5 Questions to Ask Before You Get Your Kid a Phone

Make sure they (and you!) are ready for the next step with conversation starters that get everyone on the same page. By Sierra Filucci

You're on your way to pick up your kid after school, and traffic is crawling or your train is delayed or your car breaks down. If only your kid had a phone, you could tell him you'll be late. It's moments like these that lead many parents to get their tweens or teens their first phones. But even though the convenience is compelling -- and your kid has probably been begging for one -- how do you know he's really ready?

If you're considering a smartphone for your kid, you'll need to think through a few things, from who will pay for it to whether she's responsible enough to use it appropriately. But once you decide to take the plunge, start the conversation with these five questions. Also, consider requiring your kid to complete **Digital Compass** (a Common Sense Media game that teaches digital citizenship) before handing over the device.

Why do you want a cell phone?

The answer to this question will help you understand what to expect once she gets the phone and where she might need some limits. Does she want to text with friends? Or play Crossy Road for hours?

Do you understand the rules your family and school have for phone use?

Most kids know they have to answer yes to this question, but it can help start the conversation about your family and school's expectations around how the phone is used, from whether they can download apps without permission to how they can or can't use the phone in the classroom. Be sure to discuss the consequences if rules are broken.

What are some concerns you think your family and teachers have about phones?

This question helps you understand what your kid thinks are the main sources of tension around kids and phone use. You can use this conversation to clarify any of your concerns, such as how often your kid is on the phone, whether he uses social media apps, and how to handle a call or text from a stranger.

What are five places it's not OK to use your phone?

Phone etiquette and safety are ongoing conversations, since kids will be experiencing some phone situations for the first time. But this is a good time to lay down the absolute basics, like no staring at your phone when Grandma's talking, no taking photos in locker rooms, no phones at the dinner table, and so on.

What will you do if you lose or break your phone?

Unfortunately, this is a real possibility. Talk about whether the phone will be replaced and, if so, who pays for it. Is insurance an option? Discuss options for preventing loss or breakage.

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Parenting, Media, and Everything In Between

5 Reasons You Don't Need to Worry About Kids and Social Media

Discover the ways social media can be a force for good in the lives of kids and teens, and help them maximize the benefits. By Caroline Knorr 3/14/2018

Topics: Facebook, Instagram, and Social

Ver en español

From sexting to cyberbullying to FOMO, social media sure has its share of negatives. But, if it's all bad, how did 2,000 students protest their school system's budget cuts? How are teens leading the charge against cyberbullying? How did they organize a national school walkout day to protest gun laws? Easy: savvy use of social media. For a few years now, many teens have been saying that social media -- despite its flaws -- is mostly positive. And new research is shedding light on the good things that can happen when kids connect, share, and learn online. As kids begin to use tools such as Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and even YouTube in earnest, they're learning the responsibility that comes with the power to broadcast to the world. You can help nurture the positive aspects by accepting how important social media is for kids and

helping them find ways for it to add real value to their lives. For inspiration, here are some of the benefits of your kid being social media-savvy:

It lets them do good. Twitter, Facebook, and other large social networks expose kids to important issues and people from all over the world. Kids realize they have a voice they didn't have before and are doing everything from crowdfunding social justice projects to anonymously tweeting positive thoughts. Check out these sites that help kids do good.

It strengthens friendships. Studies, including Common Sense Media's *Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives* and the Pew Research Center's *Teens, Technology and Friendships* show that social media helps teens make friends and keep them.

It can offer a sense of belonging. While heavy social media use can isolate kids, a study conducted by Griffith University and the University of Queensland in Australia found that although American teens have fewer friends than their historical counterparts, they are less lonely than teens in past decades. They report feeling less isolated and have actually become more socially adept, partly due to an increase in technology use.

It provides genuine support. Online acceptance -- whether a kid is interested in an unusual subject that isn't considered "cool" or is grappling with sexual identity -- can validate a marginalized kid. Suicidal teens can even get immediate access to quality support online. One example occurred on a *Minecraft* forum on Reddit when an entire online community used voice-conferencing software to talk a teen out of his decision to commit suicide.

It helps them express themselves. The popularity of fan fiction (original stories based on existing material that people write and upload online) proves how strong the desire for self-expression is. Both producers and performers can satisfy this need through social media. Digital technology allows kids to share their work with a wider audience and even collaborate with far-flung partners (an essential 21st-century skill). If they're really serious, social media can provide essential feedback for kids to hone their craft.

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About Caroline Knorr

As Common Sense Media's parenting editor, Caroline helps parents make sense of what's going on in their kids' media lives. From games to cell phones to movies and more, if you're wondering "what's the right age for...?"... Read more

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March 21, 2018

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Apps to Help Keep Track of What Your Kids Are Doing Online

Though open communication is best, these tools can help parents who want a little extra control.
By Christine Elgersma

As kids become more independent, we want to foster their sense of responsibility and give them room to prove themselves. But it can be difficult to navigate this natural separation, especially when kids are doing who-knows-what on their devices. There are constant questions: Where are they? Who's contacting them? What are they doing online? Since tweens and teens are often tight-lipped about their lives, it can be tricky to get clear answers.

