



**SMARTPHONE  
FREE CHILDHOOD**

# Smartphones: the new frontier in parenting

PARENT WORKSHOP MARCH 2025



# IN TWO DECADES, EVERYTHING'S CHANGED

2004



**2004**

Nokias ruled



2024



**2007**

The first iPhone  
launches



**2008**

Apple app  
store opens



**2012**

4G launches in the  
UK, enabling  
internet everywhere



**2024**

89% of 12-year-olds own a  
smartphone, permanently  
connected to the internet  
via 4g/5g



# THEY'RE NOT REALLY 'PHONES' AT ALL



## MOBILE PHONE

Make calls, send texts, play Snake



## POCKET SUPERCOMPUTER

24/7 access to the internet in your pocket



## PARENTS WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

**94%**

of primary school  
parents think  
smartphones  
are harmful

Parentkind nationwide poll of 2,496  
people, April 24

**70%**

of parents believe  
smartphones  
negatives impact  
family life

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24

**33%**

of parents of children  
with smartphones have  
cried over their child's  
phone obsession

HMD poll of 10,000 parents, June 24



## YOUNG PEOPLE WISH THINGS WERE DIFFERENT

**67%**

of 16-18 year olds  
think smartphones  
are harmful

Parentkind poll, 2024

**1 in 5**

of 16-18 year olds  
have felt “life is not  
worth living” due to  
social media

Parentkind poll, 2024

**50%**

of teens say they are  
“addicted” to social  
media

Millennium Cohort Study, 2024



# YET SMARTPHONES HAVE BECOME THE NORM



**25%**

of 5-7 year olds  
in the UK own their  
own smartphone

**89%**

of 12 year-olds  
in the UK own their  
own smartphone



SOURCE: OFCOM Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes April 24



# EVERYONE'S GOT ONE BECAUSE EVERYONE'S GOT ONE



Most parents believe smartphones are harmful, yet almost all children have them by Year 7



Because resisting peer pressure becomes almost impossible when children's social lives migrate online

*The powerful network effects of smartphones and social media mean parents and young people feel like they have no choice*





**So what exactly  
*is* the problem?**





When children first started getting smartphones in the early 2010s we didn't understand their impact.

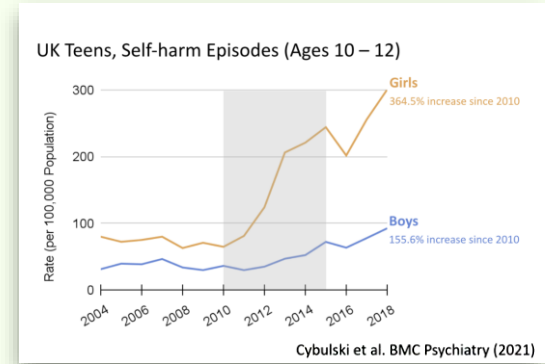
Now we do, and the evidence is overwhelming.



# SMARTPHONES ARE FUELLING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm and even suicide among teens have all dramatically spiked globally since 2010 – when children started getting smartphones.

A 2023 global study of 27,969 young adults from Sapiens Labs showed that the younger they got their first smartphone, the worse their mental health today.



## 3x

Teens with problematic smartphone-use are twice as likely to have anxiety and three times as likely to have depression

King's College London, 2024

## 1 in 5

UK 16 to 18 years olds say that their social media has made them feel that 'life is not worth living'

Parentkind Poll, 2024

## 53%

The number of children referred to emergency mental healthcare in England has soared by 53% in three years

Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024



**“The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency. It is time to require a warning label on social media platforms.”**



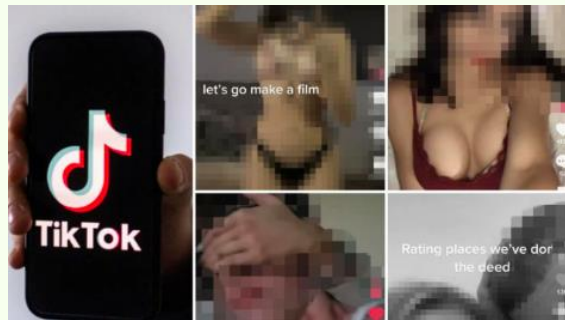
**Dr Vivek Murthy**  
US Surgeon General, 2024



# SMARTPHONES EXPOSE KIDS TO HARMFUL CONTENT

Having unrestricted access to the internet in your pocket creates a gateway to extreme content and viewpoints that we'd never dream of exposing children to in real life.

