
Family Digital Wellness Guide

Evidence-Based Recommendations

This guide consolidates 34 institutional guidelines and peer-reviewed studies, including those from the WHO, AAP, APA, UNICEF, the U.S. Surgeon General, the UK government, and journals such as JAMA Pediatrics, JAMA Psychiatry, and Nature Communications. It provides families with clear, evidence-based guidance from birth through age 18, with the aim of supporting children to grow up confident, healthy, and well-equipped to navigate a digital world.

All Ages

0-2

3-5

6-12

13-18

ALL AGES

Core Principles

- **Prioritize real-world experiences and protect attention, learning, and mental health.** Follow age-appropriate screen time guidelines. Choose high-quality, slow-paced, age-appropriate content. Avoid fast-paced, sensational, or age-inappropriate content, auto-play, and infinite scroll. [2, 5, 19]
- **Cultivate strong family connections and safeguard sleep.** Strong family relationships are protective for children at every age. Family meals, shared activities, conversations about the day, and consistent bedtime routines build the foundation children draw on when navigating digital pressures. Sleep is also one of the most consistently documented concerns of screen use across all ages. Bedtime screen use, in-bed interactive use, and overnight notifications disrupt sleep in toddlers, school-age children, teens, and adults. Create device-free bedrooms, set tech curfews, and shut off devices at least one hour before bed. [5, 14, 32, 33]
- **Model healthy digital behaviors and create family agreements.** Parents' own technology habits are one of the strongest influences on children's habits. Model the behavior you want to see. Family agreements give households a shared framework for how technology is used, who uses what, when, and where, and create natural openings for ongoing conversation as children grow. The AAP's Family Media Plan and Common Sense Media's Family Media Agreement offer free templates families can adapt. [3, 4, 21]
- **Delay access to smartphones and social media.** A global study of over 100,000 young adults found mental wellbeing declined progressively with younger age of first smartphone ownership, with outcomes notably worse for those who received a smartphone before age 13 [18]. For social media, multiple lines of research point to early adolescence (approximately ages 11 to 15) as the period of greatest sensitivity: neuroimaging studies, longitudinal studies, and a meta-analysis of 153 studies converge on this window [28, 29, 30]. Based on this evidence, this guide recommends delaying smartphones until at least age 14 and social media until at least age 16.
- **Be cautious and selective with AI.** The evidence on AI's effects on child development is still emerging. Leading institutions, including the APA, Common Sense Media, and the Brookings Institution, agree that current risks for children outweigh demonstrated benefits, and that AI companion chatbots should not be used by minors. At the same time, narrow, supervised use of general AI tools can support learning when paired with strong human guidance, critical thinking, and clear conversation about what AI is and is not. [25, 26, 27]

AGES 0 – 2

Infants and Toddlers

Screens can compete directly with the inputs infants need most. Infants learn through reciprocal, face-to-face interaction with caregivers, watching faces, hearing voices, being responded to. These early human connections build the foundations of language, attention, and emotional development. Institutional consensus on this age group is consistent across major pediatric bodies.

- **Aim for no screen time during the first 18 months.** The WHO, AAP, and UK EYSTAG (2026) align with this guidance, with limited exceptions for shared family interactions like video calling relatives or looking at family photos together. [2, 4, 17]
- **Prioritize responsive interaction, play, and reading.** Research following children from infancy through adolescence finds early screen exposure is associated with later effects on decision-making and anxiety. Frequent parent-child reading, responsive play, and back-and-forth conversation help protect early development. [20, 22, 34]
- **Reduce passive screen exposure in the home.** Turn off background TV. A meta-analysis found background television was negatively associated with cognitive outcomes in young children. Avoid routine parental device use during feeding, play, and caregiving. These early interactions are foundational for healthy development. [3, 19, 21]
- **Avoid AI-enabled toys and apps for this age group.** Infants and toddlers benefit most from interactive, responsive human caregiving, which is the gold standard for early development at this age. [17, 26, 27]

AGES 3 – 5

Early Childhood

At this age, screens can disrupt the language, attention, and self-regulation systems children are actively building. Between ages 3 and 5, children are still developing the ability to distinguish reality from fiction. This is both an important time to introduce healthy digital habits and a period when unsupervised digital exposure can be especially disruptive.

- **Limit recreational screen use to 1 hour or less per day, ideally in short chunks of 30 minutes or less.** Choose high-quality, slow-paced, interactive and educational content with simple stories, limited movement, and repetition. Avoid fast-paced, social media-style videos. [2, 3, 17]
- **Co-view educational media.** Engage together through conversation to boost language, attention, and connection. Ask questions, respond to what is happening on screen, and connect it to real-world experiences. [4, 5, 19]
- **Create a supportive digital environment.** Screen use at this age should be the exception rather than the default, with strong household norms around it. Keep screens off at mealtimes and in the hour before bed. Turn off background TV. Avoid parental device use during play and caregiving. Young children pick up technology habits from the adults around them. These informal household norms become the foundation for the family media plan that takes shape in school-age years. [3, 5, 17]
- **Avoid AI tools, toys, and chatbots.** Common Sense Media (January 2026) recommends that parents avoid giving AI toys to children age 5 and under. The UK expert panel (March 2026) reached the same conclusion. At this age, children cannot distinguish between an AI response and a human response, and are particularly susceptible to forming attachments to interactive technologies. [17, 26, 27]

AGES 6 – 12

School-Age Children

Children can encounter digital social complexity before they have the skills to navigate it. At this age, peer relationships become more important and children develop the early foundations of independent thinking. Most children first encounter digital social environments here, group chats, gaming communication, messaging platforms, before their social-emotional skills are fully developed.

