

Get Smart: Technology, Social Media and the Impact on Your Child  
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The average age for getting a smartphone in the United States is now ten years old, and fifty percent of twelve-year olds have social media accounts. This drop in age has been accompanied by a rise in teen depression. A survey conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services revealed a 60% increase in depression among teens from 2010 to 2016. According to the CDC, the suicide rate among 15 to 19 year old girls doubled between 2007 and 2015, marking a forty-year high, and the rate increased 30% among teenage boys in the same age range.

It appears there is a connection between the increase in depression and suicide and the use of smartphones among teens. One study, conducted by Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, revealed a correlation between smartphone use and suicidal behavior. This study found that kids who spent over three hours a day on their phones or other devices were 34% more likely to have at least one suicide-related behavior than kids who used devices under two hours a day. Kids who spent more than five hours a day on a smartphone were 71% more likely to have a risk factor for suicide compared to kids who spent an hour a day on their phones. While correlation does not necessarily indicate causation, these findings are cause for concern.

During adolescence, the brain is still developing and adapting to environmental cues. Adolescents lack good impulse control and exercise poorer judgment than adults, which may lead them to make bad choices about online content or what they put on social media. Adolescents have a hyperactive reward system, which is good for learning but also can allow them to become addicted to technology because of the instant gratification that technology provides. In the wake of new technologies, kids have become more easily distracted and less sensitive to the emotions of others. Constant use of a smartphone may actually result in less time spent in social interactions and impede the ability to read emotional cues. Kids spend less time in direct social contact even when they are with other people.

So how should parents deal with technology? What is the right age for a kid to get a phone? As with many issues in parenting, *it depends*. For example, some kids are in schools where communicating with teachers and getting assignments is done online. Young people communicate by texting, including group texts, and in many social circles not having a phone means being out of the loop. Smartphones can allow parents to keep track of their kids, they can allow for easy communication and the assurance that their child can reach them in an emergency. Here are some ideas to consider as you decide what is best for your child:

- Delay getting your child a smartphone for as long as possible. Consider an inexpensive flip phone for communication before allowing a smartphone. An expensive phone in the hands of a child who can't keep track of a jacket is a problem waiting to happen. Keep in mind that the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed yet, which means kids don't have good impulse control or judgment. It

won't be fully developed until age twenty-five, but every year brings increased maturity. Many people believe it's best to wait on smartphones until a child is fourteen, but what is right for one child and one family is not necessarily right for another. The appropriate threshold may be higher or lower for your child.

- Take advantage of parental controls and think through a graduated plan according to age and maturity. Limit apps and consider setting your child's phone to grayscale to make the phone less appealing.
- Don't let kids take devices into their bedroom at night when they need to be sleeping. Kids have trouble unplugging and going to sleep, so make sure the phone stays in a public area of the house at night. An old-fashioned alarm clock works as well as a phone as an alarm.
- Set limits regarding devices, (e.g. no phones at the dinner table), limit how much time can be spent on phones, try apps that shut off social media during homework time if necessary. Consider technology-free Sabbaths (i.e. a day your family takes a rest from technology) or technology-free rooms in your home.
- Think through what your policy is about checking your child's texts or social media and be open about it. Problems arise when parents sneak onto their kids' phones to read their texts. Be open with your kids if you are going to be checking. Make sure to be friends with your child on social media.
- Have ongoing conversations with your children about their online life just as you would about their social life. Talk about what to do when something makes them uncomfortable. Get them to understand that no one is totally honest on social media and that everything we see is what people choose for us to see rather than a true picture of their lives.
- Remember that today's kids are digitally native and, even if you are digitally savvy, you probably aren't connected to the same things. Kids may hide apps, create secret accounts and find all sorts of ways to do things without your knowledge. Don't assume you know everything they are doing. Did your parents know everything you did when you were growing up?
- Teach your children basic Internet safety. Tell them not to accept friend requests from people they don't know or to give out personal information, especially their age and where they live or go to school.
- Discuss what to do if they come across or experience cyberbullying. Tell them to come to you or another trusted adult if they sense that someone might be in trouble. Sometimes teens signal that they are a danger to self or others on social media.
- Teach your children that what they post online never goes away. Smartphones allow kids to make mistakes that can't be undone, such as sexting.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries with your teen. You may be able to text your child throughout the day but that doesn't mean that you should. Teens need to learn to be independent and to rely on themselves, and they need some space to do it. Be thoughtful about when and why you communicate with your teen.
- Model healthy behavior. Your children will be watching how you handle technology from a young age. If you are on your phone all the time, don't be surprised when they want to be as well. If you want your kids to put down their

phones, put yours down as well and spend time doing something together that doesn't involve technology.