

BEYOND CLASS

A phone-free childhood

Sally McGrane on one Irish village that is making it happen

The kids are a little different in Greystones. In 2023, the Irish seaside town just south of Dublin launched a grassroots initiative led by parents, school principals and community members to loosen the grip of technology on their younger children by adopting a voluntary “no smart devices” code and supporting it with workshops and social events.

Three years later, no one in Greystones claims to have cured the ills of modern technology. But they’ve learnt that they can’t do anything about it one child at a time. Only a townwide effort could defang the kids’ “everyone else has one” argument.

“With social media, it’s a collective thing,” said Jennifer Whitmore, a member of Irish parliament and a Greystones mother of four. “Addressing it in a clustered manner is the way to go.”

The movement, called It Takes a Village, has since grown well beyond this small town of 22,000 residents. In a country that is home to the European headquarters of tech companies including Google, Meta, Microsoft, Apple and LinkedIn, and where the average firstborn child gets a smartphone at age nine — younger siblings tend to get them earlier — the effort has struck a chord with everyone from local shopkeepers to national politicians.

“It was one of the first places that took collective action,” said Daisy Greenwell, who co-founded Britain’s Smartphone Free Childhood initiative later the same year — inspired, in part, by Greystones. “It made me think that we could shift the culture here too.”

Before he held his current position as Ireland’s deputy prime minister, Simon Harris, a Greystones father, helped launch the project. “I believe we are effectively seeing the experimentation with our young people’s



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mental health and well-being with social media,” said Harris, in a recent post on Instagram. “And it just can’t be allowed to continue.”

The goal is to give kids time to ease into the digital future rather than drown in it, said Rachel Harper, the principal of St Patrick’s National School, who spearheads the initiative. “This is the world the children are growing up in, and we need to equip them,” she said.

It Takes a Village was conceived as students returned to school after Covid-19 lockdowns. Harper was struck by how many tears she was seeing at the school gates. She heard similar reports from other primary school principals, teachers and parents — children struggling to sleep, refusing to come to school, downloading calorie-counting apps, or too upset by messages sent the night before to focus in class.

“If we didn’t take a stand now,” she said, “in five years would they be getting phones at five or six?”

Eoghan Cleary, a teacher and assistant principal at Greystones’ Temple Carrig secondary school, was one of the local educators who sounded the alarm. “I wish I didn’t have to see any more beheadings’ — that’s what my students say to me the most,” he said. “I don’t want to see people being raped online.”

After some 800 parents responded to a survey sent out by the primary schools — more than half said their children were anxious, and many had sought mental-health assistance — the town decided it was time to act.

“I think it was just so obvious, the damage phones were causing,” said one resident, Ross McParland, who first heard about the schools’ concerns over dinner at Harper’s house. McParland, a retired real estate con-

sultant, turned to the Greystones Town Team. Usually responsible for things like Christmas decorations and the St Patrick’s Day parade, Town Team volunteers were soon focused on the anti-anxiety project.

To kick off the project, McParland hosted a town hall. Harris spoke, as did Stephen Donnelly, then the Irish minister of health and another Greystones father. Two weeks later, all eight primary school principals signed a letter to parents in support of a voluntary code being rolled out by the PTAs. Parents could agree not to buy their kids a smart device before secondary school, which most children start at age 12. Seventy per cent of parents signed up, and the community united behind the cause.

The founder of a local film festival handled communications. Garrett Harte, a former editor-in-chief of Newstalk, Ireland’s nationwide talk-radio station, helped hone the initiative’s message and delivery.

According to a 2025 study by Cyber-SafeKids, an online-safety group, 28 per cent of Irish children between the ages of eight and 12 experienced content or unsolicited contact that “bothered” them, including exposure to horror, violence, sexual material and threats; 63 per cent of primary school-aged children said their parents couldn’t see what they’re doing online.

But with workshops for adults and children, podcasts on the topic and events like a phone-free beach party, Greystones has seen a shift — parents say the pressure to get their kids a smartphone before the end of primary school has all but vanished. Some say they feel less alone navigating new technological shoals. At St Patrick’s, one teacher said her students were more alert in the mornings.

Harper said that children are making plans in person, playing outdoors more, and “just being kids”.

NYTNS