- **Set screen-use guardrails.** Focus on what screen use displaces: sleep, schoolwork, physical activity, family connection, and unstructured play, rather than counting hours alone. The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 framework focuses on what children are watching, when, and what it replaces in their day, rather than strict time limits. [5, 13, 14]
- **Create a family media plan together.** School-age is the age when household technology agreements work best because children can participate in setting them. Build the plan with your child, not for them: agree together on household norms (no devices in the bedroom, no screens at mealtime, screens in common areas), what content is appropriate, and how much time. Revisit the plan as children grow. [5, 16, 6]
- **Teach online safety and digital citizenship.** Use parental controls and approved-content lists. Discuss how to recognize advertising, protect personal information, and respond to uncomfortable content. [5, 6, 12]
- **Delay smartphones and social media.** Many children today get their first smartphone around age 10 or 11, and 40% of under-13s already have a social media profile (Ofcom 2025). This guide recommends delaying smartphones until at least 14 and social media until at least 16. If a child needs a device for communication, basic phones provide connection without full smartphone access. Some countries have enacted minimum-age legislation, but in most places families face the decision on their own. Parent pacts offer practical support and shared community for those choosing to delay. [1, 7, 8, 18]
- **Introduce messaging carefully.** Group chats are common even in elementary school. A study of 4,477 elementary, middle, and high school students found about 30% reported personal victimization from cyberbullying in WhatsApp class groups, with the highest rates at the elementary level [5, 31]. Most messaging platforms set minimum ages of 13 or higher. If a child uses messaging, 1:1 conversations and smaller trusted groups with parent visibility are preferable to class-wide chats. Review chats together as co-navigation, not surveillance. Talk through what to do if something feels wrong: leave the chat, silence notifications, and share with a parent.
- **Use AI with extreme caution.** Common Sense Media warns that AI companion chatbots are not appropriate for minors, and AI toys for this age group warrant extreme caution. When a child uses general AI tools for schoolwork, co-use with them: sit together, discuss what the tool is doing, and check outputs. [25, 26, 27]

AGES 13 – 18

Teens

Adolescence is when social media's effects on mental wellbeing peak [29, 30], and when algorithms shape much of what teens encounter online. Identity formation, risk-taking, and the desire for autonomy accelerate during these developmentally rich years. Guidance at this stage works best as partnership, staying connected with teens as they grow into independence, and keeping the protective practices that support them through it.

- **Shape healthy smartphone use.** Delay until at least 14. When introducing a smartphone, do so with clear agreements, parental controls, and graduated independence. Start with limited app access and clear practices: phones charge outside bedrooms, no phones at meals. The risks associated with early smartphone access are mediated through social media, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep, and poor family relationships, so address each of these directly from the start. [1, 7, 18]
- **Guide social media use thoughtfully.** Delay until at least 16. Guide critical thinking, encourage positive content choices, and monitor for signs of harm such as sleep disruption, anxiety, depression, negative body image, or social withdrawal. If these signs emerge, scaling back access is appropriate at any age. [6, 7, 30]
- **Navigate group chat dynamics.** Group chats remain a significant part of teen digital life. Exclusion, mocking, and pile-ons can escalate quickly in group settings, and anything shared can be screenshotted or forwarded. Keep conversation open about the dynamics teens encounter, checking in regularly rather than only after problems arise. Agree on chat-free hours around bedtime and family time. [5, 8, 31]
- **Strengthen healthy tech habits as autonomy grows.** Monitor whether screen use is displacing what teens need most: sleep, schoolwork, activity, and relationships. As teens take on more independence, the practices established earlier remain protective: devices charge outside bedrooms (sleep protection), no screens at meals (family connection), screens off before bed (mental health). Revisit your family media plan together as teens grow. [5, 14, 32]
- **Deepen digital literacy and agency.** Building on the digital citizenship work begun in earlier years, teens move from supervised navigation to independent judgment: critically evaluating information, recognizing manipulation, managing their digital identity, and contributing positively to their communities. Parents play a key supporting role by modeling critical thinking, talking openly about content teens encounter, asking how they evaluated what they saw, and continuing conversations about online experiences. [5, 12, 15]
- **Develop AI literacy.** No AI companions. Common Sense Media concluded that AI companion chatbots pose unacceptable risks to anyone under 18. The APA warns that adolescents may form emotional dependencies on AI that displace real-world relationships. The Brookings Institution recommends narrow, learning-focused use of general AI tools that supports teens' own reasoning rather than replacing it. [25, 26, 27]

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