

Smartphones: the new frontier in parenting

MARCH 2025

IN TWO DECADES, EVERYTHING'S CHANGED

2004 → 2024



2004
Nokias ruled



2007
The first iPhone launches



2008
Apple app store opens



2012
4G launches in the UK, enabling internet everywhere



2024
89% of 12-year-olds own a smartphone, permanently connected to the internet via 4g/5g

THEY’RE NOT REALLY ‘PHONES’ AT ALL



MOBILE PHONE

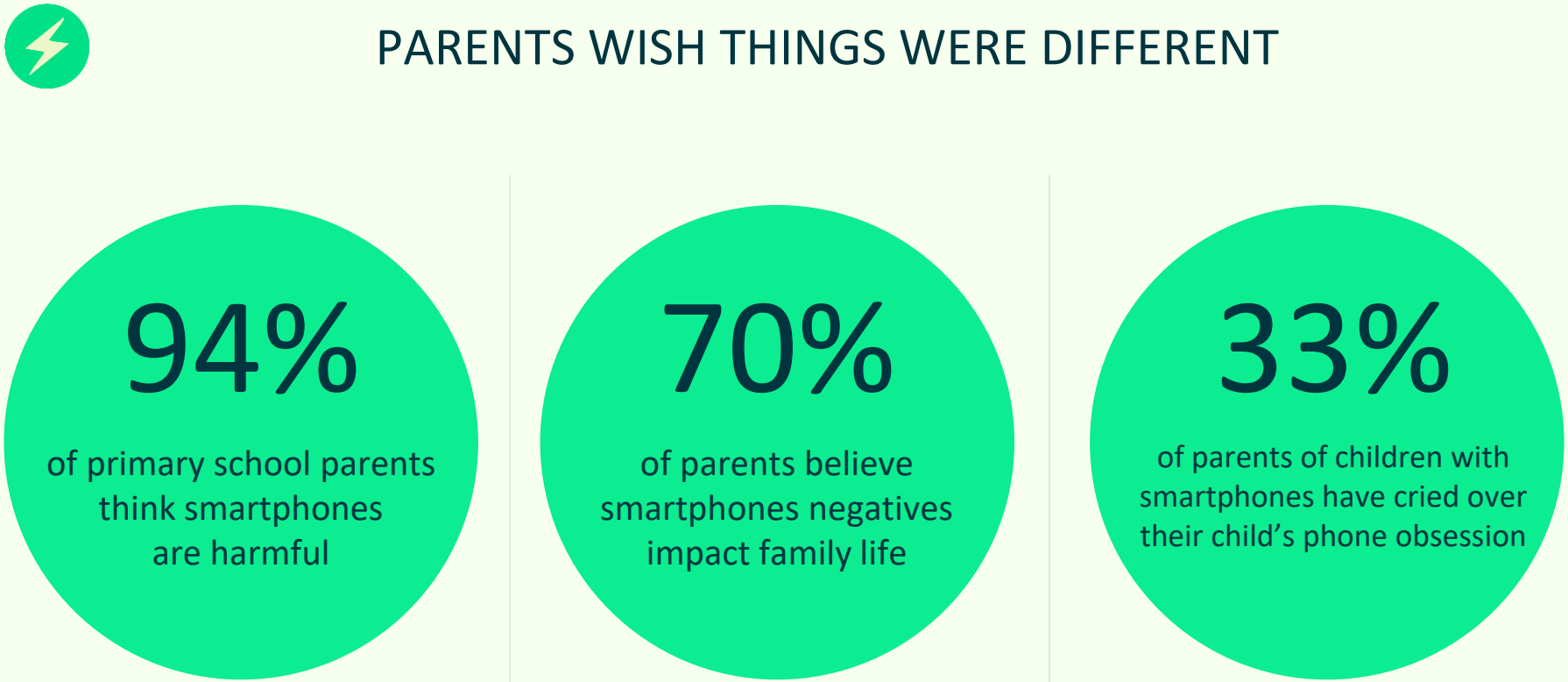
Make calls, send texts, play Snake



POCKET SUPERCOMPUTER

24/7 access to the internet in your pocket

PARENTS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

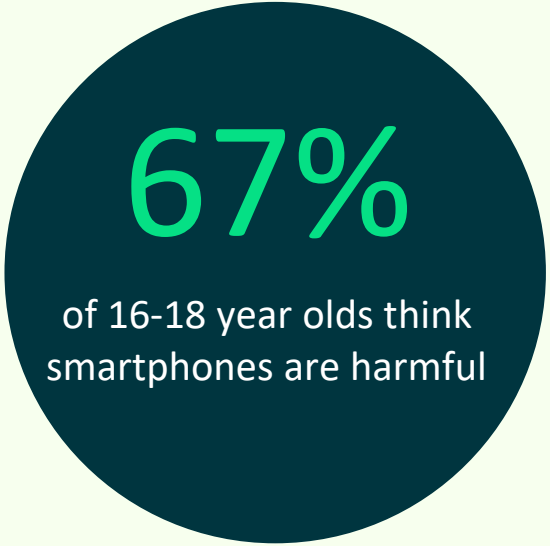


Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496 people, April 24

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24

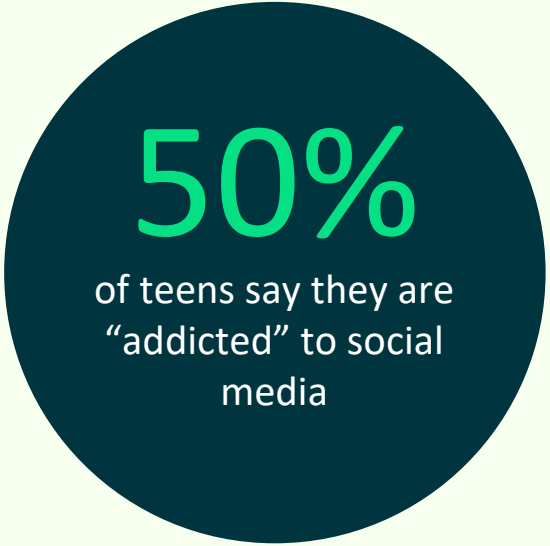
YOUNG PEOPLE WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT



Parentkind poll, 2024



Parentkind poll, 2024



Millennium Cohort Study, 2024

YET SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM



25%

of 5-7 year olds
in the UK own their own
smartphone

89%

of 12 year-olds
in the UK own their own
smartphone



SOURCE: OFCOM Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes April 24

EVERYONE’S GOT ONE BECAUSE EVERYONE’S GOT ONE



Most parents believe smartphones are harmful, yet almost all children have them by Year 7



Because resisting peer pressure becomes almost impossible when children’s social lives migrate online

The powerful network effects of smartphones and social media mean parents and young people feel like they have no choice



So what exactly *is* the problem?



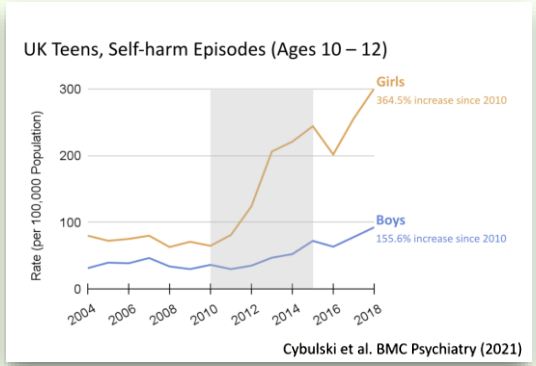
When children first started getting smartphones in the early 2010s we didn’t understand their impact.

Now we do, and the evidence is overwhelming.

SMARTPHONES ARE FUELLING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and even suicide among teens have all dramatically spiked globally since 2010 – when children started getting smartphones.

