



Local Alliance Starter Guide

A guide to establishing a local parents' alliance
in your child's school

Introduction

So you've just finished reading "The Anxious Generation" by Jonathon Haidt. Or you recently watched "Childhood 2.0". Or you've been following the Heads Up Alliance on Facebook for a few months. Or maybe as a parent, you just know instinctively that a childhood tethered to a smartphone is damaging for your growing children.

You feel strongly about providing your child a full and healthy play-based childhood. You know that you must delay the smartphone as long as possible. But walking that path alone seems difficult, almost overwhelming - not to mention having to deal with your child's FOMO.

You realise that if you're going to do this successfully, it's going to require a *community effort* - and you're thinking about establishing your own local alliance of families in your child's school to facilitate just that.

This guide is for you!

Establishing an alliance to support your family's resolve to delay the smartphone is easier than you think. And it might just be one of the most consequential parenting decisions you'll ever make.

Step 1: Start the Conversation

An alliance begins with just one email, one text message, just one line in one conversation with one other parent:

“Are you struggling with screens in your home as much as our family is?”

The answer is almost certain to be a resounding “YES!”. There is barely a home untouched by screen-related conflict today and many parents are just waiting for someone to start opening up about this mammoth modern problem affecting us all.

Sharing your own struggles and concerns first tends to create space for the conversation to flow more easily and honestly.

Eventually, your conversation will lead to the big questions:

Is the problem beyond us?

Are we destined to lose another generation of children to Big Tech?

Do we just give up hope of ever reclaiming childhood?

Is there something we can do about it?

You know where this is headed, right?

You’ve already thought about this issue for a while, and this is your cue to introduce the outrageously simple concept of **delaying in community**. In fact, your friend may already have heard something about the Heads Up Alliance.

“I like their message - delaying together in community until the end of Year 8 - what do you reckon? Can we do this?”

As soon as just one other family agrees to delay smartphones for their children with yours (we suggest aiming until the end of Year 8) your new local alliance is born.

Congratulations!

Step 2 - The Working Group

At this point, it's probably a good idea for you and your new community alliance partner to try to bring in a couple more families into your alliance to form a working group.

Start with the parents of your children's closest friends. You probably already have their contact details. Be brave. Send them an old-fashioned email, or if you're *really* feeling courageous, call them!

See the scripts in Step 4 for ideas on what to say.

If these parents are not too keen on what you're presenting, ask them if *they* know someone who might be interested.

Step 3 - Design Your Alliance

Once you have your working group, it's time to put your heads together and start designing your alliance.

What a great excuse to catch up over a long lunch!

Google Form

Some school alliances make a written commitment via a Google Form which parents can then share and sign.

Our suggested wording is:

“I commit to my fellow parents in my local school alliance, and to all parents in the Heads Up Alliance nationally, that I will delay giving my child a smartphone until at least the end of Year 8.”

WhatsApp

Other school alliances incorporate the wording above in a WhatsApp group.

If you do set up a WhatsApp group for your school alliance, we strongly recommend that you confirm the identities of all participants prior to entry into the chat. WhatsApp has a feature for this called the “Approve New Members” setting.

The main downside with a WhatsApp-based alliance is that unless you're careful, it can start to get noisy and result in parents spending more time on their phones than they would like - and that's the last thing we want!

Facebook Group

A private Facebook group (not a page) is another way to connect members of your new alliance.

Again, you may wish to pin the commitment wording so that it remains prominent.

Wait Mate Online Platform

Wait Mate (waitmate.org.au) is an Australian platform that allows parents in your school community to make their commitment to delay through a website. We are familiar with similar platforms from around the world, and we reckon the Wait Mate platform is easily the best of them all.

It is especially helpful if your school community does not have a parent (or group of parents) ready to take an active leadership role in an alliance. Parents simply make an online pledge, and once 10 families in the same grade have committed, the platform connects them automatically.

Bear in mind that alliances administered through Wait Mate can only form on a grade-by-grade basis (rather than across an entire school or community). And because the platform does the organising for you, parents are required to share some personal information with Wait Mate.

Email

Finally, we have email.

It's a bit more work than the platforms above, but also very powerful and very rewarding.

It's also most conducive to community building as your own alliance has full control over its communications.

Here's how it works:

A nominated parent maintains a list of families in the school's alliance - and sends an email occasionally to all the families in the alliance (perhaps monthly or even quarterly is fine).

The email serves to share relevant news with the alliance and to provide an up-to-date student list by grade so that every parent and child in the alliance knows the identity of the other children in the alliance. This provides an explicit and powerful reminder to the children that they are not alone (since parents are encouraged to share the names of other students in the alliance with their own children, especially those in the same class/grade).

