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Creating a culture of digital wellbeing in school communities

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Future-ready: preparing learners to thrive

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Aims

- Understand key evidence behind current digital wellbeing concerns.
- Gain practical strategies for embedding digital awareness
- Explore approaches for shaping a positive digital culture
- Discover resources to guide conversations with learners, colleagues and parents.

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What has been your experience of social media today?

Zero/lots

By chance / by choice

Overwhelmed

Annoyed by

Unregulated

Mindless scrolling

Confident

Enjoyable

Detoxing

Distracted

Helpful / informative

Necessary

Connected

Engaged

Creative

Reflective

Responsible

Irresponsible

Self–regulated

Well-managed

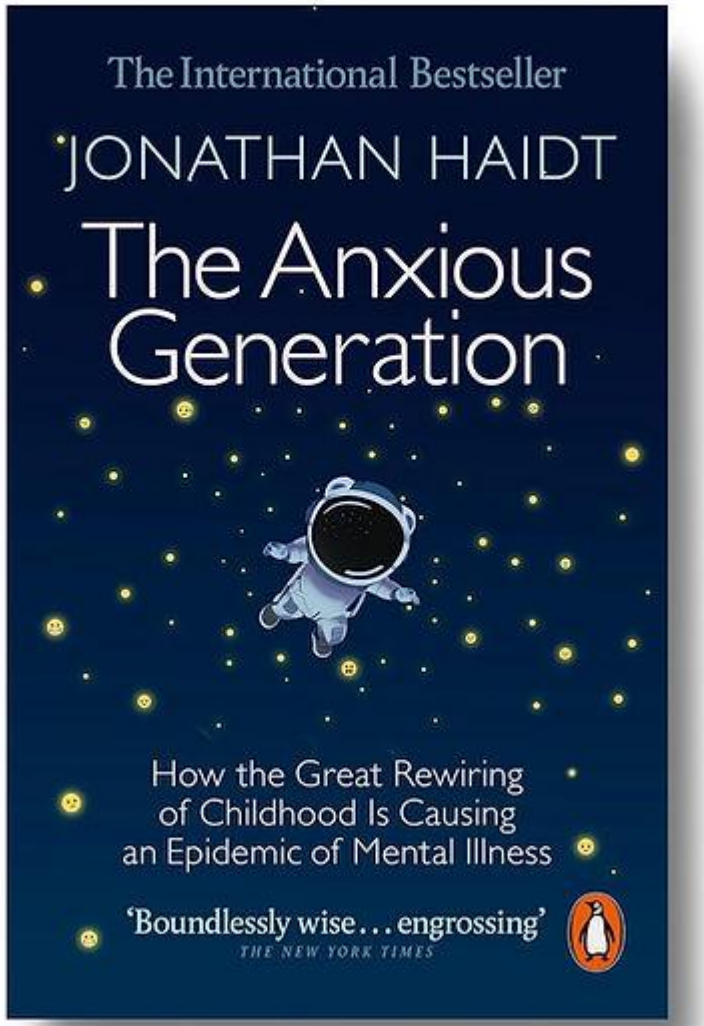


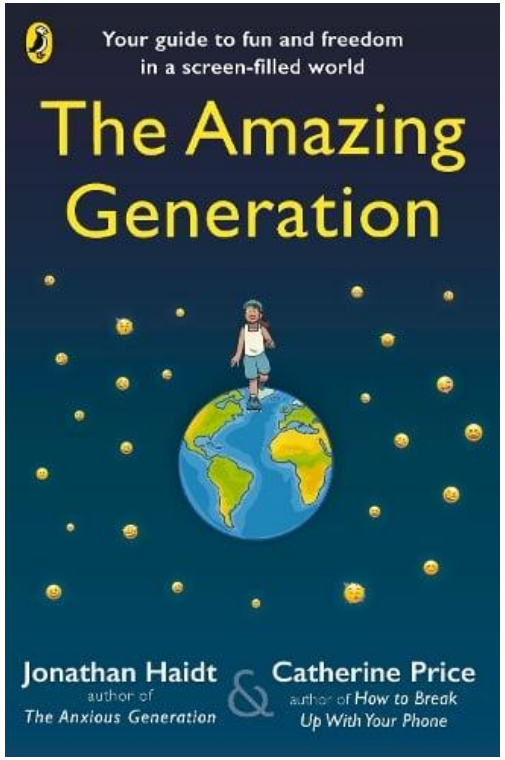
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Why digital wellbeing in schools?

'Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and - as I will show - unsuitable for children and adolescence'

- Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, page 6





What are the issues?

- Adolescence is a sensitive developmental window.
- Brain systems linked to emotion, reward, peer approval and impulse control are still developing.
- Algorithm-driven platforms amplify comparison, vigilance and emotional reactivity.
- The issue is not 'screens' but patterns of use.
- Sleep disruption, constant social comparison, loss of boredom, reduced in-person play.
- Less time outside.
- Girls and vulnerable learners disproportionately affected.

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How strong is the evidence?

What the research does show:

- Clear associations between digital patterns and:
  - sleep disruption
  - anxiety and low mood
  - attention difficulties.
- Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period.
- Platform design (not just 'screen time') matters.



What the research does NOT claim definitively:

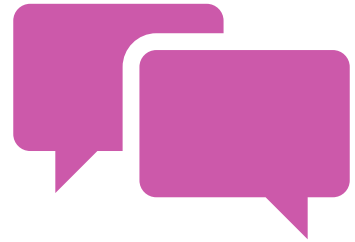
- That all technology is harmful.
- That effects are the same for every child.
- That schools alone can solve this.

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If we know this, what becomes a reasonable responsibility for schools?

Please share your experience:

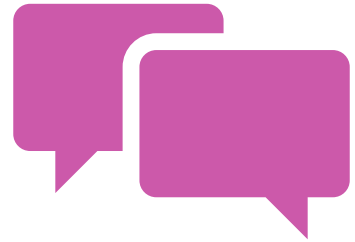
- Where do you see students using technology well?



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Please fill in the poll:

- Where do you see warning signs?
  - Sleep
  - Anxiety
  - Attention
  - Peer relationships



What are schools noticing?

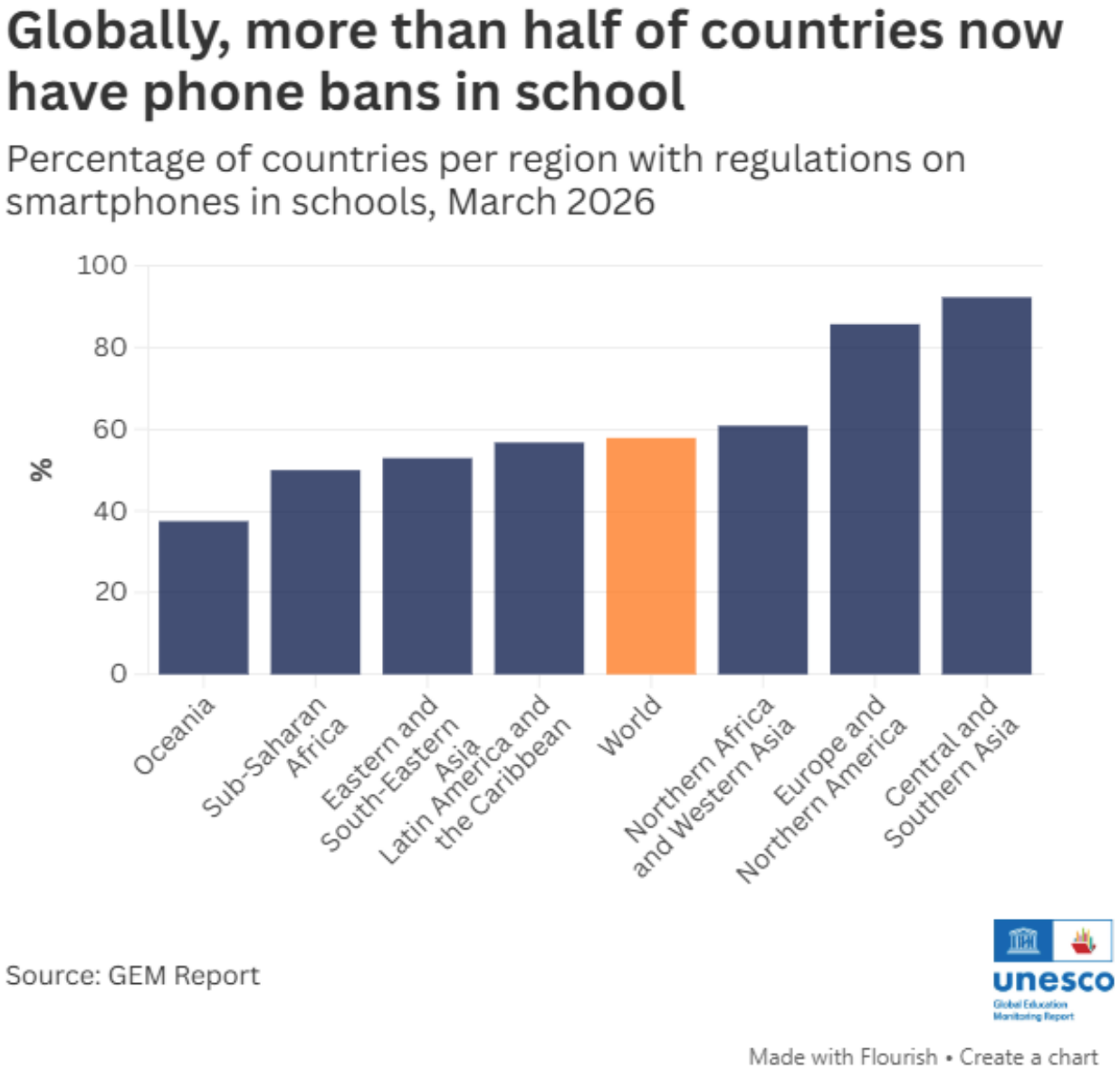
Across contexts, schools report:

