

# What are parents' and children's co-constructed views on mobile phone use and policies in school?

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## Abstract

Increasing ownership of mobile phones by children increases pressure on schools to create mobile phone policies. This study investigated parents' and children's co-constructed views of mobile phone use at school. Nine parents and child (aged 10 to 11 years) dyads were interviewed. The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Generally, parents and children held shared views of the importance of having phones to keep in contact alongside an awareness of the risks. Hearing the children's and parents' co-constructed views and solutions highlight the potential positive impact of their involvement in co-developing school mobile phone policies.

## KEYWORDS

co-constructed, interviews, mobile phones, school policy, thematic analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Technology is evolving and increasingly part of everyday life. Mobile phones are the most owned device among 12- to 15-year-olds and the one they most frequently use to access the internet (Ofcom., 2021). Across Europe, the most common age for a child to first own a mobile phone is 10 years old (GSMA & the Mobile Society Research Institute, 2015), with 91% of 12- to 15-year-olds

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having their own smartphone in the UK (Ofcom., 2021). Similarly, in the US 53% of children own a smartphone by age 11, increasing to 69% by age 12 (Rideout & Robb, 2019).

The increase of children owning mobile phones places more pressure on schools to create mobile phone use policies. Although some countries (e.g. France, Israel, Turkey and regions of Canada and Australia) have banned mobile phone use in lessons, many countries, including the UK and USA, have no uniform school mobile phone use policy. Instead, individual schools have the choice of whether to create one, and if they do the choice of what to include within it.

Reviews of the evidence on the benefits and potential harm of mobile phones for children's learning are mixed (Amez & Baert, 2020; Imwa, 2022). While technology can be used to positively impact student performance and keep students engaged (e.g., Supandi et al., 2018; Torres & Statti, 2019) potential for distraction is widely cited (for reviews see Chen & Yan, 2016; Dontre, 2021). Furthermore, although it has been found that banning mobile phone use in schools can increase students' academic performance (Beneito & Vicente-Chirivella, 2022), especially for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (Beland & Murphy, 2015), this has not been consistently replicated (e.g. Kessel et al., 2020). Many studies have focused on different age groups with little consideration given to children's maturity and academic motivation. However, older pupils tend to use their phone when the intensity of teaching is low, and therefore interference with learning is minimal (Olin-Scheller et al., 2021), whereas younger children may be more negatively impacted (Dempsey et al., 2019) as they lack the maturity and experience to decide when to engage in phone use.

In addition to the existing research on the impact of mobile phones on learning, those responsible for school mobile phone policies should consider the views of teachers, parents and children (Gao et al., 2017). The views of parents are important, as these have been suggested to influence the extent to which their children follow the policy. The views of children are important as they are the policy receivers and beneficiaries (Gao et al., 2017).

Little research provides insight into opinions of children on the use of mobile phones in school. From interviews with secondary school children from two UK schools it was found that children were confused by the rules about where they could use their phones but that they thought that using mobile phones for education allowed them to access more content and explore their creativity (Walker, 2013). Thomas and Munoz (2016) and Kunene and Tsiobolane (2017) found that although some high school pupils supported the integration of mobile phones into lessons for education many were concerned about classroom disruption and inappropriate use. Similarly, Ott et al. (2018) found that pupils recognised mobile phones as a beneficial tool which could facilitate their schoolwork, but also commented on the distractions they could introduce, including teachers' enforcement of policy.

Research on parents' perceptions of children's mobile phone use is also sparse. One study indicates parents of Turkish children were concerned about overuse of mobile phones, but there was no reference to their use in schools (Genc, 2014). However, parents feel they should have good school-family cooperation for mobile technologies to be a positive experience (Ozdamili & Yildiz, 2014). Not only is there little research in this area, the views of parents and their children are rarely considered within the same study, therefore it is hard to understand the extent to which they may have shared or contrasting views. One exception to this is Gao et al. (2017) survey study in which it was found that parents had more negative views of mobile phone use at school compared to children. However, this conclusion was based on individually completed surveys, therefore understanding and exploring the potential reasons for the differences found was not possible.

The current research aimed to bring together parents and children through paired depth interviews (Wilson et al., 2016) to address the research question of 'What are parents' and children's co-constructed views on mobile phone use and policies in school?'. The objectives were to look at the co-constructed views and how parents and children discuss school mobile phone use and policies. Participating children were 10–11 years old (Year 6) as this is the age at which many children get their first mobile phone, have increased autonomy (Hafen et al., 2012) and are preparing to transition into secondary schools which often have different mobile phone use policies.