The Big Yes

In addition to all this, we encourage local alliances to organise a program of "in real life" voluntary activities with each other.

Our movement is a **positive movement at its heart**. We say "not yet" to smartphones in order to say "yes" to so much more: to nature, family, your neighbourhood, genuine human connection, play, creativity, music, art, books, curiosity, self-knowledge, to life!

Delaying smartphones opens up a world of possibilities for our children with their friends: hiking in a local national park, picnicking, enjoying some shopping followed by face-to-face conversation over lunch, a game of soccer in the park, taking an art class together, a trip to the theatre, participation in a "National Tree Day" event, a visit to the zoo, attending a game of

footy, and so much more! The possibilities are endless once our kids are freed from distracting hand-held devices!

The program doesn't need to be complicated or burdensome. A super easy and low-cost event is a gathering at a local park on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Everyone can bring a plate of food to share. One family brings their cricket set, another brings a footy and a couple of others a deck of UNO - and you're all good to go!

Especially in the beginning, when your alliance is still busy getting established and finding its feet, you might only like to aim for your first "in real life" event a few months down the track, even six months away. That's totally fine, but we recommend still setting a date early and letting new members know about it. It will give your young alliance something to look forward to and a sense from the get-go that it is going to be a genuine real-world community with a positive outlook.

For even more great ideas, check out regional alliances "Kiama Unplugged" (NSW) and "The Phone Pledge" (VIC).

Toy, Games, Book Library

Some other ways for your alliance to build community is to establish a toy, games or book library among members.

The book library can even include books for parents (especially titles about the effects of too much screen-time on children!).

Perhaps the suggested "cost" of borrowing some toys, games or books from another family in the alliance is to bake them a banana cake with your children and have them over for afternoon tea?

Step 4 - Spread the Word

An alliance of four or five families is a good start, but you're only just getting warmed up. You want as many families on board as possible - because the more families that join your new alliance, the more supported you and your children will feel, and the more likely that *all* families will see their commitments through until the end of Year 8.

Your small but determined alliance will now need to brainstorm about the best way to spread the word to other parents in the school. The approaches you take will be unique to each school community.

Many schools have informal WhatsApp chats (either whole-school or grade-specific) and these are excellent forums to initiate conversations more broadly. Here's a rough script that might get you started:

“Hey Year 2 parents, I’ve been speaking with Cathy (Olivia’s mum) and Felicity (Jonah’s mum) and we’ve all noticed a lot of media reports lately about the risks of giving our children access to smartphones and social media too early. The government is so concerned, it’s even passed laws to raise the minimum age of social media to 16 years! We all want our kids to have a full and healthy childhood (with plenty of outdoor play, sport, reading, music, nature etc) but all that good stuff will probably get pushed down the list if they end up addicted to Snapchat or Fortnite. Some surveys show that a lot of teens are now spending more time on their screens than they do sleeping! I know in my own home, battles over screens have already started and I’m not sure if I’m up for another ten years of it. Is anyone else going through similar struggles and concerned about these issues?”

An empathetic discussion involving a number of parents will hopefully ensue (and with a bit of luck Cathy and Felicity chime in with some support too).

At some point you can follow up with a message along the following lines:

“There’s a group I’ve been following for a little while called the Heads Up Alliance, a community of Australian parents holding out smartphones for their kids until the end of Year 8. They encourage parents to start up local alliances in their own schools. Maybe this is something we can do here in our school? Their Facebook page has a lot of interesting information on this topic if you’re keen to know some more: facebook.com/theheadsupalliance.”

Eventually, you want to be able to email an Information Sheet to interested parents. A comprehensive sample is already prepared and attached as an Appendix to this Guide. Please use it and tailor it to your heart’s content.

The school’s parent association is another potential avenue to spread the word. It shouldn’t be too difficult to introduce your new alliance to the school community at the upcoming parent association meeting. Remember to bring a bunch of printed Information Sheets to the meeting and hand them out!

Distributing Information Sheets by hand at morning drop off or afternoon pick up might also be an option for you (but if you’re going to do this on school grounds, you should seek the permission of your principal first).

Whichever methods you employ to spread the word, appreciate that many parents have already given their children smartphones and might feel a little confronted by your message at first. Ensure

that your approach is gentle, inquisitive and perhaps even compassionate. Our movement does not seek to disparage other parents. Rather we seek to inform and empower.