Hardcore pornography, extreme political views, sexualised and violent imagery, trolling and material promoting suicide, self-harm and eating disorders have become part of the fabric of modern childhood.



**51%**

of UK 11-13 year-olds  
have seen hardcore  
pornography online

British Board of Film Classification Report, March 2022

**75%**

of UK 15 year olds  
questioned had been  
sent beheading videos

Digital Childhoods, children's commissioner report, 2022

**90%**

of girls and 50% of boys  
say they are sent  
unwanted explicit  
content

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools, 2021



**“We’ll look back in 20 years  
and be horrified by what our  
children were exposed to”**



**Dame Rachel de Souza**

Children’s Commissioner for England, 2022



# SMARTPHONES APPS ARE ADDICTIVE BY DESIGN

Tech companies spend billions on making apps and devices as addictive as possible because 'maximising engagement' is the fundamental objective of their business model.

So it's little wonder that many children are routinely 'spending six, seven, eight hours a day on social media – often more' (Ofcom, 2024).



**46%**

of teens say they  
use the their phones  
“almost constantly”

Pew Research Centre, Aug 2022

**29 hours**

Per week is the average  
British 12-year-old now  
spends on their smartphone

Childwise Monitor Report, 2021

**2 in 3**

of 11-17 year olds ‘often’  
or ‘sometimes’ find it  
difficult to put down  
their phone

Common Sense Media, 2023



**“Behind every screen on your phone, a thousand engineers have worked to make it maximally addicting. Children are particularly susceptible to this kind of manipulative design.”**



**Aza Raskin**

Co-inventor of ‘infinite scroll’, turned campaigner

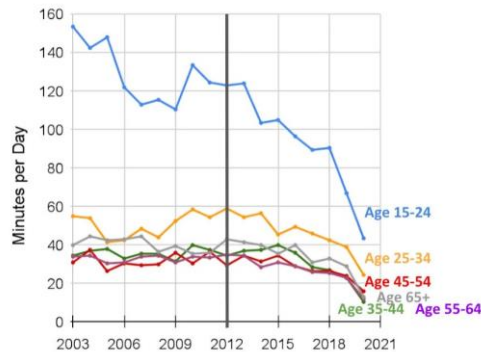


# SMARTPHONES ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING CHILDHOOD

Smartphones are experience blockers, distracting children from engaging in the real world activities and connections that are crucial to healthy childhood development.

The opportunity cost to childhood is profound. The average UK 12 year-old now spends over four hours per day on their smartphone, displacing the kinds of activities that have shaped childhood for millennia.

Daily Avg Time with Friends (minutes)



**43%**

of US teenagers waking minutes  
are spent on screens

Gitnux Marketdata Report, Jan 2024

**30%**

Since 1975, the daily average time  
children spend playing outdoors  
has fallen by 30%, while screen-  
based activities have risen 23%

Zach Rausch - Mullan 2019

**65%**

The daily average time that  
teenagers spend with friends  
has plummeted by 65% since 2010

American Time Use Study



**“When kids are on their phones all day, it’s not just what they’re doing on the phone that matters — it’s what they’re not doing. They’re missing out on crucial experiences that help them grow into healthy adults.”**



**Dr Jonathan Haidt**

Professor of Social Psychology, NYU



~Susie

In the last decade there have been 70% less outdoor accidents and 93% more incidents of self harm in children... as a GP I can promise you it's much easier to mend a broken bone than a broken mind.



