

Do Mobile Phone Bans Work?

Rules and the use of technology in school in relation to adolescents' behavior

Research report from primary and secondary schools
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Authors:

Bc. Nikol Kvardová

Bc. Natália Valkovičová

prof. PhDr. David Šmahel, Ph.D.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been extensive discussion in the foreign and Czech media regarding bans on the use of mobile technology by adolescents during breaks at school. Advocates for bans often focus on the fact that adolescents do not communicate face to face during breaks, because they use their mobile phones and the applications on them, like social networks and games (Mačí, 2018; Endrštová, 2018). Adolescents may start to prefer to communicate with each other through screens (Russell, 2018), thus losing the opportunity to socialize with peers in direct contact, which is needed to acquire interpersonal skills (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2019). Another argument in favor of a ban is that breaks are primarily intended for rest, but children do not relax while watching the news on social networks or playing mobile games. According to some authors, the result is that adolescents are distracted and inattentive, which negatively affects learning (Kopecký, 2018; Wright, 2018).

On the other hand, according to the Czech School Inspectorate, the prohibition of mobile phones during breaks is a violation of the private property rights of pupils (Mačí, 2018; Endrštová, 2018). Breaks are free time for adolescents to use at their discretion. In addition, mobile phones can have a positive and enriching effect on the learning process by allowing adolescents to search for information directly related to the school curriculum (Selwyn, 2019).

In the Czech Republic and abroad, the consequences of bans on mobile technology during breaks have not been sufficiently investigated. In 2019, a research report (Kopecký & Szotkowski) showed that mobile phones were allowed during breaks in more than 50% of Czech schools. The report compared the most common student activities, both with and without a ban. The most frequent activity in both cases was communication with classmates. In other activities, schools differed based on whether the phones were allowed or not — where mobile phones are allowed students play games or browse social networks (approximately 40% of students for both activities); in schools with a mobile phone ban, students stroll around the school (39%) or are bored at their desk (35%). Strolling around the school and sitting bored at a desk were also frequent activities for students with their phones allowed (33% both); however, possible consequences of the permission of mobile phones in the classroom during breaks has not been sufficiently explored. Media discussions are mostly based on personal statements

from educators, parents, and psychologists, and there is no empirical data that has examined this problem. This was the motivation for our research.

This research report is based on empirical data collected from April to June 2019 at 32 schools in South Moravia. The report summarizes the basic findings regarding the links between the permission or prohibition of mobile devices to adolescents' activities during breaks, their Internet use, and some of the difficulties that are presented in the media as the possible consequences of using mobile phones at school. Specifically, there are problems with concentration, fatigue, and the lack of communicating with classmates during breaks.

KEY FINDINGS

- The most frequent activity for adolescents during school breaks is **communicating with classmates** (93%), followed by **preparing for the next lesson** (55%), and **using a mobile phone or tablet** (51%).
- When adolescents use mobile phones or tablets during breaks, they are most often on **social networks** (56% daily) or **communicate with family, friends, or someone on the Internet** (41% daily). However, adolescents often do **things related to school** on their mobile phone or tablet (29% daily) or **read the news** (35% daily).
- **Only a quarter** (24%) of adolescents who **use a mobile phone or a tablet** during breaks **spend most of the break on these devices**. Almost half (46%) of those who use mobile phones use them only as a minor part of the break or almost not at all.
- **About a third (34%) of elementary schools and all secondary schools** in our sample **allow mobile phones during breaks**.
- Allowing or banning the use of a mobile phone during breaks is **very little related to activities during breaks**. There are **no differences** in the frequency of **communicating with classmates, playing board and other offline games, preparing for the next lesson, or reading magazines and books**. There is little difference in movement and doing nothing (e.g., relaxing) — in schools with a ban, adolescents move a bit more (41% to 25%) and spend less time passively (50% to 62%).

Allowing or banning the use of mobile technology during school breaks is **not related** to:

- **total hours** spent on the Internet
- **the excessive use of the Internet**
- **problems with concentration** during lessons after the break
- **problems with fatigue** after the break
- problems related to **having no one to talk to** during breaks

METHODOLOGY

Sample. The data is from 1,031 Czech adolescents (54% girls) who use the Internet. The age distribution corresponds to 60% of adolescents aged 11-14 and 40% aged 15-17. The average age was 14.1 (SD = 1.4 years). We asked all of the questions directly to the adolescents, with the exception of questions related to the rules for the use of mobile phones during breaks, which were addressed to the teachers in the schools where the data was collected.

Questionnaire. The findings are based on a questionnaire developed by the authors. The research is part of the EU Kids Online project and builds on the first wave of data collection in 2017-18. More information about EU Kids Online is available online: irtis.muni.cz/euko

Sample selection. The sample consists of pupils in the sixth to ninth years of primary schools and up to the first and second years at secondary schools. It was selected from randomly addressed primary and secondary schools and secondary grammar schools from the South Moravian Region with an emphasis on the even distribution of years. Data were collected in 32 schools and 71 classes. The research sample is not representative of the entire Czech adolescent population.

Data collection process. Data was collected in schools from April 24, 2019 to June 19, 2019. The questionnaire was completed online on computers as part of one lesson. A trained administrator, who was always present during the completion of the questionnaires, introduced the questionnaire to the respondents and helped them with any technical problems.

Ethical aspects of the research. Written informed consent of legal representatives and the oral consent of the adolescents were obtained prior to the collection of the questionnaires. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and they were given the choice to provide *Don't Know* or *Don't Want to Answer* for each question. They could skip any question. For this reason, the number of responses to each question may vary.

Graphs. Only the percentages of valid responses are shown in the graphs. Therefore, the graphs do not include respondents who did not answer the question or stated that they do not know or do not want to answer. Due to rounding to integers, the sums of the values in the graphs may not always be 100%. The graphs show answers from the entire research sample, except for Section 2 (Online activities during breaks), where only adolescents using a mobile phone or tablet during breaks answered the questions. Another exception is the part of the report devoted to the excessive use of the Internet, where we gathered information from about half of the research sample.