A 2023 global study of 27,969 young adults from Sapiens Labs showed that the younger they got their first smartphone, the worse their mental health today.



3x

Teens with problematic smartphone-use are twice as likely to have anxiety and three times as likely to have depression

King's College London, 2024

1 in 5

UK 16 to 18 years olds say that their social media has made them feel that 'life is not worth living'

Parentkind Poll, 2024

53%

The number of children referred to emergency mental healthcare in England has soared by 53% in three years

Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024

“The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency.
It is time to require a warning label on social media platforms.”

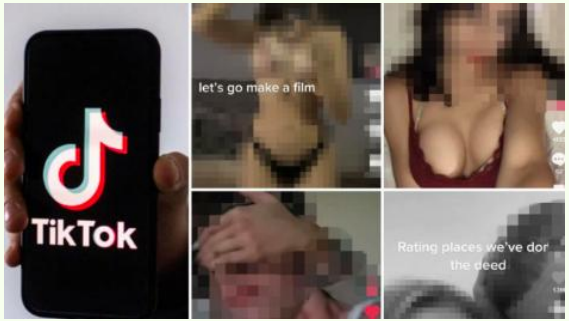


Dr Vivek Murthy
US Surgeon General, 2024

SMARTPHONES EXPOSE KIDS TO HARMFUL CONTENT

Having unrestricted access to the internet in your pocket creates a gateway to extreme content and viewpoints that we'd never dream of exposing children to in real life.

Hardcore pornography, extreme political views, sexualised and violent imagery, trolling and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders have become part of the fabric of modern childhood.



51%

of UK 11-13 year-olds have seen hardcore pornography online

British Board of Film Classification Report, March 2022

75%

of UK 15 year olds questioned had been sent beheading videos

Digital Childhoods, children's commissioner report, 2022

90%

of girls and 50% of boys say they are sent unwanted explicit content

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools, 2021

“We’ll look back in 20 years and be horrified by what our children were exposed to”



Dame Rachel de Souza
Children’s Commissioner for England, 2022

SMARTPHONES APPS ARE ADDICTIVE BY DESIGN

Tech companies spend billions on making apps and devices as addictive as possible because ‘maximising engagement’ is the fundamental objective of their business model.