24

Dr Susie Davies, founder of Papaya Parents, citing NHS DATA





## SADLY, WE COULD GO ON



### SLEEP

Bedtime use of smartphones doubles children's risk of poor sleep



### BULLYING

84% of bullying now takes place on a device



### DISTRACTIONS

On average teens are bombarded by 237 smartphone notifications a day



### ARGUMENTS

55% of parents say their child's smartphone use causes big family arguments



### ROAD SAFETY

Mobile phone distraction is a major cause of road accidents involving children



### CRIME

500 children a day were mugged in 2020 in the UK, almost all for smartphones



# It's little wonder that many of the people who created this technology keep it away from their kids

STEVE JOBS

“We don’t allow the iPad in the home. We think it’s too dangerous for them”



EVAN SPIEGEL

Grew up without a TV and credits his own success on that tech restriction. Limits his kid to 1.5 hours screen time per week



BILL GATES

Didn’t allow his 4 children smartphones or their own computers until they were 14





Parents are in an  
*impossible* position



## BECAUSE OUR 'CHOICE' ISN'T REALLY A CHOICE AT ALL



### Either we...

Give our children access to a product that we know to be harmful.



### Or we...

Risk alienating them from their peers at a crucial stage of their development.

***IT'S A LOSE-LOSE; FOR PARENTS, FOR CHILDREN & FOR SOCIETY***



# LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

THE IRISH TIMES

Education

Mobile phones set to be banned across all second-level schools under new Government plans

said that they are open to children using social media. Government adviser warned that content online was likely to



Figures show that there is a mental health crisis among young people. Ministers believe social media is partly to blame  
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Shawn Hul  
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The New York Times

## California Schools Must Restrict Phones Under New Law Signed by Newsom

Calls for crackdowns have mounted with reports of cyberbullying and studies indicating that smartphones are harmful to children's mental health.

Listen to this article - 4:43 min [Listen now](#) [Share full article](#)



The Minister for Education is planning to ban mobile phones from all second-level schools as part of research which links use of devices to distraction and cyberbullying. Photograph by Barlow/PA Wire

Carl O'Brien

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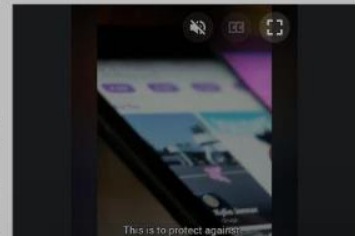
France

## France to trial ban on mobile phones at school for children under 15

'Digital pause' experiment at 200 secondary schools could be extended nationwide in January

Kim Willsher in Paris

Follow Kim Willsher



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it will work

Anthony Albanese has revealed how a nationwide age-based ban on social media accounts, including Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, will work.

Education

Children's exposure to harmful online content a 'public health crisis', says Minister

Stronger laws may be needed to safeguard young people, according to Stephen Donnelly



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LEADERS ACROSS THE WORLD ARE THINKING ABOUT  
HOW TO LEGISLATE TO PROTECT CHILDHOOD

BUT PROPER REGULATION OF BIG TECH WILL TAKE  
YEARS, AND WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO WASTE



**The solution is to  
work together**





If we all agree to delay giving our children smartphones, and instead gave them brick phones until at least the end of Year 9, the peer pressure instantly reduces.

Saying no can feel impossible when you're acting alone. Acting collectively makes it infinitely easier.





## **This is what Smartphone Free Childhood is all about.**

It's a growing movement of 150,000 parents in the UK who are coming together to support each other in delaying access to smartphones and social media for their children.

It's coordinated via a national network of WhatsApp communities where parents can learn more about the issue, find other like-minded parents and support one another.





# WE'RE NOT ANTI-TECH, WE'RE PRO-CHILDHOOD

Technology has immense benefits, and young people should be able to enjoy the opportunities it creates – when they're ready and when it's safe to do so.

But childhood is precious and fleeting. All children should have the opportunity to learn, develop and grow free from the addictive-by-design algorithms and age-inappropriate content of social media and smartphones.



