

Smartphone Free Childhood

Connecting, empowering and uniting parents, educators and regulators to delay smartphones and social media, establish phone-free schools, and safeguard the use of technology in education.



A Parent's Guide: Starting the EdTech conversation with your school

Today's classrooms are more digital than ever before. From tablets and online homework to interactive whiteboards and learning apps, technology is woven into how children learn. Whilst educational technology (EdTech) can open opportunities, they also raise important questions for parents:

-  Should the device stay at school, or come home?
-  Are these tools really supporting learning?
-  What safeguards are in place to protect my child?

Having open conversations with your child's school helps ensure that **technology is being used in ways that support learning, encourage balance, and protect wellbeing**. By asking the right questions, parents can better understand their school's approach to screen time, digital tools, and online safety and privacy, and play an active role in shaping a healthy relationship between education and technology.

This guide provides practical tips and conversation starters to help you confidently engage with your child's teachers and school leaders about EdTech use, fostering a collaborative, solution finding approach that supports what is best for your child.

About Smartphone Free Childhood South Africa

The Smartphone Free Childhood (SFC-SA) movement supports a **slow-tech** and **low-tech** approach to childhood – and an intentional, informed approach to the use of technology in education.



We believe technology can be a powerful tool for learning when used responsibly, with clear boundaries and thoughtful integration into the classroom. **However, it should never replace human connection, critical thinking, creativity and socio-emotional development.**

That's why at SFC-SA we emphasise collaboration between families and schools, ensuring that decisions around technology use are mindful, transparent and inclusive.

At the **heart of our approach** is a focus on learner **wellbeing, safeguarding**, and creating a **balanced digital environment** where children can benefit from innovation without being overwhelmed by it.



By working together, we can promote responsible digital learning that supports healthy development, protects children, and prepares them for the future.

Join the Movement!



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The impact of technology on children

Children in primary school are in a critical stage of development – physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral/spiritual.

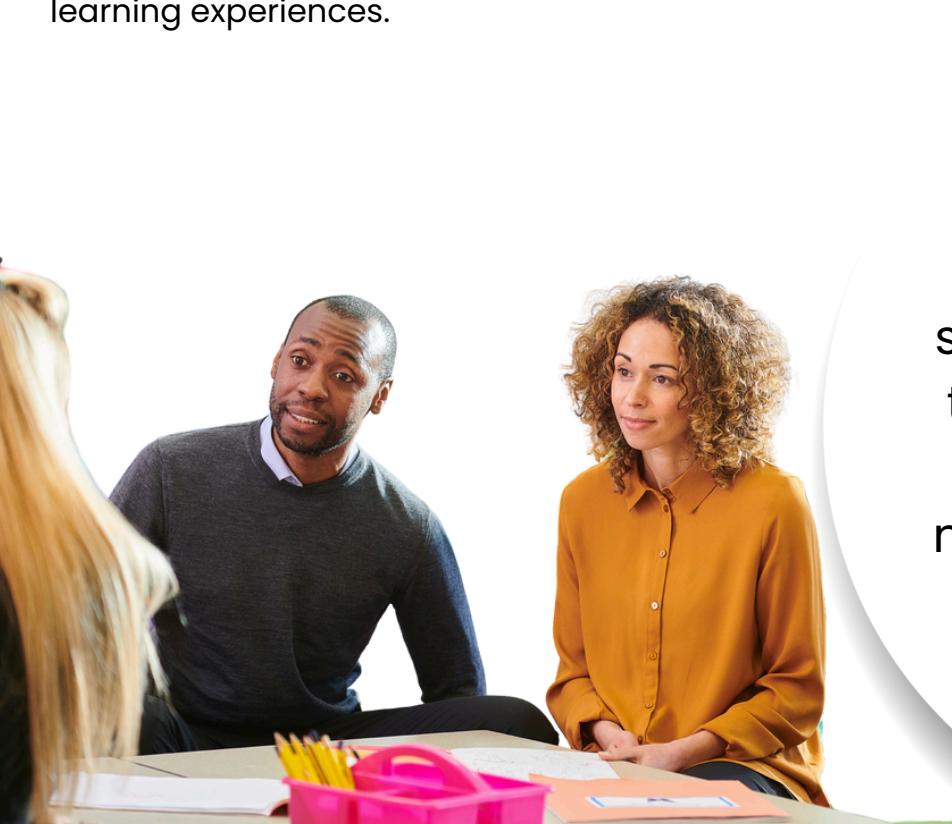
The research highlights that excessive and unsupervised screen use during this period can lead to physical issues like poor **sleep, weight gain, and vision problems, as well as developmental problems** such as reduced social skills, lower academic performance, attention difficulties, and increased risk of anxiety and depression.