So it’s little wonder that many children are routinely ‘spending six, seven, eight hours a day on social media – often more’ (Ofcom, 2024).



46%

of teens say they use the their phones “almost constantly”

Pew Research Centre, Aug 2022

29 hours

Per week is the average British 12-year-old now spends on their smartphone

Childwise Monitor Report, 2021

2 in 3

of 11-17 year olds ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ find it difficult to put down their phone

Common Sense Media, 2023

“Behind every screen on your phone,
a thousand engineers have worked to make it
maximally addicting. Children are particularly
susceptible to this kind of manipulative design.”

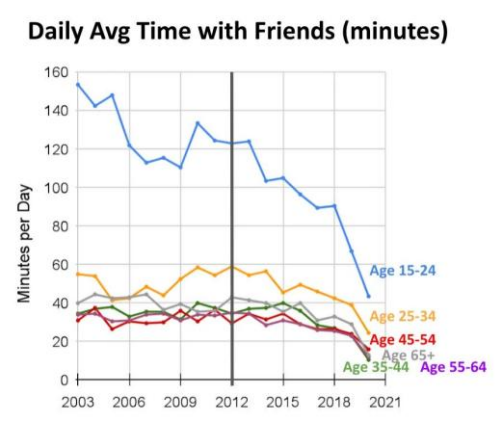


Aza Raskin
Co-inventor of ‘infinite scroll’, turned campaigner

SMARTPHONES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING CHILDHOOD

Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world activities and connections that are crucial to healthy childhood development.

The opportunity cost to childhood is profound. The average UK 12 year-old now spends over four hours per day on their smartphone, displacing the kinds of activities that have shaped childhood for millennia.



43%

of US teenagers waking minutes are spent on screens

Gitnux Marketdata Report, Jan 2024

30%

Since 1975, the daily average time children spend playing outdoors has fallen by 30%, while screen-based activities have risen 23%

Zach Rausch - Mullan 2019

65%

The daily average time that teenagers spend with friends has plummeted by 65% since 2010

American Time Use Study

“When kids are on their phones all day, it’s not just what they're doing on the phone that matters — it’s what they’re not doing. They’re missing out on crucial experiences that help them grow into healthy adults.”



Dr Jonathan Haidt
Professor of Social Psychology, NYU



Dr Susie Davies, founder of Papaya Parents, citing NHS DATA

SADLY, WE COULD GO ON

SLEEP
Bedtime use of smartphones doubles children's risk of poor sleep

BULLYING
84% of bullying now takes place on a device

DISTRACTIONS
On average teens are bombarded by 237 smartphone notifications a day

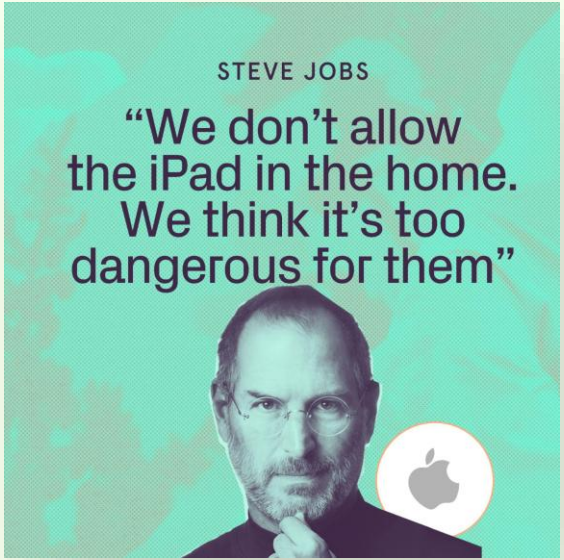
ARGUMENTS
55% of parents say their child’s smartphone use causes big family arguments

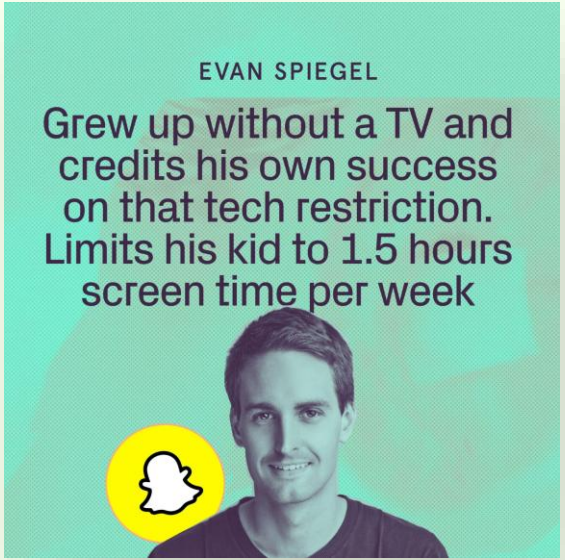
ROAD SAFETY
Mobile phone distraction is a major cause of road accidents involving children

CRIME
500 children a day were mugged in 2020 in the UK, almost all for smartphones

1: Jama Paediatrics, 2016; 2: Ofcom, 2022; 3: CommonSense Media, 2023; 4: HMD, 2024; 5: LookUp; 6: ONS, 2020

It’s little wonder that many of the people who created this technology keep it away from their kids








Parents are in an
impossible position

BECAUSE OUR ‘CHOICE’ ISN’T REALLY A CHOICE AT ALL



Either we…

Give our children access to a product that we know to be harmful.