Statistical data analysis. We tested some of the links of mobile phone usage rules during breaks (e.g., activities during breaks, Internet use during the school day and weekend, excessive Internet use, problems that may be related to the break) with statistical tests. More information on the statistical data analysis is available here (in Czech):

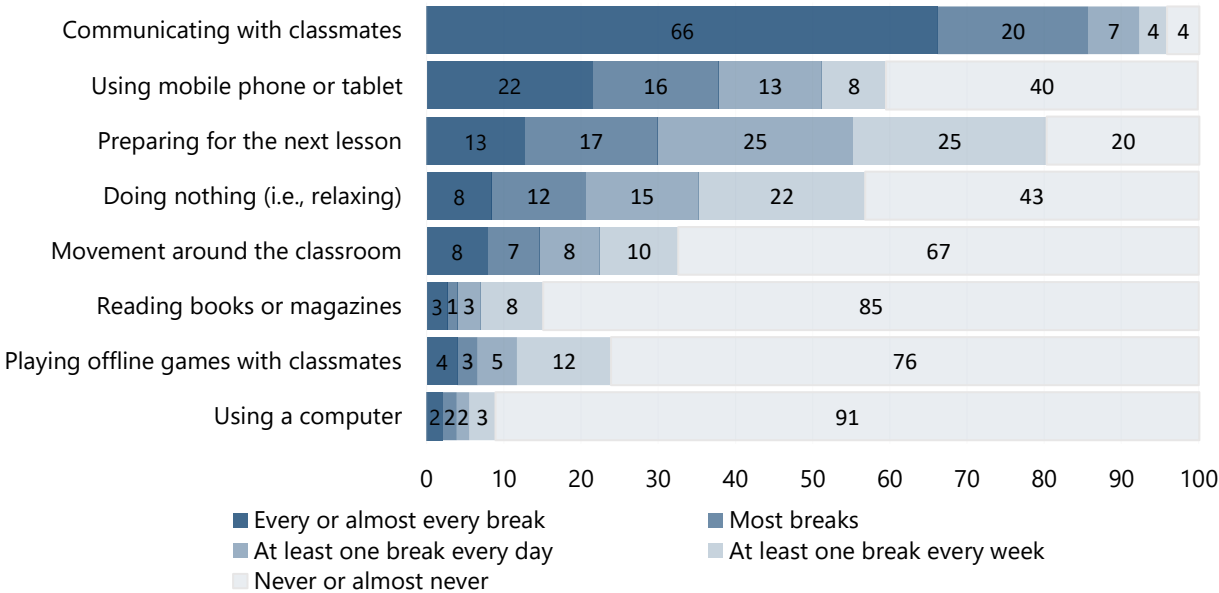
irtis.muni.cz/media/3180404/2019_mobily-o-prestavkach_statisticka-analyza-dat_priloha.pdf

ACTIVITIES DURING SCHOOL BREAKS

Participants were asked how often they did the following activities during breaks at school: **communicate with classmates; play board or other offline games; prepare for the next lesson or do homework; read magazines or books; move around the classroom or go outdoors; use a laptop or a computer; use a mobile phone or a tablet; and do nothing during the break (i.e., relax).** The answers are shown in Figure 1.

The most frequent activity during breaks among adolescents in our sample was to **communicate with classmates** - 66% communicate every or almost every break, and another 27% communicate during at least one break each day. Other activities that take place during at least one break each week are to use **a phone or a tablet** (60% of adolescents), **prepare for the next lesson** or **do homework** (80%). And about half (57%) do nothing during at least one break a week. Less frequent activities that more than two-thirds of our respondents do not do during breaks are move around the classroom or go outdoors, read magazines or books, play board or other offline games with classmates, and use a laptop or a computer.

Figure 1: Activities of adolescents during breaks

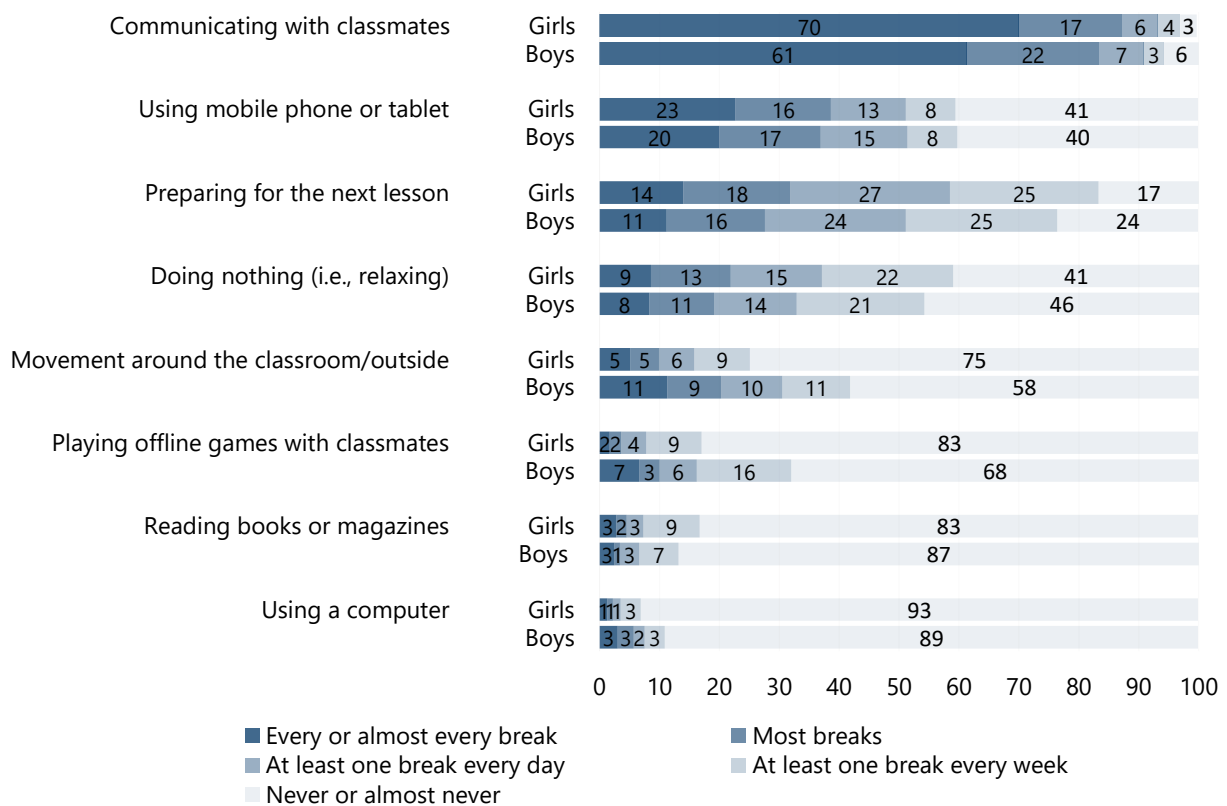


Question: We are interested in what you do at school during breaks. Indicate what you do during breaks in a typical week and how often.

