

PRIMARY SCHOOL STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF SMARTPHONE USE AMONG CHILDREN

East Midlands, 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A major new survey of over 200 primary school staff across the East Midlands and the East of England reveals overwhelming concern about the impact of smartphones on children's wellbeing, learning, and relationships. The findings show that smartphones are entering children's lives at ever-younger ages, with significant consequences for attention, sleep, social development, and mental health. Teachers consistently reported rising levels of anxiety, friendship breakdowns linked to online interactions, and exposure to inappropriate content at primary level.



Despite strong efforts by schools to teach online safety, most educators believe smartphones should not be in the hands of primary-aged pupils.

These results highlight the urgent need for joined-up action between schools, parents, and policymakers to set clear boundaries, strengthen digital education, and protect children's wellbeing in an increasingly connected world.



KEY FINDINGS

1. **Over 9 in 10 staff believe smartphones harm children:** 91% agreed that smartphone use is having a negative impact on primary pupils.
2. **Children are getting phones younger than ever:** 90% said pupils are being given smartphones at increasingly early ages – in some cases before starting school.
3. **Teachers link smartphones to rising anxiety:** 93% reported more children showing anxiety symptoms, with many linking this directly to smartphone use and online pressures.
4. **Smartphones disrupt focus and sleep:** 91% observed reduced concentration in class, and 79% noted children arriving tired due to late-night screen use.
5. **Exposure to harmful content widespread:** 74% of staff were aware of children encountering inappropriate online material; 69% reported more sexualised language and behaviour.
6. **Friendship conflicts increasingly play out online:** 77% of respondents highlighted peer difficulties linked to digital interactions; 67% said they regularly manage smartphone-related incidents.
7. **Educators united against smartphones in primary:** 93% of participants believe primary-aged children should not have smartphones.



METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted in Spring 2025 to capture the views of primary school staff across the East Midlands on children's smartphone use.

- **Sample:** Over 200 staff members responded, representing a broad mix of classroom teachers, teaching assistants, senior leaders, and early years practitioners.
- **Approach:** An online survey was distributed through school networks, professional associations, and education forums. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.
- **Content:** The survey combined closed questions (e.g., Likert scale ratings of impact and concern) with open-ended questions that invited staff to share observations, examples, and reflections from their own practice.
- **Analysis:** Quantitative data was analysed to generate percentages and overall trends, while qualitative comments were coded thematically to illustrate staff experiences and highlight recurring concerns.

This approach ensures the findings reflect both the scale of concern and the lived experiences of practitioners working directly with children in primary schools.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

This report draws on the views of over 200 primary school staff across the East Midlands, who shared their observations, concerns, and experiences of children's smartphone use. The findings provide valuable insight into the challenges schools are currently facing, as well as the strengths and opportunities for future support. The purpose of this report is to inform and equip school leaders as they reflect on the role of digital technology in children's lives and learning.

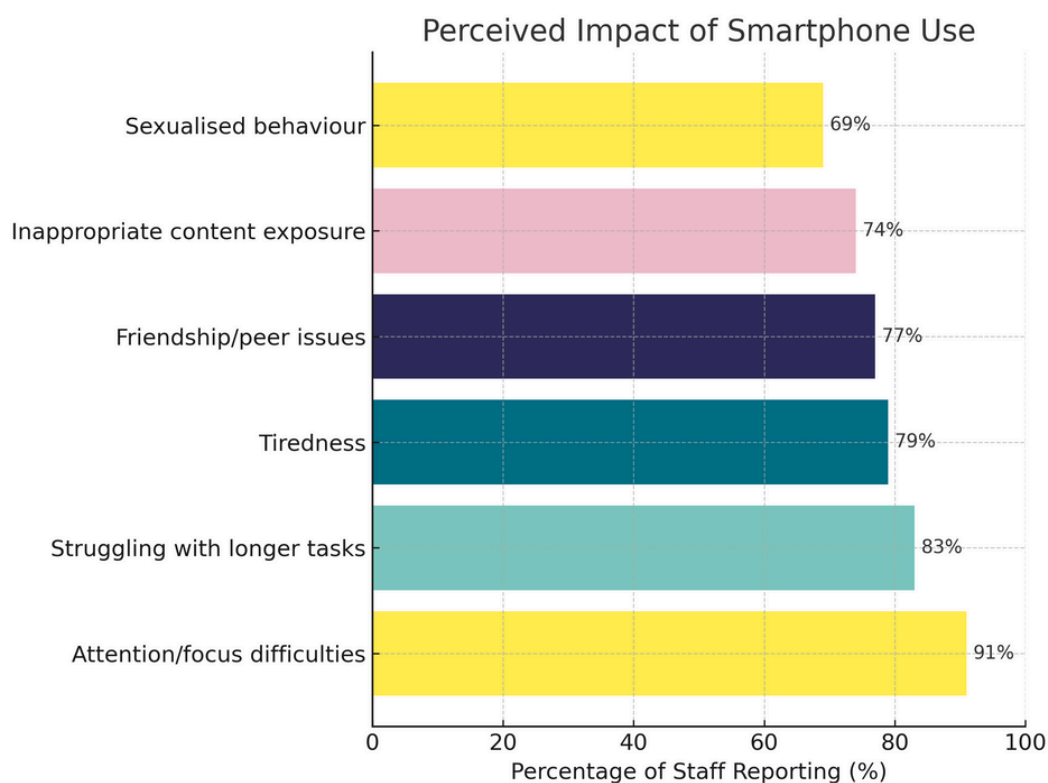
Staff across the survey expressed a strikingly high level of concern about the effects of smartphones on primary-aged pupils. 91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that smartphone use is having a negative impact. This reflects a broad professional consensus that the devices, while common in wider society, present particular challenges when introduced at too early an age. Teachers also observed that children are acquiring smartphones at younger ages than in the past. 90% of staff reported that children in their schools are being given phones at increasingly young ages. In many cases, pupils are entering upper Key Stage 2 already equipped with personal devices, raising questions about how much digital independence children are expected to manage before secondary transition. The issue is even evident in the very earliest stages of education. As one nursery teacher explained:

"A quarter of my class have their own smartphones and some of these have started their own YouTube channels. Over half are allowed to use their parents' phones. I am seeing growing speech problems, behaviour, anxiety related issues before they even start school. I truly believe the growing change in attitudes, behaviour and inability to focus in these very little children is down to (in some part) the increased use of electronic devices."