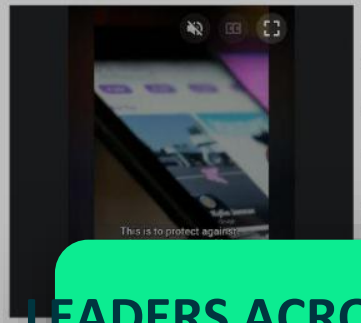


Or we…

Risk alienating them from their peers at a crucial stage of their development.

IT’S A LOSE-LOSE; FOR PARENTS, FOR CHILDREN & FOR SOCIETY

LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD



Anthony Albanese has revealed how a nationwide age-based ban on social media accounts, including Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, will work.



Education

Children's exposure to harmful online content a 'public health crisis', says Minister

Stronger laws may be needed to safeguard young people, according to Stephen Donnelly



France

France to trial ban on mobile phones at school for children under 15

'Digital pause' experiment at 200 secondary schools could be extended nationwide in January

Kim Willsher *in Paris*

Follow Kim Willsher



The Minister for Education is plannin phones from all second-level schools research which links use of devices t distraction and cyberbullying. Photog Barlow/PA Wire

Carl O'Brien

ve that is intended to d children's mental

ire schools in the hones by July 1, 2026, e by children in le more than a year

THE IRISH TIMES

Education

Mobile phones set to be banned across all second-level schools under new Government plans



Figures show that there is a mental health crisis among young people. Ministers believe social media is partly to blame

GETTY IMAGES

The New York Times

California Schools Must Restrict Phones Under New Law Signed by Newsom

Calls for crackdowns have mounted with reports of cyberbullying and studies indicating that smartphones are harmful to children's mental health.