## METHOD

### Participants

In total 18 participants were interviewed, in nine parent–child pairs, based on Braun and Clarke's (2013) suggestion that 6–10 interviews are needed to collect sufficiently rich data. Nine mothers took part with three female and six male children all aged 10 and 11 years and in their final year of primary school. All children attended schools in semi-rural areas of Northwest England. Three of the children owned their own mobile phone, four did not and two did not respond to the request for background details. Most mothers were 35–44 years old and of the seven who responded to the request for background details, all had a qualification at college level, most having undergraduate or postgraduate university qualifications. Of the parents that were willing to disclose their average yearly family income, all earned above £40 000. The full table of demographic data can be found within the supplementary materials (Table S1).

Ethical approval was granted by Staffordshire University. Participants were recruited using opportunity and snowball sampling. All parents gave written informed consent for their, and their child's, participation. All children gave written assent. Participants created their own pseudonyms prior to interviews commencing.

### Procedure

Wilson et al.'s (2016) framework for paired depth interviews was followed. Benefits of this approach include identifying consensus view, greater reliability, depth and breadth of responses and the existing relationship between the pair being interviewed allowing the voice to be heard of those who otherwise may not have been, (Lewis, 1992; Wilson et al., 2016). However, possible power imbalance has to be carefully considered in these interviews, especially when children are involved (Caldwell, 2013; Morrow, 2008). To address this the researcher emphasised that they wished to hear both the child's and parent's opinions and while these might be similar it was recognised that they might also differ. It was explained that if this occurred participants should discuss their differences of opinion with each other, and that the researcher would facilitate this discussion by encouraging participants to explain their views. To ensure the voices of both participants were heard the researcher occasionally directed questions specifically to the parent or the child. Although the power imbalance was a potential risk to participants during the interviews it has also been suggested that shared interviews can be advantageous as merging views of two people can minimise conflict (Hertz, 1995) and solves the issue of participants wanting to know what each other have said if they were to be interviewed separately (Valentine, 1999).

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on previous work carried out by one of the authors when interviewing parents and children about views on screen-time (Heath & Rose, 2019). It included questions exploring the views of mobile phones, the importance they place on mobile phones and any rules they may have (e.g., 'What would influence your decision about your child having/not having a mobile phone?'). In addition, participants were provided with extracts from current primary and secondary school policies in the local area and were asked to discuss and give their opinions on these. Policies varied from a total ban to allowing mobile phones to be used in lessons. The interviewer asked questions to promote discussion between participants and used follow-up questions to encourage the participants to elaborate.

All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Each transcript was sent to the parent participant to review, no retractions or changes were requested. Finally, all parent participants received an email with a link to an anonymous questionnaire requesting demographic information (average income, educational background and whether their child owns their own mobile phone).

## Analysis

On completion of interviews, audio recordings were transcribed (total time recorded 5 h, 53 min and 27 s). Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen to analyse the qualitative data as it aims to identify themes across the data and is suitable for exploring people's views (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). The research was underpinned by a critical realist ontological position which assumes there is a 'truth' that is knowable but that it can only ever be partially accessed because of subjectivity and the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Madill et al., 2000). The thematic analysis was inductive, as the focus was in exploring the participants' views without imposing any pre-existing framework. The data were analysed using the six steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, this involved reading the data set several times to ensure familiarisation. Second, informed by the inductive nature of the analysis, the data were coded at a semantic level keeping close to the data and its content, summarising segments of the data at an explicit 'surface' level, for example, 'concerns over safety'. Third, similar codes were collated into provisional themes using a colour coding strategy. In the fourth step themes were reviewed against the coded data extracts to check coherence and 'fit.' Initially two themes and seven subthemes were generated, but these were refined in step four with subthemes merged after deciding that they were not sufficiently distinct. After refinement, two themes were developed, each with two subthemes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following thematic analysis of the data, two themes were generated which capture the co-constructed views of the parents and children on mobile phone use in schools. Parents and children shared the view that it was important to have mobile phones at school (theme one), particularly because of concerns over safety and keeping in contact. Additionally, there was joint acknowledgement of the risks and the view that it was important to balance these by setting limits and boundaries (theme two).