- rising anxiety and emotional dysregulation
- reduced attention and persistence
- sleep-deprived students
- increased peer conflict moving seamlessly between online and offline.



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Phone bans



How many countries have phone bans in school?
UNESCO: Global education monitoring report, March 2026

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From evidence to action

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If this evidence is broadly right, what does it mean for **classrooms** and **whole-school culture**?

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Evidence to action

In the chat, please share a **classroom** or **whole-school** action that could help support one of the four themes identified in the evidence.

Please identify your theme by a number between 1 and 4

1: Sleep & constant connectivity	• sleep disruption strongly linked to anxiety and low mood • late-night device use impacts learning and behaviour • adolescents struggle with self-regulation when boundaries are absent.
2: Attention & cognitive overload	• sustained attention is declining • multitasking impairs learning • boredom is a developmental need, not a failure.
3: Social comparison & peer dynamics	• adolescents are neurologically sensitive to peer evaluation • online comparison intensifies self-criticism • peer conflict now follows students everywhere.
4: Unequal impact	• vulnerable students experience stronger positive and negative effects • neurodivergent learners may struggle more with regulation • digital harm often intersects with existing vulnerabilities.

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Feedback - suggestions

Classroom-level actions:

- Explicit teaching about sleep, focus, and wellbeing.
- Planned device-free learning.
- Teaching self-regulation, not assuming it.
- Modelling healthy digital behaviour.

Whole school:

- Clear, consistent phone norms.
- Shared expectations for homework and communication.
- Digital wellbeing embedded in PSHE & safeguarding.
- Staff alignment (not individual discretion).
- Partnership framing with parents.

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Why do schools matter? Schools…

normalise expectations

structure attention and time

foster good relationships

are trusted authorities for families

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Case Study

"Safeguarding is of paramount importance and it does come at a cost," he said.

"And we've seen huge benefits in terms of students speaking with each other and attending clubs; it's made it all worthwhile."

Evie, 16, welcomed the ban, saying: "I definitely used to see a lot more people just on their phones in the middle of lessons and I think now it is more social and everyone's listening to the teachers and people concentrating."

The Netherhall School



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'We've seen huge benefits since banning mobiles'



Evie, 16, said it was nice not to have the distraction of a mobile phone during the school day

Katy Prickett and **Debbie Tubby**, at The Netherhall School

25 March 2026

A secondary school which banned smartphones has seen "huge benefits" for students both academically and socially, according to its head teacher.

