

Parenting in the Digital Age

Raising kids and teenagers comes with many challenges, and the increase of technology, internet, and media use has created a lot of additional challenges and difficult conversations that caregivers and their children need to navigate. We know that using technology and social media can also have a really big impact on mental health, so it's important to understand how to use these things in healthy ways. On this page we'll:

- Provide guidelines and resources for you to set appropriate boundaries and have tough conversations with your kids
- Help you understand the risks and benefits of technology and media
- Help your kids learn the skills they need to navigate the digital age on their own

Age Appropriate Expectations & Guidelines

The American Academy of Pediatrics has guidelines for media use in kids, although you should use your own judgment in deciding what is right for your family. The basic of their guidelines are:

- Babies under 18 months old should not use screens if at all possible.
- Young children 18 to 24 months old should have a limited amount of screen time and should watch with their caregiver.
- Kids between 2 and 5 years old should have an hour or less of screen time per day.
- Kids and teenagers older than 6 should have age-appropriate limits and boundaries on their screen and media use.

These guidelines are mostly focused on the time that kids spend on screens, but it's also important to think about the quality and content of the media your child is engaged with. You can rely a bit on age ratings for specific movies and TV shows, but in general the best rule of thumb is to use your judgment as a caregiver to determine what's best for your child. When you're able to, take a look at what they're watching or seeing online, and have conversations with them about what they're learning and engaging with online. The best thing you can do is teach your child good boundaries and maintain healthy communication with them, so they know if they see something online that makes them uncomfortable, they can leave the situation and talk to you about it.

Risks & Benefits of Technology Use for Kids

There are a few benefits to technology use for kids and teenagers, and as parents and caregivers we've all been in situations with kids where we just need to keep them entertained for a bit – technology is an easy solution in situations like these (ever taken a toddler on a road trip or flight? If so, you definitely know what we're talking about). Having digital literacy and technology skills can be useful for kids in school and in their future jobs. Engaging with others on the internet can in some cases help kids develop a sense of community, and kids can learn about a lot of different topics with access to technology that we didn't have a few decades ago. However, technology and social media also come with *a lot* of risks that caregivers should be aware of. Some things to keep an eye on are:

- **Safety:** it's important for kids to understand ways to keep themselves and others safe when they are using technology. The best way to do this is to start talking to your kids early about potential safety issues online, and to revisit that conversation every so often as they get older. As a general rule of thumb, if you are worried your child isn't old enough to talk about topics related to online safety, or make good decisions to keep themselves safe in the digital world, they probably aren't ready to have unsupervised access to technology. Some areas to focus on with any child who has social media, a phone or tablet, or internet access on a computer are 1) knowing who you are talking to online, 2) knowing who can see your personal information (like your location, name, and age), and 3) knowing what to do if you see something that makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- **Knowing who you're talking to:** teach your child that not everyone online is who they say they are, and encourage them to only accept friend requests or messages from people they know in real life. Many apps have privacy settings for this (e.g. you can set a rule that only friends or contacts can send you a direct message). Red flags to watch for are fake profiles or people pretending to be younger than they are, strangers sending you messages on games or social media apps to have a private conversation, or someone asking you for photos of yourself or personal details. Ask your child:
 - If someone online sends you a friend or follow request but you don't know them, what could you do?
 - Have you ever talked to someone online that you didn't know?