## Theme 1: The importance of having mobile phones at school

Parents and children appeared to agree that having a mobile phone at school, especially secondary school, was important for the child's safety when getting to and from school (subtheme 1) and for children keeping in touch with their parents at school for both practical and emotional support (subtheme 2).

### 1:1 Concerns over child's safety when getting to and from school

Children having a mobile phone was spoken about as being very important to parents for them to know their child was safe. The main concern was about their child's safety when they go to secondary school, especially if their child will travel independently of the parents. As illustrated below, the transition to secondary school represents a point in the child's life associated with more independence; this increase in independence for Mary is something that justifies the need for a mobile phone.

**Mary (Parent):** Ok erm right. I do not have a problem with them owning them, but we have said at home that he can have his own phone just before he goes to secondary school. I think for me that's quite a good age. Up to that point we know we are going to pick him up from school, drop him off at school, we know where he is.

**Peter (Child):** I will be more independent at secondary school as well?

Using a mobile phone to contact parents reflects parents' views in previous survey research which found that although parents can be against the use of mobile phones in schools, they have a positive view of their use for their child to contact home at break and lunch (Kucuk et al., 2020). The view that it is important to have a mobile phone in school because of concerns over safety, is further highlighted when parents and children discuss a school policy which bans children having mobile phones in school. As illustrated below, both parent and child found it hard to understand how this was safe for those children who do not get picked up from school:

**Faith (Child):** What if the parent is not picking them up?

**Eloise (Parent):** Yeah like she walks back... well I drop you off at [name of shop] and you walk to school with your friend, then I pick you up at [name of another local shop] so within that time if I had to go out of my car... park up go out my car to go pick your phone up there was no point you taking it in the first place.

**Faith (Child):** Yeah.

**Eloise (Parent):** If you did not have that phone, I think that I would worry too much. You probably would not be going out, would you?

**Faith (Child):** No.

This exchange, and the previous one between Mary and Peter, both indicate the shared nature of the view that mobile phones are important for safety as children's independence increases. Although not a view explicitly expressed by the children in this study, previous research makes a connection between young people having mobile phones to help them feel safer in public (Pain et al., 2005), further highlighting the link between the perceived importance of mobile phone ownership for children's safety.

It is notable that views about safety were often introduced by parents in the current study, rather than the children themselves, but that children then agreed. However, in one interview the child, TT introduced the idea, and the parent, although disagreeing with the need for mobile phones at school, acknowledged their importance for children who walk home. This supports previous findings of children and parents' opinions on children's independent mobility which found that children sometimes had a wider range of concerns of safety than parents (Crawford et al., 2017).

**Interviewer:** Ok. How do you feel about children owning mobile phones? You can say whatever you want.

**TT (Child):** Erm I think it could be... a bad thing if you are like pretty young erm... like 6 or something, but when you get about... older, it gets more important because erm, because you get, you learn more stuff and somethings might like say... You break your leg or something when you are with your friends and you need your phone to rings someone.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So like emergencies?

**TT (Child):** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Ok.

**TT's mum (Parent):** I do not think it's important at all for children to have mobile phones. In fact, I absolutely disagree with it. Do not I?... and you know I do. This is why I was really glad you gave your opinion. Erm... yeah, I do not think there is any need for it. I do not think there is any need for it in school. I do not... I think that if there is an emergency at school, they have got phones there that they can ring. Erm... they used to say you know, have mobile phone because if you are walking home then you need it. I think if you are walking home then fair enough, but how many kids are walking home.

## 1:2 Keeping in contact with parents when at secondary school

Alongside the importance of having a mobile phone at school for concerns over safety, phones were viewed as important and convenient by both parents and children for staying in contact for logistical reasons and so that parents could provide the child with emotional support if necessary. Again, these concerns were mainly introduced by the parents, with agreement from the children following. Several comments emphasised how at secondary school it would become more necessary for children to be able to make these communications themselves.

**Jane (Parent):** Well, he tells me he needs picking up at 5, instead he's getting on the bus because club is cancelled then I have to make rearrangements so. I think that's... well the other option is the school informs parents. If they completely banned phone, they would have to manage contacting parents. Like at her primary school if somethings cancelled at the end of, after school then they will text all the parents but if you have got a 1000 pupils at secondary school you cannot do that can you.