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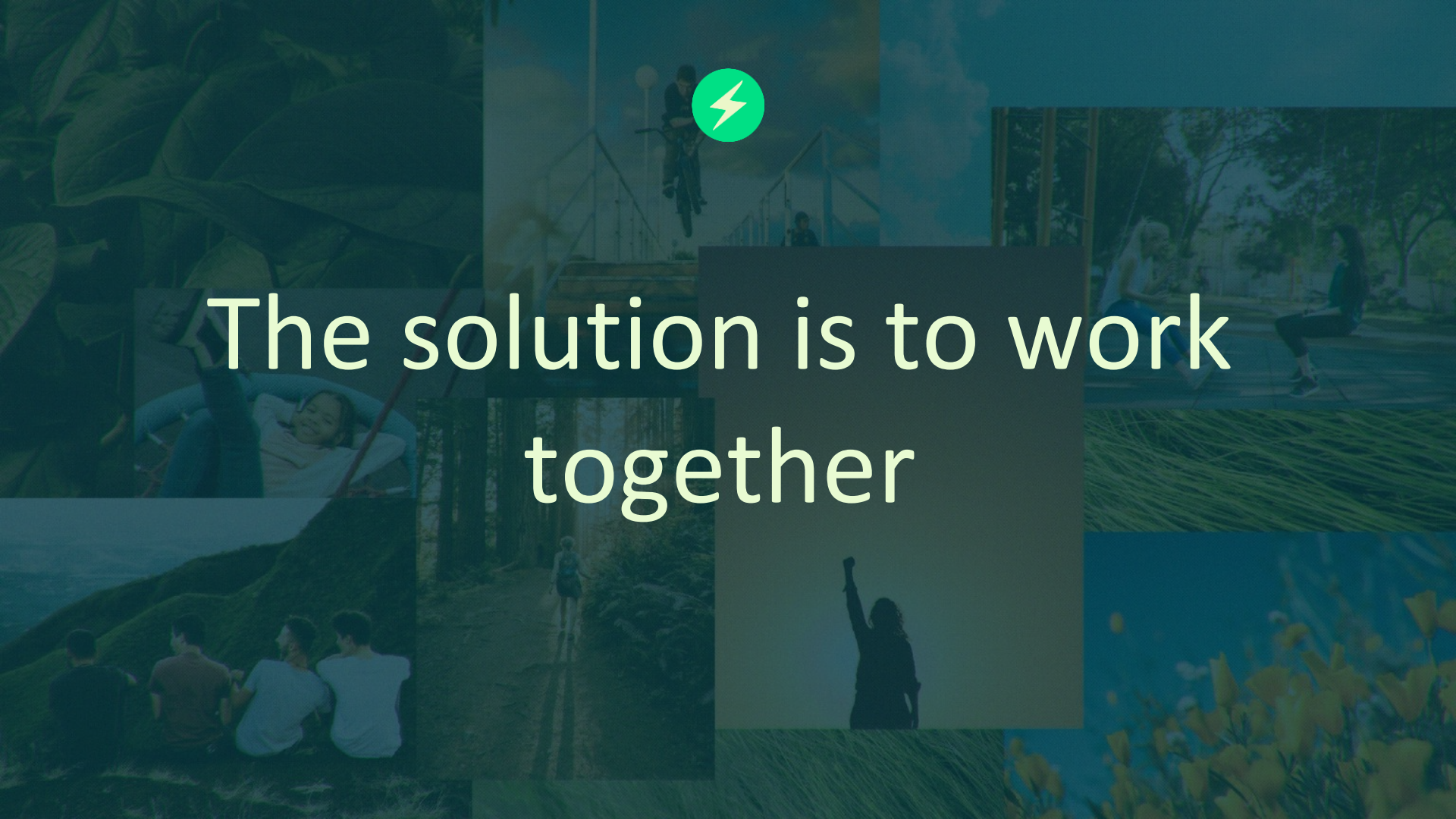
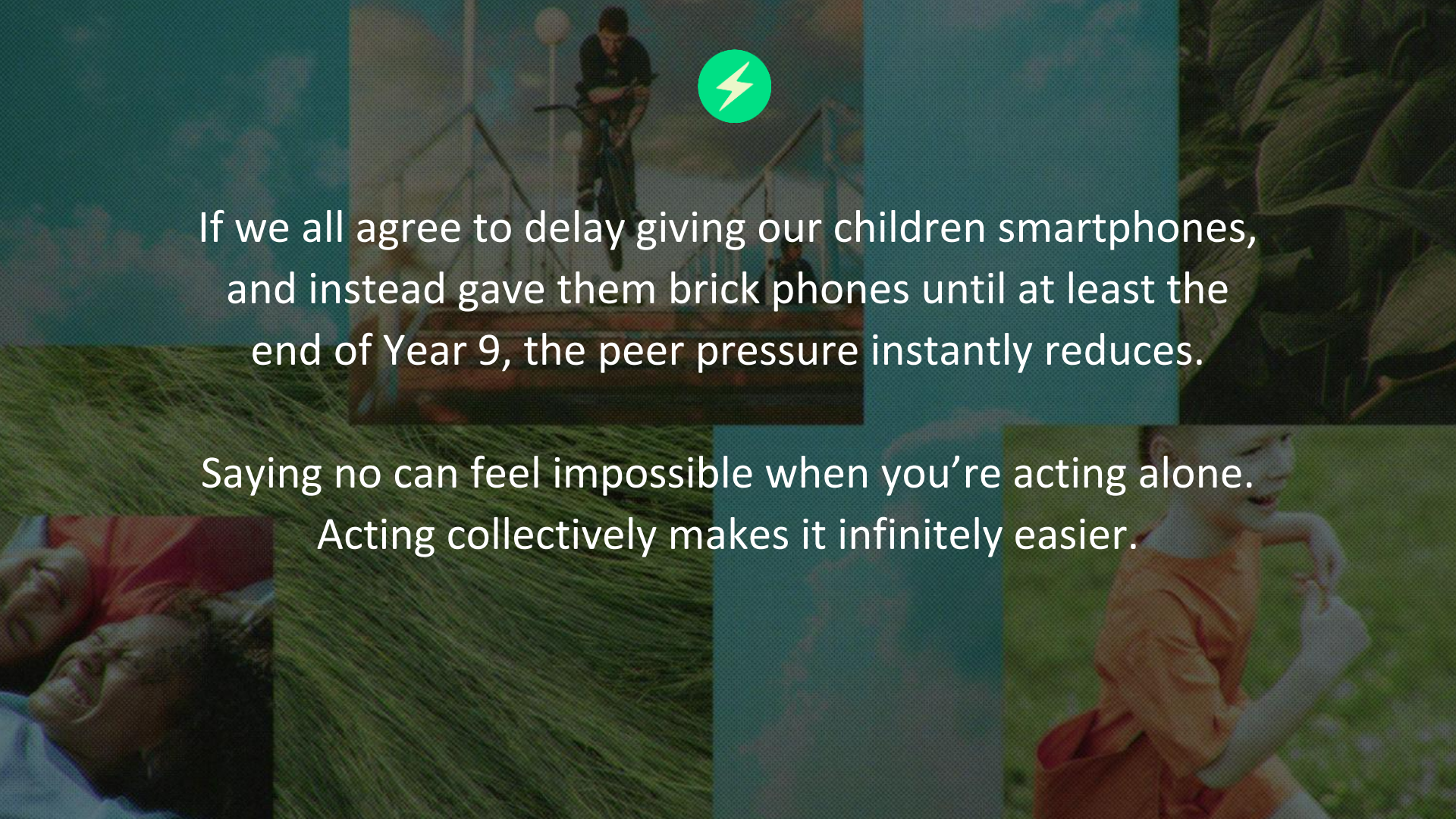
LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

