

# Smartphones and social media fact sheet

The digital landscape has transformed in the last decade and, currently, nine in ten children will own a smartphone by the age of eleven. The long-term impact on children's mental health and development isn't fully understood, but current research suggests that the messages they receive during these formative years can shape their beliefs about themselves and the world around them – sometimes adversely affecting their mental health.

Smartphones and social media have become unavoidable realities and practicalities of daily life for most of us. New technology is continually evolving, and as children grow up, we need to teach them how to navigate the internet safely and critically, recognise when something isn't right, and feel confident approaching someone for help when they need it.

The tricky questions are how and when to introduce them to the smartphone and the world of social media.

Many psychologists, headteachers and GPs are recommending these two basic rules:

- No smartphones until the age of 14
- No social media until the age of 16

This is because children and young people are vulnerable. Here are some of the common risks to children and young people online:

- An increased sense of loneliness or low self-worth due to comparisons with others and exposure to unrealistic expectations for body image or lifestyle.

- Access to strangers through gaming platforms, apps and social media which may make children vulnerable to grooming or manipulation.
- Violent, pornographic or other potentially inappropriate and harmful content which can influence unhealthy or dangerous modelling for relationships.
- Behavioural addiction which distracts from learning and hobbies, creates a dependency on external validation, and interrupts sleep.
- Misinformation and false news which influence racist, misogynistic or other harmful beliefs and potentially harmful behaviour.
- Cyberbullying from strangers or peers at school which can go unseen and can result in dangerous situations.
- The Dangers of Algorithms - [Better Internet for Kids EU](#):

“As algorithms are used as part of persuasive design techniques, the frequent recommendation of relevant content can encourage young people to spend longer on social media or video-sharing platforms than they wish. The ‘just one more...’ effect can be very persuasive!”

“As algorithms will often filter content based on a user’s behaviour and interests (for instance, what they watch most frequently, words that they search for), there is a risk that, if a young person searches for harmful content that is harmful, the algorithm mistakenly believes that this is content they want to see and provide more of it in the future. Even searches for appropriate content can sometimes stray into the realms of upsetting or inappropriate, particularly if the algorithms decide that a user should see something that produces a stronger emotional response (such as content that contains hate or animal cruelty). In some cases, young people have been exposed to content that can harm them, such as content about self-harm, eating disorders and dangerous exercise/diet regimes.”

Should I get my child a phone? If so, what are my options?

There is growing pressure from children to own the latest smartphone, and the prevailing argument is that children will be socially isolated without one.

Many parents and carers buy their child a mobile phone just before they transition to secondary school. There is a lot of pressure that this should be a smartphone, and it may feel like there aren’t any other available options, but you do have choices.

There are many advantages of delaying when children have unlimited access to a smartphone. It allows your child to develop their inter-relational skills, maturity and self-esteem before the onslaught of social media.

### Basic phones

More and more schools are now insisting that children do not bring smartphones into school. One easy solution, therefore, is to start your child with a basic phone (a phone with no internet access).

If your child needs a phone to text and call you and their friends, this is the simplest solution. The main advantage is that without your consent, children can't download apps, access harmful content online or Snapchat friends in the middle of the night. You are saving yourself endless "discussions" about which apps they can/ can't have and the disappointment of finding out they have downloaded them anyway without your consent. It may not be the most popular choice and is probably more suitable for younger adolescents, but the longer you can keep your child smartphone-free, the easier it will be for them to develop their skills of resilience, inter-personal skills - paving the way for being able to handle a smartphone well when the time comes.

### Smartphones

If you do decide to give your child a smartphone earlier, how do you keep them as safe as possible? And how can you, as parents and carers, successfully help your child to thrive in the digital age? Where does the correct balance lie between giving your child freedom on the internet and putting controls in place to keep them safe on social media?

However hard you try, it is really difficult to control and monitor what children get up to on their smartphones. This can become a source of family tension.

They can be a constant source of distraction and source of potential conflict over apps and time spent online. Children are very astute at bypassing parental controls, and the very apps they use have been designed to be highly addictive.

