

Smartphones at school: Inside a not-so-simple debate

[Clayton Collins](#) Sept. 20, 2024, 9:00 a.m. ET

It's often yet another binary battle: Cellphones at school are either out-and-out distractions that drag down learning or they're needed tools, and lifelines in emergencies. Two Monitor writers set out to explore the middle, then joined our podcast to discuss the assignment.

A Fight Over Students' Phones

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Smartphones in hand, all of the time, and pretty much everywhere.

That has largely become a social norm in the United States and Canada. Can we expect different behavior from, say, young teens at school?

Turns out, this is more than a story of enforcement, by parents or schools. It's partly about seeing cause and effect, and adapting. The Monitor's Jackie Valley and Sara Miller Llana recently co-wrote a Monitor Weekly cover story on the subject.

"What we found through this reporting is that when kids were presented with the opportunity to take a social media break, whether because they were forced to or encouraged [to], they saw the benefits," says Jackie on our "Why We Wrote This" podcast.

And parents? Many work to keep their children from the clutches of too much social media. But a school shooting can change that. The phone becomes an indispensable means of contact.

Solutions come hard. What might matter most: A problem is getting

attention.

“I actually feel so much better about the whole situation after reporting this,” says Sara. “Because we weren’t even having this conversation a couple of years ago.”

Episode transcript

Clay Collins: Start a conversation about smartphones in the classroom, and it’s probably going to go one of a couple of ways: They’re either huge distractions and impediments to learning, like having televisions in students’ hands, or they’re just ubiquitous tools, handy security devices – lifelines even.

Of course, there’s some active thinking in between those positions too.

[MUSIC]

Collins: This is “Why We Wrote This.” I’m Clay Collins. Monitor writers Sara Miller Llana and Jackie Valley, both return guests, recently co-reported a cover story on this topic for the Monitor Weekly. They join me here today. Welcome, Sara and Jackie!

Sara Miller Llana: Thank you.

Jackie Valley: Hi. Nice to be here.

Collins: So this story is a talker. There’s a lot of discussion of parental versus institutional authority, you know, what childhood “should” look like, how personal tech contributes to social isolation. And a lot has happened even since you wrote this story. So first, Jackie, as an education reporter, how do you see school and parent attitudes trending and evolving? And how do you get at them in your work?

Valley: Yeah, I mean, like you said, there’s been a lot of activity even in the

last few weeks, um, unfortunately, because of the Georgia shooting. But I'd say if we step back to the end of last school year, the drumbeat over the summer was more cellphone bans or restrictions in jurisdiction after jurisdiction and state after state. And then what we saw a couple weeks ago with the unfortunate tragedy at Apalachee High School was almost a pumping in the brakes in some ways.

In the immediate aftermath, we saw some of the really devastating text message conversations between students and their parents, um, real time discussions of the shooting and the worries and the fears. The National Parents Union even earlier this week released a survey, and it was all about the reasons why parents want kids to have cellphones at school. And the largest one by far, 78 percent said: so that their child can use a phone if there's an emergency at the school. So I think that's the tension point here is, like, a lot of people, parents included, understand the distractions cellphones cause in the classrooms, the difficulties for teachers, the mental health concerns as well, but there's this large sticking point and that's what happens in an emergency situation.

Collins: Right. Some of those outbound messages were, as you say, really poignant.

The last time you were on, Jackie, you talked about a story you'd done on artificial intelligence at school, another controversial topic, and in [your story] there was a sense of hope around the idea that kids might get on top of AI and not let it be their master. Is that a thread that runs to smartphones in general? Are digitally native kids maybe more equipped to self police, uh, maybe with some parental guidance, than we might think?

Valley: I wish I had a more optimistic answer. I'm going to say no, unless they're forced to do so. And I think if we even think about our own digital use as adults, it's very difficult to turn that off sometimes.

