

# Experts have 3 tips for setting screen-time boundaries with your kids

Experts' tips on setting screen-time boundaries for kids with smartphones include starting conversations early and modeling healthy behavior.

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Smartphones and screens have increasingly become a rite of passage for many preteens and teens. With the continued rise of social media and the constant need for communication and connection, this cohort of children is spending more time online and their digital world is reshaping how they socialize, learn and relax.

Parents and mental health experts are sounding the alarm and grappling with how to balance the benefits and harms of giving their children smartphones at a young age. Many experts say while there is no one-size-fits-all approach, there are ways to help minimize the risks and exposure.

## Encourage open and ongoing communication

A big part of setting expectations of what is acceptable is starting conversations early and keeping them going. Some mental health experts say parents should explain to children as young as toddlers when they are going to be using their phones and give a reason.

Megan Moreno, co-medical director of the Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health at the American Academy of Pediatrics, said caregivers need better language to engage with their teens. She suggests asking questions like: What are you doing right now? Are you enjoying it? Are you learning something or connecting with someone? Are you actually getting something out

If the answer to any of the questions is no, Moreno said, the conversation can shift to how to dial back screen use. Adults can also model honesty by admitting their own struggles, whether they are getting pulled into an endless TikTok scroll or losing track of time online.

Framing it as something to work on together helps move the dynamic away from constant policing and toward collaboration, which teens are more likely to see as fair.

Moreno said there is no universal age when children are ready for a smartphone, and parents should base their decision on individual needs.

“Lots of kids who have medical conditions ... [need] to track elements of their health using a phone,” said Moreno. “There’s advancements in technology where kids can give themselves insulin and track their blood glucose, but that

usually requires a smartphone.”

## Adults can lead by example

Experts say children model their behaviors on the adults they see. So when parents ask teens to limit phone use but are constantly scrolling themselves, those rules can seem unequal.

Children are exposed to screens from infancy, often through their caregivers’ own device use, so parental modeling early on is especially influential.

“Young patients will tell me their parent will walk into a room and say, ‘Put your phone down. You’re getting brain rot,’” Moreno said. “At the same time, teens see those same adults engaging in the exact behaviors they are being criticized for.”

Many adults need to keep their phones nearby for work or emergencies, but how they handle phone access makes a difference, according to Jennifer Katzenstein, a pediatric neuropsychologist at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

“My son knows that my phone is with me because I’m on call. I’m going to put it down and actually even turn the ringer on, which I think many of us are reluctant to do,” said Katzenstein.

## Set clear and flexible boundaries together

Families vary in what they consider urgent, and those decisions are often shaped by shared values. Allowing flexibility for genuinely important messages, while maintaining overall limits, can build trust and reduce conflict, experts say.

Gina Marcello, an associate teaching professor in Rutgers University’s School of Communication and Information, said parents can set simple, concrete limits: “things like designated leisure time, restricting scrolling to certain hours, or keeping devices off the dinner table,” she said. “Those are clear, tangible boundaries.”

When parents apply the same standards to themselves that they expect from their children, rules are more likely to be seen as fair rather than controlling, Marcello said.

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