However, if you choose or have chosen to give your child a smartphone, we offer some tips and guidance for keeping your children safe.

## Advice on apps and staying safe on social media

Whether your child has the latest iPhone or no phone at all (but some access to the internet through an iPad or computer), it is the apps we need to think most carefully about.

Some of the best brains in Silicon Valley have crafted these apps to increase their persuasive technology and keep young people hooked. Whether it is streaks on snap chat, likes on Facebook or autoplay on YouTube, these apps have been designed to be addictive.

Use Parent App Guides for quick tips on making these apps safer and less addictive for young people. <https://www.papayaparents.com/solutions#anchor-link-Parentcontrolapps>

## Parental consent on apps

One way to try to delay the onslaught of social media is to, as a minimum, hold off until the minimum age of the app. However, the age limits are very lenient when considering the access to strangers, inappropriate content, and influencers that they bring right into your child's eye line.

If your child wants to download an app, we encourage you to spend time reading the guidelines to understand what access the app gives other people to them and what safety measures need to be put in place first. By changing privacy settings, you can considerably improve the safety of many apps.

However, this does not reduce their addictive lure and impact on well-being and self-esteem, although ensuring your child has time limits for social media apps may help with this.

Social media comes with dangers. It can be a portal for cyberbullying, online grooming, and access to inappropriate content.

Research is starting to show that social media may, in fact, increase loneliness. It also encourages young people to base their value on other people's opinions which can damage their ability to develop robust self-esteem.

However, it also how young people today communicate, and denying them access to it completely may seem a step too far for many parents and young people.

There may, however, be a sensible middle path that includes social media, just not too much of it! It's worth reading up and familiarising yourself with social media apps before agreeing to your child having them. Apps that appear harmless may give strangers access to your child's location and personal details, and although none of the social media sites are perfect, there are ways to make them safer. By changing the privacy settings and monitoring time spent on apps, it may be possible to find a healthy middle ground.

### Top Tips on smartphone safety

In summary, if you choose a smartphone, things to consider include:

- Waiting till app age limits/ holding off even longer
- Setting time limits for social media
- Using parental control apps to help prevent addiction and help your child learn to monitor their use carefully
- Agreeing as a family to boundaries, e.g. no phones upstairs at night or the meal table and consequences if these are broken
- Agreeing to open negotiations before an app is downloaded and that certain apps may come with boundaries, e.g. having social media set to PRIVATE MODE
- Knowing your apps and how to make them more secure
- Chatting with friends in the community- can you agree to similar boundaries?
- Staying strong - being a parent isn't about being popular.

## Quick guide to social media

### Snapchat

Snapchat is the infamous messages service where your messages "snaps" disappear after 10 minutes. It has been known as a portal for bullying, grooming and sexting (the exchange of naked images) but is loved by teens as it's fun and in the moment.

However, many an unsuspecting teenager has been caught out by a snap saved on a screenshot or by a third party app then forwarded. This can be incredibly damaging for their wellbeing, especially if it is an explicit photo.

- Consider limiting the TIME spent on Snapchat as is highly addictive due to its streaks feature
- Snapchatters who see your messages can always potentially save them, whether by taking a screenshot or by using some other image-capture technology (a separate piece of software, or even simply by taking a photo of their screen with a second camera).
- Check your PRIVACY settings are set to “friends only.”
- Make sure “Who Contact me” is set to my friends only
- Set view my story to “friends only.”
- If you’re in a GROUP chat with people you don’t know, they will be able to see your messages and number unless you change the setting
- Use GHOST mode to disable the GPS map (whereby other users can know your exact location)
- Turn OFF quick add (a facility that suggests you as a friend according to people you already know but gives access to your details to a greater number of other people)
- Learn about how long snaps are visible and who else can see them

## Instagram

Instagram is a viral photo messaging app with young people. It allows you to post stories and videos, which in PUBLIC mode anyone can follow and comment on. It has been linked with low self-esteem in teenagers as they look to the approval of others on what they post. Many children have two Instagram accounts; one very highly manicured public account and one private one for closer friends.

