

Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools

Update 2024



Fairness

Equality

Respect

Inclusion



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

This guidance has been developed in partnership with COSLA and members of the Scottish Advisory Group for Relationships and Behaviour in Schools.



The Interim Chief Inspector of Education has contributed to, and is supportive of, this guidance.

Foreword



In the aftermath of the pandemic, relationships and behaviour in our schools have changed. Since becoming Education Secretary, I have heard that directly from our teachers and support staff – the Scottish Government’s [Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research](#) (BISSR) provided the detailed evidence on many of the issues we face.

Mobile phones have become intrinsic to the way we all communicate; particularly for our young people. Notwithstanding, there is a growing body of [evidence](#) to suggest that over-exposure to mobile phone use can result in limited concentration, unhappiness and isolation. Further, the recently published [Programme of International Student Assessment \(PISA\) 2022 data](#), published in December 2023, showed that almost a third of 15 year olds in Scotland and across all OECD countries reported being distracted using digital devices in most or every maths class – and around a quarter reported being distracted by others using digital devices.

It is important we equip the next generation with the necessary skills and resilience associated with the modern age. Mobile phone use impacts on learning and teaching. Within this context it is important that Scotland’s headteachers are empowered to act in the best interests of their pupils, to support our hard-working teachers to ensure a consistent learning environment is provided to all pupils in our classrooms.

That means empowering headteachers to take the steps they see fit to limit the use of mobile phones in our schools, up to and including a full ban on the school estate during the school day, if that is their judgement. I am clear in publishing this guidance that, as Cabinet Secretary, I will support any headteacher who decides to institute a ban on mobile phones in their school. Crucially, however, this decision is one which rests with Scotland’s headteachers, who know their pupils and their staff and who we trust to take the best decisions in the interests of their school communities.

The Scottish Government does not intend to dictate approaches to our headteachers – they know better than anyone the specific approach which will work best in their school. But we are making clear with this guidance that our headteachers are empowered to take action up to and including a whole school bans. This Government supports Scotland’s schools in taking the necessary steps to tackle the negative effects associated with mobile phone use; to enhance outcomes for all of Scotland’s young people.

Jenny Gilruth MSP

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Vision

1. 'To enable all schools and local authorities to develop an ethos of citizenship that leads to respectful and responsible use of mobile technology. This will encourage schools to positively embrace mobile technology to enhance learning now and, in the future, whilst helping them protect staff, children and young people from the possible disruptive and harmful consequences of misuse.'

Context

2. Mobile technology is an integral part of the lives of children and young people and families across Scotland. [Data](#) shows that 62% of 8-11 year olds in Scotland own their own mobile phone, rising to 96% for 12-15 year olds. Many pupils bring their own personal mobile phone into school.
3. Used responsibly, mobile devices such as phones and tablets can be powerful tools to enhance learning and teaching, communication and social experiences, and may remove barriers to learning for some pupils. In addition, they can bring a sense of security to parents and carers as their children enjoy more independent activities, such as walking to and from school.
4. However, pupils bringing their own mobile devices into schools can also create challenges. It is evident that mobile devices, when used inappropriately, are causing disruption to pupils' learning and that of their peers. The [Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research \(BISSR\) 2023](#) indicated increased concerns over the disruption the misuse of devices caused in class. This is echoed by data from the [Programme of International Student Assessment \(PISA\) 2022](#), which found that almost one in three 15 year olds in Scotland (and across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries) reported being distracted using digital devices in most or every maths class, and around a quarter of pupils got distracted by other pupils using digital devices. This research found that pupils appeared to be less distracted when they switched off notifications from social networks and apps on their digital devices during class, when they did not have their digital device open in class to take notes or search for information, and when they did not feel pressured to be online and answer messages while in class.
5. BISSR 2023 also highlighted an increase in more serious behaviours including the abusive use of mobile phones in schools, for example, mobile phones being used to bully or harass pupils and staff. Such behaviour is unacceptable in any context. The misuse of mobile technology, including the filming of incidents which are posted on social media, is also frequently reported in the media, with many demonstrating the potentially devastating impact of such misuse on pupils, their families and the safety and wellbeing of staff.
6. The Scottish Ministers have made a clear commitment to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights in Scotland, by incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law. Considering the UNCRC requirements in the context of mobile devices, any decisions relating to the use of such devices in schools should be made acting in the best interests of the child and taking their views