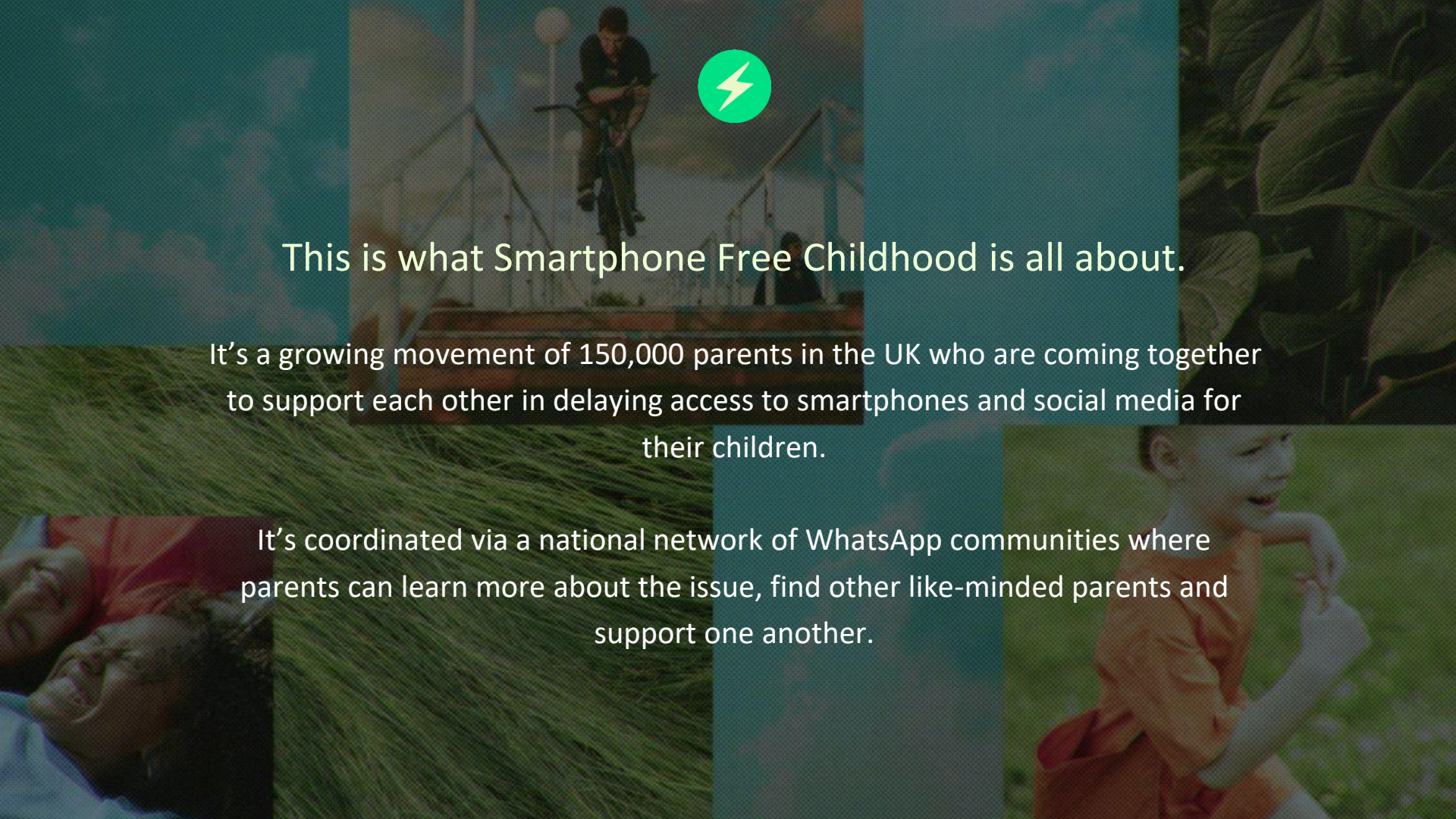
BUT PROPER REGULATION OF BIG TECH WILL TAKE YEARS, AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE


The solution is to work together



If we all agree to delay giving our children smartphones, and instead gave them brick phones until at least the end of Year 9, the peer pressure instantly reduces.

