

Defining moment for telcos as offline childhood trend accelerates

Parents across Europe are pushing for offline childhoods as research links heavy smartphone use to reduced wellbeing. Policymakers are reacting with restrictions, and telcos now face pressure to define their role, offer safer tools, and support alternatives that promote healthier digital habits



Lost in the screen: Research warns that excessive smartphone use among children can lead to increased distraction

Telcos face a pivotal moment

Smartphones have become part of children's daily lives, offering convenience and connectivity. At the same time, researchers are increasingly examining how early exposure affects child development, while parents across Europe express growing concern about the impact on social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Some parents are even calling for a smartphone free childhood.

Some telecom providers already offer various tools that help families set boundaries online. But the industry could also seize this opportunity to sell services to children that are better aligned with an offline lifestyle. Either way, operators are being drawn into the debate and must consider where they stand as societal expectations shift.

Debating children's smartphone use

Recognising the importance of in person interactions that foster empathy, cooperation, and resilience, parents are exploring ways to encourage their children to spend more time offline. They are concerned that constant digital distraction limits children's opportunities for real world development and look for ways to reduce screen time.

Debates over the harmful effects of children's smartphone use remain widespread, while researchers continue to investigate the effects of early and frequent smartphone use. While waiting for clearer guidance from both policymakers and scientists, many parents feel they need to act to protect their children.

At many primary and secondary schools, students now have smartphones, and media reports suggest that parents are increasingly uneasy about the consequences. Across Europe, families worry about heightened anxiety levels and shorter attention spans, a sentiment that has helped fuel new grassroots initiatives.

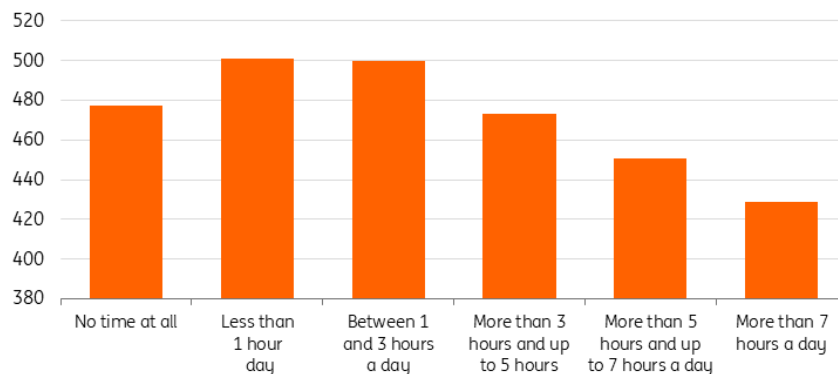
The Smartphone Free Childhood movement

Inspired by developments in the UK, where the Smartphone Free Childhood initiative originated, parents across Europe are joining collective efforts to protect what they see as a unique and formative period of childhood. They believe online distractions reduce the space children need for unstructured play and real life problem solving. Many parents want their children to become authentic individuals who remain true to themselves and see social media and an online lifestyle as undermining that goal in harmful ways.

What the research says

The OECD's triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study offers a nuanced perspective. The 2022 results show that moderate use of digital devices can enhance students' performance in school and strengthen their sense of belonging. However, when 15 year olds use their smartphones for more than three hours per day, their mathematics scores decline, and they are more likely to feel distracted and less connected to their school environment. The findings highlight the importance of limiting digital distractions rather than eliminating technology altogether.

Spending more time on social media reduces mathematics scores



Source: OECS (PISA), ING

Growing legislative pressure

Policymakers across several countries are taking note of these concerns. Australia and Denmark have introduced social media bans for first year college students, and France is considering similar measures. The UK is exploring new actions as part of ongoing research related to its online safety act. The Netherlands has already banned smartphones in schools. Elsewhere, parental consent frameworks are being strengthened in place of outright bans. These developments illustrate that the debate is no longer confined to family decisions; governments are becoming active participants.

How telecom providers and tech firms can shape the response

Telecom providers and technology firms have already found ways to support families. Some offer parental control tools, data use restrictions, and app blocking features. Others contribute through social responsibility campaigns. KPN launched a campaign to stop online pestering, while Deutsche Telekom initiated efforts to raise awareness about the potential consequences of parents sharing pictures of their children online. These examples demonstrate that operators have a role to play not only in online safety but also in shaping children's digital habits.

Opportunities in alternative products and services

Campaigners propose alternatives to regular smartphones, such as audio players, basic phones, and simplified smartwatches. Some of these devices naturally fit within telco portfolios because they require SIM cards or data connections, including certain wearables and trackers used to locate children's bikes. Offering such products would allow telecom providers to stay engaged with a new generation of users in a responsible manner, helping retain future customers while encouraging a more mindful approach to technology.

Looking ahead: 2026 will intensify the debate

The discussion around the negative effects of smartphones on children is likely to intensify in 2026. Companies must now define their position on societal responsibility. A deeper understanding of both the challenges created by smartphones and the potential solutions will be essential. Telcos sit at the intersection of technology, family life, and public policy, and their stance will help shape

expectations around digital wellbeing in the years ahead.

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