

Session 2 – Semestre 1 – Année 2024-2025

Langue : Anglais

Niveau : N4

Date : 21 juin 2025

Durée : 1h30

‘The crux of all evil’: what happened to the first city that tried to ban smartphones for under-14s? Amelia Gentleman – *The Guardian*, 7 May 2025

A one-storey 1960s block with 14 classrooms backing on to a playing field, Cunningham Hill primary feels like an unlikely hub for a revolution. But a year ago, Matthew Tavender, the head teacher of the school, began coordinating with the heads at other primary schools across the city, then sent a joint letter to parents and carers across St Albans: the highly addictive nature of smartphones was having a lasting effect on children’s brains. The devices were robbing children of their childhood. Could parents, the letter asked, please avoid giving them smartphones until they turned 14?

One of the fathers who received the letter was Matt Adams, the founder and editor of the *St Albans Times*, who wrote an article highlighting the initiative. The story was picked up nationally, and then internationally. People in Singapore, Australia and South Africa all heard about an ambitious attempt by parents and teachers in a small suburban city, 23 miles from central London, to fight off the reach of global tech companies.

A year later, it’s clear that St Albans is still far from a smartphone-free city for under-14s. And yet, something small and potentially significant has shifted. In December 2023, when Tavender did a survey of his year 6 pupils (aged 10-11), 45 of 60 pupils already had smartphones – 75%. A year later, this has dropped to just seven – 12%. A similarly stark drop has been noted by heads at other schools in the city. His aim is for this trend to continue. In fact, he hopes that the smartphone resistance movement accompanies his primary schoolchildren into secondary school, so that in time the sight of a child carrying a smartphone in St Albans will trigger a frisson of shock, akin to the vision of a child with a cigarette.

Tavender was concerned, too, about declining concentration. “It’s the TikTok brain.” Exam preparation study sessions have had to be broken up into shorter chunks to allow children to cope, he says. At one meeting I attended, he told the parents that executives in Silicon Valley don’t let their children access social media. “They know something we don’t know,” he says.

Last February, he heard a radio interview with a primary head teacher in Dorset talking about a campaign to encourage parents to give their children “brick” phones; he called him to ask for advice and was put in touch with the newly launched Smartphone Free Childhood

movement, an initiative set up by parents in Suffolk, which campaigns for a ban on social media for children under 16 and a ban on smartphones for children under 14.

32 Then, in May, at the start of the summer term, Tavender and his colleague Elbourne-Cload convened a parents' meeting. "It was the most well-attended meeting we've ever had," he says. "About 80 people turned up; normally we get about 40 to 50." One father interrupted the presentation to accuse the teachers of being anti-tech, Tavender tells me, but mostly there was a sense of optimism that the parents could do something to translate their sense of latent worry
36 into positive action. In the absence of help from the government or action by tech firms, they felt suddenly empowered. A few days after the meeting, the St Albans primary schools consortium sent out their letter.

40 The schools were already smartphone-free areas, the letter explained, but the idea was to "change the 'normal' age that children are given smartphones". "By 'smartphones', we refer to phones that are able to access the internet, as opposed to mobile phones that can only text and make phone calls." Parents should "resist pressure" from their children, and work together to "reset the expectation and remove social peer pressure".

44 "When you're ready for your child to stop being a child, give them a smartphone," Tavender tells parents. "WhatsApp is the **crux** of all evil, in my mind." Particularly worrying were the recent changes to the app's settings, allowing users to create bigger groups. He had noticed children taking part in a "first to 1,000 challenge", which involves trying to create huge group chats.
48 Photographs get shared with ever-widening circles of people; no one really knows who else is in the group.

In a Hollywood version of the St Albans story, there would be a triumphant ending, perhaps with parents hiring a steamroller to crunch their children's tech, or with teachers facilitating
52 a penitent visit from the founders of WhatsApp, who fly over from California to visit pupils and parents at Cunningham Hill, offering their apologies in a drizzly playground. Tavender, played by Martin Freeman, would be **feted** for his David and Goliath-style success. I'm not sure that production companies will be in a bidding race for the rights to this story quite yet.

56 Tavender thinks the movement will expand organically. "It will take a few years to really show the impact." He has also noticed fewer parents ignoring their children at pickup time in favour of their mobiles. Mostly he feels happy to have played a small part in beginning to shift mindsets. "Overall it's been a success, but it's a long journey," he says.

Reading (6 points)

1. Match the words in bold in the text to their synonyms in the following list. (2 points)

- a. the essence, the heart
- b. similar
- c. honoured, celebrated
- d. manage, deal with

2. True or false? Justify your answer with a quote from the text. (2 points)

- a. Children under 14 are never seen with smartphones in St Albans.
- b. Tavender was not the first head teacher to encourage a ban on smartphones.
- c. Parents were feeling more confident after the first meeting at the school.
- d. The journalist thinks there will be a movie about St Albans soon.

3. Briefly answer the questions below in your own words. Do not quote from the text. (2 points)

- a. What is a 'brick' phone (line 27)? (1 point)
- b. According to Tavender, which negative effects do smartphones have on schoolchildren? (1 point)

Grammar (4 points)

1. Indirect questions (2 points)

Rewrite the following sentences as indirect questions.

Ex. The letter asked: 'Could parents please avoid giving their children smartphones?'

---> The letter asked if parents could avoid giving their children smartphones.

- a. 'Do you consider this a success?', the journalist asked the headteacher.
- b. 'Are we ready for our children to become adults?', the parents wonder.

2. Present perfect continuous (2 points)

Transform these sentences using the present perfect continuous.

Ex. The teachers started confiscating phones one year ago.

---> The teachers have been confiscating phones for a year.

- a. My nephew started playing video games when he was five.
- b. After the letter was sent, parents started buying their children brick phones.

Writing (10 points)

Choose ONE of the topics below and write a 200-word essay (+/- 10%). Your answer should be based on well-organised arguments and examples.

1. In *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that the "new phone-based childhood that took shape roughly 12 years ago is making young people sick and blocking their progress to flourishing in adulthood." Do you agree with him? Why?

2. You are a parent and have received the letter from the school. Write a reply explaining why you agree or disagree with the school's initiative.