

Teens and Smartphones

According to the website Psychology Today, “Smartphones are not causing kids and teens to fall off a cliff into misery and despair. The sky is not falling.” However, there is research to suggest that kids use of smartphones can have a negative effect on their wellbeing. The website goes on to warn about “too much screen time.” In fact, children’s typical use today is overuse.

95% of teens today have access to a smartphone. Common Sense Media found that the average teen spends 9 hours a day, online. The overuse of screens is associated with depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Kids who overuse often don’t get enough sleep, physical activity or in-person social interactions. The Pew Research Center wrote, “Even teens are worried that they spend too much time on their phones.”

So what is the right age for kids to have a smartphone? Many parents get their children smartphones between the ages of 10 to 12, some even earlier. This, despite the fact that the creators of many mobile apps recommend children should be at least 13 years of age before using the app. We believe children should be at least 13 or 14 years old before parents consider providing or allowing smartphones. More than age however, parents should ask themselves this question, “Is my child mature enough to use a smartphone responsibly?” Here are the reasons why.

A report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Pediatrics, analyzed 39 studies and found that 27% of teens have received nude photos and 15% of teens send nude photos. However, recent “sexting” scandals on some middle and high school campuses across the country highlight the importance of maintaining open lines of communication and parental oversight with teens. In these particular incidents 50 to 60% of the high school students were involved in sending nude photographs using mobile apps.

Sexting is illegal and violates both state and federal child anti-pornography laws. While some states have legislated new laws that specifically address teen sexting and treat it as a misdemeanor crime, other states maintain FELONY provisions. In all states, a sexting conviction will constitute a violation, whether misdemeanor or felony. Some states still require convicted teens to register as sex offenders, tarnishing their reputation and impacting future employment opportunities. Many (if not most) teens are unaware that sexting is a crime.

Keeping up with teens and the changes in social media requires constant effort. We’ve mentioned the most commonly used mobile apps below, but new apps are constantly being developed. More teens use mobile apps and their smartphones to go online, than computers.

According to a recent PEW Research Center report, 51% of teenagers, ages 13 to 17, say they still use Facebook. That number is considerably lower than YouTube, (85%) Instagram, (72%) and Snapchat, (69%). Social media trends change rapidly and we strongly recommend that parents conduct their own frequent research. A simple Internet search of “teens and social media” will return several articles and research reports that can help parents stay current. Parents are encouraged to spot check their child’s Internet browser’s history settings which may reveal what sites they visit. Why?

Here are just a few of the statistics from the National Crime Prevention Center, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the University of New Hampshire Youth Internet Safety Survey and the Pew Research Center:

- 95% of teens go online at least weekly.
- There are over 4.2 million pornographic websites.
- 70% of all teens have accidentally encountered porn during an Internet search
- **The single largest consumer group of Internet porn is children, ages 12 to 17.**
- 69% of teens regularly receive online communications from strangers and DO NOT tell a parent or guardian.
- 96% of teens use social networking sites and apps.
- 71% of teens use more than one social networking site or app.

Notable, is the age of children viewing porn, (12 to 17). Just one of many reasons we believe children should be at least 13 or 14 years old before parents consider providing or allowing smartphones.

Example: One parent gave her two children smartphones when they were just 10 and 11 years old. Less than 3 months later, the eldest child was suspended from school. The child was caught with another engaged in an oral sex act, on campus. The children were duplicating an act seen on a pornographic website.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. On 5/29/19, two high school students were caught having sex on campus. The students were recording the act and uploading it to a social media platform for their friends to see.

For parents, “hidden” or “secret” apps are another area of concern. One such app looks and acts like a regular calculator. Other hidden mobile apps include: The Vault, Vaulty, Best Secret Folder, Private Photo Vault, Gallery Vault, Gallery Lock, KeepSafe and iOS Hidden Photos. Most of these apps do not show on the phones “gallery” and allow users to hide videos, pictures, and texts. Other versions allow teens to go online without leaving any browser history. Only when the user types in their password for that specific hidden or secret application, does the app reveal its true purpose.

Did you know that most smartphones allow users to hide any app on the phone? By doing an Internet search for “find hidden apps on iPhone” or “find hidden apps on Android” parents can learn how to uncover and remove most hidden apps on smartphones. One helpful site is Safe Guard: <https://safeguarde.com/find-hidden-apps-android-iphone/>

Unfortunately, there is no technology available that allows for complete parental control of mobile apps. If one did exist, developers would simply create a new app to defeat it. Applications can however, be located and removed from the phone. There are MANY Parental Control Apps on the market that help parents both monitor and limit their child’s use of social media.

[Here are the URL’s for several of the top rated parental control apps.](https://www.bark.us/)
<https://www.bark.us/>

<https://www.qustodio.com/>
<https://www.webwatcher.com/ca>
<https://www.eset.com/us/home/parental-control-android/>
<https://www.netnanny.com/>
<https://screentimelabs.com/>
<https://meetcircle.com/>
<https://pr.norton.com/norton-family-premier>
<https://www.identityguard.com/>
<https://usa.kaspersky.com/safekids>
<https://www.mobicip.com/>
<https://www.kuukla.com/en/>
<https://mamabearapp.com/>
<https://www.life360.com/>

So What Should Parents Do?

Talking with your children about sexting, bullying and connecting with strangers online is the best way to head off potential problems. The next step is to monitor your child's use of digital devices. Remember, smartphones are a 'thing' and parents control things. One popular trend helping families reconnect is "7 to 7." As a general rule, every family member's smartphone is turned off at 7 PM. Phones are turned back on at 7 AM the following morning. At the very least, parents could try turning off every phone during the family dinner hour. Use the time away from all media to reconnect with your kids.

In Summary:

1. Talk with your children about their Internet, computer and smartphone use.
2. ACTIVELY supervise all of your child's smartphone use. (69% of teens regularly receive online communications from strangers and do not tell a parent or guardian.)
3. Learn instant messaging slang terms. (Go to: <http://www.netlingo.com/> or <http://www.urbandictionary.com>)
4. Learn all you can about your child's smartphone's technology. Are there any hidden or secret apps? Apps that allow users to remain anonymous or encourage contact with strangers should be located and removed from a child's smartphone or tablet.
5. Have the passwords to smartphones, tablets and the social networking sites your child uses. If your child refuses to provide them, withhold the device/s until your child gives you all passwords. Verify that they work and spot-check these from time to time. (Despite what some children may claim, this is not a violation of a child's "rights," but the exercising of the parents' responsibility to protect their children.)
6. Make smartphones and texting off limits during meals and at other family times. Parents must model this themselves.
7. Learn all you can about keeping your children safe. Visit:

<https://staysafeonline.org/>
<https://www.common sense media.org/>
<https://www.verywellfamily.com/search?q=social+media>
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/> (Parent's Guide to Social Media for Kids)