# OUR RECOMMENDED APPROACH

- Simple phone until at least the end of Year 9
- Delay social media until 16
- Internet & WhatsApp access via a shared family computer
- Track with an Airtag if you want to know where they are



**SMARTPHONE**



**SOCIAL MEDIA**



**SIMPLE PHONE**



**FAMILY COMPUTER**





# PARENTAL CONTROLS AREN'T THE SOLUTION

- Even the most tech-savvy parents struggle to manage parental controls
- Some apps require updates to hundreds of settings to make them age appropriate
- Even if your child's phone has parental controls, their friends may not so they may be sent inappropriate content regardless

**58%**

of teens say they've  
never had controls  
put on their phone  
by parents

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

**47%**

of teens with  
controls in place  
say they have  
bypassed them

(Parentkind poll, May 2024)

And teens find  
multiple ways to  
bypass controls:

Performing a factory reset

Using VPN software

Hacking the WiFi router

Memorising your passcode



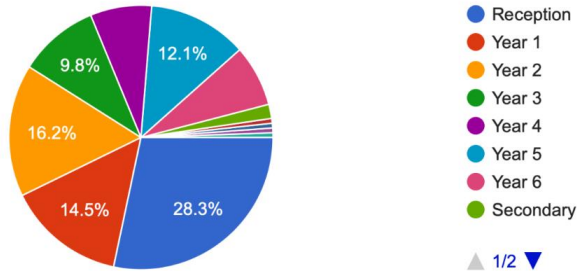
# The St. Laurence Smartphone Survey



# 173 parents responded to our St. Laurence smartphone survey. Here's what they said:

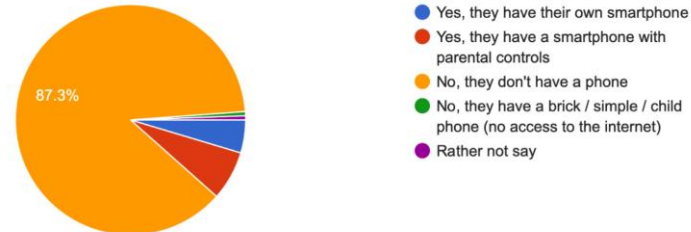
What year is your child in?

173 responses



Does your child have a smartphone?

173 responses







Kids at St. Laurence who have phones use them for:

- Entertainment (gaming,youtube, etc)
- Staying in touch with friends and family
- Education
- Social media

The top apps they're using (in order of popularity) are:

1. YouTube or YouTube Kids
2. WhatsApp
3. TikTok
4. Snapchat
5. Instagram

Of parents who reported having issues surrounding their child's smartphone use so far, the top issues include:

- decreased interest in hobbies/independent play
- family arguments over screen time
- cyberbullying
- seeing or being sent inappropriate content

### Are you feeling pressure to get your child a smartphone?

153 responses



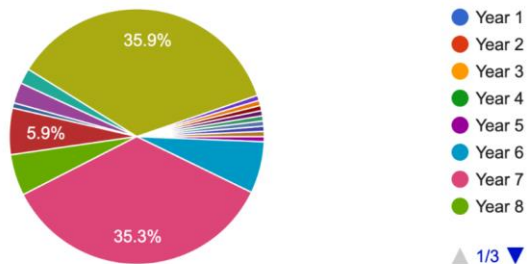
The majority of parents who responded said they're not currently feeling pressure to get their child a smartphone

35 percent of parents currently plan to get their child a smartphone when they start Year 7.

36 percent are still undecided.

### What age are you planning to get your child a smartphone?

153 responses





The top reasons parents who answered the survey plan to get a smartphone for their child are:

1. To keep in touch with them (71%)
2. To know where they are (55%)
3. So they won't be left out (29%)
4. So that they will know how to use technology (27%)

53% of parents surveyed said they would get their child a “brick phone” instead of a smartphone as a first step if some of their peers were doing the same. A further 31% said they might be open to doing that.