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

Such accounts underline the extent to which the presence of devices is shaping children's development well before they are ready for the social and emotional demands of independent digital use.

The chart below summarises the perceived impacts of smartphone use as reported by staff:



In the classroom, reduced attention and focus was a major theme. 91% of staff reported noticeable difficulties with concentration, with many describing children as more easily distracted and less able to sustain their focus. Linked to this, 83% also noted that children are increasingly struggling to sustain effort in longer or more demanding tasks, suggesting that the presence of fast-moving, highly stimulating digital content outside of school may be affecting children's capacity to persist with slower-paced learning.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

Another concern raised was the link between smartphone use and tiredness. 79% of teachers reported noticing children arriving at school tired, often thought to be the result of late night screen activity. This has important implications for learning readiness and classroom behaviour, with staff frequently attributing morning fatigue to unsupervised device use at home.



Exposure to inappropriate online content was also identified as a significant issue. 74% of staff said they were aware of children encountering unsuitable material, such as images and videos. Related to this, around 69% of staff reported noticing an increase in sexualised language and behaviour among pupils, which they believed could be linked to early or repeated exposure to such material. As one teacher commented:

"Children are seeing too much, too young. They are growing up quicker than ever in the sense of the things they know, but they can't cope with it emotionally because of their age. I have concerns over their knowledge of sexual things (for example they will laugh if an answer in Maths is 69) and also concern for language amongst boys like 'alpha' and 'sigma' and 'riz' which I believe stem from a growing misogynist online dialogue."

These findings point to the risk that children are navigating online spaces without sufficient safeguards. Teachers described the unsettling impact of these conversations on classroom dynamics and on children's understanding of relationships. Many felt that such exposure was happening at an earlier age than in previous cohorts, suggesting that younger children are now encountering adult themes sooner than expected.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

Emotional wellbeing emerged as the principal area of concern. 93% of staff agreed that more children are showing symptoms of anxiety in primary school, with many linking this to their online interactions and smartphone habits. Staff described pupils feeling pressure from group chats, social comparisons, and the constant availability of digital communication, all of which may heighten stress at a young age. As one teacher reflected:

"I feel that children are now over supervised in the real world with high levels of risk assessments etc. But we are underprotective in the online world—it is creating an anxious generation in the real world and an over confident one in the online world."

These observations highlight the complex interplay between children's digital and offline experiences, and the need for schools and families to work together to build balanced, healthy habits.

Staff consistently reported that smartphones are complicating peer relationships. 77% of respondents highlighted that friendship difficulties are increasingly linked to online interactions. Senior leaders and teachers in Years 5 and 6, in particular, emphasised the growing time spent managing conflicts that originate in digital spaces rather than in person, 67% reported that they are increasingly managing smartphone-related issues in their classrooms. Staff described incidents where disagreements on messaging apps or group chats quickly escalated into classroom disputes.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS



"I have had to deal with so many issues this year related to online bullying –children having the confidence to say things over the phone that they would never say in person, or creating accounts under a false name – and then denying all responsibility. It takes us to ask for screenshots for them to realise they have been caught. We have had the police involved several times." Teacher – Year 6

This reflects the extent to which digital communication is impacting social dynamics, often with serious consequences that extend beyond the playground.

Despite these challenges, many schools reported a strong commitment to online safety education. 83% of respondents reported that online safety is taught regularly in their schools, showing strong commitment to digital education within the curriculum. However, several respondents described frustration that, despite schools offering guidance and information, engagement from families is often low. As one teacher observed:

"Parents are in complete denial about the issue and VERY few actually engage with the resources, information meetings etc that are provided. Pupils do not have phones in school so it all happens at home but we end up dealing with the fall out."

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

The after effects of online disputes, late night usage, or unsupervised screen time often spill over into the classroom. This highlights the need for digital education to evolve – not only teaching children to use technology responsibly, but also equipping parents with practical strategies to manage screen time and implement online boundaries at home.



Finally, the survey revealed an overwhelming consensus on the central question of smartphone ownership in primary school. 93% of staff stated that primary-aged children should not have smartphones, reflecting a strong and united professional view. This finding underlines the seriousness with which educators regard the risks, and highlights the importance of a joined up approach between schools, parents, and policymakers.



SUGGESTED ACTIONS

1. **Review and update policies:** Ensure mobile phone and digital device policies are up to date, clearly communicated, and consistently applied across the school.
2. **Strengthen parent engagement:** Offer workshops and guidance to support families in setting healthy boundaries around smartphone use.
3. **Promote healthy routines:** Share resources with parents and pupils on sleep hygiene and reducing late-night screen activity.
4. **Embed digital wellbeing in the curriculum:** Integrate teaching about digital balance, resilience, and safe online behaviours across subjects.
5. **Monitor pastoral concerns:** Encourage staff to remain alert to signs of anxiety, tiredness, and friendship issues that may be linked to smartphone use.
6. **Invest in CPD and staff training:** Provide professional development that equips staff with strategies and confidence to address the challenges smartphones bring to school life.

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