What we found through this reporting is that when kids were presented with

the opportunity to take a social media break, whether because they were forced to, or, um, encouraged, they saw the benefits. And I'm thinking of two students, one, uh, Lydia, she developed a social media addiction, and so she had a hard stop. It was really difficult at first, but then she saw the benefits over time. And then I interviewed a state senator's children, and they had recently come back from an Alaskan cruise. And so theirs was more circumstantial because there just wasn't good Wi-Fi up there, and they realized that, yeah, instead of just looking down at their phone in any moment of boredom, they were talking to each other and seeing what their cousins were up to. But I think even as the senator said, you know, he wasn't entirely optimistic that that would be a lasting habit for them.

Collins: Hmm. I love the idea of circumstantial, uh, intervention as opposed to, you know, putting your phone in a pouch ... to sort of create situations where the phone isn't needed.

Sara, you wrote a companion column for this cover story about your daughter actually kind of pining for a time when phones weren't omnipresent. How did being a parent affect how you came to this story?

Miller Llana: Yeah. Well, this is one of those rare times that I'm actually living the story I'm reporting. I mean, I myself largely got off of social media. I really only use it the bare minimum, for work. Because I could see, you know, what it was doing to my own mental state. So when it came time for her to get a phone, I was, and remain, very vigilant about it. But I think for me, the point that was made over and over in this piece is that this is much bigger than one parent's success and consistency or discipline. Um, I can go insane, and I do, in my own house, like sort of following her around, trying to limit [her] time with her phone. But in the end, it doesn't really matter, you know, when it's the social norm to be on your phone all the time.

And, you know, I think she does recognize that, when she's with her friends, she'd rather be with them in person and not with each of them on their own phones, which happens a lot. I mean, I don't know that she would agree that

she's pining for a time without her phone, but she can recognize that, you know, what she saw in the movie, we were watching "Footloose," that's what my companion column was about, um, you know, about senior prom and, and the whole student body coming together to create this event. I think she recognizes that: "Oh wow, gosh. I wish we could do something like that without our phones."

Collins: You've been a foreign correspondent, Sara, and I know you watch the global waterfront for context when it comes to stories. We've seen recent action in France, um, around a digital pause on phones for kids under 15; in Sweden, recommendations around non-use of screens by very young kids; and in Australia, where it's mostly about limited use of social media. I wonder, you know, cultures are different, and histories are different, parenting is different, but are there universal concerns around kids and smartphones?

Miller Llana: I do think that cultural context really matters here. My daughter is half Spanish. So this summer we were in a rural village in the middle of nowhere, and there the town kids meet up every single evening. You know, it's Spain, so that's at 10:15 p.m. And, you know, some of the kids had phones with them and some even looked at their Twitter or their Instagram accounts. But they were out. They were out together.

And according to my daughter, you know, those kids with phones maybe glanced at them, but they didn't sit there scrolling all evening, each of them isolated in their own phone. And I think to me, that was a really valuable lesson because. If all the other stuff is there, you know, going out, meeting others, playing, doing activities, and social media is a small part of everything else, it's probably fine. So in a culture like Spain, where there's so much attention on socializing in groups, I feel that it's not as slippery a slope as in a place where there's less emphasis on community or less freedom to be out with your friends roaming around at night.

So that's one answer. Another thing I just want to say, school shootings are

seen as, well, they are such an American phenomenon, but that idea of "safetyism," you know, an overprotectiveness or coddling of children. I mean, that really goes across countries and cultures. So in Canada, you know, where school shootings have happened, but they're not nearly at the same level, two thirds of children said that it was their parents who put their first phones in their hands. And why? Because they wanted to be able to connect with them at all times.

Valley: I had done a story earlier this summer about a school in Las Vegas, [an] elementary school, that was trying to foster independence among children. When I was in that fifth grade classroom, the teacher ended up having an informal Q& A session with the students, and they talked about what they're allowed to do day to day. And so many of them were not even allowed to walk the dog or ride a bike to a friend's house. But then when she asked about their social media use, and I would say the majority of students in that class had a cellphone, there were far fewer limitations. And so it was this interesting juxtaposition of a lot of restrictions in the physical world, but then free reign in the digital world.