- What can you do if you feel uncomfortable or unsafe talking to someone online?
- **Knowing who can see your personal information:** emphasize to your child that you should *never share personal details* like photos, your age, your address, the name of your school, or your birth date with people online. This goes for parents too – that first day of school picture or a family picture while you're on vacation? Don't share exactly where you are and don't include details like your child's birthday or the name of their school and teacher. Also check settings on apps and social media accounts – some have location sharing settings (Snapchat is an example of this) that may tell people where you are when you post or share something. Most people know it's not safe to share information like your social security number, driver's license number, credit card numbers, bank information, or passwords online. Other, more subtle information to avoid sharing are things like pictures of the outside of your home, your full legal name or birthdate, the name of your school or workplace, anything related to your daily routine, your phone number or personal email address, travel plans, or any private information about other family members (siblings, parents, kids, grandparents, etc.). Ask your child:
 - What are some examples of information that is safe or not safe to share with others online? How do you know what is safe to share?
 - Do you know everyone who might see the things you share or post? Is it possible for people you don't know to get information about you?
 - Are there things about yourself that you wouldn't feel comfortable with strangers knowing? Are there things about yourself that you wouldn't feel comfortable with everyone at your school knowing?
- **Knowing what to do if you feel unsafe or uncomfortable:** most people use the internet a lot, and at some point, everyone will find something accidentally that they weren't really looking for. Have you ever misspelled something in a Google search and then ended up getting results that were totally different from what you were trying to find? Have you ever watched something on YouTube or TikTok and then gotten a bunch of recommended videos that you weren't really interested in? Even if kids aren't intentionally looking for things on the internet that are scary, sexual, violent, or unsafe, it's impossible to control everything they might see online. Make sure they know who they can talk to if they see something

that makes them feel uncomfortable – maybe it's you or maybe it's another trusted adult. You can also teach them how to block or report certain users or types of content on specific apps. In the same way that we make safety plans for unsafe behavior, we can have safety plans ready to go for problems kids may find online. You can find a sample one [here](#). Ask your child:

- Have you ever seen something online that you weren't really interested in or looking for? Have you ever seen something that made you feel uncomfortable or unsafe?
 - What can you do if something happens online that makes you feel scared or uncomfortable?
 - Have you ever blocked someone on social media before? Why? If not, do you know how to block or report someone?
- **Privacy:** it's important for kids to understand that things they share on the internet *are not private and can be accessed by other people*. Usually it's best for kids to have private accounts on social media (this limits who can see their information) but even when this is the case, accounts are never truly private. Make sure your child knows that things they share about themselves, or about peers, siblings, or others, may be seen by a lot of people – including people they don't know.
 - How to get a conversation going with your child about **privacy** and technology use:
 - Who do you think can see what you post on social media?
 - Are your social media accounts private? Do your friends have privacy settings on their accounts?
 - Have you ever seen something on social media that might be embarrassing for someone or that they might not have wanted others to see?
 - What do you think happens to the things you post on social media after you post them? In a few years, can people still see them? If you delete them, could people still find them?
 - **Mental Health:** it's important for kids to understand that there are a lot of negative mental health effects from the use of technology and social media (scientists actually found that the number of people who had symptoms of anxiety and depression went up really quickly once smart phones were

developed, and kids who get phones earlier may be more likely to have mental health difficulties later in life). There are also things that can happen on social media platforms that can cause kids stress or negative emotions, like comparing themselves to others, or even being bullied on social media or the internet (this is called cyber-bullying).

- How to get a conversation going with your child about **mental health** and technology use:
 - Do you think people feel better or worse about themselves when they look at things that other people post on social media? Why?
 - Have you ever seen someone be mean to someone else or get bullied online? Tell me about what this was like.
 - Did you know that it's really common for people to struggle with feeling anxious or feeling down if they use social media a lot? Why do you think that is?
 - How do you feel when you see things your friends post on social media? What do you like seeing on social media and what makes you feel sad or upset?
- **Physical Health:** it's important for caregivers and kids to be aware that spending too much time using screens and technology isn't good for kids' bodies and brains. Usually people are just sitting still when they are watching TV, browsing the internet, or scrolling on social media – so doing this too much can mean you're spending less time moving your body or connecting with people in real life, both of which are important for us to stay healthy. Using screens right before bedtime can also be bad for kids' sleep and make it harder for them to go to sleep at night. And spending a lot of time using technology can even affect the way kids' brains work and how well they are able to concentrate and remember things. Lots of apps, websites, and technologies are designed to make kids and adults want to keep using them – and your child's brain is even less developed than yours in the areas of self-control and decision-making. So if you're an adult caregiver and you have a hard time putting down your phone or turning off the TV sometimes, imagine how hard it can be for your child. That's why it's important for caregivers to help set limits with their children – because if you give your child a phone with no limits on it, it's designed to suck them in and make them want to use it more. Some specific ways you can help your child stay physically healthy while using technology are:
 - By setting time limits for how long they are allowed to use screens per day