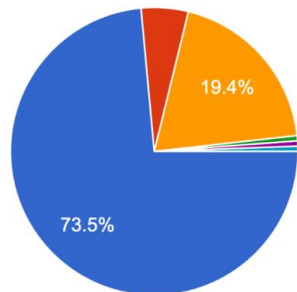
55% of parents surveyed said they would be interested in or willing to consider signing a parent pact to wait until the end of Year 9 before getting their child a smartphone.





Would you be supportive of a change in UK law that restricts social media access to kids aged 16+?

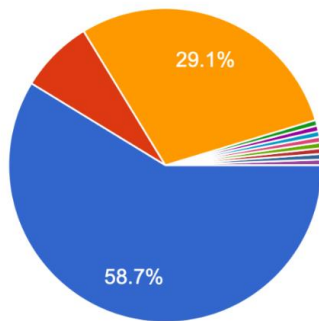
170 responses



- Yes
- No
- Not sure at the moment / would need more information
- Things like kids yt are a good step
- Yes but this is separate issue to having a phone
- Yes. My reason my child would have a phone would be to contact me or a family member who was trusted or vic...

Would you be supportive of a change in UK law that bans smartphones in schools?

172 responses



- Yes
- No
- Not sure at the moment / would need more information
- Yes but children should be able to h...
- Not sure, at the moment there are n...
- No. Can ban use of in school but no...
- Ban them being used. I use my sons



# **THE PARENT PACT**

makes collective  
action simple



# **TOGETHER WE'RE POWERFUL!**

Join other St. Laurence parents who are committing to wait until at least the end of primary school before giving their children a smartphone.





**We're all trying  
to do the best  
for our kids**



# WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

**Navigating the fast changing world of smartphones and social media is complex.**

This stuff's tricky, the evidence is evolving fast, and every family is different.

Wherever you sit on the spectrum, or whatever decisions you've made for your children, we respect your position.

Every family will come to their own conclusions; we just want to open up a conversation about these issues.

It's a new frontier of parenting, and we're all in it together.





**Let's keep  
talking**





# **SMARTPHONE FREE CHILDHOOD**

[www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk](http://www.smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk)

[@smartphonefreechildhood](https://www.instagram.com/smartphonefreechildhood)



*Smartphone Free Childhood is a restricted fund under the auspices of Prism the Gift Fund, Charity Number 1099682.*