- Age 13 with parental consent.
- Set time limits for how long children can spend on the app to reduce the risk of addiction and dependence. Reports so far have suggested that the GREATER the time spent on social media the BIGGER the problem. (see parental controls)
- Use private mode as in public mode anyone can access your account
- Block any followers you don’t know or anyone who is making nasty/ inappropriate contents online
- Add comment controls so you can weed out offensive or annoying comments
- If you’re on Facebook as well, check your app settings, so it doesn’t automatically share between the two sites
- Turn off activity status so people can’t see whether you’re online or not
- To watch how to stay safe on Instagram: <https://youtu.be/eZbr3-Vl9cE>.

## Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site (although less so with today's younger generation who have moved onto other platforms). It allows you to create a page about yourself and post stories and photos to your friends. However, by default, your settings are PUBLIC, so anyone can follow or send you a friend request.

- Minimum Age is 13 with parental consent
- Set TIME LIMITS for how long children can spend on the app to reduce the risk of addiction
- Change your setting to PRIVATE instead of public
- Only allow friends-of-friends to send friend requests (instead of everyone)
- Only allow friends to FOLLOW you (not PUBLIC)
- Who can see future posts - change to friends (instead of everyone)
- BLOCK anyone who is bullying you online or who is following you, but you don't know them
- To watch a video with all the details on how you can make a Facebook account more private: <https://youtu.be/6VyoouopcDY>
- For parental advice and more detail, go to: <https://www.net-aware.org.uk/networks/facebook/>

## YouTube

YouTube is a top-rated video sharing platform where you can both watch and upload videos. "Vloggers" have become famous with posts from makeup tutorials to travel advice. Children as young as ten have shared sensitive material about family loss etc. Anyone who innocently posts may be in the firing line for negative comments and publicity!

- Use restricted mode to block inappropriate content
- Use YOUTUBE kids instead
- Teach young people to think before you post, especially if the content is sensitive

## WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a useful group messaging app that is less associated with problems than other social media platforms. However, it is worth considering that it generates a considerable amount of extra messaging traffic, and people can feel left out if they are not invited to a group chat. It can be used as a vehicle for cyberbullying and

and online humiliation. WhatsApp has end-to-end encryption so messages are protected so no one else can read or listen to them.

- The minimum age for WhatsApp is 16 due to GDPR issues (anyone on a group chat can access your phone number).
- Set your profile picture and live location to friends only
- Exit large chats and block unwanted users
- Turn off read receipts
- For safety tips, go to: <https://www.whatsapp.com/safety>.

## TikTok

TikTok is the social media app of the moment; it's fun, interactive and has the bonus of the chance of stardom. Users can easily create, edit and share videos with friends and the public at large. However, there are multiple reports of predators using this site to groom and share explicit material. In its default public mode, anyone can view the videos your child shares, and anyone can send your child a video, which could contain explicit content.

TikTok's emphasis is on popular music, and many videos include swearing and sexual lyrics. The app autoplays other teens videos, which are very frequently of teenagers wearing revealing clothing and dancing suggestively. Although TikTok won't let you search directly for content such as "sex" or "porn", a significant proportion of its content is highly sexualised videos produced by young boys and girls. We highly recommend downloading the app yourself and getting a clearer idea of what your child will have access to before they download it - it's a real eye-opener. They may plan to use it to post sweet, fun videos, but the content that receives attention on the site is highly sexualised, so there is pressure for users to make their content more 'likeable'.

- Tik Tok's age limit is 13, but all you need is a fake birthdate to bypass this.
- Set the profile to PRIVATE by going into settings. This means that others users cannot see your videos unless they follow you and you have approved them to do so. You can also disable "allow others to find me" so that other users don't receive suggestions to follow you. However, even with a private account, your child's profile photo, username, and bio are still visible to all users on the platform
- Turn on restricted mode to filter out inappropriate content - although this feature doesn't appear to make much difference to the content, and we would not recommend relying on it to protect your child.

