

Even after shootings, experts warn against cellphones in schools

Students in Texas called 911 from their elementary school, but will more phones in classrooms make children safer?

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June 1, 2022 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

The commonly recommended age for a first cellphone is 13 years old. Most kids that age are in the eighth grade, getting ready to learn algebra. The desperate phone calls to 911 coming from inside Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Tex., where 21 people were killed last month, were placed by children younger than that.

In the aftermath of another school shooting, concerned parents are weighing whether phones are a distraction or a potential lifeline for their children. One of the students who called 911 in Uvalde was believed to have used her teacher's phone after the educator was shot to death and dropped her device. Many kids in elementary school have their own devices, if not with them in class.

Phone ownership already is widespread among younger children, with 43 percent of 8-to-12-year-olds owning their own smartphone, according to the 2021 Common Sense Census. Often, the push to make sure children are allowed to bring their devices into schools doesn't come from the students, but from their families. A phone is a way for guardians to coordinate pickups, to see a child's location throughout the day and to communicate with them in case of an emergency.

Trapped alongside gunman, student called 911 to 'please send police'

The devices have become part of many students' daily lives, despite various attempts over the years by state legislatures and cities to keep them out of classrooms. New York City had a decades-long ban on cellphones in public schools that ended in 2015. Other countries have fared better; France banned cellphones in schools for children under 15 in 2018.

The enforcement often falls to individual schools and teachers. They use techniques such as making students drop devices into special holders at the start of class or asking them to store them in locked bags such as the kind made by Yondr. Some schools have started integrating smartphones into their lessons,

though education experts say that can leave out families who can't afford the expensive devices.

Despite any emotional benefits for adults or educational use for children, screen-time and security experts don't recommend taking smartphones to class, at least not without some ground rules and guidance on how to use them in a worst-case scenario.

"The general rule is, when you're in a lockdown, educators and safety officials don't want kids on the phones because you want their full 100 percent attention on the teacher or other educators," said Ken Trump, president of the consulting firm National School Safety and Security Services.

Trump gives schools lockdown trainings, walking educators through the best ways to save lives during a threat like an active shooter. Teachers are trained to lock their classroom doors, turn out the lights, pull down any blinds and move the children to "hard corners" — areas at an angle that would be difficult to shoot at from a door.

But the most important piece of advice he gives in trainings, Trump said, is to be quiet.

A phone can make unwanted noises, and in a silent lockdown, even a vibration could be too loud. Depending on their age, kids might also be tempted to post about an ongoing incident to social media, which Trump said could both inspire other potential gunmen seeking fame or reveal details about their location. Even the ability to call 911 isn't a good reason, because an entire school full of people calling at once could overload a switchboard.

Educators and experts who study children and technology have their own reasons for not wanting the technology on campus. First and foremost, a pocket-size computer with access to the Internet is a distraction during lessons. Getting children to pay attention to a history class can be difficult even without the competition. Experts also worry about the role phones play in bullying at schools and the impact of social media on development and mental health.

Even after the shooting, one mother we spoke to decided to stick with her decision not to let her 12-year-old daughter have a phone for those reasons. The parent, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of privacy concerns for her child, worries about gun violence and the dangers her daughter could be exposed to online. She said phone use would present a distraction, and she worries it could replace in-person social interactions and knows she can't have oversight over many conversations or posts that might happen via smartphone. She's also worried about misinformation that her daughter could see or read. "It is harder today to get ahead of the misinformation than it has EVER been," she

said in an online message. “We try to teach her about current events, share the differing opinions and discuss. ... It’s scary to think what she may hear and believe to be the truth.”

Schools are banning smartphones. Here’s an argument for why they shouldn’t.

If parents must give kids phones, they should come with talks about media literacy, bullying and instructions to turn their devices fully off during shootings. Guardians should also take the time to look into old-fashioned flip phones, which lack a lot of the same features, or turn on parental controls, said Jean Twenge, a psychologist who studies children and technology and is the author of “iGen.”

“During school, the two main concerns are distraction in the classroom, the way that phones interfere with face-to-face conversation, for example, during lunch,” said Twenge. “Then there’s all of the reasons young children having access to social media and unfettered access to the Internet is a problem.”

Every situation is unique, and younger kids who walk or bike to school on their own might be a good-use case for a phone. But security and fear might not outweigh the drawbacks of phones for many families.

“Phones are not going to stop school shootings. Gun control might,” Twenge said.

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