

Navigating Technology at Home: Practical Guidance for Ages 0-15

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Technology is widespread in our culture, but our experience, along with a substantial and growing body of research, makes clear that its use is harmful for children. While many maintain that a moderate amount of technology is acceptable, the interpretation of “moderate” varies widely, with detrimental effects on our younger generation. Thankfully, there is increasing awareness of these effects, and we believe that our culture is ready to significantly decrease children’s exposure to it in the near future. Based on Jonathan Haidt’s work in *The Anxious Generation*, there is a current call to restrict smartphone use until high school, restrict social media access until 16, and remove phones from schools. We believe this is the bare minimum necessary to preserve children’s mental health, social abilities, and intellectual capabilities.

As a part of our ongoing efforts to maintain our school as an extremely low-tech community, we have put together this information so that you can make carefully considered decisions about the use of technology in your home.

Young Children’s Community through Lower Elementary (0-9 years):

For these ages we recommend absolutely no smart devices for children (phones, watches, tablets). Phone calls or video calls are excellent ways to stay in touch with family and friends, under the supervision of a parent or guardian.

Upper Elementary (9-12 years):

For this age we recommend absolutely no smartphones. A landline is an excellent option for allowing your children to make and receive calls to friends and family from home. We recommend against watches and tablets, but understand that there are circumstances where parents want their child to have a way to communicate with their parents when they are independent. For these cases, we recommend a Gizmo or Gabb watch, which can receive calls and texts from parent-approved contacts and do not currently have internet access (See Device Suggestion List on the last page for more details on the differences between the two watches). Regardless of the device they use to be in touch with you or your approved contacts, at this age it is of the utmost importance that you review their communication and other activity on these devices **regularly**. Remind them that the digital world is not private. You must teach them how to communicate and use these devices responsibly and kindly.

- *Note: Before you assume your child needs a way to contact you when they are not with you, remind yourself that if you are allowing them to be independent in your community, then they have probably already shown that they have good judgment at home. Additionally, keep in mind that you probably live in an area where your child is surrounded by responsible adults who would be happy to allow your child to borrow their phone if they need to reach you. Your actions reveal your belief system to your child. When you allow them to be independent and use their own faculties to problem solve, and when you reveal a basic trust in the world, you are encouraging them to grow in confidence and competence.*

Secondary Level (12-14/15 years):

We continue to recommend absolutely no smartphones for this age level. The portability of a phone combined with the access to information, entertainment, and connection make it highly addictive and problematic. For this age, as children are looking to be more in contact with their peers, we suggest a Gizmo or Gabb watch or a tablet or computer with messaging capabilities that is stored in a public area of your home (See Device Suggestion List on the last page for more details of the differences between the two watches). An Apple Watch can work for communication, but, because of its internet access and smaller size, will require more supervision for its use and to ensure your child is not using it when they are not supposed to be.

Your children are older and savvier now, and are likely more interested in exploring the digital world and the different ways they can communicate with their friends than when they were younger. *Please do not assume that just because they exhibited responsibility and restraint when they were eleven that this means they will have the same relationship with technological devices as adolescents.* They have entered a new plane of development and have different priorities, interests, and characteristics during this time. It still is of the utmost importance that you **regularly** check any devices they have access to and go over any worrisome findings. This includes:

- Screen time history and data
- Message conversations
- Browser history
- Email
- Maps
- Music
- Photos

Additionally, we recommend reaching out to the parents of your child's peer group and asking them to let you know if they see anything worrisome from your child on their child's device.

If your child has access to a device that is connected to the internet, then you should restrict access to those apps, but it is important to realize that ***parental controls are not reliable***. There are many ways that app companies *and* your curious, bright children will find ways around controls. In the past few years, this has included:

- When the system resets after an update, parental controls can disappear.
- Even if you limit browser use, a child can access the internet through maps apps.
- If you restrict downloads on their device, but *you* have a particular app on *your* device, then they are able to go into the "Family" settings and download any app that you have, *even if you have restricted it*. Then, if you have not restricted the deleting of apps on their device, they can delete the app and it will not show up under their screen time history.
- If a particular app company changes what "category" their app is stored under, then your parental control may no longer be valid.
- A child can delete individual messages that they don't want you to see.
- You may restrict a website on their device, but if a friend sends a link, then they can view the site after it is sent.
- Your child is able to view TikTok videos through the Spotify app.
- Because Spotify depends on creators to self-report, much extremely problematic (violent, sexual, etc.) content on Spotify is not labeled "Explicit" so an explicit filter will not protect your child from exposure.
- Your children can change the time zone on their device to get around "downtime" schedules.
- The software and hardware is constantly changing, so even if you are able to make parental controls work for you for a brief time, you can be assured that something new will come up within the next month!
- ***Regularly Google and / or search on ChatGPT "Ways around parental controls" and "Ways around screen time limits" to find the new methods that companies and children are using to circumvent efforts to manage screen time and usage.***

For all these reasons, we highly recommend that parents exercise extreme caution and prudence before allowing their children access to devices connected to the internet. It is *impossible* to turn a smartphone into a "dumb phone" (or a smart device into a dumb device).

Third party parental control apps are often easier to use, more reliable, and more aggressive in filtering out negative content than using only operating system parental controls. Aura, Bark, Canopy, Net Nanny, OurPact, and Qustodio are all examples of these kinds of apps. Dr. Jean Twenge (*10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World*) uses Qustodio for her own family.

Remember: Phones and apps have *no* incentive to restrict your child's use of the phone. The more time your child spends on their phone and apps, the more money companies make. This is what motivates them.

Given whatever decision you make for your family, we strongly encourage the following rules if your child has access to any device:

- The device *belongs* to the adults.
- The device lives in public areas and never goes to the child's room.
- Remove the browser from phones, or any device that your child is left alone with.
- If it is an item that sometimes travels outside the home with the child, then you should always discuss whether it is necessary for a particular excursion.
- No use during meals, family time, social time, or on short car rides.
- Discuss internet activity and usage for devices that have access to a browser. When they want to look something up it should be primarily under direct supervision, or at least with an adult present in the room for frequent checks.
- Enact app limits for all apps your child may express interest in and any overall limits that are possible with the device.
- Enact "downtime" so that the phone shuts down during the night.
- Block adult content, and block addictive sites, such as YouTube (and keep in mind that there are other ways to access these sites even with controls!).
- No group texts beyond a small group for planning purposes. We find that group texts are a precursor experience for social media, and children are likely to engage in spamming, teasing, and other inappropriate behavior and language, including removing classmates from conversations and adding them against their will.
- ***Absolutely no social media, including Snapchat and TikTok.***
- ***Regular and thorough checks, followed by conversation. Make sure your children know that you will check their devices, and remind them that the digital world is not private.***

Device/Communication Suggestions (These *currently* do not have internet access—borrowed from *The Tech Exit* by Clare Morel. Also, consult waituntil8th.org for a comparison of smart phone alternatives.):

- A landline
- Gizmo watch (requires Verizon service and can only text with other Gizmo watches or phones that have the Gizmo app downloaded, also works for phone calls)
- Gabb watch (does not require Verizon service and can text with any number that is pre-approved by the parent, also works for phone calls)
- TickTalk watch
- The Gabb phone
- The Light phone
- The Wisephone
- The Bark Phone
- The Pinwheel phone
- Flip phones
- The Nokia 6310

For Further Reading:

- *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt (in particular, Chapter 12: “What Parents Can Do Now”)
- *The Tech Exit* by Clare Morel (in particular, the Appendix)
- *10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World*, by Jean Twenge
- waituntil8th.org (has an excellent section comparing devices without internet access)