

An age-by-age guide to kids and smartphones

How should kids use cellphones? And at what age are they emotionally ready to have their own? Here's what the experts have to say.



BY STACEY STEIN | MAR 21, 2018



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Marni Rebelo held off on giving her daughter, Mia, a smartphone for as long as possible. Then, just before Mia's 13th birthday, she received one as a gift from her grandfather. "She was the last of her friends to get a phone—by over a year, at least," says Rebelo, adding that she and her husband were concerned that the phone would "overtake" their daughter's life.

And to a degree, it has. "It feels like she is on the phone a lot, either texting friends or looking at Instagram," says Rebelo. "I think parents might want to seriously consider holding off because apps tend to be **addictive in nature**, and other previously loved activities tend to drop off because of phone usage."

These days, the average age when kids get their first smartphones is around 10 years old, according to Calgary-based parenting expert Judy Arnall, author of *Parenting with Patience*. But exposure to mobile devices often begins at a much younger age: It's becoming increasingly common to see toddlers wielding smartphones in strollers and **preschoolers zoned out in front of iPads** at restaurants.

So should parents think twice before handing smartphones to their little ones or buying phones for their 10-year-olds so that they can fit in with their friends? Here's what the experts have to say on age-by-age guidelines.

Ages four to six

The experts are unequivocal: Kids in this age group shouldn't be using smartphones (or other mobile devices), period. When it comes to screen time in general, the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) recommends limiting it to less than one hour a day for children ages two to five years old (screen time for children younger than two years old is not recommended at all), while the American Academy of Pediatrics advises placing consistent limits on media consumption for children ages six and older. Smartphone use at a very young age is **damaging to developing brains**, according to Michael Cheng, a child and family psychiatrist at Ottawa's Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. He explains that mobile devices cause the brain to become wired from an early age to crave easy dopamine, referring to the "feel-good" chemical released by the brain. The constant overstimulation from screens gives the brain hits of dopamine (and adrenaline), which is why they're so addictive.

Cheng says it's not the technology itself that's bad for kids but the way it's being used that disconnects them from basic needs (such as sleep, nutrition, **fresh air and physical activity**), as well as higher needs (such as a sense of belonging and meaning in life).

"If kids get used to screens at an early age, the brain loses its ability to work for its dopamine," cautions Cheng. "Why would you want to go outside to get your dopamine when you could just get it from a screen?"

Social skills are also learned in person. "Kids should be interacting face to face, looking into the eyes of another human being so that they can learn to develop empathy and read facial expressions—what makes another child happy or sad," says Cheng.

If you are going to allow screen time and smartphones at this age, Arnall cautions against letting young kids watch ostensibly harmless videos on **YouTube unmonitored** because children can end up being redirected to inappropriate content without parents' knowledge. "The danger is that parents are not monitoring what their kids see," she says. "They're using [mobile devices] as babysitters."

Ages seven to nine

According to a 2014 report by the non-profit group MediaSmarts, 24 percent of Canadian children in grade four—some as young as eight years old—own mobile phones. Cheng says his advice for younger kids also applies to this age group: no phones. However, if some parents want their kids to have phones to keep in touch when they're away from home, he says an old-school flip phone without Internet access will do just fine.

To underscore this point, Cheng says that it's very telling that some of the biggest leaders in tech are wary of letting their own children use the products they helped create. The late **Apple co-founder Steve Jobs** limited his kids' use of technology and even prohibited them from using the iPad when it was released. Bill Gates, former CEO of Microsoft, didn't allow his kids to have their own phones until they turned 14.

When it comes to social media for this age group, Arnall is emphatic. "It's absolutely not recommended," she says, explaining that kids at this age don't understand the permanence of posting things online because those critical-thinking skills don't kick in until age 13. She also points to other pitfalls, such as cyberbullying. "It's an added stress in their lives that isn't age appropriate," says Arnall. The MediaSmarts report notes that, of those kids in grade four who have mobile phones, about one-fifth use social media networks like Facebook and Snapchat, even though their policies require users to be at least 13 years old.

In terms of **screen time in general** for this age group, the CPS guidelines only address kids up to age five. The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology says that children ages five to 11 years old should limit their recreational screen time to no more than two hours a day, while lower levels are associated with additional health benefits.

