

A Starting Guide to Cell Phones in the Classroom

Phone Ban, Free for All, or a Mix of Both?

“Biggest plus we have seen in the 11 -14 year olds girls is an increase in active/physical and imaginative play. And the girls said they actually welcomed the change as they didn’t really want to be on the devices but felt the peer pressure to do so.”

— Margaret, from Auckland Diocesan School for girls on their phone policy

June 2013 in Minnesota, USA: Madeleine, a parent educator, overheard a discussion on whether preschool children should be given a cell phone. Not long after, Taino, an engineer, had a Phone Free wedding in Sweden. He later moved to New Zealand and started Phone Free Day and has helped hundreds of people create a healthier relationship with their phones.

Madeleine and Taino teamed up to share some thoughts and provide a step-by-step guide to starting the conversation around phones in schools.

Don’t get us wrong – we think that smartphones are a marvellous invention so...

What is the problem?

In short, the challenge is not phones or apps themselves, but in what way, how much and when we use them. There is no real norm or etiquette around phones, and very few get taught how to develop healthy relationships with phones and other devices. With phone apps like games and social media being designed to keep us using them, many schools experience challenges arising from students’ phone use with everything from bullying to distractions and learning disruptions.



“Having a conversation at school about technology use and constant connectivity supports moving towards increased independence and confidence.”

“Social media is designed to keep your attention on the screen. We’ve all seen those docs and read the research. It’s all about screen time – that’s where the money is for these companies, and schools are in direct conflict with that.”

– Hillmorton school

They also change how we interact: “There was a lot less play, a lot less socialising, we were really concerned,” said the senior leader at Waiuku school.

We are clearly facing challenges, with a very dark impact. But luckily there are remedies and a growing movement for change. So do we put the responsibility on parents to educate their kids on phone etiquette at home? A total ban in school? Or something in the middle where phones can be brought to school but are handed in at the start of the day?

We believe that listening to those schools that have taken the first steps is a good way to go.

How can we start a conversation about phone use at school?

If you are finding that phones are a source of conflict or distraction, here are some things you can do:

1. Talk to other teachers and the leadership team. Are they also seeing the current phone culture as an issue?
2. Talk to parents and students. Audit the impact of phone use at school both on social aspects and performance.
3. Create a ‘business case’ with the pros and cons of a policy.

4. Evaluate the data above and decide on a direction and philosophy. For example, no regulation at all, phones handed in at the start of the day or phones only used at breaks.
5. Socialise the proposal to the school whanau and students.
6. Present to the board.
7. Inform whanau and students on the outcome.
8. Develop posters and information for the roll out of any action.

Important points to consider:

As with any change, there are several keys to success with some important points to consider.

- Strong leadership support and involvement from students and parents using the wellbeing indicators as a starting place:
 - Culture of wellbeing - values and practice
 - Ako - learning, teaching and curriculum
 - Systems - people and initiatives
- Mitigating risks:
 - Legal considerations?
 - What about students and parents who complain or refuse?
 - What are common complaints?
 - How do you answer?
 - What other risks do you identify?
- Preparing targeted approach for individual situations
- Creating effective, supportive policies
- Involving parents, caregivers, and whanau throughout the process
- Ensuring school-wide, professional learning and development about the new policy, how to implement it and providing support for teachers.

What will you do to take action?

- Start a conversation?
- Audit your own smartphone use?
- Observe the impact of smartphones in your classroom?
- Do nothing?

Bringing it All Together

We believe that the most crucial point is to support teachers, students and their families is to create healthy technology




habits. By doing so we can improve study results, increase both physical and mental wellbeing and create a more inclusive culture.

“The classroom culture has changed considerably...especially among the Year 9s to 13s, the classroom culture changed almost overnight...students are able to concentrate far better on what they’re doing in class, without the distraction of notifications and sometimes phone calls.”

*--Hillmorton High School head Ann Brokenshire
in a TVNZ interview*

Schools also provide an environment for children to learn to make decisions about their world away from their families. Stealing this opportunity to grow and develop can create a dependence that is detrimental to a student in the long run. Having a conversation at school about technology use and constant connectivity supports moving towards increased independence and confidence.

Phones are not inherently good or bad. They are incredible pieces of technology that can empower us just as they can have detrimental effects - it all comes down to how we use them. 



Madeleine Taylor

Madeleine Taylor is a parent of three grown sons and works as a People Skills Consultant. Madeleine is an accomplished workshop facilitator and long-time trainer of negotiation, influencing skills and managing difficult conversations. Madeleine is a parent educator exploring how to grow resilient children in this complex world. She also is the coauthor of “The Business of People - Leadership for a changing world.” Published 2020.

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