The view that mobile phones facilitate easy communication between children and parents during the school day was also expressed when school polices were discussed. For example, one parent highlighted that a policy which involved confiscating a child's phone for a week would in effect be punishing the family as well as the child.

**Ethel (Parent):** A week is quite a long time for people to go. If your family logistics depends on your child having that phone, it's as much a punishment on the family as it is the child.

This supports the findings from quantitative research conducted in China which found that both pupils and their parents were significantly less supportive than teachers of mobile phones being banned in high schools (Gao et al., 2017). In addition to practical reasons, one of the parents highlighted the importance of their child having a mobile phone for keeping in contact to socialise when they might be experiencing difficulties at school such as bullying.

**Eloise (Parent):** My eldest had problems with bullying at the secondary at the start. He used to message me in breaktimes because he did not really have any friends, so that was his bit of socialising. If he did not speak to me, he wasn't speaking to anyone.

Contacting home for this child appears to be important for their mental health and reassuring for their parent. Research does allude to the idea of college students finding mobile phones important for contact, to share experiences and retain emotional and physical support from their parents (Chen & Katz, 2009). Further evidence of this was found in the interviews as parents did comment on other situations where their child might need to contact them. For example, Sue (parent) spoke about a situation in which her child contacts her when she was having a bad day in the second year of secondary school 'it was one of those days, she just needed to come home' with a tone of seriousness suggesting it was important. This mirrors research that suggests mobile phones are the keyway for families to keep in touch and ensure young people's safety (Devitt & Roker, 2009), with safety referring to social and emotional well-being as well as physical safety.

Overall, parents emphasised the importance of children having a mobile phone while at secondary school, not only due to parent's concerns over their child's safety travelling to and from school but because they valued being able to keep in contact with their child during the school day. While these views were introduced by parents, they were supported by the children.

## **Theme 2 Balancing the risks and setting limits**

There was also a shared view and acknowledgement that despite the importance of having mobile phones in school, there were risks to using mobile phones (subtheme1) and that it was important to balance the risks by setting limits and boundaries (subtheme 2). Parents and children also co-constructed solutions and rules on how to ensure mobile phones are used safely.

### **2:1 Knowledge of the risks**

Both parents and children understood the risks of using mobile phones and seemed able to discuss these with ease. For example, when asked if anything worried them, this child feels they can speak openly about the potential for adults abusing children's trust:

**Dave (Child):** There's a lot of sexual abuse on there like... a 12-year-old, I think it was a 11-year-old kid that thought that this kid was like 12 or something but he was actually 54. They said they would like to meet up and...

**Interviewer:** Is that something they have talked about at school?

**Dave (Child):** Yeah and quite a lot at charity stuff and things like that, we did a charity thing and we... she had a really tough time and she does not go on it anymore because of this thing that happened to her because they said 'lets meet up somewhere' and then this man came and... I'm not sure what she did.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything that worries you?

**Sue (Parent):** Erm... and the same, as Dave said, you know the getting in touch with somebody I do not know ... so yeah just safety, making sure that he's safe, making sure I know who he's speaking to and what he's doing and what he's looking at and... you know the information that's out there because its horrendous you know. So, I have put certain blocks in place erm but I'm not always sure... you put certain blocks in but then you cannot access like information that actually is alright, do you know what I mean?

The mother's uncertainty about whether she might also be blocking access to appropriate content reflects findings by Livingstone and Helsper (2008) of parents' view that filters may not always be effective in reducing the risk of inappropriate content. Despite the shared acknowledgement and knowledge of the risks expressed in the discussion, it was clear that Dave's knowledge came as a surprise to his mother:

**Sue (Parent):** Well I will tell you what I'm surprised by... what you said about the sexual abuse aspect of it and things. Again, that surprised me that you know about that sort of stuff.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Sue (Parent):** We try to talk about be open about things and... but yeah its, it's surprising that you are aware of that. I've always said you have to be careful online; I would not have even thought you would use those words really. So yeah that's surprising.

This surprise indicates that the paired interview provided an environment which promoted open discussion, and the parent gained new insight into her child's views. Another parent-child dyad appeared to have a shared understanding of some of the risks with both parent and child tending to finish each other's sentences off.

**Jessica (Parent):** Yeah, you know the wrong people getting in touch and...

**Rebecca (Child):** Yeah...

**Jessica (Parent):** ...people telling you they are someone they are not.

**Rebecca (Child):** Yeah, they can hack your friends accounts and start talking to you and stuff like that.

**Jessica (Parent):** Yes, yeah. Some people aren't what they appear to be, that's a concern.

**Rebecca (Child):** Yeah because they might act nice on a game or texting, but they actually might be... like a masked murderer.