Some really good talking points when discussing this issue with other parents is to highlight that smartphones:

- Are designed to hook children in and be used habitually
- Give children dopamine hits that have them return again and again
- Make children less social
- Shorten their capacity to focus and learn
- Change the physical architecture of their brains
- Distract children from deep reading and comprehension
- Make it harder for children to rest and sleep
- Get in the way of younger children's playtime and older children's sports/exercise activities (and contribute to childhood obesity)
- Shrink quality family time
- Inhibit the formation and nurturing of real-world connections and friendships
- Lower children's self-esteem (by forcing them to compare themselves to fake/unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards)
- Increase stress in children by pressuring them to maintain a curated online image
- Escalate their risk of anxiety and depression
- Facilitate bullying
- Expose children to sexualised content

- Expose them to sextortion
- Increase the risk of child predation

Some parents might already know and agree with all the above but aren't so clear as to why building an alliance of school families is important.

If you get the chance to explain why it matters, share that delaying with other families is beneficial for children because they get to see that they are not the only ones in the school (much less in the world) without a smartphone. FOMO is very real for children so reducing their isolation (or their perception of it) is critical.

An alliance is also helpful for parents because it allows us to see in a very focused way that there are indeed many families just like ours who have decided to delay smartphone use. We might be in the minority, but we are not alone! We can take comfort in knowing that we are not the only "mean" parents around. We give strength *to* each other and draw strength *from* each other to help our families all stay the course over the coming years.

Step 5 - Engage Your School

If you're lucky enough to have a principal who is up to date on the emerging science and the conversations taking place around the world on the "great rewiring of childhood" you will be at a very significant advantage. If he or she is as passionate about this issue as you are (some principals *really* are) and is even prepared to champion your new school alliance, well, you've hit the jackpot.

With your principal's support, you will be able to spread the word effortlessly and broadly: via the school newsletter, the school website, the school social media pages, assemblies and other events where parents are present.

Other parents are also more likely to be open to hearing your message if they see that the principal is on board.

Of course, all this has to start with a face-to-face meeting where a small group of parents introduces the alliance to the principal and requests his/her support.

The meeting might go something like this:

- Inform the principal that a group of parents at the school have recently come together to delay smartphones for the various reasons set out in Step 4.
- Explain why establishing an alliance is important (ie. for the benefit of your children and yourselves - again, refer to Step 4)

- Explain that his/her position of leadership in the school community means that he/she has significant influence over the attitudes of parents on this matter.
- If he/she too is concerned about the shift from a play-based childhood to a phone-based one, would he/she consider raising awareness of this issue in the school as well as promoting the parent alliance?
- Would he or she consider preparing a guide for the school community recommending that parents across the board delay access to smartphones?
- Acknowledge that schools are busy places and that teachers and principals have a lot on their plates. Reassure the principal that the alliance is - and will remain - a parent-led and parent-run initiative. It will not create any new administrative burdens on the school.
- If anything, it might make for a more happy, relaxed and attentive student population - and teachers' work easier in the long run!

Other great points of contact at your school are head of wellbeing, grade coordinators and the assistant principal.

Now, if ultimately the school is unable or unwilling to support your alliance, don't be disheartened. Whilst the school's formal support is a very "nice-to-have", it certainly is not a "must-have". Your alliance is parent-led and it will find success and achieve great things either way.

Did we mention handing out information sheets yet? If you have to, you have to. Your kids are worth it!

Step 6 - Register Your Local Alliance With The Heads Up Alliance

Finally, we request that every school alliance register with us by emailing the following information to theheadsupalliance@gmail.com:

- (a) Name of Local Alliance
- (b) Name of School
- (c) Suburb, postcode and state of School
- (d) WhatsApp Link or Email Contact
- (e) Name, email address and telephone number of school's representatives (three maximum).

Our website (launching soon) will disclose the information (a) - (d) above. This will enable any parent from your school who wishes to join your alliance in future (and has somehow been missed by you) to find you through our platforms.

The representative(s) will be added to your state's Heads Up Alliance WhatsApp chat and be able to pass on information to your school alliance that might be relevant to our movement on a state and national level. The personal details of your school's representative(s) will not be made public.

Respecting your desire to be as free from your phone as possible, we are very mindful to limit our communications on the state WhatsApp groups to the bare minimum (most times this will be around one message per week).

Please note: for privacy, if you send us a WhatsApp Link, remember to ensure that the group has engaged the “Approve New Members” setting. If you send us an email address, please ensure it is not a personal or work email address. We recommend that you set up a new email address for your local alliance (eg. penfield-alliance@gmail.com).

Frequently Asked Questions

I would like to give my child a retro phone. Can my family still be in a local alliance?