# Susan Dunigan

## Founder of The Enlightened Parent



THE\_ENLIGHTENED\_PARENT







**Cyberbullying**

**Predators**

**Inappropriate  
content**

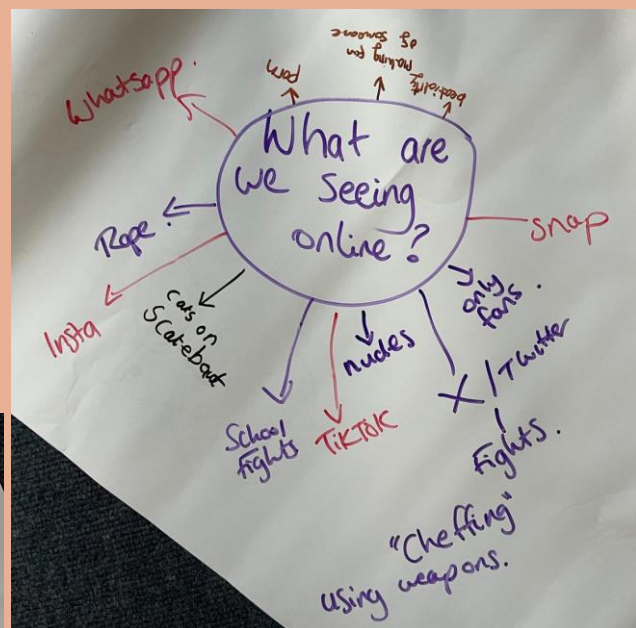
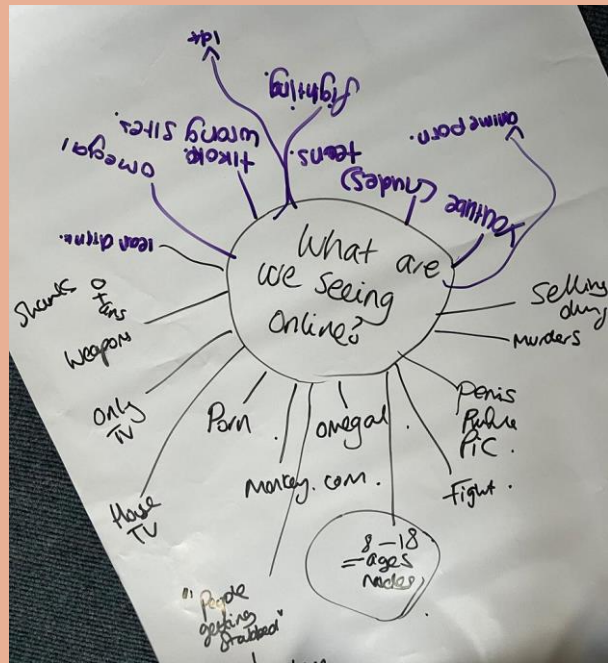
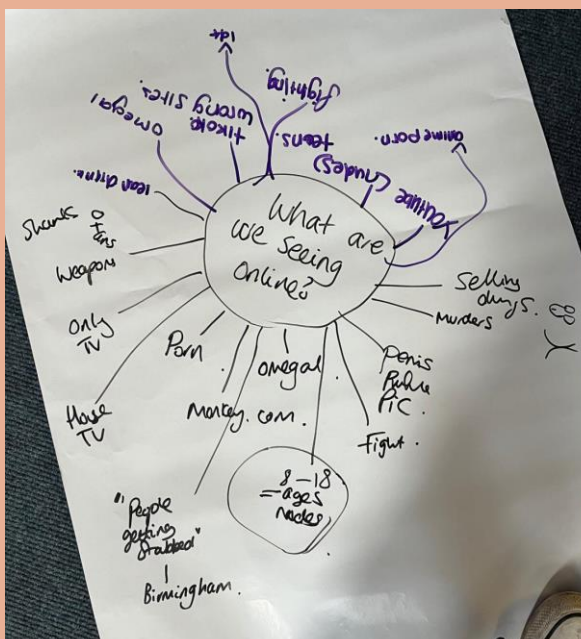
**Phishing**

**Exploitation**

- **Poor mental health**
- **Social skills**
- **Perception of healthy relationships**
- **Addiction**
- **Gambling**
- **Sleep disturbance**







