

HELPING KIDS GET A HEALTHY START WITH PHONES

Phones and other media are a big part of kids' lives, and they can be a healthy part too. Here are some ways that you can make sure your kids get the best possible start when using media and digital devices.

GENERAL TIPS

Make screens a part of your family life and routine.

Instead of counting hours or minutes of "screen time," set times and places where using devices **is or isn't allowed** – for example bedrooms, meal times, family outings, and so on. It's also helpful to **set a one-screen limit** so kids have to think about what they're doing with their devices.

Be a part of your kids' media lives.

Just like you talk to your kids about their friends and what happens at school, you should have an ongoing conversation about their media lives too. Research shows that what's called **joint media engagement** is key to helping kids get the most from media and avoid negative effects and experiences. The good news is that most kids **want** their parents involved in their media lives!

With younger kids, you should try to foster screen activities that **promote engagement with your family**. With tweens and teens, foster activities that promote real engagement with their friends.

This can include **co-viewing** media and **doing screen activities together**, like exploring apps, playing games or making videos.

This is not the same thing as **spying on your kids**.

Spying on your kids sends the message that you don't trust them, and that if something goes wrong they're better off hiding it from you than getting help.

"Monitoring our kids gives us a false sense of security, and leaves them poorly prepared for their future without us." Devorah Heitner, author of *Growing Up Online*

- It's better to **talk to your kids**, to **set rules and guidelines** and to **supervise** them by keeping devices out of private spaces like bedrooms. If you decide you do need to know exactly what they're doing online, **be open** about why you're doing it and tell them how they can **earn your trust**.

Set rules and guidelines.

MediaSmarts' research has shown that when there are rules in the home about how kids should behave online, those kids are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours or to have negative experiences. But as parenting expert Melinda Wenner Moyer puts it, "while some rules and limits are protective, having too many can backfire." So instead of being all about punishment, rules should be a way to share your values and to give kids **guidance** about how to deal with online issues.

Those rules will change as they get older, but **the most important rule** for kids of all ages is **“if something goes wrong, come and tell me right away and we’ll find a solution together.”**

For more suggestions about rules, see this MediaSmarts tip sheet: <https://mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/family-online-rules-tip-sheet>.

FIRST SMARTPHONE

For kids – and parents – the first smartphone can be a big step. Here are some tips to make sure it’s a good one.

Don’t assume your child wants a phone!

It’s a myth that young kids are demanding phones: more than half of Canadian kids got their first phone because their parents or guardians wanted to be able to call or text them, not because they asked for it. Kids also say that they **want** their parents set rules and guidelines when they get their first phone and to be ready to support them in facing the new challenges it brings.

So how do you decide when is the right time to give your child a phone? The research says that **there isn’t a single right age:** instead, consider whether your child is mature enough to access the internet without you, whether they understand the **rules and values** you expect them to live by online, and the ways that having a phone might affect their – and your family’s – life.

The purpose of a first phone should be to **let your child become more independent** – to go places

without you, to make plans with friends on their own, to take more responsibility for their schoolwork, and to explore their own hobbies and interests. If you don’t think they’re ready for these, or you don’t feel a phone will help reach these goals, wait to give them a phone. Teaching them ways to contact you **without** a phone will make sure they know what to do if something goes wrong with their phone when they’re older.

Think about why your child might need a phone and how they would use it.

Kids can’t take advantage of the benefits and opportunities of having a phone without being exposed to some of the risks. As parents, our job is to **prepare them to manage those risks.**

For instance, they may be switching over from media that have a lot of social and emotional cues (like video and voice chat) to ones that don’t (like texting and social media.) That can lead to a lot more misunderstandings and hurt feelings, and can make small conflicts blow up into big drama. Tell kids to always **take a break** before answering a text or social network post that upsets them, and to **talk things out in person** if they can.

Make sure you’re not exaggerating how common some risks really are. For example just **two in ten** kids have ever cyberbullied anyone, and only **one in ten** Canadian kids has ever sent a sext. It’s important they know how few kids actually do these things: the more common teens think something is, the more likely they are to think it’s okay – and to do it themselves.

Review and negotiate rules.

