childhood, followed by a written test and a practical test at 17 years old. Learning about sex, starts with extensive education rather than practice, evolving from friendships to eventual sexual relations at an age-appropriate stage.

Contrastingly, social media uploads have no age-gating yet have a digital footprint akin to a tattoo that lasts forever and has infinite reach; whereas a body tattoo (age-gated at 18 years old) can be easily covered up or even removed! By delaying children from using social media and the smartphones that so conveniently house social media, schools and parents have time to teach digital wellness habits at an age-appropriate time, without running the risks of cyber trauma.

Currently, if you want to discuss the dangers of pornography with children, particularly boys, before they are exposed to it, then you are going to have that conversation by 9 years of age. Most boys have been exposed to hardcore pornography by 10 or 11 years old these days - this seems extraordinarily out of synch with laws that have been designed to protect children under 18 years old from viewing pornography; let alone today's extremely violent porn laced with paedophilia.

By delaying children's exposure to social media and the smartphones that house it so well, parents have time to discuss these issues before exposure, not in retrospect. We wouldn't expect children to be better at driving cars if they started young with no supervision or learning, so why do we think this is the best way to teach children about being safe online. Age-appropriate exposure and gradual introduction with guidance seems to be a more sensible approach – which parent wants to risk their child's wellbeing, especially as the benefits appear to be dwarfed by the associated risks? If it was any other product in the real world, it would have to be proven safe before children could use it. Smartphones should be under the same restraints: using safety-by-design and the precautionary principle:

*“As with new medicines, the emphasis must be on demonstrating that the innovation is safe rather than that the social experiment is causing harm. Society has imposed rules on the age at which children can drink or smoke or watch violent films, so it is logical to create a “digital watershed” to safeguard children, with robust age verification enforced through a universal digital ID system.”* The Times - Rachel Sylvester

We need help in the fight against Big Tech to protect our children: we are no match for the Tech Giants of Silicon Valley, who have billions of pounds at their disposal, as well as some of the brightest brains on the planet. They have created smartphones and smart devices are so intuitive, that the elderly with no tech expertise can learn it, and even babies and chimps are able to master it! With such a user-friendly design, no one is excluded from being a customer, but are we really viewed as just a customer? With our digital identities and data on the line we are quickly commoditised and we become the “product” in an attention-economy.

Brave whistle-blowers, such as Meta’s Sarah Wyn-Williams, have revealed that our every move is sold to advertisers: even children when they are at a vulnerable point, having just deleted a selfie, have beauty products unashamedly pushed to them. TikTok may present user-friendly functions to “dislike” content, but if that content is watched for any length of time, that “preference” expressed through watching will override the function selected, and undesirable content continues to appear. Ofcom says that Snapchat is used by 74% of UK teens, but “Anxious Generation” author Jonathan Haidt says “Snapchat is harming children at an industrial scale”, facilitating drug dealing, grooming, sextortion and addiction. Various teen accounts recently promoted are still not deemed safe.

It’s not good enough to say “it’s just the parent’s problem”: parental controls on smart devices are easily bypassed (47% of teens say they have bypassed controls, Parentkind survey 2024) by using VPN software, performing factory resets, or hacking the wifi router. Even schools with greater technical expertise than parents, struggle to stop children hacking their way through controls and protections. However, it’s not just parents that are responsible, not just schools, not just Governments, but we are all responsible and need to work together to find ways to protect childhood today. Big Tech is not here to make our life easier, they are here to make money, often through the simple mandate to just “keep kids online”, even at the cost of sleep, education and IRL play and socialisation.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopted by Jersey, emphasises the child’s best interests, right to life and develop to their full potential, right to access information from the media and freedom of expression and association (safely and within the law) and the right to relax and play. However, the dominance of the digital dimension appears to have infringed some of these rights: evidence reveals that children are not able to access information or express themselves safely online, that their online experiences are actually preventing them from developing to their full potential, as well as being barriers to essential IRL play and socialisation.

Whilst a digital dimension to childhood might be an interesting addition, it should not dominate childhood to the point of diminishing overall wellbeing and holistic development (physical, mental, educational and social). Children are multi-sensory and if sensory input is reduced too often to digital format (sight, sound and touch of a screen), the sensory dysregulation ramifications are huge: without enough IRL movement, touch, taste, smell and human-contact, holistic child development is compromised. It appears that the pendulum might have swung too far to the harm side, tipping the balance to negate any potential benefits from social media. Thus, we find ourselves in this zero-loss situation: taking children off social media is going to have minimal negative impact on their lives, but will likely have a massive benefit to their overall wellbeing.

Children uploading social media content do not have the maturity to understand the full ramification of how it might be used by others or in the future – employers often comb through a prospective employee’s digital footprint: a “digital tattoo” of sorts, but unlike a physical tattoo it is impossible to cover up, it can never be fully removed and it can go round the world and back in a nano-second!

## **OUR RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **For all Jersey schools to be genuinely smartphone free (Reception to Year 11 inclusive):**

Recent research highlights how important digital breaks are for healthy child development, giving children a break from addictive technology and releasing them to engage in IRL play and relationships. Ensuring 7-8 hours of a school day is smartphone free would be a great start!