into consideration. There is also legislation which protects the rights of school staff in relation to their employment, health and safety etc. The Curriculum for Excellence and Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) recognises that protecting the wellbeing of staff and pupils is essential for creating the right environment for effective learning and teaching through the Curriculum. Accordingly, it is necessary to recognise and respect all such rights, equally.

Purpose

7. This non-statutory guidance aims to provide public schools and education authorities with information on developing and updating local policies that encourage the respectful and responsible use of mobile phones in school. The guidance may also be of interest to independent and grant-aided schools. Policies should reflect the need to support pupils' learning, whilst protecting staff and pupils from bullying, harassment and abuse. It is therefore necessary to recognise that in considering respectful and responsible use, mobile phones can both enhance and detract from learning, depending on their use.
8. As noted in paragraph 3 above, there are some benefits to pupils taking their mobile phones to school. Another example of a potential benefit is that personal mobile phones can be used to access some school-based services, such as ordering school meals. This guidance therefore takes into account the potential benefits of personal mobile phones, whilst also considering the risks set out in paragraphs 4 and 5 above. In light of these factors, it is not considered to be appropriate or feasible to introduce a ban nationally on mobile phones in schools.
9. An approach is required that promotes the respectful and responsible use of mobile phones in schools, including to support learning whilst encouraging schools to adopt a robust but measured response to their inappropriate use. Schools and education authorities may introduce restrictions and limitations on the use of mobile phones in schools, through a policy approach. The purpose of this guidance is to assist schools and education authorities in introducing or updating any such measures relating to mobile phones in ways that work best for them, in light of their local context.
10. This guidance has been refreshed, based on guidance originally developed in 2013 by a working group established by the Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools. It has been informed by relevant research and existing policies and it aims:
 - to provide a set of guiding principles for schools and education authorities to consider when developing and updating their own policies on respectful and responsible use of mobile phones, rooted in the principles of 'citizenship' as part of Curriculum for Excellence, anti-bullying policies and approaches to promoting positive relationships and behaviour outlined in the national policy guidance [Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1](#) and [Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2](#).
 - to emphasise that these principles are aligned with the UNCRC, and to existing [health and wellbeing experiences and outcomes](#), particularly those referring to social, emotional and mental wellbeing and relationships.

- to emphasise the school's and education authority's responsibility for the health, wellbeing and safety of their staff and pupils.
- to provide guidance on how to develop local policies in partnership with the whole school community, engendering a sense of engagement, ownership and commitment.
- to provide information on relevant legal aspects. Schools and education authorities may wish to seek their own legal advice where appropriate.

