

What Many Parents Miss About the Phones-in-Schools Debate

Some focus on reaching their children in an emergency—and overlook the devices' everyday threats.

By Gail Cornwall The Atlantic. AUGUST 25, 2025

SOMEONE KEEPS TEXTING ME while I'm at work, even after I asked her to stop, and I can't block her, because she's my 16-year-old daughter. A note sent during school lunch was about music lessons; she wanted to know what I thought about her switching from bassoon to cello. Another arrived in the middle of her third class: "For chem I need to bring in a half gallon of milk by Thursday." A few days later, she asked me to call the attendance office.

These messages and dozens more like them could have been avoided had my daughter chatted with a classmate or waited to talk with me later. But just as objects in motion stay in motion, kids who have a cellphone use it. And my daughter has very much had hers while in school, when she's supposed to be focused on learning and engaging with the people around her.

On the one hand, I appreciate her conscientious desire to deal with things right away. I also appreciate why many parents want their kids to have a phone accessible: It can be comforting to think that kids can be reached in an emergency, and convenient to communicate on the fly when after-school plans change. On the other hand, as a former teacher and a writer steeped in the academic literature on psychology, child development, and pedagogy, I know that letting kids have phones in schools comes with many costs. They can distract students from learning, increase social anxiety and stress, and suppress opportunities for emotional and intellectual growth. They can also diminish kids' autonomy, in effect serving as a digital umbilical cord tethering students to their parents.

For years, teachers were largely left to make and enforce their own device policies, and parents wishing to curtail their kids' phone use had to fend for themselves. But public opinion and, in many states, laws have shifted. According to a recent Education Week article, 31 states and the District of Columbia require (or will soon require) a phone limit or ban in schools; an additional five states recommend that districts adopt such policies, and two others offer incentives for doing so. (Most of these limits will rightfully come with carve-outs for students with special needs who rely on apps.) That means that within the next two years, a majority of U.S. kids will be subject to some sort of phone-use restriction.

I, for one, take this as good news. My efforts to limit phone use didn't work well when I was going it alone. When my son was younger, I pushed for his classmates' parents to hold off on giving their children smartphones, but after a few sixth graders formed a group chat, more and more kids turned up at school with devices. (My bid to delay Snapchat use the next year met a similar fate.) I'm hopeful that school-based restrictions will help. They certainly seem to have improved kids' lives elsewhere. Australia implemented a country-wide ban of phones in schools last year. More than 80 percent of the school principals surveyed in New South Wales later said that students had become less distracted, learning had improved, and socializing had increased. In South Australia, incidences of behavioral problems and rule-breaking plummeted.

Still, it's unclear how phone limits will play out in the U.S. The level of restriction in the new laws and policies varies significantly. Rules on paper don't always translate to practice. And some parents have publicly opposed these limits while privately helping their kids flout them. This kind of obstruction rarely serves anyone—neither teachers trying to teach, nor students trying to learn. It also, for reasons that might not be obvious, generally

fails to serve parents: both those trying to stave off phone use and those who wholeheartedly embrace giving phones to kids.

PART OF THE REASON that I feel so strongly about getting phones out of classrooms is that I know what school was like for teachers without them. In 2005, when I was 25 years old, I showed up at a Maryland high school eager to thrill three classes of freshmen with my impassioned dissection of *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead, I learned how quickly a kid's eraser-tapping could distract the whole room, and how easily one student's bare calves could steal another teen's attention. Reclaiming their focus took everything I had: silliness, flexibility, and a strong dose of humility.

Today, I doubt Mercutio and I would stand a chance. Even with the rising number of restrictions, smartphones are virtually unavoidable in many schools. Consider my 16-year-old's experience: Her debate team communicates using the Discord app. Flyers about activities require scanning a QR code. Her teachers frequently ask that she submit photos of completed assignments, which her laptop camera can't capture clearly. In some classes, students are expected to complete learning games on their smartphone.

Because of the way devices—and human brains—are built, asking teens to use a phone in class but not look at other apps is likely to be as ineffective as DARE's "Just Say No" campaign. Studies have shown that simply having a phone nearby can reduce a person's capacity to engage with those around them and focus on tasks. This is because each alert offers a burst of dopamine, which can condition people to want to open their phone even before they get a notification. That pull is hard enough for adults to resist. For adolescents and their less-mature prefrontal cortex (their brain's control center), inhibiting the impulse is much more difficult, Daria Kuss, an associate psychology professor at Nottingham Trent University, in England, told me.