- You can manage who can comment and direct message your child on the app and set it to “friends only”. You can also put comment filters on to reduce obscene comments.
- Supervise your children and stick to songs you already know.
- Block anyone sending inappropriate messages or videos or set to “friends only”.
- Consider sharing an account with your child or following them so you can see what material they are accessing or set up family safety mode.
- Set up time restrictions as with the endless autoplay of short videos, it is very addictive. This can be done via the app itself or via screen time or equivalent on your phone. For further info, go to: [and online humiliation. WhatsApp has end-to-end encryption so messages are protected so no one else can read or listen to them.](#)

## Family Phone Contracts

It will make your life easier if you can agree a contract with your child when they get their first phone. This is a list of what they can and can't do and the consequences should they overstep. You can stick this on the fridge door, so it is seen every day and easy to refer to.

However, behind every contract needs to be conversation, trust, and relationship. Having an open communication channel is the most important thing to have in place at whatever point you are on the tech journey.

If you are delaying buying a smartphone, this is a perfect time to discuss why and get your child on board. If, on the other hand, your child has a phone and you are trying to reign it in slightly, talking about everyone's tech use as a family is a great place to start. The conclusion which you are trying to reach is a shared agreement on some set family values.

Some things you might wish to discuss as a family:

- How do we, as a family, want to communicate?
- What do we value most about our family?
- What do you/ don't you like about our family's use of technology?
- What do we / don't we like about social media?
- What are our BIG NO's and why?
- What compromises can we all agree to?
- What will the consequence be if we push the boundaries?

- How much screen time is reasonable? In the week? At weekends?
- Are phones in bedrooms a good idea? What should our family decision be?

You can find a sample template of a family media contract on the papaya parents' website - <https://www.papayaparents.com/solutions#anchor-link-familycontracts>

## Parent Control Apps

When looking at some of the technological solutions available, the first issue is one of trust vs control.

There is a difficult balance between trusting your child with unmonitored access to the internet and putting more boundaries in place to keep them safe (children are often innocent victims online of harmful content sent to them rather than actively going to look for it).

It is worth considering that even sensible and trustworthy children can still be inadvertently drawn into all sorts of mishaps through links from friends, adults posing as children, seemingly innocent searches on google, and algorithms on Instagram.

Putting basic filters on your child's phone is just like insisting children wear a seat belt in a car.

You can use parental control apps to

- Monitor screen time
- Filter adult content and block sites

For a general guide on parent control apps go to

<https://www.papayaparents.com/solutions#anchor-link-Parentcontrolapps>

The best parental control app will depend on what type of phone your child has:

### iPhone

If your child has an iPhone, the simplest way to restrict their phone use is to use the inbuilt software. This can control screen time, block adult content, limit or block access to games and restrict internet searching. You can set time limits for different apps and schedule downtime. It is all controlled by a parent password.

## Parent control apps on android phones

There are dozens of parental control apps for android phones. Some examples include Qustodio, Google family link, Kapersky, Norton Family

## Smartphones and addiction

Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that makes you feel good. It is released in anticipation of a reward - like the build-up and excitement before you go on holiday - it's that feel-good buzzy feeling before something good happening. Our brains are flooded by dopamine as we subconsciously anticipate reward (a nice comment on our photo, a message from a friend or achieving the next level on a game).

Social media and gaming sites have been specifically designed to use these so-called "variable reward schedules" to make our brain release more dopamine (making us feel good) and thereby making them more addictive as we crave more dopamine.

Tech companies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and google are all caught in a competition for our attention ([humanetech.com](http://humanetech.com)). They need our attention to make money, and the more, the better. The more we scroll, the more they make, the more we click, the more income they generate.

## Dangerous algorithms

Tech companies are employing the best psychologists in Silicon Valley to increase the persuasive technology of their apps and to keep us glued to them - whether its scroll downs, auto-plays on YouTube, notifications, or streaks on Snapchat - they are actively learning how to hook us in more and more deeply.

## Questions you can discuss with your child:

- How do you feel knowing tech companies are making money from your use of social media?
- Do you mind?
- What do you think about tech companies making their apps specifically more addictive for young people?
- How do you react to the fact that Bill Gates sends his children to a tech-free school and limits their tech use?
- Do you think tech companies have a duty of care towards young people?