Absolutely! If your child’s phone is a “startphone” used for calling and texting only (ie. the phone is a tool and not a pocket-sized poker machine), you can most definitely still be part of the school’s alliance.

What if my child needs a phone for safety reasons?

We acknowledge that for some families a phone is an important safety tool. A *smartphone* opens up a whole new world of danger, however. For this reason, we urge parents to consider a startphone instead.

If GPS tracking functionality is important to your family, there are also voice/text/GPS smartwatches on the market that meet the needs of safety-conscious parents.

What if my child already has a smartphone?

If you previously permitted your child to have their own smartphone, it is okay as a parent (motivated by your love and concern for their wellbeing) to change your mind!

Of course, the conversation will need to be sensitive to your own child's situation, but in an alliance, it helps to be able to share with your child that you know of other families in their own class/grade/school who have considered this issue and have concluded similarly that it is better to wait until (at least) the end of Year 8.

If you think your child may be *clinically addicted* to their smartphone, then the Heads Up Alliance might be appropriate for your family down the track. But as a first step, you should seek professional medical help and follow the advice of your medical professional about the best way to reverse course and break your child's addiction.

My child is in Year 1. Should I wait until he/she is older to establish an alliance?

The earlier you start these conversations and build your local alliance, the better.

The older your child gets, the greater the number of his or her classmates that will own a phone, and the task of pulling those families back into an alliance becomes that much harder.

So we reckon Year 1 or Year 2 is perfect (and Kindy/Prep is even better)!

Why do you draw the line at the end of Year 8?

It's certainly *not* because smartphones suddenly become beneficial for our children in Year 9!

In fact, we secretly (not-so-secretly) hope that every family who joins the Heads Up Alliance continues delaying smartphones for their children right through until the end of high school!

Having said that, we don't want to overwhelm parents of Kindy/Prep children with a request to make a 10-plus year commitment.

Since most children receive their first smartphone before they commence high school, we've landed on Year 8 because it is *something* of a challenge, without being *too* daunting.

Parents are then free to re-assess for themselves at the end of Year 8 - and we hope most do continue on the "delay" path. But even if some parents meet only the Year 8 commitment, then their children have in the very least won two *priceless* extra years of childhood.

What about tablets? Shouldn't they be delayed as well?

Tablets don't sit in the palms of our children's hands 24-7. They don't fit in their pockets, beckoning them every few minutes with a buzz or a ping as smartphones do.

Smartphones on the other hand are relentless and exhausting, actively working to never allow your child rest. Even when not being used actively, smartphones aim to frame the backdrop of every childhood experience.

They don't give up at night either, when the smartphone is easily hidden under bed sheets and robs your child of precious sleep.

We know that delaying smartphones will not solve every screen and tech-related problem for your family. But it does go a very long way and makes your job of managing all the other stuff (tablets, gaming, laptops and other screens) a whole lot easier.

What happens if I change my mind after making the commitment to delay?

If you wish to break your commitment and exit your alliance at some point in the future, no doubt a few people will be sad to see you go, but they will also respect your right to do so.

Does “delaying” mean we don't need to educate children about online harms?

No!

Education is still crucial and by the time children receive their first smartphone (whether in Year 9 or later), we want them to be as

ready as possible to contend with algorithms, predators, bullies, sextortionists, beauty filters, the “like” button and other persuasive design elements.

Parents should however be extremely skeptical of cyber safety educators who do not actively champion delaying (particularly in community) as an eminently sensible first line of defence. These are the same people who stand against parents (and the interests of children) when we lobby to ban smartphones from schools. Frankly, such educators have become as much a part of the problem as Big Tech itself and parents should ask themselves why they are more interested in band-aid solutions than in prevention.

If your school’s cyber safety educator is not an enthusiastic proponent of delaying in community, please contact us and we will aim to put you in touch with educators from your region who are.

Does the Heads Up Alliance have control or oversight of a local alliance?

No.

Each local alliance is independent and responsible for its own name, branding, structure/governance and membership list.

Apart from the contact details of the representative(s) from each local alliance, the Heads Up Alliance holds no information about the individual members of local alliances (and for your privacy, nor do we want to).

The role of the Heads Up Alliance is to connect all the local school alliances around the country and to give them a sense of a shared mission and national community.

I still have questions. Can I speak with you?

Yes, absolutely! We're more than happy to help and answer all your questions.

Please send an email to theheadsupalliance@gmail.com and provide a contact number for us to call you.



Appendix 1

Sample Information Sheet



What is the Penfield School Alliance?

The Penfield School Alliance is a grouping of families from our school who are concerned about the harmful effects of smartphones on our children.