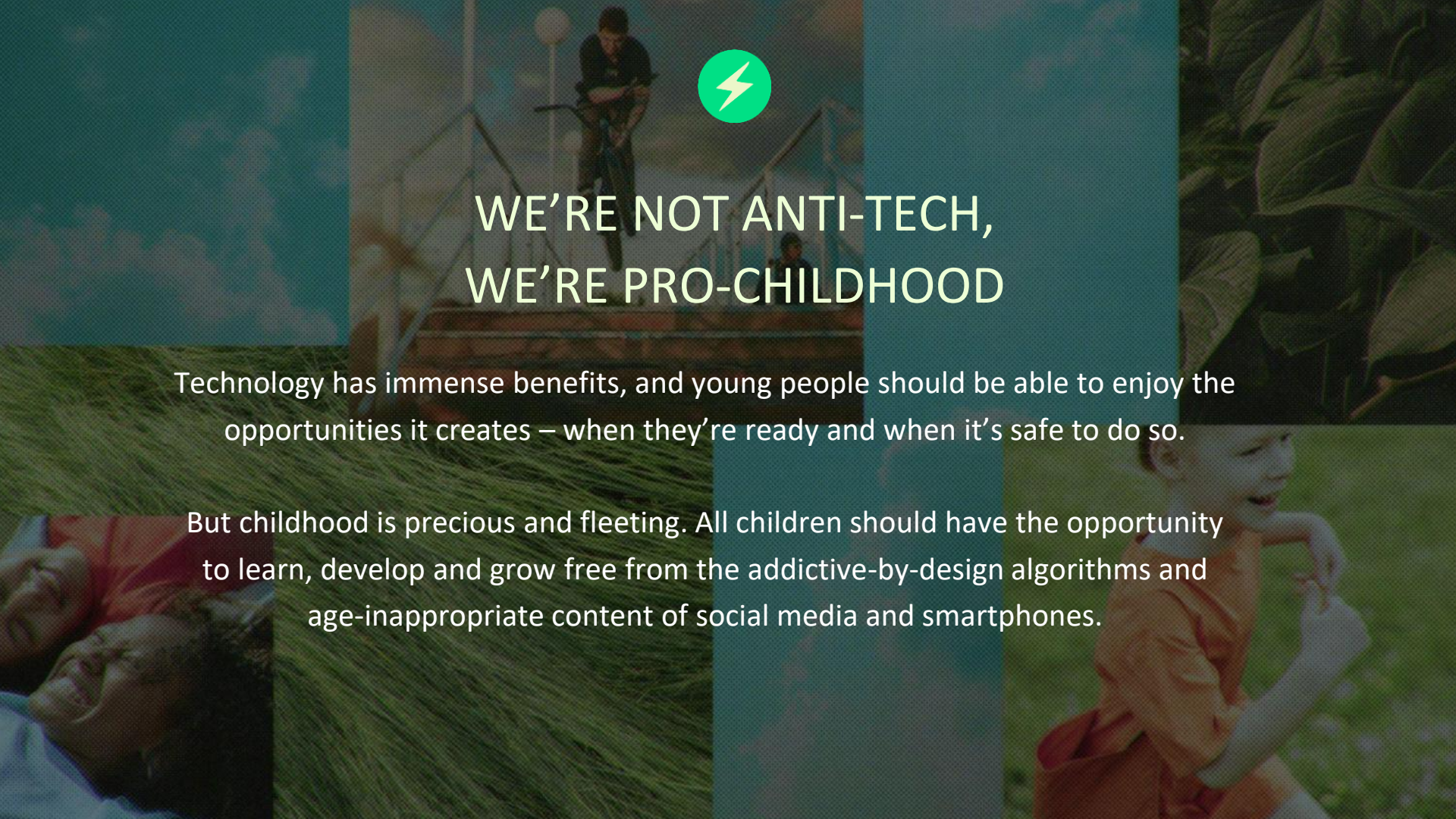
Saying no can feel impossible when you're acting alone. Acting collectively makes it infinitely easier.



This is what Smartphone Free Childhood is all about.

It’s a growing movement of 150,000 parents in the UK who are coming together to support each other in delaying access to smartphones and social media for their children.

It’s coordinated via a national network of WhatsApp communities where parents can learn more about the issue, find other like-minded parents and support one another.



WE'RE NOT ANTI-TECH, WE'RE PRO-CHILDHOOD

Technology has immense benefits, and young people should be able to enjoy the opportunities it creates – when they're ready and when it's safe to do so.

But childhood is precious and fleeting. All children should have the opportunity to learn, develop and grow free from the addictive-by-design algorithms and age-inappropriate content of social media and smartphones.