Differences in activities during breaks by gender

We were also interested if girls and boys differed in how often they did specific activities during breaks. These differences are shown in Figure 2. Girls are more likely to prepare for the next lesson or do homework (84% of girls and 76% of boys use at least one break each week to prepare), but the difference is small. **Boys move around the classroom/outside during breaks more often than girls** (41% of boys said they moved for at least one break a week, while 25% of girls reported the same frequency). **There was also a difference in our sample in playing board games or other offline games: boys play more often** (32% of boys play for at least one break a week, while only 17% of girls play). We found approximately the same frequency for both boys and girls for communicating with classmates, using a phone or a tablet, reading magazines or books, using a computer or a laptop, and doing nothing during the break.

Figure 2: Gender differences in break activities

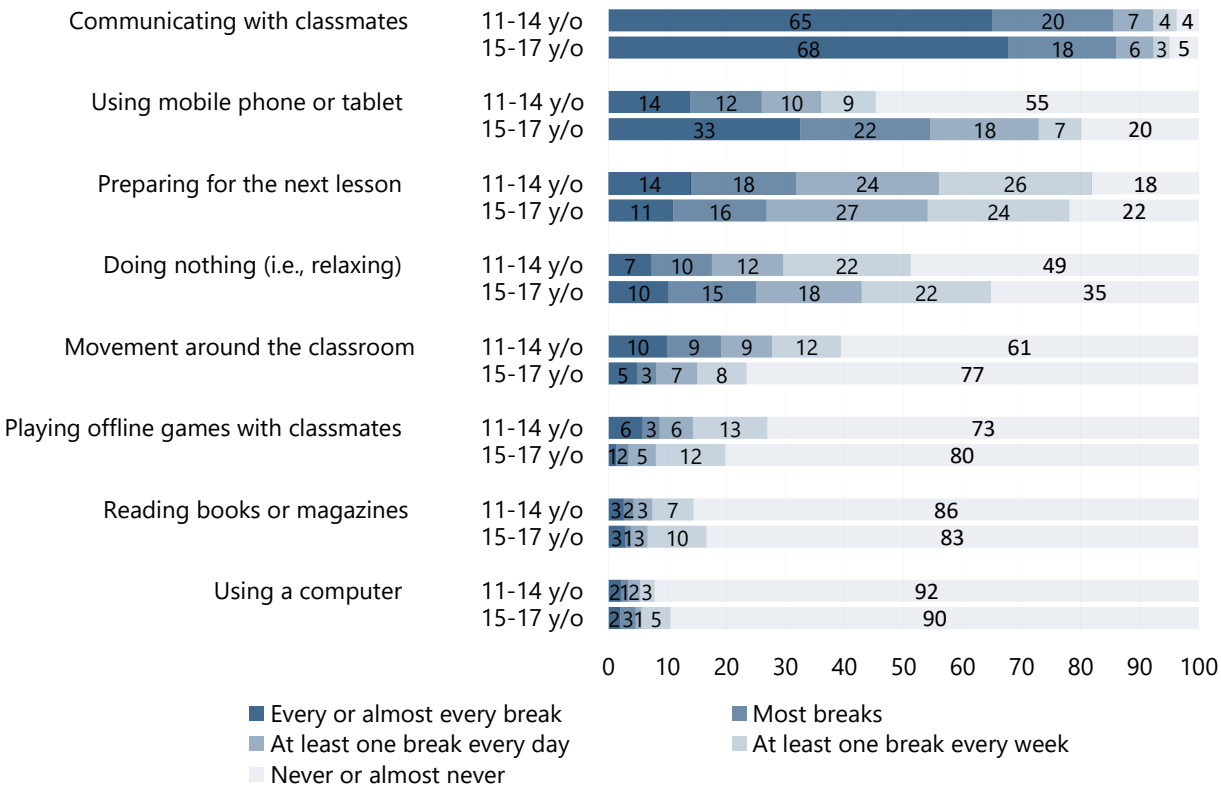


Question: We are interested in what you do at school during breaks. Indicate what you do during breaks in a typical week and how often.

Differences in activities during breaks by age

Age differences for activities during breaks are shown in Figure 3. We compared two age groups, adolescents between 11 and 14 and adolescents aged 15 to 17. The biggest difference was the use of a smartphone or a tablet. **Adolescents aged 15 to 17 use phones or tablets more often during breaks** (33% use them almost every break and another 47% use them at least one break per week) than the younger age group (14% of the younger group use a mobile phone or tablet almost every break, 31% at least one break per week). We observed other differences in moving around the classroom and playing board or other offline games — the younger adolescents in our research sample move a little more during the breaks and more often play board games. Older adolescents also do nothing during the break more often. However, these differences were minimal.

Figure 3: Age differences in break activities



Question: We are interested in what you do at school during breaks. Indicate what you do during breaks in a typical week and how often.

