

Smartphones and Social Media

A guide for parents and carers

Written in association with Papaya Parents

Nine in ten children will own a smartphone by the age of eleven. The long-term impact on children's mental health is not fully understood, but current research suggests that the messages children receive during these formative years can shape their beliefs about themselves and the world — sometimes adversely affecting their mental health.

Smartphones and social media are unavoidable realities of modern life. 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 asking for help when they need it.

Why age limits matter

Many psychologists, headteachers, and GPs recommend two basic guidelines:

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

Common risks to children and young people online include:

- Increased loneliness or low self-worth from comparisons with others and exposure to unrealistic standards for body image or lifestyle.
- Access to strangers through gaming platforms, apps, and social media — making children vulnerable to grooming or manipulation.
- Violent, pornographic, or otherwise harmful content that can model unhealthy attitudes and behaviours.
- Behavioural addiction that distracts from learning and hobbies, creates dependency on external validation, and disrupts sleep.
- Misinformation and false news that can reinforce harmful beliefs.
- Cyberbullying from strangers or peers, which can go unseen and escalate quickly.
- Dangerous algorithms that serve increasingly extreme or harmful content based on a child's viewing history — including material about self-harm, eating disorders, and dangerous diet regimes.

Should I get my child a phone?

There is growing pressure for children to own the latest smartphone, with the argument that they will be socially isolated without one. But you do have choices.

Basic phones (no internet access)

A basic phone lets your child call and text without accessing apps, harmful content, or social media. More schools are now asking children not to bring smartphones to school, making this a practical option. It avoids the constant negotiation over apps — and the longer a child remains smartphone-free, the more time they have to develop resilience and interpersonal skills before that changes.

If you choose a smartphone

It is genuinely difficult to control what children access on smartphones. Children are adept at bypassing parental controls, and the apps are designed to be highly addictive. However, if you do give your child a smartphone, the tips below can help keep them safer.

Top tips for smartphone safety

- Wait until app age limits — and consider waiting even longer.
- Set time limits for social media apps.
- Use parental control apps to help prevent addiction and encourage your child to monitor their own use.
- Agree family boundaries together — for example, no phones at the dinner table or in bedrooms at night — and be clear about consequences if these are broken.
- Agree that certain apps come with conditions, such as being set to private mode.
- Familiarise yourself with each app before agreeing to it, and keep privacy settings up to date.
- Talk to other parents in your community — shared boundaries are easier to maintain.
- Stay firm. Being a parent is not about being popular.

Platform guide for parents

Snapchat

Messages ("snaps") disappear after viewing, but can be screenshot or captured by other means. Highly addictive due to "streaks." Key steps: set privacy to "friends only" throughout; enable Ghost Mode to disable location sharing; turn off Quick Add; set time limits.

Instagram

A photo and video sharing app linked to low self-esteem in teenagers. Many children maintain two accounts — a public one and a private one. Key steps: set to private mode; block unknown followers; add comment controls; set time limits; turn off activity status.

Facebook

Less popular with younger users but still widely used. Default settings are public. Key steps: set profile to private; restrict who can send friend requests to friends-of-friends; set time limits; block anyone who is bullying or unknown.

YouTube

Video sharing platform where algorithms can serve increasingly extreme content. Key steps: use Restricted Mode to block inappropriate content; use YouTube Kids for younger children; teach children to think before posting, especially sensitive content.

WhatsApp

Group messaging with end-to-end encryption. Minimum age is 16 due to GDPR (anyone in a group chat can see your phone number). Can be used for cyberbullying and can generate feelings of exclusion. Key steps: set profile photo and location to friends only; turn off read receipts; exit large unknown chats.

TikTok

Short video platform with a strong addictive pull. In default public mode, anyone can view your child's videos or send them content. A significant proportion of popular content is highly sexualised. We recommend downloading the app yourself before agreeing to it. Key steps: set profile to private; disable "allow others to find me"; restrict who can comment and message to friends only; set strict time limits.

Smartphones and addiction

Social media and gaming apps are deliberately designed to trigger dopamine release in the brain — the same chemical associated with anticipation and reward. Techniques such as streaks, likes, autoplay, and notifications are all engineered to keep users engaged longer. Tech companies employ specialists to make their platforms as addictive as possible.

A useful conversation to have with your child: "How would you feel if you were unexpectedly separated from your phone for more than an hour?" If the answer is worried, agitated, or anxious, it may be a sign of over-reliance.

Family phone contracts

Agreeing a family phone contract when a child first gets a phone can help avoid ongoing conflict. This is a shared agreement on what is and is not acceptable, and what the consequences are if boundaries are crossed.

Questions to discuss as a family:

- How do we, as a family, want to use and communicate about technology?
- What do we value most about family time?
- What are our non-negotiables, and why?
- What compromises can we all agree to?
- How much screen time is reasonable on school days and weekends?
- Are phones in bedrooms a good idea?

A sample family media contract template is available at: papayaparents.com/solutions

Parental controls

- **iPhone:** use the built-in Screen Time settings to control app access, set time limits, filter adult content, and schedule downtime — all managed with a parent password.
- **Android:** parental control apps include Qustodio, Google Family Link, Kaspersky, and Norton Family.
- **Home Wi-Fi:** most internet providers allow you to set content filters and time restrictions through your router settings.

Talking to your child about online safety

If there is a culture of shame or secrecy around harmful content, children will find it harder to ask questions or process difficult things they have seen. Asking open questions about how online content makes them feel builds the kind of trust that keeps communication open.

Encourage young people to explore privacy and safety settings on their accounts, and to know where the block, mute, unfollow, and report features are. Algorithmic awareness — understanding that apps are designed to keep them engaged and serve content based on their history — is a valuable life skill.

Further resources

- Safer Internet Centre (parents): saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers/phones
- NSPCC online safety: learning.nspcc.org.uk/online-safety
- Childline staying safe online: childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety
- Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP): ceop.police.uk
- Papaya Parents (contracts and parental controls): papayaparents.com
- Net Aware (platform guides): net-aware.org.uk