That urge to take a peek isn't just chemically driven; it's also social. As Mitch Prinstein, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor and member of the American Psychological Association's executive-leadership team, told me, the norm among many teens is to be more or less constantly online: to respond to texts quickly, to be at the ready with effusive comments on posts and videos. Being too slow with a phone can threaten a friendship, he said. The result is "digital stress," which not only adds a layer of distraction but has also been tied to depressive symptoms. "Would you let them endure some other stressor the entire time while they're supposed to be concentrated at school and learning?" Prinstein asked. "Of course not."

Managing all of this digital social worry doesn't seem to be helping teens become more interpersonally adept. Sitting in an airport with my 18-year-old and her friend, on the way to check out a college campus this past spring, I wondered aloud why her younger sister kept calling me from school during passing periods, even though she didn't seem to have anything to say. My older daughter saw nothing amiss; apparently she, too, often faked an urgent need to consult her phone to avoid talking with people in the halls. "Everyone" does, she said. But when kids use a phone to escape awkward interactions, they may be more likely to avoid those situations in the future—which might make future scenarios more awkward, which might, in turn, beget more avoidance, Philip C. Kendall, who directs Temple University's Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic, told me. Unwanted isolation can lie just a short step away.

When kids *can't* avoid one another, growth happens. Exposure to little discomforts, such as accidentally locking eyes with an attractive student, can build teens' tolerance for future discomfort and make them more likely to put themselves out there. Over time, that willingness to take risks can lead to social acuity and new friendships. In the 1990s, when I couldn't find my best friends at lunch or didn't have class with them, I had to hang out with other people, including a group of older students from the next town over. At first, my attempts to seem cool were stilted; I oscillated between transparent pandering and annoying brashness. But I got used to the

unease, leaned into my nerdiness, and one day changed a popular kid's opinion of me by cracking a dirty science joke while we waited for human bio to start. That couldn't have happened had my lab partner been texting her ride or die.

THAT DAY AT THE AIRPORT, I asked my older daughter and her buddy how school would be harder without phones. Their No. 1 concern was locating friends. Plus, how could you coordinate a project with groupmates? Fair questions, but I had answers. Back when I was a high schooler, I planned ahead and set a place and time to meet for group projects. If I still couldn't find people, I asked around. And when confronted with other midday dilemmas, like those my younger daughter has been texting about, I turned to the people around me. If I'd been required to bring in milk for chem, I might have bummed a ride to the store with an upperclassman. If I'd had to decide, on the spot, whether to play bassoon or cello the following year, I would have asked a teacher for advice (and in the process built the type of not-just-transactional relationship that studies indicate can improve engagement in schools).

Some of the problems today's kids face differ from those I tackled, which means their solutions will too. But without phones, when students get stuck, they'll be forced to figure out how to get unstuck on their own. Allowing children the agency to do so has been shown to lead to improved competence, greater overall wellness, and a lower likelihood of cheating. And giving students independence can spur growth even when they make the wrong call—as they are bound to sometimes when they can't contact their parents. Falling and getting back up breeds resilience and can teach kids to not fall down the same way again.

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Yet many parents hesitate to support restrictive policies. A 2024 survey found that 78 percent of parents whose child took a phone to school were worried about school emergencies. I get it. Each time I hear sirens, my first thought is that one of my kids has been hit by a car, a bus, or a bullet. I want to text them or track them—anything for reassurance. Still, I hold off. I remind myself that calamity is highly unlikely, and that even if my son were to get clipped in a crosswalk, his leg would be broken whether I heard about it right away or not. Constant monitoring can't keep my children safe; school-day access to them offers merely a temporary balm for my discomfort with life's uncertainty. That momentary relief, in my view, is not worth all that families sacrifice when kids have phones in schools. Without them, for a few hours, parents can finally be free of the expectation that they remain constantly on duty. And kids can grow from interacting with their peers and teachers—no digital escape hatch in sight.

As more districts deliberate banning phones, my hope is that more parents will embrace their own discomfort, and that of their kids. They might be surprised by how quickly their children show signs of relief—and rise to the challenge. Back when my 16-year-old texted me about which instrument she should play, I ignored her. Ten minutes later, she sent two more texts: "Actually never mind," the first one read. And then came the second: "I like bassoon."