Household rules still make a difference for teens! MediaSmarts' research has found that kids whose homes had rules were less likely to be mean to others online or to excuse meanness as "just joking," and more likely to do something when they saw others being bullied and to ask parents or guardians for help.

A new phone can be a great opportunity to discuss your **household rules**, and to involve your kids in developing new ones. The biggest issues you'll want to focus on are **privacy and respect**, so be specific: ask kids to give details about *how* they will follow the rules, like "What are some examples of treating people with respect online? What are some examples of *not* treating people with respect?".

"My parents prepared me pretty well for what comes with a cellphone. They also have a rule: If they want to look at my phone at any time, they can. I let them see it. They don't snoop. They don't look through any of my texts. But they do make sure I'm safe. It's beneficial to all of us. For that to work, there has to be mutual trust there to begin with — and I have that with my parents." 14-year-old

Think about "training wheels."

Just because your child is ready for a phone doesn't mean they're ready for everything on the phone. Teen girls, in particular, are most likely to suffer negative effects from social media between the ages of 11 and 13, exactly when many get their first phones. (For boys it's 14-15).

One option is to start kids off with a **"dumb phone"** that has no internet access, just texting and voice calls. This makes sense if you have a real need to be stay in touch with your child before they're ready for a smartphone, but from their point of view it may look like a bad deal because it makes them **less** independent.

Instead, start talking to them about the benefits and challenges of social media a while **before** they start using it. Go through the **Parent and Safety centres** with them, learn about the privacy settings, and talk about the experiences of friends or peers who are already using them.

If they really want to start using a social network before you think they're ready, **create a joint account** that you will share. That way you'll be able to supervise what they're doing until they "graduate" to their own account. (Many social networks have safety settings for kids between 13 and 18, so it's important they give their real age when signing up.)

Help them manage the role devices play in their lives.

Phones can have a big impact on our lives because we carry them with us wherever we go. It can be hard to turn them off or put them away.

It's helpful to explain the different ways that apps are designed to keep you coming back to them, like notifications, Likes, and the "endless scroll," but **don't use the word "addiction"**: research shows we have better control over how we use devices, and fewer negative effects, if we look at technology as a tool that we can use and control.

To do this, help them understand how phones can make it hard to concentrate or get a good night's sleep, and show them how to turn off notifications for different apps (it's usually in the Settings for the phone.)

Look at things from their point of view.

Phones and social media quickly become central to kids' lives. A lot of the time, when they don't want to put them away it's because they feel a **duty to friends** – to Like their posts, to support them when they have problems or defend them when they get into drama. Being online is especially important to 2SLGBTQ+ youth and kids with disabilities.

Katie Davis, author of *Technology's Child*, recommends we help our kids "reframe their social media interactions, observing that a friend who doesn't respond immediately may simply be unavailable rather than uninterested, or that the stream of attractive images and videos tweens see on their social media feeds were likely produced with considerable effort."

Kids also go online to find support and community. Instead of warning kids not to talk to "strangers," help them find **safe spaces and good information** online and tell them the warning signs of a **dangerous** online contact, like:

- flattering them about their looks
- asking them to move to a private space

- introducing sex or sexual topics into the conversation
- sharing or offering to share sexual images, and
- asking them not to tell their parents or friends about a conversation or about the relationship.

Be ready to be the bad guy.

Teens find it hard to tell their friends that they won't be there to Like a selfie or lend a sympathetic ear at two in the morning, and they may appreciate being able to blame it on you. (Not that they'd ever admit it to you.) MediaSmarts' research has found that teens don't want their parents to leave them alone, but they do want them to be personally involved, so **don't rely just on technical tools** like monitoring apps or one-size-fits-all solutions like screen time limits.

Practice what you preach.

According to online safety expert Sonia Livingstone, "**children hate hypocrisy**. They hate feeling they're being told off for something that their parents do, like using the phone at mealtimes or going to bed with a phone."

Even more than when they're kids, it's important that you model good behaviour and follow the same rules as your teens as much as possible. We're all learning together: if you feel like you absolutely have to answer a work e-mail right away, you might understand better than you think how they feel when someone comments on one of their Instagram posts.

Make sure the messages you're sending with your rules are consistent, too. We can't expect kids to respect their privacy – or other people's – if we're snooping on them!