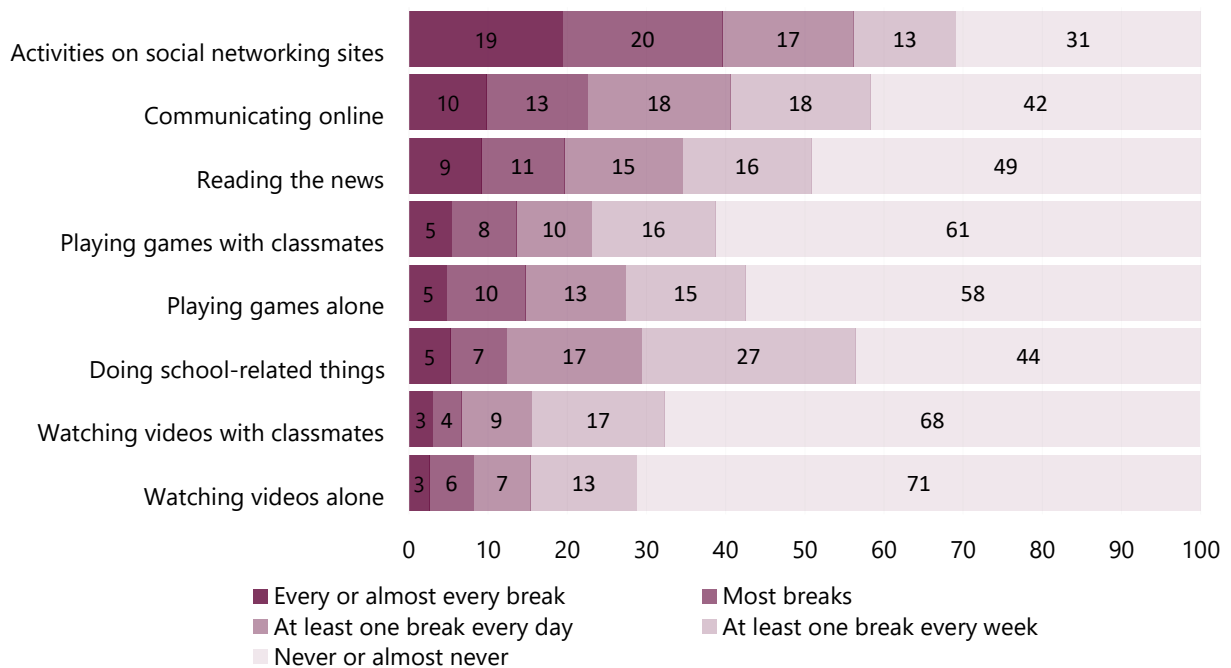
ONLINE ACTIVITIES DURING SCHOOL BREAKS

The adolescents who reported using a mobile phone or a tablet during breaks (707 respondents, 69% of the sample) were asked what they did on these devices and how often they did these online activities during breaks. **Therefore, Section 2 only contains answers from respondents who used a mobile phone or a tablet during breaks.** The responses are shown in Figure 4.

The most frequent activity was the use of social networking sites, with which 56% of our sample spent one or more breaks per day. The second most frequent activity was **communicating online** with family, friends, or someone on the Internet, with more than a third (41%) of adolescents from our sample spending at least one break a day with this activity. However, our respondents did not use their mobile phones at school only for fun or communication with friends; more than half used their phone or tablet to look for information for school (56%) or to read the news (51%) during at least one break per week.

Figure 4: Online activities during school breaks

The graph refers to the 707 adolescents who use technology during breaks.



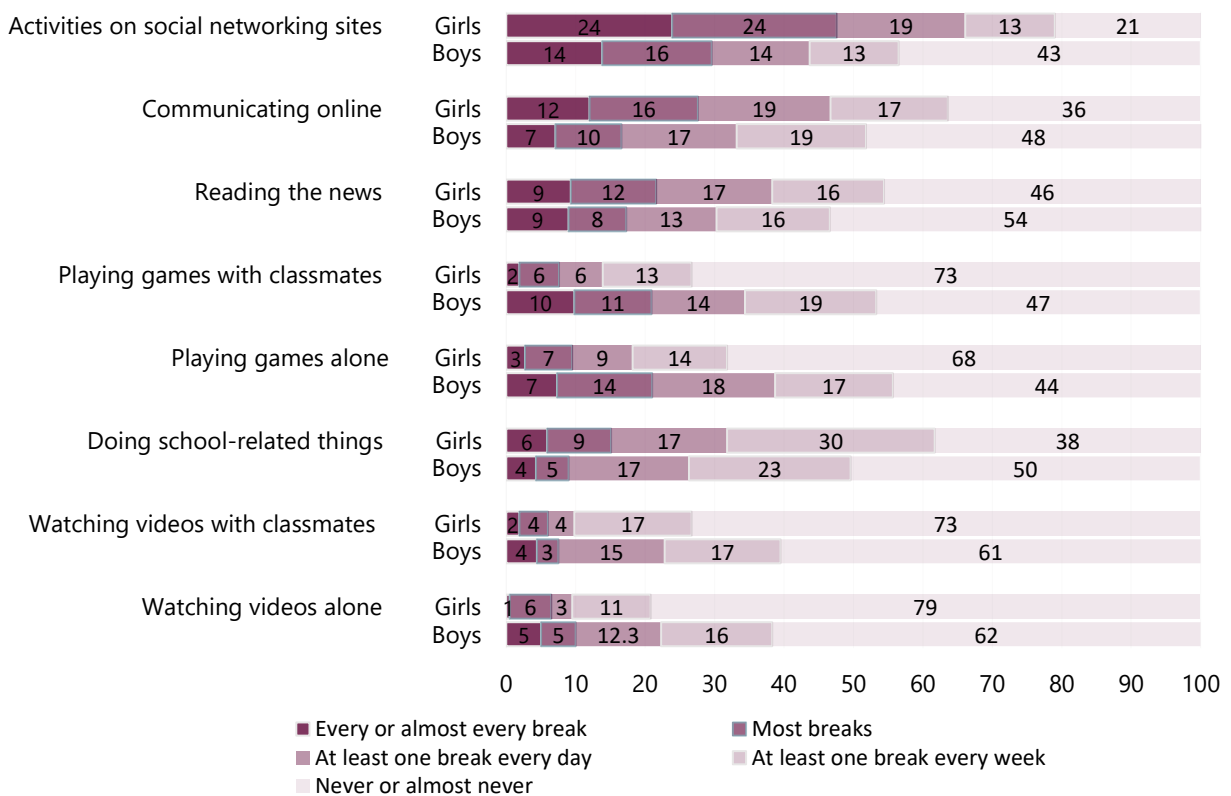
Question: You indicated that you use your mobile phone or tablet during breaks. Please indicate what you do on the PHONE OR TABLET during breaks and how often.

Differences in online activities during breaks by gender

Gender plays a role in the online break activities. Figure 5 shows that **girls spend more time on social networking sites** (48% of them say they use social media every or almost every break) and with **communicating online** (47% of them spend one or more breaks daily with this activity). They also **look for school-related information** more often than boys (62% during at least one break a week). **Boys in our sample spend breaks playing mobile games more often than girls, either alone** (39% during one or more breaks a day) or **with classmates** (35% during one or more breaks a day).

The graph refers to the 707 adolescents who use technology during breaks.

