Are phones making kids worse readers? What three new studies found

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Teen reading hit a record low, kids who own phones scored lower, and schools that locked phones away saw reading rise. What it means, and what to do at home.

Three studies this fall point the same way: children who spend more time on phones tend to read less well, and schools that locked phones away saw reading grow a little faster. The headline you may have seen, that teenagers now read about a grade below where they used to, comes from the biggest of them, an international test of 15-year-olds. None of the three proves that phones cause the drop. But together they are enough to act on at home, and the things that help cost nothing. Here is what each one found, what it does not show, and what to do this week.

1. Teenagers' reading fell to a record low

In September 2026 the OECD published the results of PISA 2025, a reading, math and science test taken by about 760,000 15-year-olds in 91 countries and economies. The average reading score across OECD countries was 461, the lowest the test has ever recorded: down 14 points in three years and 28 points since 2015. The OECD describes a drop of that size as roughly a year of school, which is where "a full grade level behind" comes from.

The United States fell 14 points since 2022, close to its lowest since it first took part in 2000, and about a quarter of American 15-year-olds (25.7%) scored as low performers in reading (Al Jazeera, 9 Sept 2026).

The OECD's own explanation is careful. Its report says more screen time and falling rates of reading for enjoyment have coincided with weaker reading: the lines move together. That is not the same as proof that one causes the other, and other things changed over the same years, the pandemic among them.

2. Younger children who own a phone read less well

In July 2026, psychologists at UCLA published a study of third and sixth graders in Los Angeles County schools in the journal Behavioral Sciences (UCLA, July 2026). Children read short passages and answered questions about them. Those who owned their own phone scored lower on understanding what they read than those who did not.

The surprising part: having the phone in the room made no difference. Whether it was on the desk, in a bag, or at home that day, scores were the same. What went with lower reading was owning one, which the authors read as a sign of how a child spends the rest of the day, not of

a buzz in the moment. They also found that the age a child got a first phone did not track with scores. Like the OECD's, this is a link, not proof.

3. Schools that locked phones away saw reading grow faster

Today, 18 November 2026, Education Week reported on a study from Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research. It followed about 3.3 million students in grades 3 to 10 at 4,600 schools from 2021–22 through 2025–26, and compared schools that locked phones in pouches for the whole school day with schools that did not.

After a strict bell-to-bell ban, reading and math grew by about two extra weeks of learning a year, and fewer students fell far behind in reading in any given year. The researchers call that notable, not huge, and expect it to add up over years rather than show as a jump. Other recent studies of school phone bans have found smaller gains or none, so this is one strong piece of evidence, not the last word.

What the three add up to

Read together, they say three things a parent can use:

- It is the hours, not the device in the room. The UCLA result and the OECD's link to reading for enjoyment both point at what phones crowd out: time reading, and time getting used to long stretches of text.
- Taking the phone away for a stretch seems to help a little. The Harvard study is the closest of the three to showing cause, and its effect is real but modest.
- Nobody has shown a phone ruins a reader. Every study here measures averages. A child who reads every day is still a reader, phone or no phone.

What to do this week

1. Make a phone-free reading time. Ten to twenty minutes, same time each day, phone in another room (yours too, if you can). How long should kids read? has the minutes by age.
2. Let them read what they like. Comics, graphic novels, manga and joke books all count; reading for enjoyment is the habit the OECD saw fall. If your child is stuck, graphic novels for reluctant readers is a place to start.
3. Keep phones out of the bedroom at night. A charging spot in the kitchen ends the late scroll and leaves the bedside for a book.
4. Write the rules down together. A family screen agreement works better than a fight each night, and the screen time guide by age has limits to start from.
5. Ask your school what its phone rule is, and whether phones are put away for the whole day or only in class. That was the difference in the Harvard study.
6. Hold off on a first phone if you can. No study here proves the right age, but each month without one is more time for everything else.

Where we stand

Peabody is a website, so it is a screen too, and you should weigh what we say with that in mind. We build it for short, purposeful sessions: a story at your child's reading level, a few games, and then off. There is no feed to scroll and no ads. Peabody is free through the end of 2026, with no sign-up needed to read.

Sources

- OECD, PISA 2025 Results, Volume I, September 2026, and the OECD's announcement.
- Greenfield, Hanna, Burgos-Calvillo and Rhinehart, Children, Cell Phones, and Reading Comprehension, Behavioral Sciences, July 2026.
- Education Week, Students Made More Math, Reading Progress After Their Schools Banned Phones, 18 November 2026, on the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research study.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/phones-and-kids-reading-2026