**Jessica (Parent):** Yeah, they could. That is a worry. Yeah but that unfortunately is the real-world darling.

**Rebecca (Child):** Yeah.

**Jessica (Parent):** So, you have got to be very, very careful.

Both the risks that are spoken about in the conversations above, sexual abuse and mistaken identity, relate more generally to children's internet use, rather than specifically to mobile phone use. While predictors of children's problematic internet use have been extensively explored (for a review see Anderson et al., 2017) and parents' role in mediating children's internet use studied (for a review



see Dingus Keuhlen et al., 2020) little attention has been given specifically to risks of mobile phone usage, and children's and parents' knowledge of these. Therefore, this is a novel contribution of the current research and one which future research could explore further.

## 2:2 Importance of limits and boundaries

Parents and children shared the view that it was important to balance the risks by setting limits and boundaries and that mobile phone school policies should assist with this. For example, the importance of restricting access to a mobile phone at specific times during the day at secondary school was suggested by Jessica and Rebecca:

**Jessica (Parent):** Yeah... and at the secondary school I agree... they definitely, definitely have their place. You can take them. You can use them but you are not allowed them...

**Rebecca (Child):** Do not use them in the wrong way.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Jessica (Parent):** Yeah ...not allowed them switched on during your lessons... you can use them on your break and lunchtime.

In this discussion both Jessica and Rebecca, seem to acknowledge that there is appropriate and inappropriate use of mobile phones at school. This is further highlighted, and the consequences of inappropriate use and the importance of schools setting boundaries, in this discussion between Marg and Jane:

**Marg (Child):** If you were using it in class and the teacher did not know...

**Jane (Parent):** Your teacher would be very upset with you, would not they?

**Marg (Child):** Yeah, miss would probably take it off you.

**Jane (Parent):** Yeah.

**Marg (Child):** And like...

**Jane (Parent):** Yeah, they know better I think at our school. Its good discipline is not it.

Within this extract the parent and child discuss how going against the school's rules would play out. In both discussions parents and children seem to have shared views about inappropriate mobile phone use and the need for consequences for this in schools. This is illustrated by them finishing of each other's sentences. Although, most focus was on the school enforcing boundaries on mobile phone use while at school, some participants also acknowledged the parents' role in this. For example, in the following extract some tension between TT's and his mother's views of a school policy in which inappropriate mobile use could result in exclusion were evident.

**TT (Child):** I think that's totally fair because that is literally what happens at school... you get kicked out of class and sit in another class, so yeah, I think that's totally fair.

**TT's mum (Parent):** Actually... I do not think it's that fair.

**TT (Child):** Yeah, I guess cuz...

**TT's mum (Parent):** No, no, no, you can totally have your opinion. I think that's great that you think that's good. I think if you are a habitual offender... let us talk about TT. If TT was habitually using his phone in school and somebody had taken it off him for a week and it has not worked, then the parent should step in and the parent should sort it out. This is passive

parenting though, that's why they do not. erm and I think 100% that it needs to be the parents, but should the kid be excluded or put in isolation... probably not... But how many parents have you got that would take that on. Because I think taking a phone off a child as a parent, once you have given it to them, is going to cause animosity. When TT eventually gets one, which is going to be a second hand one and quite an old one, there will be very strong ground rules set. So... yeah actually I do not agree with that.

Although the parent disagrees with the harsh punishment of exclusion, they are clear that children need boundaries. Furthermore, the parent reassures the child that it is ok to have a different opinion and appreciates their honesty, easing any tension. The child's opinion suggests a strong tendency towards following the rules, emphasising an appreciation of boundaries. This is supported by research into parent/child involvement in co-designing safety applications, which indicates that children acknowledge safety needs and accept certain parental controls (McNally et al., 2018). Although this is not necessarily connected with school policy rules, it does indicate the acceptance children have towards boundaries when co-constructing views with parents. When discussing policies the same parent goes on to say later in the interview 'exclusion is very strong' and other policies are 'far too weak' and suggests a balance is needed to meet a child half way 'a little bit more leeway also helps the child make informed choices' expressing the need for balance across policies and implying the need for compromise. This is supported by research into parent's needs for trust-control balance when it comes to mobile technologies and outdoor independent mobility (Ferron et al., 2019).