- Ask the question: “How would you feel if you were unexpectedly separated from your phone for more than an hour?”
- There is no right wrong /answer. However, if you feel worried, agitated and anxious without your phone, it could be a sign that you may be overly reliant on it.

### Wi-fi parental controls

In the home, you can set up restrictions to the type of content your child can access and limit screen time through your internet provider settings. You can also pause wi-fi if you need to get children offline straight away or take a break, although if your child also has access to a data plan, they may still be able to access the internet.

### Explore safety and privacy settings together

Encourage young people to review their settings on their social media accounts, including providing an accurate date of birth. This can help the algorithms select age-appropriate content. Exploring where block/mute, unfollow and report features are can also equip young people with strategies to deal with inappropriate content that may appear in their feeds.

### Algorithmic literacy

In the same way that media, information literacy and digital literacy are key life skills for young people, algorithmic literacy is also important. This doesn't require an in-depth understanding of how algorithms operate, but having an awareness of how algorithms are used to target advertising and content to an individual is important.

To understand this better yourself, you may like to watch The Social Dilemma

<https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/81254224>

### Encourage exploration

To ensure that young people aren't trapped in filter bubbles or echo chambers, encourage them to search for content across a variety of apps/platforms so that they can more readily encounter different views and perspectives. Encourage them to think critically about what they are viewing so they understand it may not be true.

## Talking to your children about online safety

If there is a culture of shame or secrecy around inappropriate or harmful content, then this will make it difficult for children to ask questions or process things they have seen. It can also be hard for children to understand the permanence of content which they are posting online, and the potential impact this can have on them and their peers. By asking questions about how online content makes them feel we can encourage open conversations and begin to build a deeper understanding of the complexities of online safety.

Useful links for parents and carers talking to their children can be found here:

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

<https://www.mumsnet.com/articles/talk-about-internet-safety>

## Further information and resources

How to start a conversation with your children about using a phone safely:

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers/phones>

NSPCC staying safe online:

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/online-safety>

Childline staying safe online:

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/staying-safe-online/>

Resources for 11-19-year-olds:

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/young-people/resources-for-11-19s>

Useful for young people accessing & who may be worried for themselves or a friend:

Child exploitation and online protection:

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre/>

The National Crime Agency's CEOP Education team

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/>

Parents checking & tracking children's phones:

[https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/home-family-life/technology/checking-tracking-your-childs-phone/?gad\\_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwtsy1BhD7ARIsAHOi4xZsxe43\\_EWxhEBtCls8BcUQez7qoInBKqT23aZN8NVR6MdaqWaxwawaAhAvEALw\\_wcB](https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/home-family-life/technology/checking-tracking-your-childs-phone/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwtsy1BhD7ARIsAHOi4xZsxe43_EWxhEBtCls8BcUQez7qoInBKqT23aZN8NVR6MdaqWaxwawaAhAvEALw_wcB)

List of Parental control Apps for phones:

<https://uk.pcmag.com/parental-control-monitoring/79219/the-best-parental-control-apps-for-your-phone>

[Better Internet for Kids Resources](#) – Educational resources from across the Insafe network of Safer Internet Centres. You can search for 'algorithm', for resources in your language and for resources for different age groups.

[CO:RE Evidence Base](#) – A database of publications and research on youth online experiences. Searching the database with 'algorithm' allows you to browse and read relevant research related to this issue.

[Track This](#), is a tool by Mozilla Firefox that opens 100 hundred tabs in your browser to confuse tracking algorithms into thinking you are a particular type of person.

[YouTube Regrets](#) – a 2019 study by Mozilla into how YouTube's recommendation algorithm affected individuals.

[Do Algorithms Influence Our Lives and Our Democracy?](#) – A free lesson plan from Common Sense Media, aimed at students aged 13-18.

[Digital Opportunities: Social Media and Algorithms](#) – Free lessons and resources from Meta, as part of the 'My Digital World' resources.

[How social media algorithms create echo chambers](#) – A free lesson plan by US broadcaster PBS.

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<https://www.papayaparents.com>