

School Phone Restrictions and Student Psychological Needs: The Role of Policy Type and Goal Communication

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BACKGROUND

Cell phone restrictions are rapidly being adopted in schools, often framed as necessary for reducing distractions and supporting student wellbeing, yet their developmental implications for adolescents remain unclear.

Self-Determination Theory supposes that adolescents who experience *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*, all of which may be affected by school phone policy choices, have higher levels of motivation and wellbeing.

AIMS

Determine if phone policy type relates to students' perceived impacts on *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness*.

Evaluate if implementing policies with clear communication of goals changes the relationships between phone policy type and students' perceived impacts on these psychological needs.

POLICY TYPES EXAMINED



Bans on School Premises (12% of total cases)

Students are not permitted to bring phones onto school grounds. Devices are left at home and are not present during the school day.



Bell-to-Bell (20% of total cases)

Devices are surrendered or stored upon arrival (often in a locked pouch or designated location) and remain inaccessible until dismissal.



In-Class Phone Hotels (28% of total cases)

Students place phones in a designated storage area during instructional time. Devices are returned outside of class, such as during breaks or lunch.



Phones Permitted but Silenced (23% of total cases)

Students keep possession of their phones but must keep them powered off or silenced. Phones remain out of sight during class and other school activities.

RESULTS

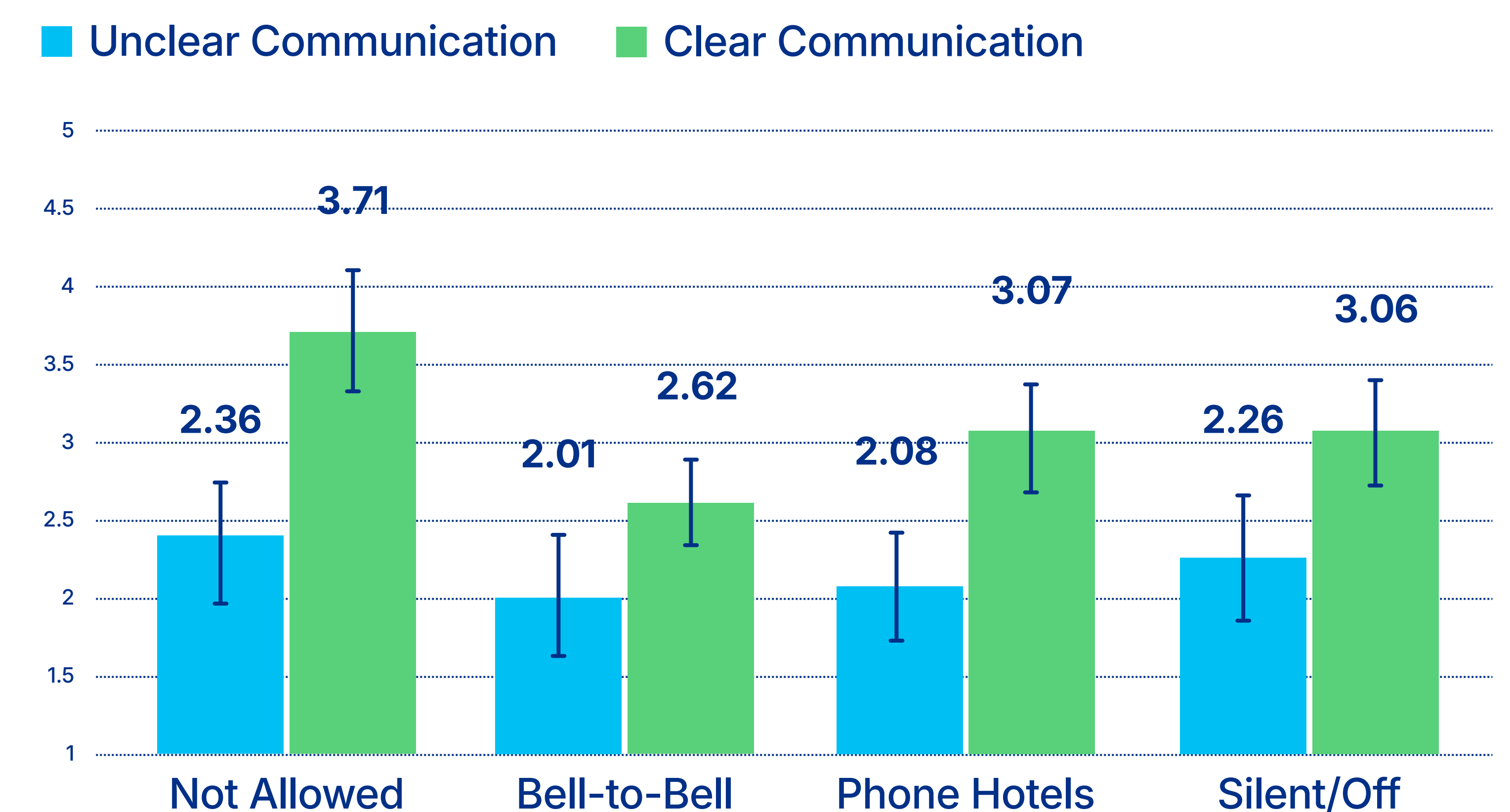
School phone policy type significantly predicted perceived impact on autonomy ($F(3,828)=4.45, p=.004$), but not on competence or relatedness.

Students in schools where **phones were not allowed on the premises reported a more positive impact on autonomy** than those with bell-to-bell policies (Mean diff=0.33, SE=0.09, $p=.003$).

Greater **clarity in communication of phone policy goals was associated with more positive perceived impacts** on autonomy, $F(4, 828)=22.53, p < .001$, competence ($F(4, 828)=14.36, p < .001$), and relatedness ($F(4, 828)=14.12, p < .001$) across all policy types.

Perceived autonomy impact by phone policy and clarity of policy communication

Higher scores indicate a more positive perceived impact.



METHODS

- Analyzed data from a national cross-sectional survey of 1,506 U.S. teens aged 13-18 years (47.2% girls, 52.8% boys, Mean age = 16.3) collected March 9-24, 2025.
- Questions asked the extent to which adolescents felt their school policy impacts their independence (autonomy), focus (competence), and social connection (relatedness), as well as clarity of policy communication. (Scale: 1 Strongly Disagree-5 Strongly Agree)
- Multivariate and univariate ANCOVAs with Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests examined associations between policy type, communication clarity, and psychological needs, controlling for age, gender, and policy timing.

CONCLUSION

Importance of Clear Communication

Administration should clearly communicate the goals of policies aiming to improve the students' perceived impact.

Policy Design Matters

Phone policies that banned devices from school premises were perceived as less autonomy-threatening than policies requiring students to surrender and lock away phones.

Key Takeaway

Together, policy design and communication clarity appear to be critical levers for supporting adolescents' psychological needs and wellbeing in school settings.