Guiding principles underpinning respectful and responsible use of mobile phones

11. Pupil, staff and parental confidence in the respectful and responsible use of mobile phones in schools lays the foundations for schools to positively embrace technology as another learning tool.
12. In alignment with the wider approach to relationships and behaviour policy in Scottish schools, this guidance is set in the context of an approach located in the promotion of positive relationships and behaviour. The significant advancements in mobile technology mean the use of mobile phones and other mobile devices are often part of pupils' and families' everyday lives. This is particularly so following the COVID-19 pandemic, where pupils were actively encouraged to undertake their learning online and relied on mobile technology as a key means of communication with teachers, friends and family.
13. This guidance therefore seeks to widen the considerations schools and education authorities should give to respectful and responsible use of mobile phone policies and suggests the following.
 - The approach to what constitutes respectful and responsible use of mobile phones should be informed by the consideration of the full range of relevant rights under the UNCRC in light of their local circumstances, with acting in the best interests of the child as a key consideration.
 - The approach must also be informed by the need to protect both pupils and staff from the risks of mobile phones, including protection from misuse and abuse. Policies must therefore be consistent with relevant legislation (for example, health and safety legislation for staff and pupils) and existing IT codes of conduct.
 - In order to give effect to the respect for the views of the child, policies relating to respectful and responsible use of mobile phones should be developed through engagement with the whole school community – pupils, staff, parents and carers. This is the most effective means of ensuring two-way engagement with, and commitment to, the policy.
 - Policies should target pupils' skills and behaviours when interacting with mobile technology. Policies should focus on the behaviours and/or functionalities of technologies that may be used inappropriately, such as sending or receiving messages or notifications, playing videos or music, or recording videos or audios in class, to develop approaches that may apply to a range of mobile technologies.

- Policies should set out clear expectations of what standards of behaviour are expected from all members of the school community, including pupils, staff, parents and carers as well as what action will be taken when such expectations are not met.
- Policies should be clearly communicated with pupils, staff, parents and carers so that all members of the school community are aware of expectations of behaviour and apply this consistently.
- The policy should be regularly reviewed to ensure the commitment of new staff, pupils, parents and carers to the policy and to take account of experience of implementation and new developments in technology.

Policy development and implementation

14. Features of a respectful and responsible use of mobile technology policy would fall within three broad categories:
- digital etiquette (standards of conduct when using mobile phones)
 - digital rights and responsibilities (what individuals can and cannot do), and
 - safe and secure use of mobile technology (precautions that can be taken to ensure digital safety).

The considerations in relation to each as part of policy development are set out below.

Digital etiquette (standards of conduct when using mobile phones)

15. Policies reflecting digital etiquette include guidance on any restrictions or limitations on personal mobile phone use within school grounds within the school day, at social school events and on school outings. For example, it may be agreed that, unless the teacher has requested that they be used in a lesson, mobile phones should be switched off and out of sight during class times, for example, within a school bag. Alternatively, a school may wish for pupils to hand mobile phones over to a member of staff during class time or may wish to restrict use of mobile phones during the school day altogether.
16. The prohibition of mobile phones during exams, unless used as part of an agreed reasonable adjustment, should be made clear; together with an explanation that if found to have a mobile phone, the consequence will be no award.
17. Digital etiquette policies may also include guidelines for both staff, pupils, parents and carers and visitors to the school, on the need to respect privacy. For example, such policies could include instructions that camera and filming functions must not be used without the prior consent of data subjects (pupils or staff etc.) and special permission of school management. Decisions on restriction or limitation of access to mobile phones should be informed by local circumstances and priorities.

18. Key features of a respectful and responsible use policy relating to digital etiquette include:
- clear guidelines on the appropriate use of mobile technology for learning and teaching purposes, and within exam conditions.
 - clear policy and procedure for the introduction of any restrictions on the use of mobile phones within school grounds, within school days, including clear expectations, procedures for restriction, safe storage and return of mobile phones.
 - consideration of situations where mobile phones may be used by pupils with particular needs, for example, a young carer who is worried about the health of their parents.
 - an expectation that the policy will be applied consistently across the school.
 - clearly stated responsibility/liability for personal mobile phones in terms of loss, theft or breakage.
 - clear guidelines on privacy policies, and rules prohibiting the uploading of images or recordings obtained by use of mobile phones to social networking or other websites without the express permission of data subjects.
19. Where restrictions on mobile phones in schools are being considered, it is important to ensure that:
- pupils, school staff, parents and carers and the wider school community are fully consulted in relation to the agreed approach on the limitations of mobile phone use in schools.
 - the content and design of the guidelines are clear and specific – PISA 2022 suggested that when a school’s written statements or rules were too generally designed, imprecise or lenient, they were unlikely to support effective teaching and learning with mobile technology.
 - the policy outlines clear practices for the potential restriction, safe storage and return of mobile phones. Current practice includes: the storage of phones by pupils within their own school bags during the school day, and phones being dropped off at a particular point or classroom, stored and returned from that location at the end of the school day.
 - schools and education authorities seek their own legal advice to ensure that the policy clearly sets out the parameters governing the restriction and limitation of mobile phones. It is suggested that the school policy should focus on school days, rather than weeks or terms, to prevent excessive restriction beyond the school day.
 - arrangements are put in place for emergency contact with pupils and families. Where schools are seeking to maximise pupils’ focus on learning, it may be appropriate to state or restate the arrangement for emergency contact with family members via school staff, rather than directly from pupils. Some exceptions to this may be necessary as set out below.