# Susan Dunigan

## Founder of The Enlightened Parent



What big  
tech  
doesn't  
want  
parents to  
know



# Been there from the beginning

16 years in the industry

Pushing boundaries

Startups -> Silicon Valley

Tech for good

I'm a parent too



Where I've worked previously

facebook

M&S  
EST. 1884

JustGiving®

Farewill

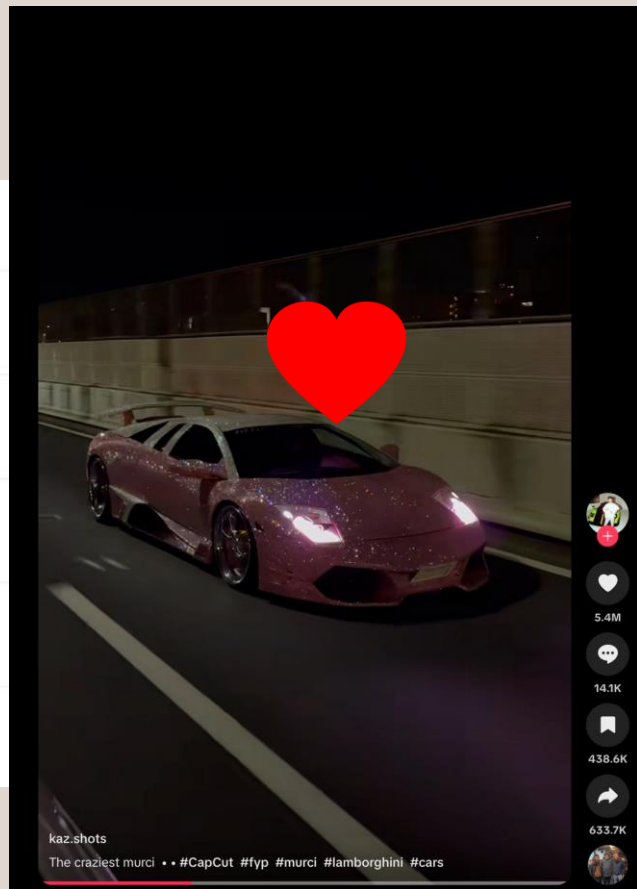
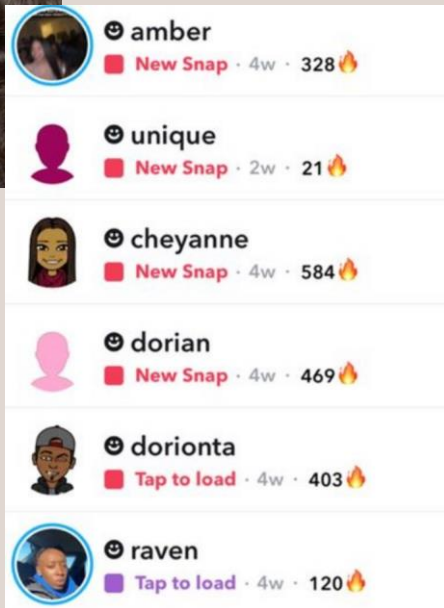
Why all the  
fuss?





Smartphones and  
Apps are  
engineered to be  
addictive.





If it affects us,  
what's it doing to  
our children's  
brains?



# Straight out the gambling playbook

Dopamine

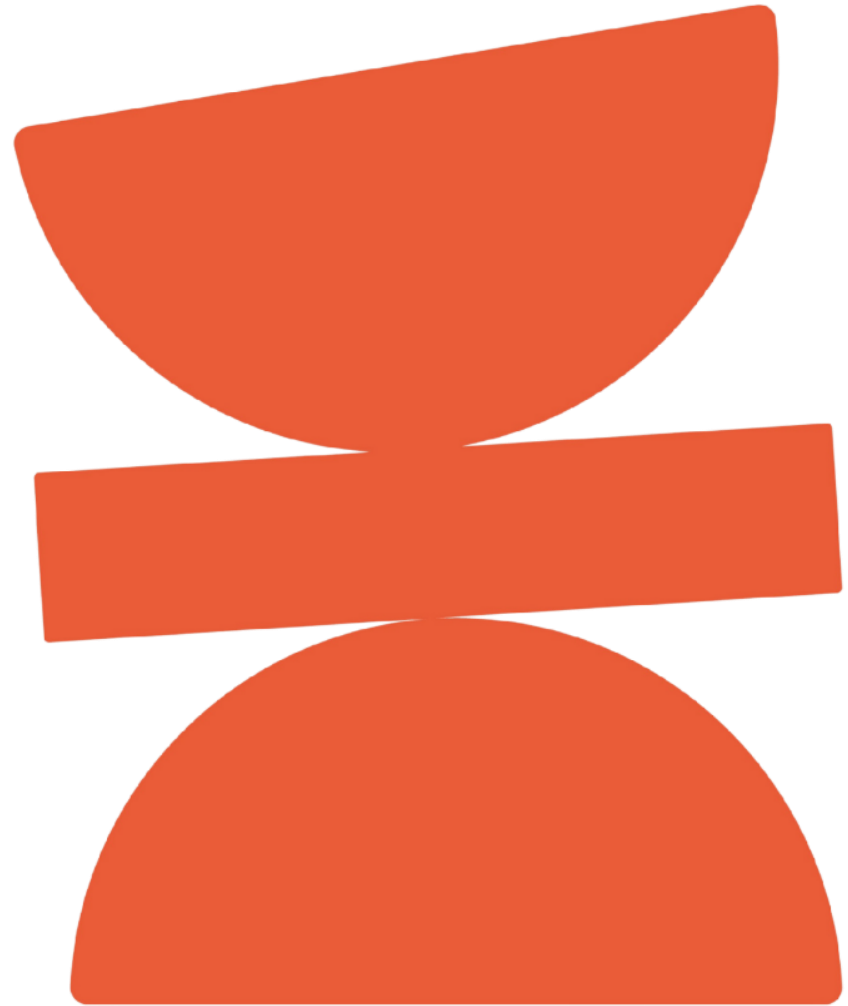
Hunter gatherers would experience it when finding food, shelter or water.