Ages 10 to 12

Cheng says parents should place strict limits on phone usage at this age and **not give children Internet-enabled mobile devices**. "Kids should only be allowed to use phones to call their parents," he says. When it comes to screens in general, Cheng notes that excess screen time is associated with unhealthy habits, such as consuming more junk food. "When we see people in our obesity clinics, one of the first things we do is try to get them off screens," he says. He notes that there are issues with younger kids that stem from video game addiction. "You see kids who are on screens from the moment they come home until they go to bed," says Cheng. "Then they don't have any friends and they become overweight."

Working on the front line in mental health services, Cheng sees the emotional damage of smartphones and social media networks on kids, noting that they promote an over-reliance on peer validation. Cheng's hope is that a minimum age for owning a smartphone will eventually be legislated. Such a movement is already afoot in the state of Colorado, where there is a

proposal to make it illegal to sell smartphones to children under 13.

“Do we let 12-year-olds drive cars?” asks Cheng. “No. Why? Because cars are dangerous. But we let 12-year-olds have cellphones, and using cellphones improperly can actually do far more damage than cars.”

The reality, though, is that many kids are getting their first Internet-enabled smartphones around age 10. A recent British study shows that **girls in this age group are particularly vulnerable**, with more time spent on social media associated with more emotional and behavioural problems in later adolescence. Arnall recommends installing parental controls and advises parents to refrain from using the phone as a discipline tool. She says kids who fear punishment of any kind (such as having their phones taken away) are less likely to open up to parents about their problems. Instead, Arnall recommends **drafting a non-punitive and respectful contract** between parents and children that lays down certain rules about safe and healthy cellphone use.

Teens

Cheng says that he would try to push back the age at which kids get their first smartphones to 16 years old, noting that he sees kids on a daily basis who are addicted to technology and suffer from **depression, anxiety and thoughts of suicide**.

“There is such a high incidence of mental and physical health issues among youth that is associated with technology overuse,” he says. He notes that most “official” recommendations are that a child is ready for supervised use of a smartphone by age 13. But another approach is for parents to consider the maturity level of their child (for example, if a child has healthy connections to people and activities that engender a sense of belonging and is inclined to talk to his parents if he gets into trouble online).

As for screen time guidelines, aside from the link between increased screen time and sedentary habits, parents might also want to consider other factors, such as the impact of electronic screens on their child’s vision. A 2014 survey of 200 American children between the ages of 10 and 17 found that 80 percent reported burning, itchy or tired eyes after using portable electronic devices (the Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends that teenagers have no more than two hours of recreational screen time a day and include breaks after 60 minutes of use, with 30 minutes being encouraged).

During the teen years, parents should try to manage phone usage while keeping an eye out for signs that their teen may be a victim of cyberbullying. “Kids want to constantly be on their phones to make sure that no one is talking about them,” says Arnall. “Social media is

stressful, and kids need parents to help them deal with that stress.”

Cheng’s advice is that teens should only use social networks to connect with friends they have in real life. “Studies show that if you’re a teen who already has face-to-face friends, social media can help you strengthen your connections with those friends,” he says. He cautions teens to avoid using social media to meet new people because this can lead to delusions of having friends who aren’t “true” friends.

Cheng sees first-hand the link between increased usage of mobile devices among teens and a spike in mental health issues. He says that there has been an unprecedented **demand for mental health services at the hospital** where he works, including a 50 percent increase in mental health crisis visits to the hospital’s emergency department over the past two years and a 146 percent increase in mental health admissions from emergency visits over the past five years.

Given these alarming statistics, parents should consider taking a more active approach to ensure that their teens are using smartphones responsibly. In Rebelo’s household, there are restrictions around Mia’s phone use: It **gets turned off at 9 p.m.**, is not stored in Mia’s bedroom and is verboten during family meals, homework time and family get-togethers. Rebelo says that parents should also consider **screen-free weekend time**, where they set aside a day (or even part of a day) to focus on other activities. She also advises parents to follow similar rules for themselves and to stick to their values.

“It’s important to not be swayed by what other parents are letting their kids do,” she says. “And you have to keep on top of it—it’s very easy to let it slip and take over.”

More tips for parents

- Don’t cave in to pressure to give your child a smartphone at a young age. “If your child gets a cellphone at 16, he’ll catch up really fast,” says Arnall.
- Social media can be one big popularity contest, and kids are especially vulnerable. Teach your children that it’s OK to not get likes on their posts, and encourage them to maintain outside interests.
- Band together with other parents who are concerned about the increased use of smartphones among young kids (check out waituntil8th.org).