



Cellphones Have Been Called “Digital Heroin.” So, Should We Ban Them in School?

“There was a time, not that many years ago, really, when we would actually get into an argument because we didn’t want to answer the phone,” quite funny and mostly clean comedian James Gregory once [said](#) during an act. “It’d be like, ‘You get it; I got it last time!’”

Boy, the world sure has changed. Back then, Gregory continued, the phone was an interruption, taking time away from what you really wanted to do. Now it *is* what people want to do.

In fact, “screen addiction” is a real phenomenon, so much so that researchers [have called](#) electronic devices “digital heroin.” As a result, a movement to ban cellphones in schools is gaining momentum. There’s also been pushback, however. Many are reluctant to live life without that continual digital fix.

Disconnect — and Reconnect

Thus do teens [spend more than](#) seven hours daily, and tweens nearly five, using screen media for entertainment. Of course, some of this screen time is spent at school; ergo, the phone-ban effort. Such restrictions have positive effects, too, as TAG24 [reported](#) last week:

Prohibiting the use of smartphones in schools measurably boosts students’ social well-being, according to a recent meta-analysis of five international research studies on the matter.

“The children feel better, and better enjoy going to school because during the breaks they talk to and play with each other more,” says Klaus Zierer, co-author of the analysis and professor of school pedagogy at the University of Augsburg in Germany.

... If students use their smartphone and social media in school, they’re exposed to the risk of cyberbullying there too, Zierer notes. “So a smartphone ban makes school a safe space against it.”

A smartphone ban may also have a positive effect on academic performance, he says, although this was difficult to measure in the studies that were examined.

No one has to convince *The Independent’s* Emma Reed of this. “Our kids can’t function without smartphones,” she [lamented](#) this week, so “it’s about time we banned them in schools.” It’s happening, too. Seven of the 20 largest American school districts [have already prohibited](#) phones during school



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hours or intend to do so. In Greece, a countrywide law dictates that students must keep their devices in their bags during class time.

Reasons — or Rationalizations?

Then there's the resistance, which often doesn't cite studies or mount valid arguments. It also sometimes comes from certain cherry-picked teens themselves. For example, *The Nation* published a [piece](#) by student Ushoshi Das, who attends Stuyvesant High School in Brooklyn, NYC. Das certainly is intelligent (you must pass a test to go to Stuyvesant). His defense of the status quo, however, smacks more of rationalization than reason.

Das acknowledges that "past generations of teenagers survived without devices and parents never worried." But then, he adds, they "also did not grow up in a world where frequent school shootings were a reality." No, they didn't — and neither does he.

While the high-profile school shootings that make news are horrible, they're not frequent. (In reality, [the two leading causes of death](#) for actual children, ages 1-14, are motor vehicle crashes and drowning.) And what of the "hundreds" of yearly "school shootings" you hear about? They're generally gangland shootouts that happen to occur on school grounds — after hours.

By the way, the top MSN respondent to Das' article wasn't fooled. "Kids don't want their phones for safety," he [wrote](#). "It's just a lie that children use to get their way." But, okay, if security really is a concern, let's compromise. Kids can have phones in school.

But only under the condition that they're simple devices that *can only be used to make phone calls*. Deal?

The Digital Drug

Part of the problem is terminology. Why do we call the devices "phones" when talking is the least of what people, kids particularly, use them for? Calling them *portable entertainment devices* (PEDs) would better put matters in perspective. Years ago, after all, parents might've not wanted children to have TVs in their bedrooms, knowing they're a negative influence. So why today are they so cavalier about kids having a TV¹⁰ in their pocket every waking hour?

Consider here, too, what psychotherapist Dr. Nicholas Kardaras warned of in 2016. Brain imaging research has shown that those iPads, smartphones, and Xboxes affect the brain's frontal cortex "in exactly the same way that cocaine does," he [said](#).

Yet parents themselves too often peddle the digital drug. Apropos here, the aforementioned Reed, citing British research, informed "that 25 per cent of three to four-year-olds [have] a smartphone." Moreover, "50 per cent of children under 13 are on social media." Well, of course: That device is a convenient babysitter, isn't it?

Wiser Heads

So, is the PED addiction threat partly why even many "elite" college students "can't read books," [as I reported Wednesday](#)? It's certainly why, as Dr. Kardaras wrote, "Silicon Valley tech executives and engineers enroll their kids in no-tech Waldorf Schools." After all, don't you think that maybe, just perhaps, they know something most people don't?

It's something, though, that students under Diana E. Graber, co-founder of [Cyberwise](#), do often learn. Earlier this year, Graber [wrote](#) of how she requires seventh-graders to "avoid all screens for at least 24



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hours.” Many don’t take it well; some even suggest that such an assignment is cruel and “illegal”! But what’s the outcome? Graber relates that

the essays students hand in when this “cruel” assignment is over tell a different story. Nearly every student writes that they “feel peaceful” or “relaxed” or “less anxious” away from their screens. And many implore me to “assign this homework again.” The essays always remind me that this generation simply does not know a world without the distraction of devices, and that providing them an example of such a world is truly the “vacation” they need.

Give Them That Break

Back in the 1600s, French inventor and philosopher Blaise Pascal stated, “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” Being “connected” with a device is the antithesis of the empty room; it’s a peace-destroying addiction. Interestingly, too, many kids sense this. I know a teen girl who attends an authentically Catholic school. It’s an institution with no electronics — just pen, paper, and books — and traditional teaching. It’s a real education, and she’s happy to be there.

She’s not alone, either, according to a March Pew Research Center study. It [found](#) that a large minority of teens, 38 percent, acknowledge that they spend too much time on their PEDs. Even PED defender Das essentially admits as much toward his article’s conclusion, writing, “It’s true that cell phones distract us.” As with all addicts, however, these youths need some help kicking the habit.

So the adults have a choice. They can step up to this plate — or continue making excuses and giving the digital heroin pushers free rein.



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