It can also negatively impact **cognitive development**, increase exposure to risks like cyberbullying, grooming and sextortion, and reduce time for essential activities like active play, outdoor time, and face-to-face interactions.



While technology can offer important educational benefits, these are outweighed by the documented risks when use is not tightly managed and monitored, age-appropriate, and purpose-driven.

Schools and parents should work together to limit personal device use during the school day and ensure that any technology integrated into learning is done under direct supervision, within a closed and secure system, and in balance with traditional, hands-on, and social learning experiences.



It is important that the introduction of EdTech should not **create a portal to inappropriate content, social media and messaging platforms** with the potential risks and harms they create for children.

Approaches to the integration of EdTech

The use of EdTech is a strategic decision that needs to be made at school board or SGB level in the interests of the school community. If a school decides to integrate technology, it should be approached carefully and mindfully, recognising the school's **duty of care** to keep learners safe from harm, including digital harm.



In a school context, **safeguarding** means ensuring children's wellbeing and safety by protecting them from harm, abuse, and neglect, both within the school and in the broader community, including online spaces.



This involves understanding the specific risks young people face outside their families, such as online bullying, exploitation, and gang violence, and working collaboratively with parents, community groups, and other organisations to create a safer environment.

When mandating the use of technology, schools are required to safeguard learners online using such as firewalls, mobile device management systems (MDMS's) and clear policies around:

- ⚡ Protection of learner data;
- ⚡ Choices and application of platforms;
- ⚡ Online and physical boundaries for device and platform use;
- ⚡ Content monitoring and filtering.
- ⚡ Age-appropriate digital citizenship education;
- ⚡ Inclusion of all learners (regardless of their home access to technology); and
- ⚡ Guidance and training of parents to support digital safety.



This requires development of a clear vision and strategy by the school, explicit rationale for EdTech choices and continual review of EdTech devices and platforms.

In addition, **schools must empower educators** to balance tech use with wellbeing, including ongoing teacher training and professional development.

It is vital that consideration is given to the pros and cons of these possible approaches:

Description	School Responsibility	Parent Responsibility	Learners Responsibility	Equity & Inclusion	Implementation	Learning Impact	Data Privacy	Sustainability
School purchases, owns and manages devices								
Devices filtered, protected and managed by the school; used only at school as educational tools	School manages devices and monitoring; High school budget (device, firewall, MDM licenses); school must secure/ manage devices (insurance & security)	Parents not required to take responsibility	Learners follow school policy/rules, less direct responsibility	Devices accessible to all, reduces digital divide	Requires strong IT support, ongoing teacher training	Consistent integration and focus, maximises classroom engagement; no tech in afternoons for homework	Data managed centrally, meets school policy	School controls device lifecycle planning
Parents purchase or lease devices for strict school-managed use								
Parents buy devices managed and filtered by school; used at home and/or school for learning only	School ensures devices used for education, protection applied at home/school; School budget needed for MDM used for home protection and management	Higher parent investment for device- parental monitoring limited (report breaches & incidents to school)	Learners required to comply with school policy across settings, some responsibility for care	Risks excluding families unable to afford devices unless subsidised	Requires strong IT support, ongoing teacher training; onboarding briefing for parents required	Permits use of tech outside of school hours for educational use only; requires monitoring	Data managed centrally, meets school policy	Challenging to manage life cycle planning, mixed refresh cycles
Parents purchase devices with shared supervision								
Parents buy devices; filtered/managed at school hours, parents responsible at home	School ensures learning environment supervision during hours; flexible for home use; shared cost	Parental monitoring required after school. Parents must set up home protections, ensure safe wifi/device care; requires consistent oversight	Learners must adapt to mixed supervision, build awareness and responsible use	Can disadvantage families without tech skills/support; Risks excluding families unable to afford devices unless subsidised	Requires strong IT support at school, ongoing teacher training; parents need guidance and training for home management	Home use may vary widely; possible distractions away from school for non-educational purposes	School can cover school data only; privacy at home depends on parent setup	Challenging to manage life cycle planning, mixed refresh cycles

 **SFC-SA believes that collaborative conversations between parents and educators, aimed at finding the best solution for a school community, are necessary and vital.**



Starting the EdTech Conversation

To begin this journey, it's important to approach the conversation with your child's school in a spirit of partnership rather than confrontation.

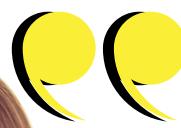
Schools are navigating rapid changes in education and technology, often with limited resources and competing priorities. By showing openness, curiosity, and appreciation for the efforts of educators, parents and caregivers can set the stage for constructive dialogue.

