How To Tell if Your Kid Is Ready for a Smartphone

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Research says 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone—but how do you know if your kid is ready? Experts weigh in on the great phone debate.

By Sona Charaipotra
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Reviewed by Laura Anderson Kirby, PhD



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About two years ago, when my daughter Kavya was 11, she began petitioning my husband and I for a new toy. Specifically, she wanted a phone. Not a flip phone, but a *smartphone.* One with all the bells and whistles: texting, video chat, social media. The whole world at her fingertips.

I couldn't really blame her for asking. My phone is definitely *my* favorite toy. I can spend endless hours on it, making to-do lists, playing mindless games, stalking friends and family on social media, and doomscrolling. (Especially doomscrolling.) I can watch TikTok videos until the app

itself scolds me and tells me to go to bed. (Yes, really.)

Which is why, when she asked for a phone again last year, I balked. She already reads endless books on her iPad, uses her computer for homework, chats with her friends via FaceTime or messenger. What does she actually need a phone for?

Unconvinced (and in typical writer-mom fashion), I asked her to write me a persuasive essay on the topic as part of her homework for the week, figuring it would buy me some time and really make her think through her reasoning at the same time.

And she's the daughter of two writers, so I don't know why I was surprised when I was, uh, sort of convinced? Her rationale, while more personal essay than researched, was relatively sound. Her basic argument:

"Assuming that I had a phone, I would be able to use the GPS to find out where I am if I get lost. That way, you wouldn't have to drop me off at guitar class. I would also be able to go to the library while you work. If I did that, then I would be able to read actual books and spend LESS screen time than if I didn't have a phone. And also, I wouldn't bug you when you are doing your work and ask you to take me to the library."

—-Kavya, 12

And...she's not wrong. Her essay hit on the primary reasons parents have for giving their kids phones: communication, tracking their location, access to information, and commemoration. Freedom, in so many ways. It's why we're all addicted to our phones, too.

But therein lies the problem. And as a parent, I know there's so much more to the conversation than that. So I decided to ask some experts for guidance on what our family has taken to calling the Great Phone Debate.

Know Your Kid

While age guidelines can help, really understanding where your kid is in terms of responsibility, adaptability, and mental health is crucial. Take a close look at how they handle responsibilities in other areas of their life–school and homework, sports and activities, TV or iPad time, chores, and consider how that will translate to phone use (and or abuse).

While a Pew study says that up to 95 percent of teens today have access to a smartphone1, that doesn't mean every tween or teen is ready for the responsibility.

"Kids can demonstrate they're ready through how responsible they are with homework, or their belongings. What is their impulse control like?" says Jean Twenge, Ph.D., a mom to three, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, and author of *iGen: Why Today's Super-*

Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy–and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood.

Dr. Twenge suggests observing the way your child handles everyday tasks and duties to see if they can handle the responsibilities—and freedom—that come with a smartphone in particular.

"If your kid is relatively on top of things, if they don't throw a tantrum when they don't get their way, if they can follow ground rules in other spaces, then maybe that's a sign they're ready," says Dr. Twenge. "But there are good kids who for whatever reason might not have great impulse control. So that's something to consider. And a kid who's already struggling with depression and anxiety is more vulnerable to what happens on social media and in communication with friends.2 That's another thing to keep in mind."

The biggest concern, Dr. Twenge says, is that "there's just so much trouble that kids can get into online. And a lot of that trouble is on social media. My research shows that time spent on social media is most closely correlated to issues of anxiety and depression, and some of that also correlates to general internet use.3 Social media, in particular, can open kids up to things that they're not ready to deal with."

Another major problem? Access to violent imagery, problematic messaging around body image and eating, and especially pornography.4 It's not that kids are necessarily looking for this content, Dr. Twenge says. But given access to technology, it does seem inevitable that they will eventually encounter it.

And while research says there's no definitive right way to parent around kids and tech5, we do know that a thoughtful approach is critical. "A lot of parents think kids live on their phones now, it's just what kids do," says Dr. Twenge. "But that doesn't recognize that these technologies are completely unregulated. So it's up to parents to set some guidelines and regulations."

And sometimes that's not enough. "Kids are smart. They've grown up with the technology," Dr. Twenge notes. "They can figure out the workarounds. So it's best to carefully consider whether your kid is actually ready for that level of access."

Start Small(er)

If you don't think your kid is quite ready for the responsibility and independent decision-making that comes with a smartphone, there are baby steps you can take as a family to introduce technology and increase your comfort level with the concept step-by-step.

"The impetus for getting a phone for many parents is safety and convenience, but you don't need a smartphone to do that," says Dr. Twenge, whose research digs deep into the impact of technology and social media on kids and teens.6 "If communication with you, the parent, is the key factor, there are other things that can do that. It doesn't have to be all or nothing."