Screens give us a near constant stream of dopamine.

~~L~~eaves us wanting more and more and more....



Why don't they  
change?





Free product

Shareholder value

Grow, grow, grow...

What they don't

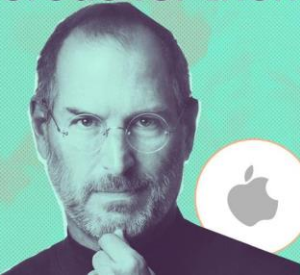
do...



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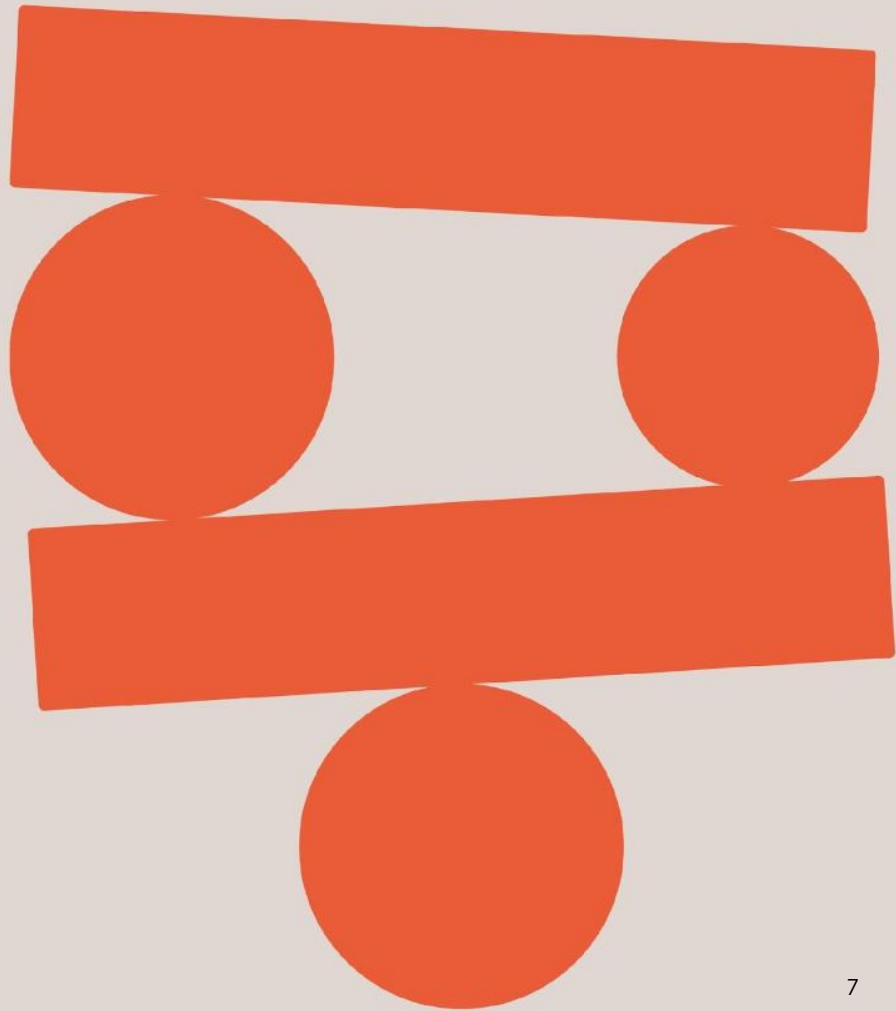


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Thank you  
for listening

