

# One Size Does Not Fit All

A report on phone bans in schools and children's rights with the OCO Youth Advisory Panel – Youth Friendly version

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for children





# Introduction

Phones are a big part of young people's lives. It's how they communicate with each other and stay in touch with their families, as well as sharing content on social media. Would you believe that an estimated 97% of children aged 12 to 14 years old and 49% of children aged 8 to 12 in Ireland have a smartphone<sup>1</sup>?

Technology is changing really quickly. And so it is understandable that parents, schools and policymakers are worried about the impact that phones and social media have on children.

In 2024, the Irish Government announced that there would be a ban on phones in schools.

However, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is concerned that children's rights, including their right to be heard, weren't taken into account when this decision was made.

We decided to ask our Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) what they think, as children haven't really been included in this conversation so far.

29 members of the OCO Youth Advisory Panel were involved. They are from Dublin, Wicklow, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Wexford, Cork, Limerick, Donegal, Cavan and Offaly. Our YAP come from different backgrounds.

We asked the YAP:

1. How phone bans in schools impact children's rights.
2. Their own experiences of phone bans in schools.
3. How rules should be developed in their schools.
4. What they want to happen next.

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<sup>1</sup> CyberSafeKids (2024), *Left To Their Own Devices: The virtually unprotected lives of kids in Ireland. Trends and Usage Report Academic Year 2023-2024*, p. 4.



## What children's rights are affected by phone bans?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international agreement, that Ireland has already signed up to, that lists all of the rights children have. When thinking about phone bans the main rights to consider are:

- **Non-discrimination (Article 2)** – countries should diminish or eliminate discrimination, including providing additional support for children who need help to enjoy their rights equally.
- **Best interests (Article 3)** – every child has a right to have their best interests taken into account as a primary consideration.
- **Life, survival and development (Article 6)** – countries should ensure the survival and development of children and this means all areas of development.
- **Children's views (Article 12)** – every child has a right to express their views and for those views to be properly considered.
- **Evolving capacities of children (Article 5)** – children have rights no matter what age they are. As children grow they should be able to exercise their rights more independently.
- **Freedom of expression (Article 13)** – phones facilitate children's ability to express themselves in the digital environment, share ideas and opinions.
- **Access to information (Article 13 and 18)** – phones allow children to be more informed and to access diverse forms of media and perspectives.
- **Protection from harm (Article 19)** – children have the right to be protected from illegal and harmful content available online.
- **The highest attainable standard of health (Article 24)** – phones offer an easy way to access health information and services while also presenting risks for children's mental health.
- **Education (Article 28 and 29)** – phones open up opportunities to learn online, develop digital literacy skills and access information that is useful for schoolwork.
- **Play (Article 31)** – children have a right to play, rest and to participate in culture and art, which can be supported by phone apps and access to the Internet.

Children's rights standards and research on phone bans show that we must move beyond talk of bans and adopt a more holistic approach to concerns around phone use, both in schools and beyond the school gates.

## What the YAP said about phone bans

- **Bans impact our rights:** We know phones can have negative impacts on our rights, but there's more to it than that. Phone bans don't think about both sides of the story and could have just as bad an impact on our rights.
- **All schools are different:** The rules are different in each school. In some of our schools, the rules aren't that strict. In others, students are being punished and paying money to get their phones back.
- **Our right to have a say:** Adults are not asking us our opinions when making these rules, even though we have the right to have our voices heard.
- **Children of different ages:** Children in primary schools might not need their phones as much as secondary school students, especially older teenagers. Adults should consider these differences when making rules.
- **Do bans even work?** Lots of young people are finding ways around bans. When we're not included in making rules around phones, bans make us more likely to break the rules.
- **We live in a digital world:** Our schools are using technology for education and we want to develop digital skills for our future.
- **There are bigger problems:** We'd like to see stronger anti-bullying policies, education on equality and respect, digital literacy lessons, and more investment in schools and health services. Most of all, we want to be included in conversations around solutions that are supposed to support us.



# What young people say...

**“One teacher screams at you for having a phone, while other teachers are scrolling”**

**“Acting like it’s a threat when instead it’s something we could adapt to”**

**“We have other issues in life besides a ban. We have much worse problems than phones.”**

**“If one of the rationales for banning phones is about bullying and protecting children, you need better anti-bullying rules then”.**

**“Don’t tell me to rely on my phone but then not let me use it”.**

**“Adults assume the worst when really they need to find the balance”**

**“Technology is part of the future, it should be part of our education”**

**“I have no idea where the rules come from”**

**“Whoever is making the rules is uninformed”**





“There is a lack of diversity in terms of what voices are heard in these decisions”

“There shouldn’t be a total ban”

“We can get around service blockers with free VPNs”

“Focus on education can be lost. It can be a distraction.”

“Taking it away from them completely is a bit extreme”

“I feel like a ban is too much”

“This would all work if people had common sense: don’t use it in class, just use it at break”

“It’s not gonna kill you not going on your phone”

Waste of money and time to reform it”





**“I use it to look at my timetable. If we use a piece of paper, we will lose it 3 days after the start of the year”**

**“It’s for parents to decide, not the government”**

**“People who don’t talk to anyone, or don’t have many friends, might use their phone and taking it away from them takes away from that. They might be listening to music at lunchtime. They should be allowed to”**

**“You can’t time an emergency!”**

**“Students are spending time in the bathroom on their phones in primary schools”**

**“We were not involved in developing rules. We were just told them at the start of the year and expected to follow them.”**

**“Take it away from first years! Many first years are blasting music on their phones and laptops!”**

**“It’s like a dictatorship!”**





# YAP Recommendations

- 1.** Do not introduce blanket phone bans in schools. Consider the impact on children's rights, particularly the right to have a say, as well as the diversity of individual schools and students, and wider research when rules around phones are being designed.
- 2.** Invest more in resources for digital education and improving schools, instead of phone pouches.
- 3.** Carry out more research and communicate this research in a child-friendly way to young people, so they understand the evidence behind decisions that are being made.
- 4.** Design different approaches to phone rules depending on the age and maturity levels of children.
- 5.** Increase support, education and awareness for parents, teachers and other adults to better understand technology and better support students through the challenges they are facing.



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