Starting your kid out with something more manageable, like a smartwatch, offers a way to ease everyone into the idea step-by-step. Options include the Verizon GizmoWatch, the Xplora, the VTech Kidizoom, the T-Mobile SyncUp, TickTalk, and others, along with more grown-up versions like the AppleWatch and Garmin options. Most of these offer basic phone, text, and GPS capabilities at a bigger bang for your buck than the average smartphone. Some also include fitness tracking options.

Then there's the Bark app, which offers tracking on most devices, and its own version of a smartphone with built-in tracking, too.

But you don't have to start with a phone right off the bat.

"A smartwatch is a great first step," says Divya Dodhia, LCSW, a child and family therapist in Jersey City, New Jersey. "It has a smaller reach, and parents have more control over how it's used and what it's used for. Plus, there's a GPS tracker in it, so you know exactly where your kid is, and they can communicate with you, but not with anyone you don't allow access to."

And using one reliably can give your child the opportunity to demonstrate that they're prepared for the next step. "It's a solid way to test whether your child is ready for the responsibility that comes with these devices, whereas a smartphone offers too much accessibility and freedom, especially in access to apps and social media," says Dodhia, mom of two girls, ages 10 and 12. "It's a great way to figure out if your child is ready—and if you're ready, too."

There are also not-so-smartphones, with more limited access and technology, meant specifically for kid communication without all the bells and whistles. Some, like the Samsung-based Troomi, offer a Kidsafe Browser option. Others, like the Android-based Gabb, have no browser, and filters for texting and apps, plus additional built-in parental controls.

Create a Contract

Once you've decided that your child is ready to embrace the responsibilities and challenges that come with smartphone access, it's time to have a serious conversation with them about rules and expectations.

Every child and every family is different, of course, but there are some basics to consider. Develop and lay out ground rules about your child's phone usage, considering things like time limits, as well as rules about social media and other apps. Then put it all in writing—but don't set it in stone.

"I do really encourage you to revisit the contract to see how things are going, and to make sure that your kid has the opportunity to contribute to what's in it, because they're a lot more likely to follow the rules if they are part of that process," says Julianna Miner, mom of two and author of *Raising a Screen-Smart Kid: Embrace the Good and Avoid the Bad in the Digital Age*, who offers a sample contract on her website.

"It's good for us to hear what they think is reasonable. I'm going to say five hours a day of TikTok is too much, but if your kid is like, 'No, that's normal,' ask first, 'Where did you get that number?'" Miner suggests. "Give them the opportunity to think about what your expectations are, and what their expectations are. Where can you meet in the middle?"

Both Dr. Twenge and Miner say that one hard-and-fast rule should be no phones at bedtime—and that goes for grown-ups, too. "Sleep time—especially for younger kids—has to be preserved, and phones will definitely interfere with that," says Dr. Twenge.

Beyond that, she says, reasonable limits on time and usage, and creating some phone-free spaces and moments, like family dinners or outings, are smart guidelines to start out with. And don't be afraid to revisit and rework the rules you set for your kid as they grow older, or if you hit a trouble spot. Kids are growing and changing, so rules should grow and change with them, too.

Set the Example

The hardest thing about setting limits on your kid's phone usage: it makes you think about your own. And if you're addicted? Chances are they will be, too. Experts will say you need to model the relationship with technology that you want your kids to have, especially when it comes to teaching them about good social media habits. And as rough as that sounds, it's critical to look at what works—and what doesn't—when it comes to your own relationship with technology, too.

"I think a good way to deal with the anxiety about kids and phone usage is to be really honest with yourself about your own usage," says Miner. "And I have asked my kids several times like, 'Do you think I'm on my phone too much?' I have never liked the answer."

After all, so very often, our kids are mirrors to ourselves. "So if you're going to be on your kids about how much they're on their phone, and what they're doing, then you need to be prepared to own your own usage, and you need to be accountable," Miner says. "If you feel like you are entitled to ask your kids: 'What are you doing? Who are you talking to? Who are you Texting? What are you watching?' Then they should be able to ask you that, and you should feel comfortable showing them."

That, of course, is easier said than done when I'm still working on curbing my own social media spirals. My ever-curious kid will definitely follow me down that Tiktok endless scrolling rabbit whole if I let her.7

So in the end, because of her brilliant essay and convincing arguments, we decided as a family to make the leap at 12, when she started walking to middle school and around town solo with her friends. We had a good chat about it, set some ground rules, and she inherited her mama's phone. (And unfortunately, her mama's phone addition, too.)

It's certainly not the end of the conversation, by any means. Especially if you ask my 9-year-old, who's definitely planning ahead. "I'm getting a smartphone when I'm 12," he recently told a friend happily. "I know, because my big sister already wrote a persuasive essay about it."

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