# Banning phones in England's schools will not address online safety, say campaigners

19 February 2024



**Call made for more ambitious legislation to protect children from harmful content on tech platforms**

Banning mobile phones in England's schools will not address the harms caused by tech platforms to children, according to leading internet safety campaigners.

Ian Russell, the father of Molly Russell, and Beeban Kidron, an influential figure in online regulation, said limiting phone use in schools would do nothing to make social media services safer.

On Monday the government outlined new guidance on mobile phone use in schools, referring to the capacity for handsets to cause distraction and disruption, as well as enable online bullying.

Russell, whose 14-year-old daughter killed herself in 2017 after viewing harmful content online, said the updated guidance on handsets in schools did not prevent children from being exposed to dangerous material on the phones themselves.

"The simple reality is that children will continue to be exposed to preventable risk day and night until we address the fundamental product safety failings of tech platforms that are dangerous by design," he said.

“The best solution to protect young people from mental and physical harm is stronger and more ambitious online safety regulation.”

Russell, who is the chair of trustees at a charity set up in memory of his daughter, the Molly Rose Foundation, said there was an “urgent need” to commit to measures that would keep children safe. The Online Safety Act, which contains provisions to shelter children from harmful content such as pornography and the promotion of suicide and eating disorders, became law last year but is still in the process of being implemented.

Under the Department for Education plan, schools are offered a range of options for curbing mobile phones, including ordering phones to be kept at home, keeping them in lockers at the school, or being allowed to keep them provided they are not used or heard.

Announcing the new guidance, the DfE said allowing mobile phone use in schools could lead to online bullying, distraction and classroom disruption. The Parentkind charity said the guidance would help address a problem where children are addicted to harmful “electronic drugs”.

Kidron, a crossbench peer and architect of the children’s code, which regulates use of under-18s’ data, said what parents, children and teachers needed was the “robust application of the Online Safety Act”.

“Those that work with children daily understand that a phone is a device to pay for a bus, contact your mum, listen to music and find information,” she said. “The device is not the issue, it is the persistent irresponsible search for profit by companies that engage with children without offering them a service suitable for their age and development capacity.”

Esther Ghey, the mother of the murdered teenager Brianna Ghey, has called for a total ban on social media access for under-16s, telling the Guardian last week that creators of apps and social media platforms had a duty to protect the mental health of the young. Ghey said she believed social media caused anxiety in her daughter and prevented her from finding “her tribe” in the offline world.

Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, has described mobile phones as an “unwanted distraction” in classrooms and hopes that banning handsets will “reset social norms”. Speaking on the BBC’s Today programme on Monday, she said

children did not go to school to “sit on your mobile phone or to send messages” but to “speak to people and socialise and … go to get educated”.

Kidron said Ghey had made a “powerful” call to hold the tech industry to account. The peer said that the government and Ofcom, the communications watchdog, had to explain how the OSA would protect children, or there would be a requirement to “legislate further”.

Shweta Singh, an assistant professor at Warwick business school, said she agreed with banning phones in schools but children would remain exposed to online harms once lessons are over.

“It’s important to understand that this ban is over as soon as they leave the school premises. And then they are back to an online presence where harms persists such as cyberbullying, self-harm, child sex abuse among others,” she said.

[Source: The Guardian]