We have made mutual commitments to each other to delay giving our children smartphones until at least the end of Year 8.

The Penfield School Alliance is part of a network of similar school alliances across Australia known as the Heads Up Alliance.

Why delay smartphones?

There are numerous important reasons to delay smartphones for children.

Smartphones:

- Are designed to hook children in and be used habitually
- Give children dopamine hits that have them return again and again
- Make children less social
- Shorten their capacity to focus and learn
- Change the physical architecture of their brains
- Distract children from deep reading and comprehension
- Make it harder for children to rest and sleep
- Get in the way of younger children's playtime and older children's sports/exercise activities (and contribute to childhood obesity)

- Shrink quality family time
- Inhibit the formation and nurturing of real-world connections and friendships
- Lower children's self-esteem (by forcing them to compare themselves to fake/unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards)
- Increase stress in children by pressuring them to maintain a curated online image
- Escalate their risk of anxiety and depression
- Facilitate bullying
- Expose children to sexualised content
- Expose them to sextortion
- Increase the risk of child predation

I agree - but why form a group?

The peer pressure on our children to have a smartphone, and their fear of missing out on online social interactions with friends, is enormous.

Even though many parents feel uneasy about smartphones in young hands, our children's incessant pleading can cause us to doubt our decisions. Which parent hasn't been subjected to the "but-everybody-else-in-my-grade-has-an-iphone" spiel? We begin to wonder if we are unfairly isolating our children from their friends and some of us end up giving in to our children's demands.

However is it actually true that "everybody" in your child's class has a smartphone? No - but it is difficult for us to actually know this and respond to our children accordingly.

By rallying like-minded parents and forming the Penfield School Alliance, we (and our children) are finally able to see in a very focused way that there are in fact many families just like ours who have decided to delay smartphone use. As parents, when we see that other families have taken the same decisions we can feel reassured that we are not the only "mean parents" but rather that we have made sound decisions for the wellbeing of our own families. We are also finally able to say with confidence to our children: "You are not alone, we know of at least ten other children in your grade who also don't have an iPhone, for example your friend Jack". Hopefully that can also help reduce our children's fears of missing out.

Finally, forming a community with like-minded parents gives us strength in numbers and provides a place where we can continue to support and encourage each other to stay the course over the coming years.

What if my child already has a smartphone?

If you previously permitted your child to have their own smartphone, it is okay as a parent (motivated by your love and concern for their wellbeing) to change your mind!

Of course the conversation will need to be sensitive to your own child's situation, but in an alliance, it helps to be able to share with your child that you know of other families in their own class/grade/school who have considered this issue and have concluded similarly that it is better to wait until (at least) the end of Year 8.

If you think your child may be *clinically addicted* to their smartphone, then the Penfield School Alliance might be appropriate for your family down the track. But as a first step, you should seek professional medical help and follow the advice of your medical professional about the best way to reverse course and break your child's addiction.

I would like to give my child a basic start phone. Can my family still be in the Penfield School Alliance?

Absolutely! If your child's phone is a “startphone” used for calling and texting only (ie. the phone is a tool and not a pocket-sized poker machine), you can most definitely still be part of the alliance.

What If my child needs a phone for safety reasons?

We acknowledge that for some families a phone is an important safety tool. A *smartphone* opens up a whole new world of danger, however. For this reason, we urge parents to consider a startphone instead.

If GPS tracking functionality is important to your family, there are also voice/text/GPS smartwatches on the market that meet the needs of safety-conscious parents.

What will I be required to do if I join the Penfield School Alliance?

By joining the Penfield School Alliance you are mutually committing to other parents in the group (and to parents in similar alliances across Australia) that you will delay giving your child a smartphone until at least the end of Year 8.

You are not actively required to do anything more than that (although partaking in alliance community events is encouraged)!

Every three months you will receive one group email to support and help you maintain your commitment (this will be an open email and will include the details of other families in the group as it is important that we can identify each other).

Why does the commitment end at Year 8?

The commitment is only a minimum commitment. Families can individually reassess their situation at the end of Year 8 and determine whether or not they wish to give their children access to smartphones at that time.

How do I join the Penfield School Alliance?

If you would like to join the Penfield School Alliance, please send an email to psalliance@gmail.com including your first name (and your husband's/wife's email address and first name), the names of your children (first name and first initial of surname is enough, eg. Sally T) and grade.

OR

If you would like to join the Penfield School Alliance, please scan the QR code below to access the Pensfield School Alliance WhatsApp group.

[Insert your school's alliance QR Code here]

More Information and Resources

<https://linktr.ee/TheHeadsUpAlliance>

