

Family Digital Wellness Guide

Evidence-Based Recommendations

This guide consolidates 49 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, Neurolmage, 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

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. A 2026 review of 23 meta-analyses covering 2.8 million children found heavier screen use associated with poorer academic achievement, language development, and emotional and behavioral outcomes, with effects comparable to established influences such as family income. [2, 5, 8, 20, 38]
- **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 are consistently associated with shorter and poorer 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, 13, 36, 37]
- **Model healthy digital behaviors and create family agreements.** Parents' own device use around their children is consistently associated with more child screen time and poorer developmental outcomes in the early years. 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, 23]
- **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 [19]. A separate study following 8,957 US children found that those who owned a smartphone at 12 reported more eating-disorder symptoms at 14 than those who did not, after accounting for earlier symptoms and family circumstances [39]. For social media, neuroimaging, longitudinal, and meta-analytic evidence all point to early adolescence (approximately ages 11 to 15) as the period of greatest sensitivity, and the AAP's 2026 statement names it as a susceptibility window [5, 29, 30, 31]. Based on this evidence, this guide recommends delaying smartphones until at least age 14 and social media until at least age 16. [5, 19, 26, 29, 30, 31]
- **Be cautious and selective with AI.** The evidence on AI's effects on child development is still emerging. Brookings concludes that on the current trajectory the risks to students outweigh the benefits; Common Sense Media concludes AI companions are unsafe for anyone under 18; the APA warns of emotional dependency and of adolescents not questioning what AI tells them. The distinction that matters at every age is supervised co-use versus solo access. A child using a general AI tool beside an adult who checks the output is a different exposure from a child with private, persistent access to a model that remembers them. Narrow, supervised use of general AI tools can support learning when paired with strong human guidance. [40, 41, 42, 44, 48]

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, 15]
- **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. [21, 22, 24]
- **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, 20, 23]
- **Avoid AI-enabled toys and apps for this age group.** Infants and toddlers benefit most from responsive human caregiving. The UK expert panel found no convincing evidence on the impacts or safety of AI toys or chatbots for under-5s and advised against them; Common Sense Media reached the same conclusion for 5 and under. [15, 41, 48]

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, in short sessions.** 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, 15]
- **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, 20]
- **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, 15]
- **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 often cannot reliably tell an AI response from a human one, and are particularly susceptible to forming attachments to interactive technologies. [15, 41, 44]

A G E S 6 – 1 2

School-Age Children

Children meet digital social life before they have the skills to navigate it. Peer relationships grow in importance, and most children first meet group chats, gaming, and messaging here, 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 asks what children are watching, when, and what it replaces, rather than setting strict time limits. [5, 12, 13, 25, 38]
- **Create a family media plan together.** Household agreements work best at this age because children can help set them. Build the plan with your child, not for them: no devices in the bedroom, no screens at mealtime, screens in common areas, what content is appropriate, and how much time. Revisit it as children grow. [5, 14, 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. Say plainly that no one should ask for photos of their body, that it is never their fault, and that telling you brings help, not punishment. Most online sexual exploitation happens on mainstream social media and in games, most often by a peer or someone known in person and often by someone first met online, and most children never tell anyone. [5, 6, 10, 18, 27, 28]
- **Delay smartphones and social media.** Most children get their first smartphone at 10 or 11, and 40% of under-13s already have a social media profile. This guide recommends delaying smartphones until at least 14 and social media until at least 16. If a child needs a device for communication, a basic phone provides connection without full smartphone access. Parent pacts offer practical support and shared community for those choosing to delay. [1, 7, 9, 19, 39]
- **Introduce messaging carefully.** Group chats are common even in elementary school, and a study of 4,477 students found about 30% had been targeted in WhatsApp class groups, with the highest rates in elementary school. If a child uses messaging, 1:1 conversations and small trusted groups with parent visibility are preferable to class-wide chats. Review chats together as co-navigation, not surveillance, and agree what to do if something feels wrong: leave the chat, silence notifications, tell a parent. [5, 9, 35]
- **Keep online gaming to people your child knows.** Most children this age game, and over half who play online play with people they have not met in person. Online-safety regulators advise that children should only communicate in games with people they and their parents know offline, and that public chat is not for children without direct supervision. Use friends-only settings, turn off open voice chat, keep gaming devices in common areas, and agree in advance on in-game spending, which is built on the same pull as gambling. Watch what gaming displaces, sleep first. [5, 9, 31, 32, 33, 34]
- **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. Most children this age already meet AI in search results, and nearly half of those who read AI summaries believe they are always accurate. When a child uses general AI tools for schoolwork, co-use: sit together, discuss what the tool is doing, and check outputs. If a child turns to AI for feelings or friendship, that is worth a conversation, because it often signals loneliness. [9, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 47, 49]

AGES 13 - 18

Teens

Early adolescence is when associations between social media and mental wellbeing are strongest, and when algorithms shape much of what teens see. Identity, risk-taking, and the desire for autonomy all accelerate. Guidance works best as partnership: stay connected as teens grow into independence, and keep the protective practices in place.

- **Shape healthy smartphone use.** Delay until at least 14. Introduce it with clear agreements, parental controls, and graduated independence: limited app access at first, phones charging outside bedrooms, no phones at meals. The risks of early smartphone access run through social media, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep, and strained family relationships, so address each from the start. [1, 7, 19, 39]
- **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. Sexual exploitation online is common in adolescence, most often from a peer, partner, or someone known in person, and often from someone first met online. Say now that pressure to send images is never their fault and that coming to you brings help, not consequences. [6, 7, 18, 27, 28, 31]
- **Navigate group chat dynamics.** Exclusion, mocking, and pile-ons escalate quickly in group chats, and anything shared can be screenshotted or forwarded. Keep the conversation open, checking in regularly rather than only after problems arise, and agree chat-free hours around bedtime and family time. [5, 9, 35]
- **Strengthen healthy tech habits as autonomy grows.** Watch whether screen use is displacing what teens need most: sleep, schoolwork, activity, and relationships. The practices set earlier remain protective as independence grows: devices charge outside bedrooms, no screens at meals, screens off before bed. Revisit the family media plan as teens grow. [5, 13, 36]
- **Deepen digital literacy and agency.** Teens move from supervised navigation to independent judgment: evaluating information, recognizing manipulation, and managing their digital identity. Parents support this by modeling critical thinking, talking openly about what teens encounter, and asking how they judged it. [5, 10, 11]
- **Keep gaming bounded and with people they know.** Early adolescence is where associations between gaming and behavior are strongest. Keep play mostly with friends known offline. Agree on total time and a hard stop before bed, and know the three signs the WHO uses to define a problem: losing control over play, gaming crowding out other interests, and continuing despite clear harm for months. If those appear, scale back and talk to a professional. [5, 16, 31, 33, 34]
- **Develop AI literacy. No AI companions.** Common Sense Media concluded that AI companion chatbots pose unacceptable risks to anyone under 18, and the APA warns that adolescents may form emotional dependencies on AI that displace real relationships. About one in five 12- to 21-year-olds used a chatbot for mental-health advice in 2025, and most told no one. The household rule for general AI is supervised and bounded, never delegated: teens use it to support their own reasoning, with an adult who can see how, never as a private confidant. Teach the limits too: only half of teens feel confident spotting AI-generated content, and many who feel confident cannot. [9, 17, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49]

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