- consideration is given to whether exceptions for individual circumstances are required. For example, exceptions for pupils:
 - who are young carers and who require ongoing contact with family members;
 - who have medical conditions that require monitoring using mobile technology;
 - who experience concern or anxiety, including whilst away from home on school trips;
 - with additional support needs where access to their mobile phone is used as part of a planned approach to managing their learning needs;
 - with disabilities who use their mobile phone as part of a reasonable adjustment, including access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) etc.
- the policy is clearly and regularly communicated to pupils, parents, carers, school staff and the wider school community.

Digital rights and responsibilities (what individuals can and cannot do)

20. The policy should highlight that unacceptable behaviour remains unacceptable whether it occurs in an online environment, the playground, the classroom or anywhere else. High expectations for respectful and responsible conduct are to remain consistent, regardless of the context, and in line with this, policies on mobile technology use in schools should be rooted within existing positive relationships and behaviour policies. Any breach of expectations in relation to mobile technology should therefore be treated in accordance with a school's relationships and behaviour policy.
21. Key features of a respectful and responsible use policy relating to rights and responsibilities should include:
 - agreed consequences for the misuse of mobile phones that are integrated with each school's existing policies and approaches to promoting relationships and behaviour, including a school's anti-bullying policy.
 - clear procedures for removal and return of mobile phones, in the circumstances of inappropriate use, in alignment with the wider relationships and behaviour policy.
 - clear protocols on reporting of misuse within the school, and the support available in school for staff and for pupils who are the subject of harassment using mobile phones.
 - an expectation that staff will respond consistently to any irresponsible use of mobile phones and will explain to pupils why certain behaviours are unacceptable, and what the potential impact of such behaviours might be.

Safe and secure use of mobile technology (precautions that can be taken to ensure digital safety).

22. Supporting pupils' awareness of safe and secure use of mobile technology is an important means for a school to support development of responsible and global citizens, recognising and respecting children's rights, and creating an anti-bullying culture. This learning can be delivered through the Curriculum for Excellence and in particular through the Health and Wellbeing and Digital Literacy experiences and outcomes.
23. Key features of a respectful and responsible use policy relating to safe and secure use of mobile technology would include:
 - an emphasis on the need for safe and responsible use of mobile phones by pupils and staff outwith formal learning and teaching purposes.
 - how a school will support the development of safe and secure use of mobile technology through the curriculum.

Engaging with parents and the wider school community

24. Evidence from PISA 2022 shows that guidelines around the use of mobile devices in school are not in and of themselves sufficient to prevent pupils from becoming distracted. Rather, the implementation and enforcement of any policy plays a critical role in determining its effectiveness.
 - Subject to any exceptions, there should be the expectation that the policy would be followed by all pupils.
 - Staff should be relied upon to apply a consistent approach to the implementation of the policy, including any aspects that apply to their own mobile phone use.
 - The importance of school staff, parents and carers working together in partnership with to ensure that the policy is followed by all.
25. Effective implementation and enforcement relies on the support and cooperation of all members of a school community – including staff, pupils and parents and carers. To ensure this support and cooperation, it is imperative that schools seek to develop their policies in collaboration with their school community and engage with parent councils (where available).
26. Opportunities should be given to consulting and communicating with staff, pupils, parents and carers to understand their respective needs and concerns. Co-creating the expectations set out within the policy should ensure that all members of the school community understand the aims and purpose of the school's approach and feel a shared ownership and commitment to its successful implementation.