The importance of having limits and boundaries in relation to mobile phone use in school is further highlighted in the following discussion where parent and child co-construct their ideal policy:

**Lucy (Parent):** I've got a great idea Jeff! This is what you need to do at school... total ban on phones... total ban but have some central people who are like... oh what's it called... when you have a... you are in the top year and you are a...?

**Jeff (Child):** Rep!

**Lucy (Parent):** No like a prefect! So, you get like telephone prefect, who are given telephones by the school and has every number and every child's telephone number in. So, they are... at breaktimes they would be in certain areas and if somebody needs to get a message home they go and say 'can you message my mum'.

**Jeff (Child):** ...and my name is... and they would look for you.

**Lucy (Parent):** And they can always contact home and there would be no need to have their phones in school.

**Jeff (Child):** Yeah!

**Lucy (Parent):** This is a great idea!

**Jeff (Child):** Always here to help.

**Lucy (Parent):** Isn't it?! It could be a rotation of kids and so if they know what they can and cannot say, if some kid comes up and say, 'can I have fishfingers for tea' they would say 'no not acceptable'. It's a really responsible role, and they could have some training on how to deal with it...

In this discussion, the parent and child balance out the possibility of a ban of mobile phones in schools and the opinions parents and children had on the perceived benefits of having a mobile phone for keeping in contact with parents when at secondary school (theme 1:2). This creates a co-constructed solution that may be accepted by schools, parents and children, by balancing out

the risks using limits and boundaries. They communicate how schools could have a ban on mobile phones, which from a school's perspective can be deemed the most low-cost and effective policy (Kessel et al., 2020), but still create situations in which children could still contact home themselves, without using their own mobile phones. Participants showed equal involvement in the conversation, added to each other's sentences, forming a solution together.

Overall, parents and children discussed a balance needed within schools to ensure mobile phones, if allowed, are used in the correct way with boundaries in place, resulting in fair punishments for misuse. Children show a good understanding of following the rules and appeared to have an acceptance of them.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the current research was to collect the views of parents and their children on mobile phone use in school and understand current school mobile phone policies, using a paired interview approach. Parents and their children held shared views, often completing each other's sentences, and building on each other's ideas, that it was important to have mobile phones at school (theme one), due to concerns over safety and keeping in contact. Similarly, there was a joint acknowledgement of the risks and the shared view that it was important to balance the risks by setting limits and boundaries (theme two).

Parents felt it was important for children to have phones at school so that children could keep in contact with home throughout the school day for logistical reasons, for example, after school plans altering, and emotional connection. The children agreed with these views, but it was noticeable that they were not generally introduced by the children. This is in line with previous research which suggested that mobile phones are the keyway families keep in touch (Devitt & Roker, 2009) and ensure safety (Pain et al., 2005). Parents believed that schools needed to find a way to allow mobile phones but understood that this could be difficult as schools find it hard to control and monitor usage.

Parents and children understood the potential dangers of using mobile phones at school, such as bullying and abuse. They were aware of apps used to control these issues, but in line with previous research, found they were not always effective (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). This reflects teachers' views that children may experience abusive behaviour when using mobile phones and the difficulty in controlling their use (Nikolopoulou, 2020). The children's knowledge of the negative aspects of mobile phone use were at times surprising for parents, as they did not realise how much their children understood. The use of the paired interviews provided a unique insight into the parent's surprise. This would have been unlikely to be evident if individual interviews had been conducted.

The main concerns parents and children had of school policies were that they were too varied. Punishments such as isolation or exclusion seemed too harsh but allowing them to have phones throughout the whole day meant possible access to inappropriate content. Policies of banning them completely went against parents' views on the benefits for safety and keeping in contact with their children, which could cause conflict with the school when deciding on the most appropriate policy. Parents wanted schools to have clear boundaries and fair punishments for misuse, and children showed willingness to abide by boundaries and accept the consequences of not following them.

It was notable that neither the children or the parents discussed the potential negative education consequences, for example, distraction of using mobile phone in lessons (Dontre, 2021), or

positive educational consequences, for example, using phones to increase engagement (Torres & Statti, 2019). Although this is something that educators may focus on it seems that it may be of less interest to children and their parents. Alternatively, it may be something that children and parents in this study had little experience of as the children were at primary school, where children are less likely to have their own device.