Figure 5: Gender differences in online break activities



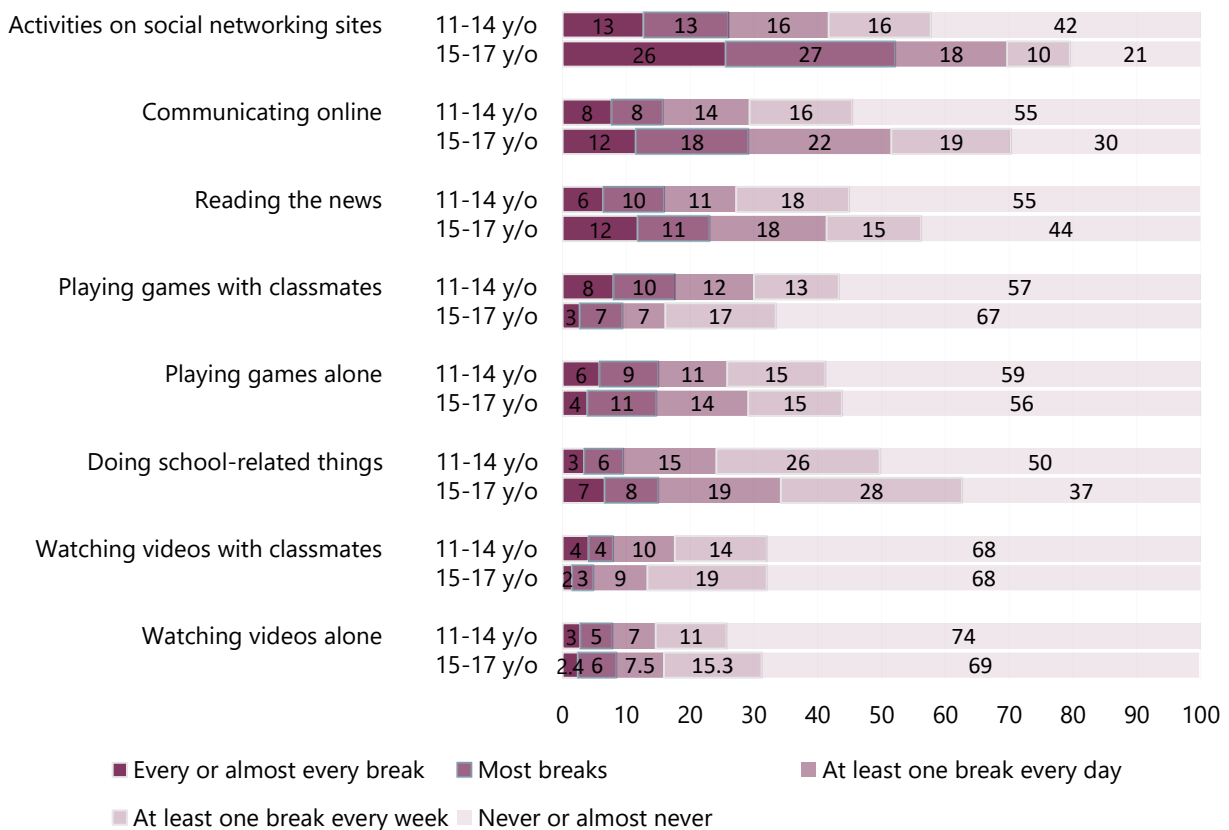
Question: You indicated that you use your mobile phone or tablet during breaks. Please indicate what you do on the PHONE OR TABLET during breaks and how often.

Differences in online activities during breaks by age

Age also played a significant role in the activities on phones or tablets during breaks. More than **half of the adolescents** (53%) from our sample **aged 15 to 17 spent most or almost every or every break on social networking sites**. In adolescents aged 11 to 14, only 26% of our sample spend most or nearly every break with this activity. The older age group also spends more time communicating online with family, friends, or someone else on the Internet (52% during at least one break a day), and they more often do school-related things (34% during at least one break a day) or read the news (41% during at least one break per day). **Almost a third of our sample in the younger age group** (30%) **plays games with classmates on their phones during one or more breaks per day**; in respondents aged 15-17, it is 17%. All online break activities by age are shown in Figure 6.

The graph refers to the 707 adolescents who use technology during breaks.

Figure 6: Age differences in online break activities



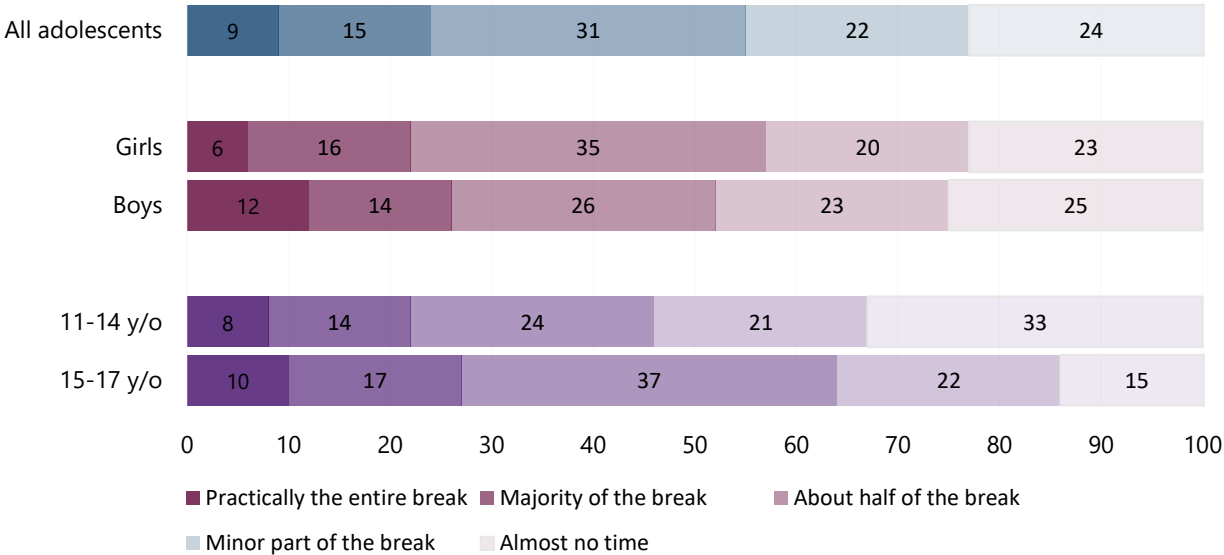
Question: You indicated that you use your mobile phone or tablet during breaks. Please indicate what you do on the PHONE OR TABLET during breaks and how often.

Time spent using a mobile phone during breaks

We asked adolescents in our sample who reported using their mobile phone or tablet at least sometimes during breaks to define both how much time they actually spent on the phone during the break and how much time they spent on other activities. Therefore, we asked them to try to estimate the percentage — from 0 to 100 — of the time spent on a mobile phone during a break. We then categorized these percentages based on the proportion of break time spent on a mobile phone: almost no time (respondents who reported 0 or 10%); a minor part of the break (20 or 30%); about half of the break (40, 50, or 60%); the majority of the break (70 or 80%), or practically the entire break (90 or 100%). The information is shown in Figure 7. **Only a quarter of the respondents (24%) used their mobile phone for the majority of the time during the break, and almost half (46%) spent only a minor part of the break or almost no time during the break on their phone.** As for the differences in gender and age, boys use their phones a little more than girls and the older age group uses their phones a little more than the younger group, but the differences are small.