Case study

In secondary schools:

- 79% of teachers reported an improvement in students' ability to focus on work
- 61% of teachers report student achievement improved
- 77% of teachers say student behaviour improved
- 69% report bullying has reduced in their schools.

Do not disturb: A review of removing cell phones from New Zealand's classrooms – Summary

Addressing counter points

- Isn’t this just a moral panic about new technology?
- Correlation doesn’t equal causation so how can we justify action?
- Many students benefit hugely from technology, do we ignore that?
- Isn’t this the responsibility of parents rather than schools?

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To conclude:



Digital wellbeing is not:

- a blanket ban without explanation or testing
- a one-off assembly
- a moral panic
- something only parents should manage

Digital wellbeing is:

- evidence informed
- relationship-centred
- culturally embedded
- revisited over time

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We do not need certainty to act,
we need enough evidence to act
thoughtfully and proportionately.

Victoria Renfro paraphrasing Jonathan Haidt

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Cambridge Programmes

Cambridge Primary Digital Literacy (0072)

Cambridge Lower Secondary Digital Literacy (0082)

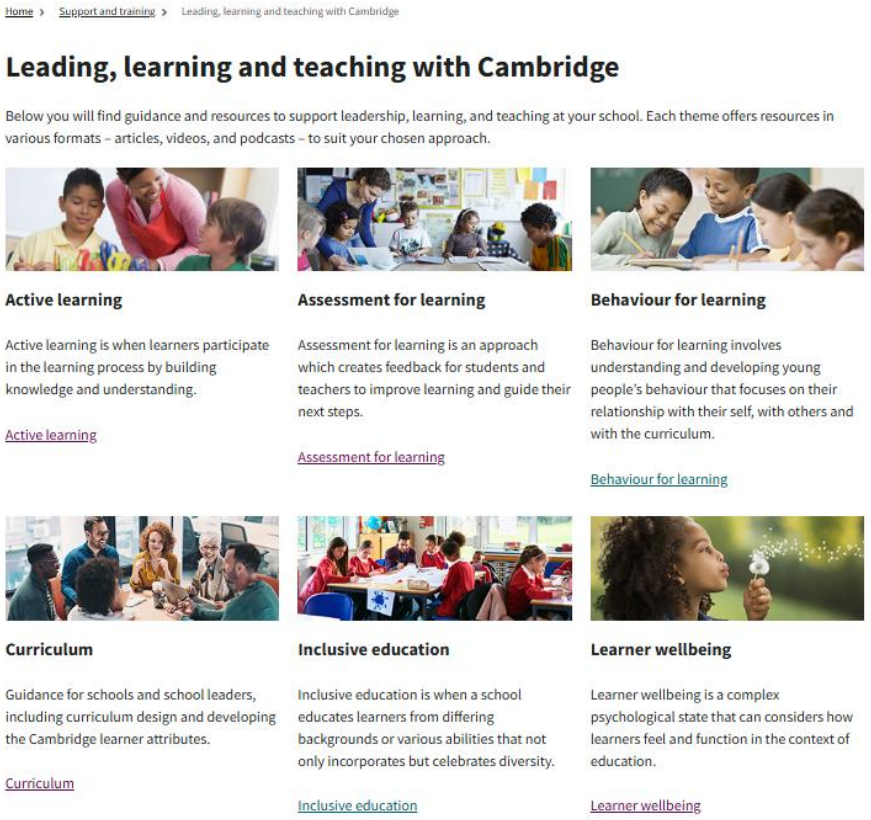
Cambridge Primary Wellbeing (0034)

Cambridge Lower Secondary Wellbeing (0859)

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Resources from Cambridge

- Leading, learning and teaching with Cambridge



- Exploring digital literacy in the classroom with confidence and flexibility - Cambridge International Education blog
- Overcoming distraction: How teachers can support students to build their focus - Cambridge International Education blog



Ep 56 - Podcast: Helping children to be AI and media literate

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Reflection & commitment

- One belief I might need to challenge…
- One classroom practice I will consider...
- One whole-school question I will take back…

Please share in the chat



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Any questions?

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