

Gen Free: Free to Be Kids

Mobilising politicians, parents, and health professionals to change our attitude to phone use and social media

Introduction

Gen Free started in Waterford in August 2023. It was a primary-school-led initiative that hoped to create space for parents to discuss their children's use of mobile phones and social media, and to agree not to purchase a smartphone for their children or allow them on social media while they were in primary school.

Among the group of principals and primary school teachers, there was a shared concern about the effects that social media and excessive screen time were having on pupils. The story across all schools – urban, rural, DEIS, big, or small – was the same: children are being affected negatively by being online and on social media.

International trends

How the use of smartphones and related technologies affects children's wellbeing and learning is a concern for educators, parents, and policymakers alike. A CyberSafeKids report (2024) found that 94% of 8- to 12-year-olds in Ireland own their own smart device, while 82% have their own social media account. Ireland is part of a trend across OECD countries, where more than 90% of teenagers report owning or having access to a smartphone (OECD, 2018). On average, teenagers spend three hours online per day outside of school (OECD, 2019). UNESCO (2023) recently called for smartphones to be banned from schools globally to tackle their disruptive influence and to reduce cyberbullying.

Abrahamsson (2024), in her study of smartphone usage with teenagers in Norway, found that banning smartphones from school caused a decrease in the number of girls seeking psychological health care. She also found that cyberbullying decreased. Girls' academic achievement increased, and these effects were larger for girls from low socio-economic backgrounds. Interestingly,



Dr Brian Barron

Principal, Portlaw NS, Co. Waterford

This article describes the work of Gen Free: Free to Be Kids, which started in Waterford in 2023 and has grown to be a national lobbying group encompassing non-governmental organisations, health professionals, educators, and parents. It outlines the group's aims, and it offers an overview of the research supporting these aims.

she found that the ban had no impact on boys' mental health or academic performance. Dempsey et al. (2020) asked if girls suffer more anxiety linked to mobile phones because of the expectation that they are always accessible and on.

Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* (2024) calls for the rewiring of childhood and the removal of smartphones and social media for under-16s. He notes that since 2012, anxiety in undergraduates in the US has risen by 134%. He calls for a dual solution: removing screens and social media and reinstating more traditional play and exploration for children.

Starting Gen Free

In August 2024, the primary school principals of Co. Waterford had a press event where the idea of Gen Free was launched.

In August 2024, the primary school principals of Co. Waterford had a press event where we launched the idea of Gen Free. Each school in the county had committed to take it on in their own context, so it would not be controlled centrally. Each school worked with its parents association and tried to get parent engagement and feedback. The response varied between schools and between parents. Some schools got very high adoption numbers straight away; others were more of a slow burn. Some parents were very enthusiastic, while others chose not to engage.

A variety of responses was to be expected, and 100% buy-in from all parents was never the goal. The goal was to create space for parents who wanted to buck the growing trend and say no to smartphones and social media for their children. There was some inevitable pessimism about 'the train having left the station' on this issue, but we pushed the message to parents that they did not need to get every other parent to sign up to Gen Free, just the parents of their children's friends. This micro-focus empowered parents to see the solution as a local one, within their influence.

Launching Gen Free was remarkably easy, with lots of early adopters and enthusiasm. The challenge became how to sustain that enthusiasm and keep the initiative on parents' radar. Yearly reminders from schools to parents and new families might help keep it fresh in their minds. However, in Waterford we felt there needed to be a national, societal, and legislative answer. We needed to make the internet and app providers responsible to protect young people online.

Free to Be Kids

By January 2024 there was a national appetite for action on smartphones and social media. I was being contacted regularly by schools and personal assistants (PAs) looking to replicate Gen Free. Greystones had their own It Takes a Village

initiative, and it was through collaborating with some of their founders and with CyberSafeKids and other interested parties that Gen Free became a national movement with three simple asks for the government:

1. Regulation: Specific and effective legislation to protect children online.
2. Education: Smartphone-free primary and secondary schools. The resourcing of educational programmes for parents.
3. Supports: A public awareness campaign aimed in particular at parents on the pitfalls of the online world and excessive screen time. Wellbeing training and support services for schools.

In September 2024, three weeks after the Irish Medical Organisation described smartphones and social media as a public health emergency, Gen Free was launched as a national lobbying movement. The Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, attended the launch and gave it his full support. There followed a robust engagement with parents through schools and PAs, asking them to email government leaders and local politicians.

Gen Free continues to work with policymakers and power brokers in the hope to create a safe, regulated space for our young people. But the power to influence change is still with individual parents and citizens to demand that policymakers put the necessary protections in place.

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