Figure 7: Proportion of time spent on phones during breaks

The graph refers to the 707 adolescents who use technology during breaks.



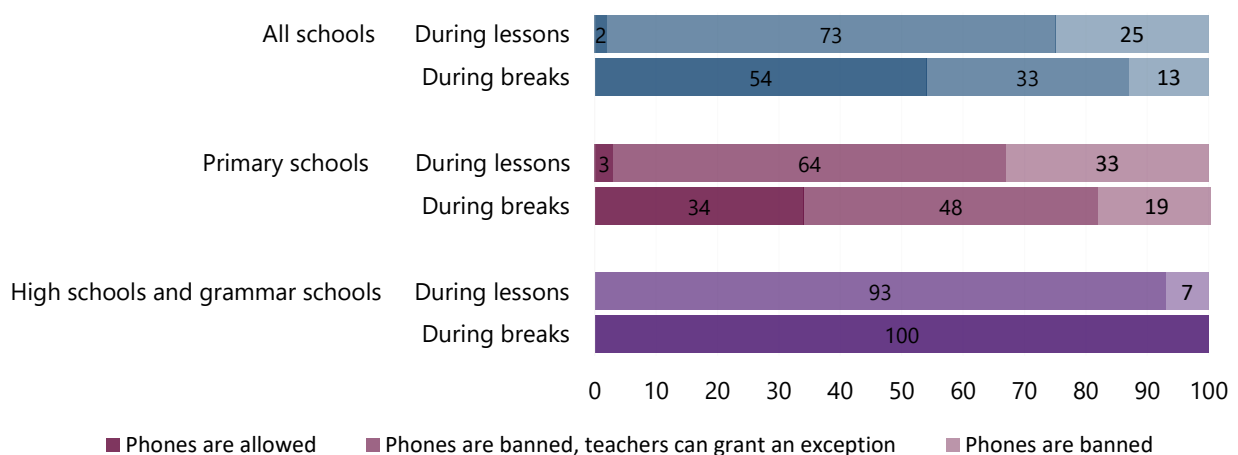
Question: Can you try to estimate how much of your time during breaks you spend using your phone or tablet?

RULES FOR THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES

All schools have rules for the use of mobile phones. We inquired about the permission or prohibition of mobile phones during lessons and breaks. We obtained this information from teachers for their whole school. We found that **only 2% of schools allow adolescents to use their mobile phones in lessons**, while 25% of schools completely forbid phones in lessons. In 73% of schools, students can obtain permission from a teacher in exceptional cases. Exceptions for mobile phones in the classroom are mainly for study activities (e.g., a stopwatch, camera, searching for training materials, online exercises) and cases where a student needs to contact their parents. Regarding breaks, **54% of schools allow mobile phones without limitations**, 13% of schools have banned mobile phones during breaks, and, in 33% of schools, teachers can permit phones during breaks in exceptional circumstances, especially when parents need to be contacted.

The rules for the use of mobile phones in our research sample varied depending on the type of school, particularly in regard to the rules for breaks. While all of the secondary schools (i.e., high schools and secondary grammar schools) from our sample allow phones without limitations, only a third of the elementary schools (34%) allow adolescents to use their phones. Therefore, most elementary schools prohibit or allow mobile phones during the break with only some exceptions. The rules for using mobile phones in lessons did not vary greatly depending on the type of school: almost all schools do not allow phones during lessons, with the exception given by the teacher.

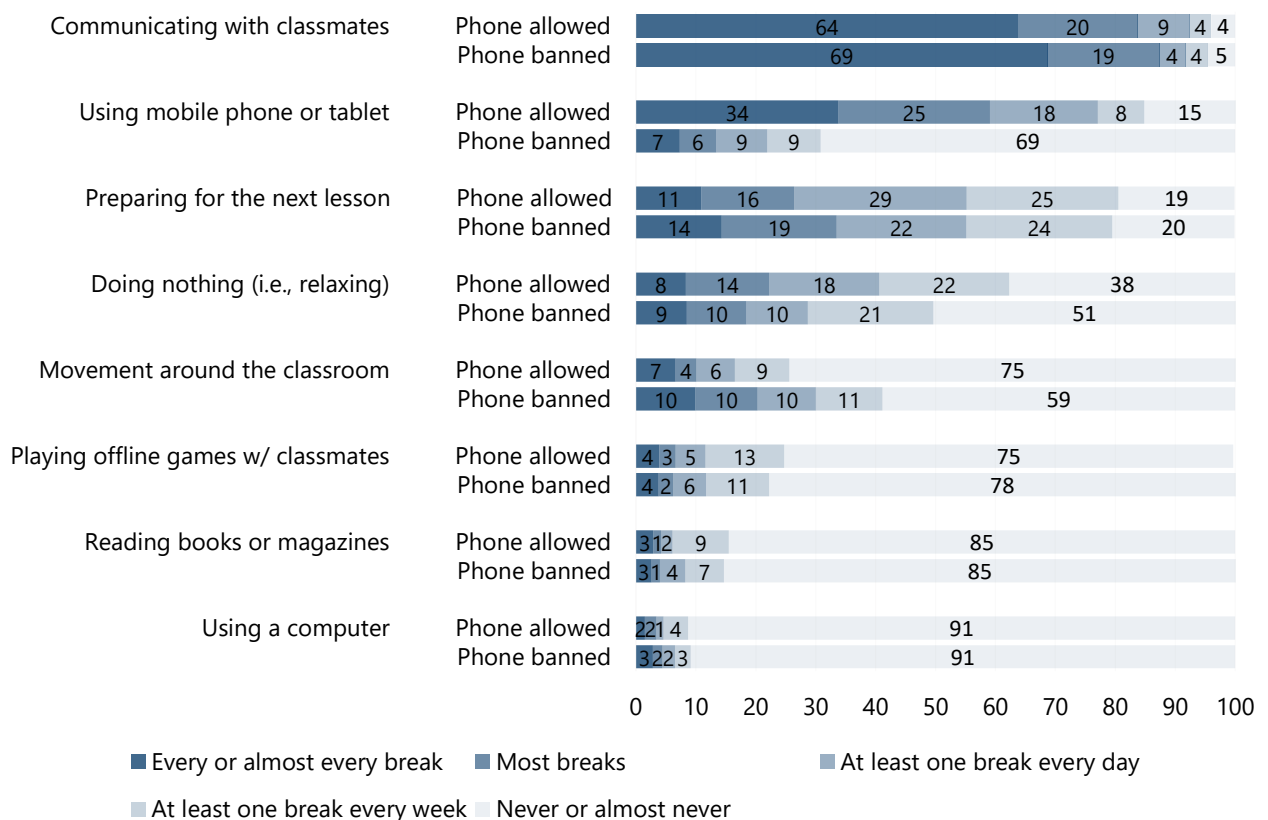
Figure 8: Rules for using mobile phones during lessons and breaks