OUR RECOMMENDED APPROACH

— Simple phone until at least the end of Year 9
— Delay social media until 16
— Internet & WhatsApp access via a shared family computer
— Track with an Airtag if you want to know where they are



SMARTPHONE



SOCIAL MEDIA



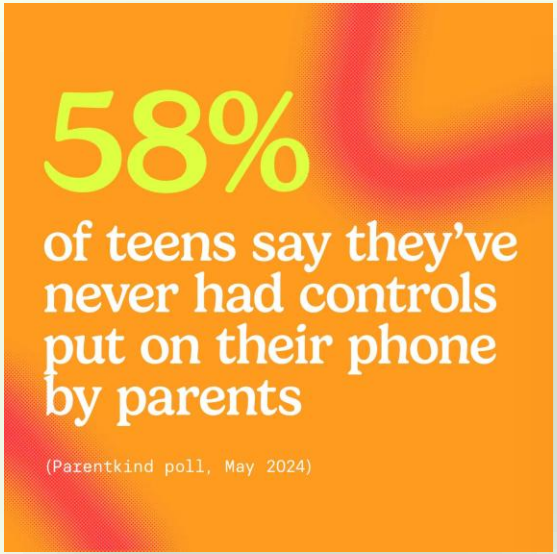
SIMPLE PHONE

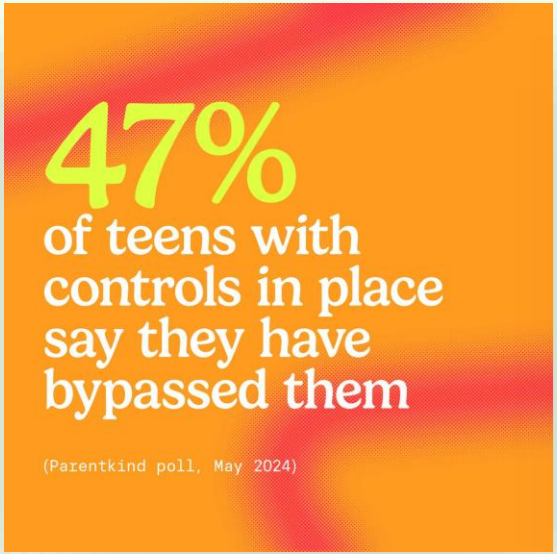


FAMILY COMPUTER

PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T THE SOLUTION

— Even the most tech-savvy parents struggle to manage parental controls
— Some apps require updates to hundreds of settings to make them age appropriate
— Even if your child's phone has parental controls, their friends may not so they may be sent inappropriate content regardless








THE PARENT PACT
makes collective action
simple

The Parent Pact is an online tool that helps parents agree to delay with others in your community. The more of us who sign, the more powerful it becomes.

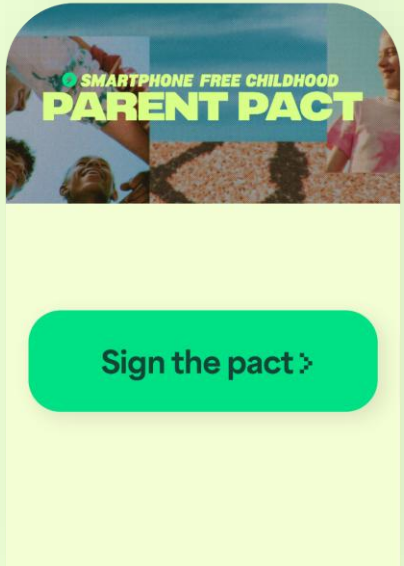
Step 01.

Select your region & child's school



Step 02.

Sign the Pact to delay until the end of Year 9



Step 03.

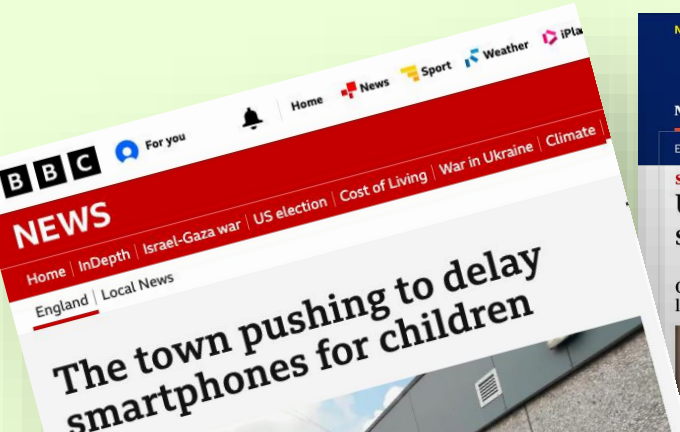
View results for your region, school & class



THE MOVEMENT IS GROWING ACROSS THE UK

97,975

Parent Pacts have been signed since launching in September







IT’S HAPPENING IN [ENTER YOUR COUNTY NAME]

5,505

Parent Pacts have been signed in Hertfordshire

26

Parent Pacts have been signed in Bridgewater


We’re all trying to do
the best for our kids

WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Navigating the fast changing world of smartphones and social media is complex.

This stuff’s tricky, the evidence is evolving fast, and every family is different.

Wherever you sit on the spectrum, or whatever decisions you’ve made for your children, we respect your position.

Every family will come to their own conclusions; we just want to open up a conversation about these issues.

It’s a new frontier of parenting, and we’re all in it together.


Let’s keep talking



SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD

www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk

@smartphonefreechildhood

Smartphone Free Childhood is a restricted fund under the auspices of Prism the Gift Fund, Charity Number 1099682.