Though direct communication is always best, and the conversations around **online safety and digital citizenship** should start long before a kid becomes a teen, there are occasions when parents feel it's necessary to **monitor what kids are doing on their devices**. Maybe they've broken your trust or you're worried about their safety. Whatever the case, there are tools to track what your kid is up to. Be aware that spying on your kid can backfire and that kids can find a way around just about any type of tracking. But if you're at the end of your rope or just need extra help managing your kid's digital life, then one of these tools might work for you. To get more information, check out our **advice about cell phone issues**, including **basic parental controls**, and less invasive (and expensive) ways to **limit access to content**.

Bark: Similar to VISR (see below), kids and parents need to work together to hook up accounts to the service. It also analyzes all device activity and alerts parents when a problem is found. If they get an alert, parents will see the content in question and get suggestions on how to handle it ($9/month).

Circle Home and Go: This app manages the Circle with Disney device, which pairs with your home Wi-Fi and controls all Wi-Fi-enabled devices. Can create time limits on specific apps, filter content, set bedtimes, and restrict internet access for the whole house or for individuals. Circle Go will let parents filter, limit, and track on networks outside the home Wi-Fi (the **Circle device** is $99, the Circle Home app is free, and the Circle Go service will be $9.95/month).

Limitly: If screen time and specific app use is your concern, this system might work for you. It lets you track your kid's app use and limit time using the device or certain apps (free, Android-only).

Pocket Guardian: Parents get alerts when sexting, bullying, or explicit images are detected on your kid's device, though you won't see the actual content or who it's from. Instead, the alert can prompt a conversation, and the app offers resources to help ($9.99–$12.99/month).

Trackidz: With this program, you don't see specific content from your kid's device, but you can track app installations and use, block browsers and apps, manage time in apps and on the device, block out device-free time, grant bonus time, track location, get an alert when your kid's phone is turned off, and see your kid's contacts. It also claims to detect cyberbullying by tracking when your kid's device use drops dramatically, which can indicate avoidance. Setting up a geo-fence lets parents track a kid's location and alerts them when a kid has gone outside the boundaries, and a kid can tap the power button to send an emergency message to parents (currently free, but will be $6.99).

VISR: For this one to work, a parent needs the kid's usernames and passwords, so be aware that it's easy for kids to set up dummy accounts. Once enabled, the tool analyzes posts and emails for bullying, profanity, nudity, violence, drugs, and late-night use and sends parents alerts when anything iffy is detected (currently free, but will be $5/month).

5 Strategies for Getting Kids Off Devices

Ever try to pry a tablet from sticky fingers? Check out these tips to avoid the tantrum.
By Christine Elgersma

"Just a sec," say nine out of 10 parents answering an email when their kid asks them for something. If it's hard for us to jump out of the digital world, just imagine you're 3 and the lines between fantasy and reality are already blurred -- then throw in a super-engaging, colorful, fun, immersive experience. Or you're 5 and each episode of *Mutt & Stuff* on the **Nick Jr. app** is better than the last. Or you're 8 and you're almost finished building something amazing in *Minecraft*. Why would you ever want to stop?

This is why getting kids off their devices is so tough. And when threatening doesn't work, and you discover the **research** that two-minute warnings aren't the best option either, what can you do? Thankfully, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has some **new guidelines** around screen use that ease some parental guilt, but you still need to get your kid off the iPad at some point. Aside from being a strong role model, try these tips to minimize conflict and find the balance we're all seeking.

- **Have another activity lined up (bonus points for making it seem fun).** For the youngest device users, transitions are hard -- period. Even if the next "to do" is a "must do" (such as eating lunch), tell your kid what's coming next. You can rehearse the process: "When I say stop, it's time for the iPad to go night-night. Let's see how fast you can flip it shut! As soon as it's asleep, we can sneak into the other room and paint."

- **Use visual and sound cues to help kids keep track of time limits.** For kids who don't yet know how to tell time, try a **timer** that can help put them in charge of the process: "When the time is up, it'll look and sound like this."

- **Find apps with built-in timers.** Video streamers like **Cakey** and **Huvi** throw parents a bone and have internal timers so the app stops on its own. Then it's up to the parent to make sure kiddo doesn't just jump into another app.

- **Tell kids to stop at a natural break, such as the end of an episode, level, or activity.** It's hard for kids (and adults!) to stop in the middle of something. Before your kid gets on a device, talk about what they want to do or play, what will be a good place to stop, and how long they think it'll take. Set the limit together and hold to it, though a little wiggle room (a couple of minutes so they can finish) is fine.

- **Discuss consequences and follow through when kids test the limits.** When all else fails, it's important to have discussed consequences for when your kid won't give it up. For little kids, the line can be something like, "If it's too hard to turn off, the tablet has to go away for a whole day." For older kids it's more about keeping devices in a public space, setting expectations, and enforcing them. If they show you they can be partners in moderating and regulating themselves, there can be more flexibility.