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Dear Parents and Carers

I wish to devote this week’s letter to a single theme: smartphones. You will be aware that I have [written to you before on this topic](#), most comprehensively this time last year.

Since that time, we have continued to update our curriculum resources and been true to our commitment to work closely with the students and families who have been caught up in the array of miseries that smartphones can generate. Nevertheless, all children remain at risk of cyber-bullying and or being exposed to harmful and disturbing content online via smartphones, gaming consoles, laptops and PCs.

In Jonathan Haidt’s latest book, ["The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness"](#), he explores the relationship between teenage mental health and the impact of modern technology. Haidt highlights the shift from a play-centric childhood to one that is dominated by smartphones. Haidt’s book, [online interviews](#) and lectures are having a big impact on both sides of the Atlantic.

Haidt refers to the current era (in which children all over the world are given smartphones) as having caused "the great rewiring of childhood," which, he argues, has disrupted social and neurological development, sleep patterns and attention spans – whilst fostering addiction, loneliness, and perfectionism.

Haidt advocates for action to address this epidemic, proposing four rules:

- (i) delaying smartphone use until high school (i.e., year 10 onwards);
- (ii) restricting all social media until age 16;
- (iii) banning phones in schools; and
- (iv) promoting more independent, unstructured play for children to develop problem-solving skills and resilience.

Haidt does not confine his book to smartphones. He is equally interested in how childhood has changed over many decades. He notes the irony that parents and carers are unable or unwilling to monitor or safeguard their children online, whilst simultaneously reducing or restricting their children’s exploration of the real world through a combination of over protectiveness, risk aversion and fear.

Haidt illustrates that parents across the western world have actually spent *more* time parenting their own children since the 1980s – and therefore our children have spent *less* time with other children (learning how to interact and learn those essential social skills). Meanwhile, children sleep less and are more likely to experience poor mental health. Haidt asks us if we encourage our children to cling to us for safety, or urge them to go and explore and be more confident. Tricky stuff for any parent or carer to read!



Figure 11.1. The junkyard playground on Governors Island, New York City, designed and run by play:ground

One of the most powerful messages in Haidt's book is the importance of there being a grassroots upheaval in parental attitudes. Perhaps more than ever before, our society does not like being told what to do and fears of a 'nanny state' emerge when governments or institutions, like schools, overreach.

That said, schools, including CNS, continue to see the misery caused by smartphones in particular, and we know that Haidt's evidence of the addictive and negative effects of this technology are very real for our children. And yet, none of us, as parent or carers, were ever asked to consent to the single greatest and most rapid socio-technological experiment in human history.

What does this mean for us at CNS? Perhaps very little and we shall just continue to do our best to manage the effects of these devices. Or... we collectively agree that the time has arrived to act with greater confidence, either for the students already at CNS or those who are new to the school or yet to join.

I am part of a group of secondary school headteachers who are committed to exploring these issues with families and we share a desire to act boldly *in partnership* with parents and carers. There is some thinking and planning emerging across RLT schools that will aim to get a true sense of how you feel as parents and carers:

- Do we regret giving our children smartphones?
- On balance, have smartphones been a good thing for our children or not?
- Do we know what our children are watching or being exposed to?
- Do we know how gaming, the internet and social media is changing our children at the neurological and psycho-social levels?
- Do we feel compelled to give into our children's requests for a smartphone? Why?

There seems very little doubt that it has become much harder to be a teenager in the past fifteen years. The data appears to be clear about that and at one level it may be a coincidence that the arrival of smartphones (c.2010) and the worrying data about teenage mental health and wellbeing align. The question is whether or not this is simply a coincidence; a correlation that has been confused with causation.

I shan't pretend to be able to conclude but in the absence of a better explanation, there appears to be overwhelming evidence that our children's mental health and wellbeing is affected by the existence of new technology that has transformed childhoods across the world.

The question is whether we, as parents, carers and educators, are merely witnesses and commentators to this, or do we wish to become disrupters and reassert the childhoods we cherish, rather than the ones our children are drawn into without our or their consent?

If this is something that strikes a chord with you then please do get in touch:

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Yours faithfully



Barry Doherty
Headteacher



"It's been so nice getting to interact with you for these past six years. Here's your first device."

Figure 12.1. H. Lin, in *The New Yorker*.¹⁷