



CREATING PHONE-FREE ZONES

This strategy is suggested in the 14-16 BrainWaves lesson:

Taking control of smartphones

About creating phone-free zones

Smartphones are now so ubiquitous that they are rarely absent from people's hands, including at meal times and night time. Yet these are precisely the times of the day when unchecked use of phones impinges on the protective wellbeing factors offered by sociable meal times and good sleep.

Creating phone-free zones means setting up specific places or times of day where phones and tablets are completely put away. For families, the most powerful places to try this are during family meals, in the hour right before bedtime, and keeping phones out of bedrooms entirely overnight. Making this work isn't just about setting rules—it's about changing the home environment. This might mean making a rule to charge all devices overnight in a central family docking station (like the kitchen), using old-fashioned physical alarm clocks instead of phones, and agreeing on strict family schedules. Crucially, research shows these zones only work if we as parents lead by example and put our own phones away too, rather than just forcing rules on our kids.

The scientific evidence behind creating phone-free zones

Recent research from around the world shows exactly why these physical boundaries are so vital for a teenager's mental health, focus, and development.

1. Sleep Quality and Nighttime Disruption

A 2026 sleep tracking study (The SBU MEDiA Study) looked at how teenagers use their phones at night. They found a huge ripple effect: if a teenager scrolls on their phone for just 20 extra minutes before bedtime, it triggers a chain reaction that keeps them scrolling for an average of 46 minutes past midnight. Keeping phones out of the bedtime routine completely stops this late-night scrolling loop.

Widespread medical reviews also show that late-night screen time floods a teenagers brain with fake morning signals (thanks to the blue light from screens) and causes mental over-excitement and anxiety. This blocks melatonin—the chemical their brain needs to fall asleep—leading to poor sleep, exhaustion, and low moods the next day.



Mathew, G. M. (2026). Pre-Bedtime Smartphone Use and Late-Night Scrolling. The SBU MEDiA Study; Sleep Journal.

Fatima, G. et al. (2026). Mobile Phone Addiction and Sleep Quality Among Children. PMC Academic Review.

2. Family Mealtimes and Connectedness

A study from the University of Arizona found that in over 70% of homes, devices are actively used at the dinner table. This creates a state of 'functional absence'—where parents and children are sitting right next to each other physically, but are miles apart emotionally. The data shows that keeping meals completely phone-free dramatically transforms family life. It allows for real face-to-face conversations and heavily reduces emotional distress and anxiety in young people, which is often caused by parents drifting away into their own screens.

Wu, J., & Lapierre, M. (2026). Device presence during family mealtimes. University of Arizona.

Further reading

For practical toolkits, evidence guides, and simple advice on how to transition to healthier digital routines, visit:

<https://www.smartphonefreechildhood.org/resource/smartphone-free-schools-evidence>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understand-the-impact-of-smartphones-and-social-media-on-children-and-young-people>