The easiest, most achievable policy would be to restrict the use of smartphones on school sites. We are now seeing many schools across the UK that have successfully implemented this approach, either by running smartphone-free school sites or using phone lockers. It is not sufficient to tell children to put phones away in pockets or bags during the school day. The 'out of sight, out of mind' mantra simply does not work, due to the addictive nature of smartphone devices and the frequency of alerts (evidence shows that their very presence, even in lockable-pouches is enough to distract). These 'no see, no hear' policies have been shown to be ineffective, with blatant phone use going undetected - removing smartphones from the person are the preferred option (using lockers or brick phone uniform policy).

Schools have the amazing opportunity to influence culture, and this can be achieved most powerfully by 'brick' only school phone policies, i.e. non-internet and camera-less 'brick' phones are specified on the uniform list. We are hopeful that this may become the norm in the future but recognise the potential challenges with such a policy at present.

There is currently no centralised school policy for smartphone-free schools, consequently, the approach varies significantly across our island's schools. Victoria College has successfully implemented phone lockers for all year 7 pupils joining in September 2024, however across the road JCG allows smartphone use during breaktimes. However, if phone lockers were offered to every year 7-11 class on the island, every child on the island could benefit from a daily digital and social media break, allowing them to focus on learning, play and socialisation during the school day.

### **Limit social media to over 16's:**

Over 16 year olds have the maturity to better process harmful content and are more able to self-regulate potential addiction. Other countries, such as Australia, are pioneers in this area by age-gating social media to over 16's. Age-verification software and raising the age of digital consent would help reduce the harmful content and addictive algorithms children are currently exposed to. Ireland and other parts of Europe have set (in data protection legislation) the age where a person with parental responsibility is required for the processing of personal data in the context of online services at 16 years old – as this map clearly illustrates: <https://www.privo.com/blog/gdpr-age-of-digital-consent>. Even Pornhub (which currently only requires ticking an "I am over 18 years old" box) has suggested age-verification at device level, so that avenue could also be explored.

### **Online safety legislation for the island (port IRL legislation to URL):**

Sadly, there is no silver bullet to police the online world. Jersey did not adopt the UK Online Safety Act (OSA) and currently doesn't have its own. We are a small jurisdiction where it is relatively easy to introduce new laws, so we could lead the way in this area. Ofcom has tried to regulate platforms to make them safe for children but have recognised that whilst the OSA can reduce risk of online harm, it cannot remove it completely – this is not a risk parents are willing to take with their children anymore! There is IRL legislation to age-gate gambling, pornography, child labour, alcohol,

nicotine, tattoos and sex: work needs to be done to port this across to the digital dimension. Children are too easily exposed to apps and online games that imitate gambling and tap into highly addictive dopamine pleasure-reward pathways in the brain, as well as invasive pornography, and data privacy breaches. Even the Roblox social gaming platform exploits children's creativity for its own profit: children pay to create games other children pay to play, but the platform keeps almost all the proceeds – thus giving echoes of child labour, whilst also being a “paedophile playground” (easy access to unsupervised children who believe they are safe just playing a game)...

### **Public health warning for addictive technology (software and hardware):**

*“The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency. It is time to require a warning label on social media platforms” Dr Vivek Murphy, US surgeon General, 2024*

There have been various voices sounding the alarm on addictive software and hardware, calling for public health warning labels on smart devices and dopamine-flooding apps and games. This could be similar to age-rating for films and video games, or alternatively like the packaging and labelling for cigarettes. Even sweets with behaviour altering additives are labelled as such!

### **Promoting simple ‘brick’ phones for children under 16 years**

Changing the phone culture for children so they are no longer expected to be responsible for safe smartphone use, or to self-regulate their access to the internet, social media or addictive apps.

### **Robust evidence-based testing for Ed Tech in all educational settings**

Early Years and Primary School settings free of Ed Tech and personal devices, promoting real-life creative imaginative natural play instead. Evidence-based testing for all Ed Tech (hardware and software) in secondary schools and the free choice to opt-out of digital learning and homework; whilst also promoting IRL play, creative activity and socialisation.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

### **PROTECT OUR CHILDREN FROM ONLINE HARM BY:**

Whilst better online regulation might ensure our children are better protected from online harms and should be considered as a matter of urgency, this may take time to implement, so we need to act quickly to protect today's children and provide ‘tech-safe’ spaces for them.

Therefore, we believe creating smartphone free educational settings is an easy, achievable, first step that can be taken to start the cultural change needed to protect our children from the harms of the digital world now.

- 1) Smartphone-free educational settings**
- 2) Age-gating social media to over 16 years**
- 3) Online safety legislation for the island**
- 4) Public health warnings for addictive technology**
- 5) Promotion of safe phones for children under 16 years**
- 6) Ed Tech in educational settings robustly tested**

It takes a village to raise a child. Parents are doing their best, but they need help, support and guidance on this issue, especially from the government. The societal problems associated with smartphone and social media mis-use are extremely serious and require us all to work together, as a united community: our families, our schools, our youth service, our police and our government.