Rules and activities during breaks

We were also interested in how the rules for the use of mobile phones related to adolescents' activities during breaks, and whether adolescents with phones allowed and adolescents with phones banned engage more or less frequently in the activities described in Figure 9. For comparison, we divided the respondents into two categories – those allowed to use phones during breaks and those prohibited from using phones during breaks. We coded the cases where phones were allowed only with permission as part of the prohibited group. The differences in activities based on whether adolescents have phones allowed or prohibited during breaks were also detected by statistical tests (see the Methodology section). The only significant difference in all of the activities was found in the use of a mobile phone or a tablet. **Respondents who were allowed to use their phones during the break also used them more often.** However, students with a prohibition on mobile phones or tablets also used them during breaks - 13% during most breaks and 9% during at least one break each day.

Figure 9: Differences in break activities based on phone use rules



Question: We are interested in what you do at school during breaks. Indicate what you do during breaks in a typical week and how often.

Small differences were also found in the frequency of movement and how often adolescents do nothing (i.e., relax) during their breaks. Students who are allowed to use their phones during breaks move less and are more likely to spend breaks doing nothing. However, these differences are small, as shown in the statistical analysis of the data, so they cannot be interpreted as meaningful. For other break activities, we found no differences that depended on the permission or prohibition of mobile phones. Therefore, the time that adolescents spend communicating with classmates, playing board or other offline games, preparing for the next lesson, reading magazines or books, and using a laptop or computer does not change according to whether phones allowed.

Rules and the use of the Internet

Permission for using a mobile phone during a break was not related to the total time spent on the Internet during the school day and during the weekend. We have analyzed the data and found that **allowing or prohibiting mobile phones during breaks does not affect the time adolescents spend on the Internet during the day.**

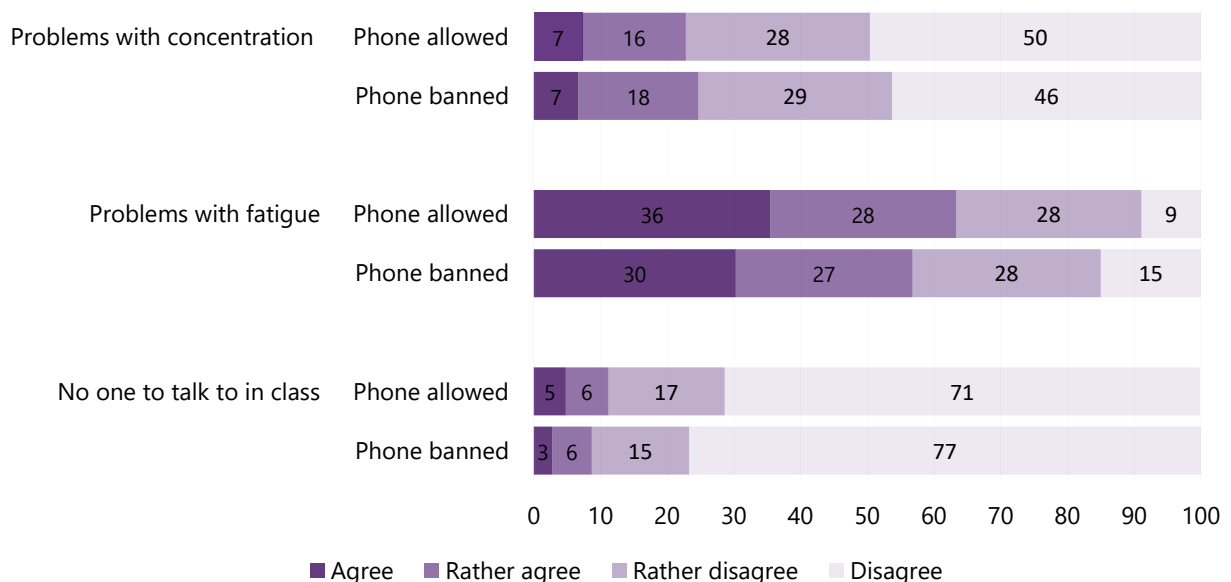
Rules and excessive use of the Internet

Permission to use mobile phones during breaks was not related to the excessive use of the Internet. This section covers half of the sample — 547 adolescents. Excessive use of the Internet is not only defined by the time spent on the Internet, but, above all, it is defined by the negative impact on different areas of life. In our research, we considered the following to be indications of excessive use: **neglect of food or sleep** due to the Internet; **discomfort** associated with the inability to connect to the Internet; **surfing the Internet despite not being entertained**; **neglecting family, friends, schoolwork, or hobbies** as a result of time spent on the Internet; and an **unsuccessful effort to limit the time** spent on the Internet. The connection of excessive use of the Internet with the rules of mobile phone use during breaks was determined by statistical tests (see the Methodology section). **We have found that there are no differences in the rate of excessive use of the Internet based on different phone use rules in schools.**

RULES, PHONE USE, AND BREAK-RELATED DIFFICULTIES

We also asked the adolescents about possible difficulties that have been mentioned as a result of the use of technology during breaks in the media debate (see the Introduction section). We asked if the students had anyone to talk to during breaks, whether they experienced difficulties concentrating during lessons, and whether they lacked rest after the break. We were interested in how these potential issues related to the rules for using mobile phones during breaks. Figure 10 shows that respondents with mobile phones permitted and mobile phones prohibited during breaks do not differ in the degree of difficulty with concentration after a break. Regarding the lack of rest and communication with classmates, there were very little differences in our research sample between adolescents who were allowed and who were prohibited from using their mobile phones during breaks. We also tested the differences with statistical tests (see the Methodology section). According to these results, the two groups do not differ in any of the problems detected.