- By not allowing phones, computers, or tablets in their bedrooms with them at night
- By making sure your child gets enough exercise every day (some parents may even set rules that kids can't use screens until after they play outside or do some kind of physical activity)
- By creating screen-free times when your child interacts with other people face-to-face, plays board games or solves puzzles, engages in creative activities, and makes their brain work in different ways
- By using apps and videos that encourage physical activity or spending time in nature (like YouTube workout videos, video games like Just Dance or Nintendo Switch Sports, or apps like GoNoodle, Sworkit Kids, or Seek by iNaturalist)

Caregiver Guidelines Rooted in Research

We know navigating technology can seem scary – and it's hard to stay on top of as a caregiver because new apps and websites are developing every day. Even if you're not familiar with all the TikTok trends or in-the-know with teenage slang and emoji usage, here are some general guidelines to help you as a caregiver – now, and with whatever technology is available 5 or 10 years down the line.

- Stay informed.
 - You're probably not ever going to keep track of everything your child and their friends are sharing, reading, and laughing about online – and that's okay. However, what is important as a caregiver is having some basic digital literacy and knowledge of what technology your child is using. Haven't seen that viral TikTok video? No worries. Haven't heard of TikTok and aren't familiar with the platform, the potential risks, or the privacy and security settings? Time to do a little research. Some apps and websites are also a lot riskier for kids than others, so having a basic knowledge of common apps and social media sites that kids use helps you and your child make an informed decision about whether or not the potential benefits of being on that site outweigh the risks and costs.
 - You won't have time to research *all* the apps that exist, so ask your child which ones are commonly used in their friend group, or which sites they've heard of. You can also rely on the blog posts and research of digital monitoring apps like Bark, who periodically update their list of

dangerous apps for kids. You'll learn which apps have features that are often used in ways that aren't safe for kids. If you and your child happen to be using the same platforms, follow each other – this provides some extra accountability for them and keeps you in the loop with what they're seeing online (both the positive and the negative).

- Set appropriate limits.
 - Kids' brains aren't fully developed, so it's harder for them to make decisions to put down the phone when they need to or turn off the video game to get something else done. Combine this with all the ways technology is designed to be addictive and draw them in, and you've got a big potential problem! Your child likely isn't developmentally ready to navigate technology entirely on their own. They probably won't tell you they appreciate it, but setting limits around technology and screens is absolutely in their best interest.
 - The limits you set should work for your family and be appropriate for your child's age and maturity level. Some things to consider:
 - What limits do I want to set around **the types of media** my child is exposed to?
 - Are there certain apps or websites that are off-limits?
 - Are there certain TV or movie ratings that your child isn't ready for?
 - What limits do I want to set around **the amount of media** my child is exposed to?
 - Is there a certain number of hours per day you feel comfortable allowing your child to be on screens?
 - Considering that some technology use is already necessary for school-aged kids to do their homework, how much additional time do you want your child to spend on screens?
 - What limits do I want to set around **when and where** my child is allowed to use technology?
 - Are there certain times of day that technology will be off-limits in my home? (keeping in mind that it's always a good idea for *anyone* to avoid using screens before bedtime & while in bed!)

- Are there certain places that I don't want my child to have access to technology? (e.g. do you want them to be able to use their phone while alone in their room? Do you want them to be able to have their tablet or play video games when with friends?)
- Talk to kids early and often.
 - It's best to gradually talk to kids about social media and technology as they gradually start to use it more. You can start the conversation with kids as young as 3 or 4, and continue adding to it and talking about things more deeply as they get older. That way, they already understand some of the concepts you're trying to communicate. Here are some possible conversation starters and things to consider talking about at different ages:
 - **Ages 3-4:** learning that technology isn't something to use all the time, setting limits and routines, social learning through technology
 - Ask: What do you like watching on TV or on the tablet? Why do you like it?
 - Ask: What's something else we can do when we want to watch TV or play a game, but we can't right now?
 - Ask: What did you learn from watching [show or movie]? Were there any parts that made you feel scared or worried?
 - **Ages 5-7:** learning what is real or not in media, introducing the basics of digital safety, introducing safe and unsafe content
 - Ask: Is everything we see in TV and movies real? How do we know if it's real or not?
 - Ask: Who do you talk to on the phone or computer? What do you talk about with them? Do you know there are some things we shouldn't share when we are texting or talking to people online (give examples)?
 - Ask: Have you ever seen something online that made you feel nervous or uncomfortable? What was it? What did you do?
 - Ask: What can you do if you ever see something online that you don't like?

