St. Francis Xavier Schools
Smart Device Free- Voluntary Code

The use of smartphones and other technologies is now a feature of daily life for people of all ages. While smartphones offer numerous advantages, they can expose primary school children to several risks including cyberbullying and encountering harmful content.

In schools we see directly the negative impact on children of smartphones/devices and social media usage. There is an increasing amount of national and international evidence to support the case for delaying its introduction until children are older.

In response to the various concerns of childhood smartphone use, parents in several school communities across Ireland have agreed not to provide their child with a smartphone until they finish Sixth Class. Many schools and organisations have come together to create a charter for all primary school pupils. The 'Gen Free' charter asks parents not to buy their child a smartphone or allow them on social media until they leave primary school. It calls for our primary aged children to be:

Gen Free - Free from smartphones, Free from social media and Free to be kids.

Survey:

In December 2024, St. Francis Xavier Parents Association of both the junior and senior schools conducted a parent survey of smartphone and social media use by children in primary school. Results of the survey found:

- 250+ parents responded to the survey with an even mix between all class levels form 1st - 6th classes.
- 85.6% of parents felt that primary school children should not own their own smartphone.
- 79.6% of parents agreed to be part of the "Keeping Childhood Smartphone Free" voluntary agreement.

As a result of this survey, the Parents Association with the support of the junior and senior school staff and Board of Managements are introducing a 'Smart Device Free Voluntary Code'. The 'Smart Device Free Voluntary Code" is one in which as many parents as possible in St. Francis Xavier Schools voluntarily agree to delay purchasing or providing a smartphone/smart device and access to social media until their child has finished their time in primary school.

It is hoped that collective participation in this voluntary code will provide parents and guardians, who are concerned about their child having personal access to a smartphone, with a tool to help address the risks of smartphone use. Collective parental agreement to hold off on purchasing smartphones will reduce peer pressure and support parents in saying no.

Benefits:

There are many benefits for children in delaying smart phone/social media usage as outlined below:

Enhanced Social and Emotional Development:

Delaying smartphone ownership can foster better social and emotional development in children. They can learn essential face-to-face communication skills and build stronger interpersonal relationships without digital distractions.

Exposure to unwanted, negative behaviours by others is also reduced. Online content and social media use can affect the mental health of young people through increased anxiety and stress, cyberbullying, self-harm, disordered eating and suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, social media allows children to communicate with their peers in ways which can cause hurt and harm to others and many children do not understand the potential impact of their actions.

Improved Concentration and Academic Performance:

By postponing smartphone usage, children can focus on their studies, leading to improved academic performance. Reduced screen time can enhance concentration and critical thinking skills.

Reduced Screen Time:

Delaying smartphone ownership limits a child's exposure to excessive screen time, reducing the risk of negative effects such as sleep disturbances, decreased physical activity and cyberbullying.

Safer Online Experience:

Young children are more vulnerable to online risks including the spreading of misinformation through online channels, negative effects on body image through social comparison and the lack of age verification.

Delaying smartphone access allows parents/guardians to educate children about responsible internet use and gradually introduce them to digital technology in a controlled environment.

Parent-Child Bonding:

Without the constant distraction of a smartphone, parents/guardians and children can engage in more meaningful activities together, strengthening the parent-child bond.

The Age of Digital Consent:

It is important for parents to be aware that in Ireland, the Age of Digital Consent is 16 years of age. It is important also for parents to adhere to age ratings on apps and on the video games their children play. Please see the Children's Data and Parental Consent Publication in the appendices

Parental Controls:

Parents should make full use of the available parental controls on any device they give their child access to. Parental controls are available on most Internet-enabled devices including computers, smartphones, tablets and gaming systems. Parental controls can help reduce the risk of your child encountering inappropriate content when they are online.

What about children who already have a smartphone?

It is a parent/guardian decision as to whether it is appropriate to continue allowing their child to have access to a smartphone/device. Some parents/guardians may wish to consider pausing current smart phone access if appropriate for their child. However, the Parents Association and schools would encourage all parents/guardians to review the age-appropriateness of any apps that children may be using including Snapchat (current minimum age is 13), TikTok (current minimum age is 13), and WhatsApp (current minimum age is 13).

St. Francis Xavier Schools are smart phone and smart device free – children should never have a personal smart device in school, including smart watches.

St. Francis Xavier Schools Access to Technology

We recognise that as part of the school's education programme pupils have some supervised access to technology to support their learning. This allows our children access to online educational resources that can greatly enhance their learning experience.

This is separate to the voluntary agreement that is being proposed. Access to and use of the internet during the school day is outlined in the school's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and any proposed voluntary agreement would not interfere with this.

Smartphone Free Voluntary Code Key points:

1. Each family's right to decide whether or not their children have access to the internet or a smartphone is respected and there is no obligation to join if you do not wish to do so.
2. This is not a solution in itself, to the growing problem but it is potentially one tool which may be helpful to those who wish to avail of it.

The voluntary collective agreement will:

- Commit you to delaying providing your child(ren) with their own smartphone or smart device until they finish primary school.
- Commit you to delaying access to social media for your child(ren) until they finish primary school.
- Complement the school's smartphone policy, which will state that students are not permitted to bring smart phones or devices onto school premises, unless for pre-agreed reasons.

How to sign up:

Please indicate your preference to join St. Francis Xavier Schools Smart-device Free Voluntary Code on your child's Aladdin's Permission page. Please complete for each of your children.