27. Individual schools will be best placed to identify the most effective means of engaging with their own school community, but should utilise a variety of communication methods and ensure that these foster two-way engagement, rather than simply information provision, in light of their experiences of what works best in effectively communicating with their school communities. This may include engaging with parent councils (where available).

Legal aspects

28. There are a number of online behaviours that could constitute a criminal offence. In responding to any specific behaviours, towards pupils or staff, it is important for schools and education authorities to have an awareness of the relevant legislative landscape and to seek their own legal advice where appropriate.
29. Legislation relevant to aspects of online safety, including the safe and responsible use of mobile phones, can be found in [appendix C5](#) of the Scottish version of the online safety policy tool for schools, 360 Degree Safe Scotland. The [360 Degree Safe Scotland self-review tool](#) is free to use and is intended to help schools review their online safety policy and practice.
30. School policies on promoting positive relationships and behaviour and anti-bullying are to provide a framework to underpin responses to cases where mobile phones have been, or are perceived to have been, used inappropriately. This includes where a mobile phone has caused a distraction from learning.
31. School staff cannot access content on a pupil's mobile phone without the pupil's consent, or the consent of their parent or carer where the pupil does not have capacity to consent.
32. Policies should make clear that there are consequences for misusing mobile phones. Where potentially criminal events have been recorded using mobile technology, this should be drawn to the attention of the police.
33. Taking photographs, videos or audio recordings of an individual without their permission may be regarded as a breach of that person's rights, and may, in some instances, be regarded as an offence by the police.
34. Should images or recordings be uploaded onto social networks without permission from the data subject, the individual should be asked to remove this as part of the normal behaviour policy of the school.

Policies

- Health and Wellbeing in Curriculum for Excellence: [Health and wellbeing | Curriculum areas | Curriculum for Excellence | Education Scotland and Technologies | Curriculum areas | Curriculum for Excellence | Education Scotland](#)
- Getting it Right for Every Child: [Getting it right for every child \(GIRFEC\) - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- [Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- [Included, engaged and involved part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- [Improving relationships and behaviour in schools: ensuring safe and consistent environments for all. Joint action plan 2024 - 2027](#)
- Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research 2023: [Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Further resources: Advice, guidance and information

- [Cyber Resilience and Internet Safety - DigiLearn \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](#)
- 360 Degree Safe is an online, interactive self review tool which allows schools to review their e-safety policy and practice. [www.360safeScotland.org.uk](#)
- Professionals Online Safety Helpline is a free helpline supporting professionals working with children and young people with any online safety issues they face. [Professionals Online Safety Helpline | SWGfL](#)
- Report Harmful Content can help with reporting harmful content online by providing up-to-date information on community standards and direct links to the correct reporting facilities across multiple platforms. [Report Harmful Content - We Help You Remove Content](#)
- Respectme, Scotland's Anti-Bullying Service. Information and advice on all aspects of bullying for practitioners, parents and carers and pupils. [www.respectme.org.uk](#)
- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), UK police agency dedicated to protecting children from sexual abuse. [www.ceop.police.uk](#)
- Think U Know: a website for young people and their parents/carers and teachers. Run by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](#)
- Childline is the UK's free, confidential helpline dedicated to children and young people [www.childline.org.uk](#) 0800 1111
- Positive Relationships and Behaviour – Education Scotland. Links to information about approaches to developing positive relationships and behaviour [Promoting positive relationships and behaviour in educational settings | Resources | Education Scotland](#)



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