- **Ages 8-10:** learn more about privacy, thinking critically about content of media, treating others with kindness and respecting limits and boundaries
 - Ask: Did you know that some things you see online aren't true or aren't real? How do we know if it's real or not? Who can we ask if we're not sure if something is true?
 - Ask: Where do you think pictures and videos go when you send them to someone online? Is it okay to share any kind of pictures or videos, or not?
 - Ask: Have you ever heard someone say something mean to someone else in real life? How about in a text or online? What should we do when we see this happen?
- **Ages 11-13:** learn about how technology use affects emotions, emphasize privacy and safety, discuss peer pressure in technology use.
 - Ask: What do you like about group texts/social media/websites you use? Is there anything you don't like about it?
 - Ask: Do you ever notice that you feel certain feelings when you are looking at things online? What kinds of feelings have you noticed? What can you do if things you see make you feel sad, scared, or angry?
 - Ask: Do you know what privacy settings are? How can we be careful with the information we share to keep you safe? What are some things that would *not* be safe to do or share online?
 - Ask: How do your friends use technology? What kinds of things do they watch or see online? Do you think these things are good or bad?
- **Ages 14-18:** start to work on independence and self-regulation with technology, discuss long-term consequences of digital footprint and information sharing, collaborative problem-solving with kids and caregivers when possible.
 - Ask: How do you decide what to post online? Do you think things that you post online could be seen by someone a few years from now? Did you know that people sometimes get in

trouble in their jobs or their relationships for things that they have posted or done online?

- Ask: What do you think are appropriate boundaries and limits for us to set for your technology use? How can I help support you and how can we work together to make good decisions?
- Ask: What do you think is helpful about the technology you use? What do you think is harmful to people about technology?
- Use new tech to your advantage.
 - You're not the only caregiver out there who worries sometimes about your child's use of technology and wants to keep them safe. As new technology develops in potentially dangerous ways, there is also new technology developing to keep kids safe. Identify your main concerns around technology and social media, and then see if a solution exists to help. For example:
 - **Want your child to be able to communicate with you about transportation and basic needs, but don't want them texting others or having internet access on their phone?**
 - You can get your child a starter phone with built in parental monitoring and controls.
 - Websites like Gabb offer a line of phones and smart watches for kids – they include recommended ages for their devices, and they also offer a music streaming service that filters out explicit or inappropriate content.
 - Providers like Pinwheel offer parents remote access to their child's phone and have their own rating system built in so you can make easier decisions about which apps are appropriate for your child.
 - **Want to be able to get alerts if your child accesses something harmful or unsafe on their phone?**
 - Check out Bark (which monitors the content & messages on your child's phone for potential safety concerns or harmful content) or Qustodio (which helps you easily see your child's

screen time and allows you to filter the types of content they can access).

- Google Family Link is a free option that offers basic content filtering if your family already uses Gmail or other Google services. Microsoft Family Safety is also available if your family uses their services. These don't have as many features as the paid options above but are a great starting point for families!

■ **Want to be able to set limits on screen time?**

- Most of the apps above that provide alerts can also help you set limits on your child's screen time.
- If your child has an iPhone or other Apple device, you can go to the "Screen Time" settings on their device to set time limits for their device or specific apps.
- If your child has an Android device, you can go to the "Digital wellbeing & parental controls" setting" to set time limits for their device or specific apps.

<https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/technology-use-children>

<https://www.common sense media.org/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-infographic>

<https://www.bark.us/blog/>

https://www.bark.us/blog/dangerous-apps-kids/?srsltid=AfmBOoq8I7qsDCcR2I50DPVbPbcL05fnEnSXL0zRoHJ_Y-1frnKDANys

