



Smartphones, your children and you



Nova Eden would like to see smartphones and social media phased out for children. Photo Lauren Baskent

“Children with problematic smartphone usage are twice as likely to experience anxiety.”

Nova Eden is a children’s mental health expert and the founder of One Collective Power, an organisation dedicated to raising awareness about the addictive nature of modern technology. She spearheaded Barnet’s drive to be the first borough in the UK to go smartphone-free in their schools. She talks to Lauren Baskent about how families can create healthier digital habits.

Q: Was there a moment that convinced you children need protection from smartphones?

A: As a parent trying to navigate parenting in the digital age with my own children, it really made me aware of how difficult it is. We now have research to show the damage that is being done to young children. I kept having the same conversation with all my friends about how difficult it was navigating screen time, smartphones and social media. I realised all parents were struggling with the same issues.

Q. What research do you feel most strongly supports your position?

A. The NHS data statistic I often quote is that outdoor childhood accidents have reduced by 73% in the past decade and self-harm incidents in young children have increased by 97%. Children are no longer pursuing the healthy activities that they need for brain development. They are not outside as much as they used to be. They are not socialising face to face the way they used to. Instead, they are spending hours and hours alone with their devices. Children with problematic smartphone usage are twice as likely to experience anxiety and three times as likely to experience depression compared to most children without problematic smartphone use.

Q. Many parents are aware of the dangers of these highly addictive devices, yet they still struggle to reduce their children’s screen time or remove smartphones altogether. What advice can you offer to parents who want to make a change but are worried about conflict, resistance or feeling too late to intervene?

A. I have had pushback from my own children. I always try to be very honest when I am working with other families. Now that we are better informed, we have to have the confidence to know that just because everyone else has something doesn’t mean it is the best thing for our child. We have to speak openly with our children, we have to have difficult conversations and we have to know within ourselves that one day our children will thank us for having firmer boundaries with them. If you give children the opportunity to choose whether they want a screen or do something else, of course they want to be on a screen. Once we take that away, or reduce the amount of time, they will find other things to do with their time.

Eco warriors start early

Green-minded pupils at Holy Trinity Primary School in Eagans Close, N2, have raised money for the Just One Tree charity for the third year in a row. Every pound raised funds the planting of a tree somewhere in the world.

The school’s Eco Warriors group are also making a difference closer to home, with the five fruit trees planted in the school grounds last year still standing strong.

They are planning a Climate for Justice art project and an Electricity Tree project to save energy.



Holy Trinity pupils during their special Tree Day

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Q. What misconceptions do you think people have about the smartphone-free movement?

A. People sometimes feel like it’s too late. We can still work and grow as parents every day and we can implement boundaries. There are ways to have healthier digital habits.

Q. How do you respond to parents who say their child needs a phone for safety?

A. I would say that a brick phone is much safer than a smartphone. First of all, they don’t have the danger of the internet in a child’s pocket. A child is a target if they are carrying around a very expensive device. Giving a child access to the internet means that the whole world can access your child. A brick phone allows calls and messages in case of an emergency.

Q. Where do you want to see this movement in five to ten years?

A. I would like to see real legislation implemented by the Government. It should be a tobacco-style regulatory framework, where we start phasing out smartphones and social media for children. There should be a minimum age with clear health warnings and laws against addictive design.