The co-constructed aspect of the current research provides a unique methodological approach within this topic area. The findings add to knowledge derived from surveys and individual interviews. When talking about whether children should have a mobile phone at school it seemed to be the parents who emphasised the importance, for physical safety, logistical convenience and emotional well-being. The children agreed with these views expressed by their parents, but had they been interviewed individually the co-construction of their view may not have been evident. Furthermore, paired interviews provided an environment that allowed parents and children to discuss thoughts and feelings possibly not heard from each other before. For example, topics such as sexual abuse were introduced by children during these interviews and, although, some parents were surprised at their child's understanding of the topic, they and their child shared some similar concerns.

It is known that schools may find banning mobile phones a low-cost policy that is effective (Kessel et al., 2020), but this does not consider the views of the parents and children involved in the school. The current research indicates that parents and children perceive mobile phones as necessary for peace of mind and safety. These are reasons that could cause conflict with teachers as they feel mobile phones are a distraction and can struggle to control their use (Nikolopoulou, 2020). From the interviews it seems that children and parents are able to discuss mobile phone use in school with little tension and many shared views. While this could reflect children choosing to only express views that they believe their parents will support, for example, having a phone for safety, this could have also been the case if the child had been interviewed individually as they may have selected reasons they believed the researcher would approve of. There was evidence within the data of parents and children talking about each other's mobile phone habits, for example, a child highlighting that their parent used the phone during family mealtimes, suggesting that the paired interviews may have increased the ecological validity of the data. Furthermore, the data provided evidence that even pre-adolescent children can discuss and express views on mobile phone use in a mature and informed manner. Therefore, when developing school mobile phone policies, the views of children should be sought. Furthermore, there was evidence that children and parents could co-construct solutions as parents and children spontaneously co-constructed ideal policies, balancing the perceived needs with the perceived risks. This suggests that parent and child input should be sought when schools develop policies. This supports the new approach being followed in Ireland which requires schools to consult with parents, children and teachers (Dempsey et al., 2019).

A further implication of the current research is the co-constructed opinions collected from parents and children can also be used to co-design safety apps. Parents' and children's discussions on the concerns of children's safety accessing information, suggested concerns of online filters being inadequate, and mirrors findings by Livingstone and Helsper (2008). The benefit of gaining the opinions of both parents and children can provide insight to future technology developers when creating apps that monitor and filter negative content. This has been suggested by previous research as the way forward when designing monitoring technologies that are accepted by children and usable by parents (McNally et al., 2018). The design of these technologies could be shared with schools, providing reassurance of the safe usage of mobile phones.

## LIMITATIONS

Although there was a good mix of participants from two counties in England, of varying school areas (town and rural), all families were from middle class areas; therefore, the sample could be biased towards families who can afford mobile phones. Although technology is rapidly evolving all over the world, there are areas of poverty, where technology is not readily available or affordable. Further research could investigate the views of families in a larger range of areas to establish their views on mobile phone policies and whether they share the same opinions. Furthermore, as opportunity sampling was used the parents who volunteered may be those that feel most comfortable discussing mobile phone use with their child and potentially have already had discussions on this topic previously. Moreover, the sample of parents was a relatively small homogeneous group of well educated, middle to high earning white mothers. Future research could actively try to recruit a more diverse sample as this could highlight a wider range of views. In addition, widening the discussions to involve schools/teachers would give a more rounded view, giving families possible reasoning behind the decisions made on mobile phone policies. Involving schools could promote conversation between families and schools and facilitate changes in policies, as more information is needed as to why policies are created differently across different schools.

## SUMMARY

The current research suggests that parents and their children have shared views on children having a mobile phone while at school in order to keep in contact with parents for safety, logistical and emotional reasons. However, they also recognise some risks of mobile phones and the need to have limits and boundaries for their use. Overall, these findings support previous evidence gained from surveys and individual interviews. The novel contribution of the current study is the evidence that parents and their children can effectively and productively discuss and co-construct their ideas about mobile phone use and policies in schools. Hearing the children's and parents' voices and their co-constructed views indicate the significant potential of involving children and their parents in the development of school mobile phone policies to achieve balanced policies which address perceived need for a phone with appropriate boundaries.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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**How to cite this article:** Rose, S. E., Gears, A. & Taylor, J. (2022). What are parents' and children's co-constructed views on mobile phone use and policies in school?. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12583>