

As they get older, most children will probably ask for their own smartphone, and parents may want to be able to stay in touch when they are not with them. While phones and tablets are empowering – because they unlock so much potential for learning and communication – we also want our kids to be smart and safe when using them.

When you hand your children cellphones, you're giving them powerful communication and media-production tools. They can create text, images and videos that can be widely distributed and uploaded on the internet instantly. Which is why parents really need to consider whether their kids are ready to use their phones responsibly and respectfully.

WHEN A CHILD SHOULD GET THEIR FIRST PHONE

According to Annie Byrne, a registered psychological counsellor, there is no perfect time for a child to get their first phone. It all depends on your family's situation and the emotional maturity of your child. Byrne states that before parents decide on getting their child a phone, they need to ask themselves these questions: 'What is the reason my child needs a phone?' and 'Am I ready to take on the extra responsibility of monitoring my child's phone usage and boundaries?' Your child may also not be mature enough to handle the responsibility of looking after a phone, so if you find that your offspring are very forgetful, getting them a phone may not be the best idea. Parents shouldn't, however, feel pressured to get their kids a phone on the premise that their peers have one. It may be difficult to handle at the time, but you will be doing them a favour in the long run, and who doesn't want fully functioning adult children, right?

THE IMPORTANCE OF LIMITING SCREEN TIME

Parents may find that although their child is not mature enough to handle a phone, they still need one for communication purposes. In this case, providing a phone for calls and texting with no internet access is the best option. According to David Gillespie, writer of *Teen Brain*, a phone with no internet access significantly reduces a child's risk of addiction, cyberbullying and consumption of harmful online content. Your child will

get a smartphone at some point in their life, so these things may still come into play but, hopefully, they will be more mature and, therefore, more prepared to handle it.

Byrne reiterates that, regardless of whether your child has a smartphone or a brick, parents still need to monitor their screen time, since children are known to indulge in risky and impulsive behaviours due to their brains not being fully developed yet. If a child's screen time is not monitored, it can have an effect on their developing brain, which can cause a whole slew of problems, physically and emotionally, that could have been avoided.

SETTING BOUNDARIES

It might sound easy in theory to limit your child's screen time, but when it comes down to it, you may find yourself giving in to them to avoid drama. This is why Byrne says it is extremely important to lay down the ground rules and continue to reinforce them so that everyone is on the same page. She says, 'it is not fair for you to expect your child's under-developed brain to be able to have the self-control to maintain the rules on their own – they need your constant reinforcement and reminding, even though it may feel tedious

to you.' To set boundaries around devices, Byrne suggests these five tips:

1. There should be restricted access to all electronic devices.
2. Devices should only be allowed to be used during certain hours of the day and only for certain necessary functions.
3. Digital apps should be severely limited, if not completely off-limits.
4. Devices should be handed in at night (all teens need eight hours of sleep a night).
5. Any breach of the rules should have clear consequences and should be enforced consistently (children who live between two different homes/parents should have the same rules enforced across the board).

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Byrne continues to say that once these boundaries have been put into place, you need to tell your child openly that you will still check their phones occasionally, for their own safety. Before checking their phones, start by having an honest conversation with them to see if there are any red flags. As with any topic, you want to maintain open communication and trust so that your child feels they can come to you if they are ever unsure of anything.