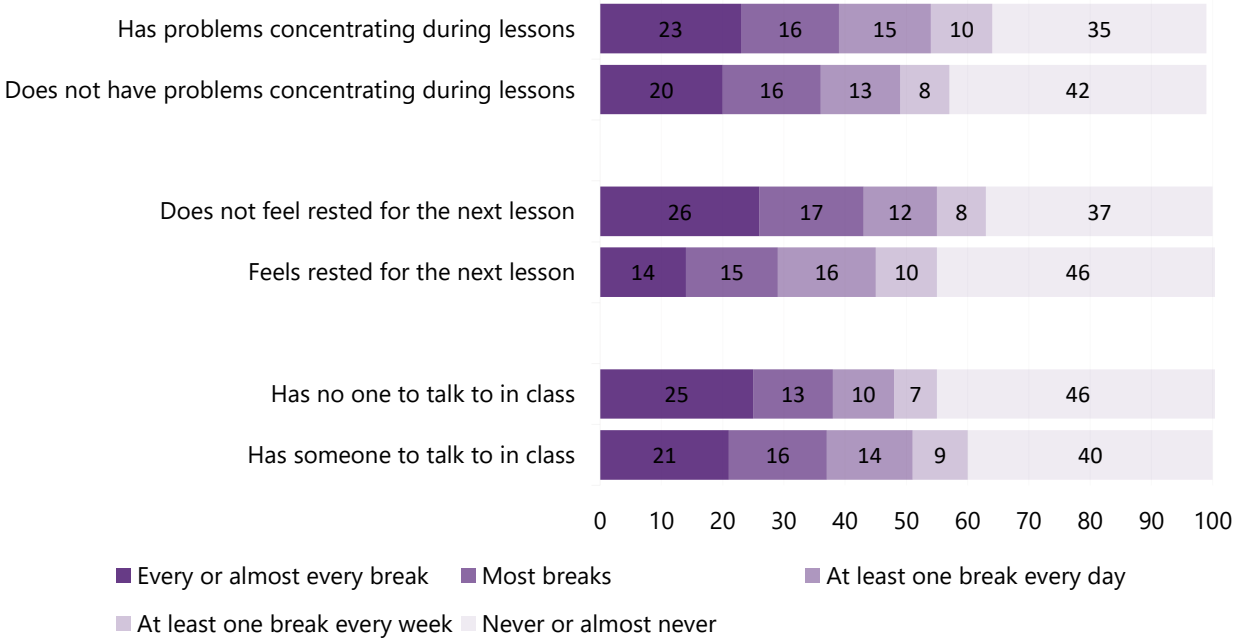
Figure 10: Differences according to mobile phone permission or prohibition in problems with concentration, fatigue, and lack of social relationships in the classroom



Question: The following questions concern events during breaks. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. (a) I have problems concentrating during lessons after a break, (b) I usually feel relaxed for the next lesson after the break [We coded the item in reverse; it is called Problems with fatigue in the chart], and (c) I have no one to talk to during breaks

In addition to the rules for using mobile phones during breaks, we have also looked at the time that adolescents spend on their phone or tablet during the break, and how using these devices during breaks is related to these difficulties. This is illustrated in Figure 11. Within our research sample, there were very small differences in the use of phones and tablets during the break between adolescents with difficulties concentrating on learning, with a lack of rest, and with a lack of communication with classmates and other students who did not have these problems. Those who have difficulties concentrating after a break and do not feel rested for the next lesson use their phone or tablet slightly more often than respondents without these problems. Adolescents who do not have anyone to talk to during the break use their phone or tablet a little less. However, the differences are minimal.

Figure 11: Differences based on time spent on a phone or tablet in problems with concentration, fatigue, and the lack of social relationships in the classroom



Question: The following questions concern events during breaks. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. (a) I have problems concentrating during lessons after a break, (b) I usually feel relaxed for the next lesson after the break [We coded the item in reverse; it is called Problems with fatigue in the chart], and (c) I have no one to talk to during breaks

CONCLUSION

This research summarizes the findings for the rules for using mobile phones during breaks in Czech schools. Our research builds on the media debate about the impact of the use of mobile technologies in schools and contributes knowledge on this subject that has not yet been empirically researched. Advocates of mobile phone bans during breaks argue that students often do not communicate face-to-face with classmates due to the use of mobile technology, thus missing the opportunity to socialize and develop communication skills (Russell, 2018; Smithee, 2018). However, the results of our research did not support this assumption. **Adolescents in our research sample communicate with classmates during breaks, whether or not they are allowed to use their mobile phones.**

Another of the most common arguments for the ban on mobile phones is the lack of rest during breaks and the consequent inattention during the lessons (Kopecký, 2018; Wright, 2018). This link was also not supported in our research, because **adolescents with and without a ban on mobile phones during breaks did not differ in their indication of problems with concentration during lessons or their lack of rest after the breaks.** Furthermore, we did not find a connection between phone use rules and adolescents' activities during breaks, such as **communicating with classmates, preparing for the next lesson, reading books or magazines, playing offline games, and using a laptop or a computer.** The biggest difference in how often adolescents use a mobile phone or a tablet during breaks is that, if they are allowed to use them, they, naturally, spend more time using these technologies. We also found small differences in the frequency of **movement around the classroom/outside** and in the amount **passive time spent during the break** — adolescents who are allowed to use their mobile phones move a little less and spend more time passively during the break (i.e., relaxing) — but the differences were very small. We also did not find any link between the rules for the use of mobile phones during breaks and the **overall time spent on the Internet** or the **excessive use of the Internet.**

The use of mobile phones at school can also have a positive and enriching effect because they can be used to look for information directly related to the school curriculum (Selwyn, 2019). Our research has also shown that students use mobile phones during breaks **to do things related to school** and **search for information related to school responsibilities.**

The results of our research on a sample of adolescents from the South Moravian Region show that the **rules for using mobile phones during breaks are insignificantly related to adolescents' activities during breaks**. However, the limitations of the self-assessment methods used in this research should be taken into account. In particular, problems that may be related to breaks (e.g., concentration) would be appropriate to measure in a different, more objective way, which could be the focus of further research. However, based on our findings, we can say that the **rules for using mobile phones are not related to the problems that are reported in the media as a result of using mobile technology during breaks**.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

- In our research, we focused on students in primary schools and secondary schools in the South Moravian Region. Our results show that **a ban on mobile technology during breaks in these grades is not necessary**. Our research has not supported the relationship between mobile-phone-use rules and the occurrence of problems that are reported as a result of using mobile technology at school during breaks.
- The use of mobile technology during breaks can also have a positive effect on learning because adolescents also use mobile phones to **search for information and do things related to school**. In addition, adolescents use their mobile phones to read the news, communicate online with friends and family, and do online activities together with classmates, which can fulfill their mental and social needs.

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Contact

prof. PhDr. David Šmahel, Ph.D.

Institute for Research of Children, Youth and Family

Faculty of Social Studies

Masaryk University, Brno

E-mail: smahel@fss.muni.cz

Phone: +420 549 497 451

Interdisciplinary Research Team on Internet and Society

<https://irtis.muni.cz/>

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