And you know, I don't want to blame parents either. I'm not a parent myself yet. But as we heard repeatedly while reporting the story, parents are in such a tough position because they do want to have that phone in their child's hands for the safety aspect. But they also feel some peer pressure, 'cause I know their kids are around others who are using social media. So you don't wanna ostracize your kid necessarily by not allowing them to have that social lifeline as well.

Miller Llana: I do think of that as a parent. You know, it is your role to find the right balance there. Yes, you hear it all the time. Like "all my friends have Instagram and I don't know what they're talking about at lunch." I mean, I hear that all the time. So I'm not going to completely ban all social media in my house. I would love to, but I don't think that's the right way, because they will always, always, always find a way, right?

But I think it's about, you know, first of all, a lot of parents are giving social media to their kids before 13, which is actually not legal. I mean, there are age limits on these apps. Um, and I think it's just about, you know, little by little, giving them a sense of independence to use it and feel part of the gang, but without just making sure that you are not letting them, you know, scroll on Twitter for four hours. Because believe me, it definitely happens. It has happened in my house.

And also, I'm sorry, I think a really important part of this is, you know, this is age old, but you really have to, as a parent, be willing to make your kid unhappy. You know, I, talked to this social media expert who, he believes, like, this is 100 percent the parents. And the parents are just either unaware, or they're too afraid of contradicting their children or making them unhappy. So you do really have to be, you know, the parent who says, no, I don't care what all the other parents are doing.

Collins: That definitely transcends time.

Miller Llana: Exactly.

Collins: So this one is a collaborative report. Um, just tell listeners a little about how that works. How do you divide up the topic and go at it, and bring your strengths to different pieces [of it]?

Miller Llana: Jackie, do you want to answer that or do you want me to answer that?

Valley: Well, I think this was a perfect marriage.

Miller Llana: I agree!

Valley: It was so much fun, first of all. Um, but secondly, it just really made sense for this piece because it's not just the United States grappling with this issue, other countries as well. So, I'm based in Las Vegas, the United States, Sara's up in Toronto. Um, so we were able to blend those

perspectives from two different countries grappling with this.

Collins: Excellent. Um, as watchers of this story, what's your sense of whether a healthy school child parent dynamic can emerge here and keep the learning experience both rich and student-focused?

Valley: I think it'll be one step forward, two steps back for a while. I think schools are trying the yonder pouches or different iterations of enforcement. We're seeing some really early promising results, but then as we mentioned earlier, when a school shooting happens, it causes rethinking. And then the other side of this is legislation. States like Utah have taken aggressive stances and are trying to put the onus more on the tech giants, and to get them to rein in their addictive algorithms and privacy laws and so forth. That is a struggle too.

One thing I found really interesting in Utah was I expected lawmakers and the leaders there to say that they were hoping that their legislation would be a model for others to follow suit by, and that was the exact opposite. They said that they are actually hoping that other states experiment in different ways, because they think that something will eventually cut through and be the right solution, but it'll take a lot of different ideas.

Collins: Sara, as journalist and parent, what do you think?

Miller Llana: I actually feel so much better about the whole situation after reporting this. Because we weren't even having this conversation a couple years ago. I bet you in four years, when kids are graduating from high school, they're going to be looking back at this time and go: What? We were allowed to do that? You know, the same way we look at driving in the backseat of a station wagon without seatbelts or all those things that we used to tolerate that we can't believe we did. I sort of feel like that's where we're heading here.

Collins: Thank you both for this story, for coming on to talk about it, and for

all of your Monitor work.

Miller Llana: Thank you.

Valley: Thank you.

Collins: Thanks for listening. For more, including links to all of Sara's and Jackie's work, including their past appearances on this podcast, find our show notes on the episode page at CSMonitor.com/WhyWeWroteThis. This episode was hosted by me, Clay Collins, and produced by Jingnan Peng. Mackenzie Farkus is also a producer on this show. Ian Case and Alyssa Britton were our sound engineers, with original music by Noel Flatt. Produced by The Christian Science Monitor, copyright 2024.