

Should schools go screen-free?

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A new paper in *JAMA Network Open* found that most middle and high schools have cell phone use policies, mostly restricting use in classrooms but not during lunch/recess. Just as with physical activity and nutrition, schools have a role in supporting screen time recommendations.

The latest screen-time related research from Dr. Pooja Tandon, a [child health](#) and development expert at Seattle Children's Research Institute, was inspired by her oldest son.

"When my son entered [middle school](#), I learned that students in many middle and high schools were allowed to have their phones with them at all times," Tandon said. "I looked into this a bit more and found that even in schools where policies limited use during class, cell phones could still be used unrestricted during lunch and recess."

This struck Tandon, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine, whose research focuses on promoting healthy active and outdoor play for children and teens.

"My fellow pediatricians and I follow guidelines that recommend children and teens enjoy two hours of age-appropriate recreational screen time a day," she said. "Yet, many children may be spending most of their waking hours in school with what could be unsupervised and unrestricted access to their phones."

First national snapshot of school cell phone policies

To better understand cell [phone](#) policies and practices at middle and high schools in the U.S., Tandon and her colleagues at the research institute's Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development, conducted a survey of public schools serving grades 6-12.

The survey sent to over 1,100 school principals, representing a national sample of schools across the U.S., asked questions about the presence of a cell phone policy for students and staff and restrictions on phone use. Additional questions addressed consequences of policy violation, the use of cell phones for curricular activities and principals' attitudes toward cell phone policies.

The results of their survey now published in *JAMA Open Network* offer the first national snapshot of school cell phone policies. Of the 210 schools responding to the survey, 97% of middle schools and 91% of high schools reported having a cell phone policy for students. A notable percentage—33% of middle schools and 69% of high schools—did not restrict phone use during lunch or recess.

"Schools have a unique opportunity to create predictable screen-free time for children," Tandon said. "Limiting phone use during the entire school day could significantly decrease their screen exposure."

Tandon thinks such an approach could lead to benefits in the classroom like improved focus and ability to learn. From a social standpoint, limiting phone use during lunch may promote more interaction between students and for children who have recess, increase physically active play.

Why screen-free schools make sense

The study also lays the foundation for future research in this understudied area to help guide recommendations for screen time in schools.

In the published paper, Tandon and her co-authors advise that just as schools are critical to helping children and teens meet guidelines for optimal physical activity and nutrition, they should support recommendations on screen time and media use.

"Just like schools are encouraged to help students achieve the recommended 60 minutes per day of physical activity, they have a role to play in helping children limit their screen time exposure," Tandon said.

Getting teacher and parent buy-in

While an overwhelming 90% of principals responding to the survey agreed that cell phone use policies should exist at both middle and high schools, Tandon recognizes that restricting cell phone use during the school day requires trade offs for schools and parents.

"We know that a lot of teachers use phones as part of their lessons, so it would be important to understand their attitudes toward student cell phone use too," she said. "Getting the support of the parent community can't be assumed either. Many parents want to be able to reach their children at school on their cell phones."

One argument she often hears from parents about limiting technology use and screen time in general is that children need to learn how to moderate consumption since screens and digital media are ubiquitous.

"I acknowledge that we need to teach our children to be responsible digital citizens and that teaching them to be responsible users isn't accomplished by blocking technology completely," Tandon said.

Tips for parents

With the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tandon acknowledges that screen time is likely up for everyone as phones and technology are helping many people stay connected.

She says in any case, it's helpful for families to have some parameters around cell phone use. Below, Tandon offers a few tips for parents when it comes to reducing their child or teen's cell phone use during the school day or when at home.

- Make family cell phone rules: "Parents are generally encouraged to set limits around screen time," Tandon said. "Rules like no cell phone use in the car or during homework or meals are good ones to add to your family's list." Create "tech free" times for the whole family so parents can model this for their children.
- Keep cell phones away: Even if it's not the policy at your child's school, encourage them to keep their [cell phone](#) away in their backpack or locker for the school day. They can then access it after [school](#).
- Explore parent controls: Especially for younger teens, consider parental controls (through phone settings or apps) around what content they can access to make sure it is age appropriate. Consider limiting access to social media.
- Keep cell phones out of bedrooms: Place cell phones out of arms reach, especially at night. Set up an area for charging phones either in the parents' room or another common family area.
- Make a plan: A family media use plan can help balance your families' on- and offline activities.

More information: Pooja S. Tandon et al. Cell Phone Use Policies in US Middle and High Schools. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2020; 3(5):e205183. [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.5183](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.5183)

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