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The aim is not to challenge or criticize, but to build a shared understanding of how EdTech is being used, what safeguards are in place, and whether it impacts learners' wellbeing, safety and privacy.



These guiding questions are designed to help you prepare, listen, and collaborate with teachers and school leaders, so that technology becomes a positive, supportive tool rather than a source of risk and harm.



Technology will never replace great teachers, but in the hands of great teachers, it is transformational

George Couros, educator & author of "The Innovator's Mindset".





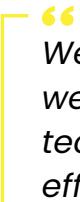
Prepare to Partner:

 **Review school EdTech and safeguarding policies**

 **Ask your child about their experience**

- What digital devices or platforms do you use most at school?
- What do you enjoy most about using technology at school?
- When you don't have technology in class, how is learning different?
- What do you enjoy most about using technology at school?
- Are there any parts of using technology at school that you find distracting or frustrating?

 **Set positive intentions**

 *We're excited to learn more about how technology supports learning and wellbeing at your school. I appreciate the work teachers do to adapt to technology and stay innovative. How can we work together to support safe and effective learning?*

 **Emphasise teamwork and shared care**

- How can parents and educators work together to support safe and mindful technology use by learners?
- How can we ensure that EdTech is used optimally and only where necessary?
- How can we work together to ensure a balance between screentime-based and offline skills development?

 **Clarify the school's vision and policy around integration and use of EdTech**

- How is technology integrated into daily lessons?
- Which apps or platforms are used in class, and what skills or experiences do they give learners that traditional methods might not?
- What educational benefits do these tools offer my child?



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Clarify EdTech's learning benefits

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Explore how screen time and offline time are balanced

- How much school time is spent using screens each day or week?
- How is screentime tracked and managed during lessons?
- What kind of parameters have you set, if any, for screentime for the various grade groups?
- Are there guidelines for balancing online and offline activities?



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Teachers remain the heart of education; technology is simply the tool that helps their impact reach further.

Ask about digital citizenship education

- How does the school teach safe, responsible online behaviour and awareness about online risks?
- How is AI and emerging technology literacy built into the curriculum?
- How are potential risks and harms managed?

Discuss privacy and learner safety

- How does the school safeguard learner data and privacy?
- Which digital platforms collect learner information, and how is that data protected?
- How does the school communicate data usage policies with families?

 **Address device management and digital safeguarding**

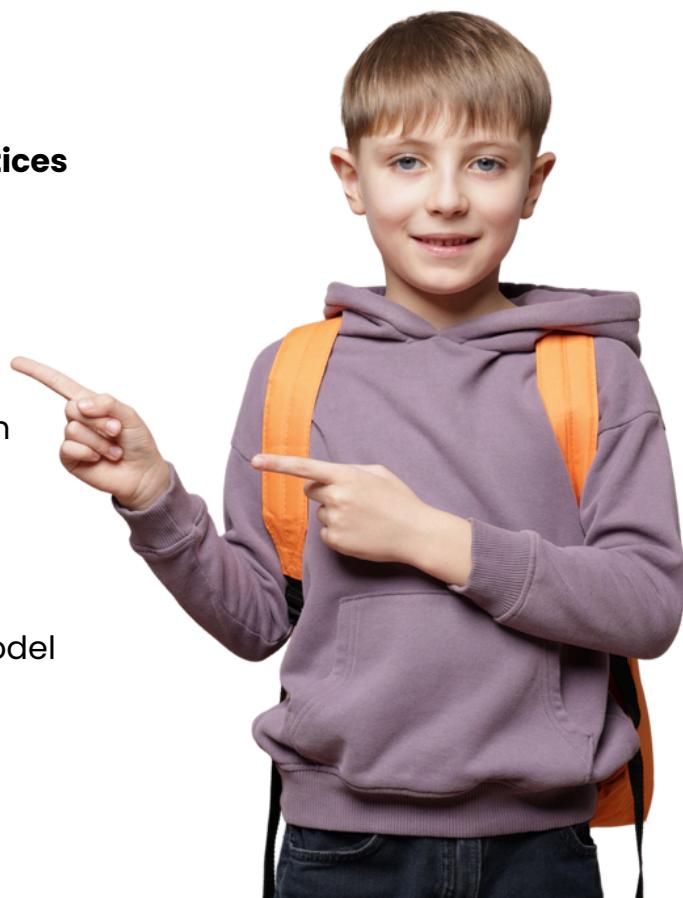
- How are devices managed and protected, both at school and at home?
- What filtering, firewalls and mobile devices management systems are used at school?
- Can these protections be extended after school?
- How does the school guide and ensure responsible device use at home?

 **Explore options around Ed Tech access**

- What is the school's approach to providing devices?
- Does the school supply technology that stays on campus, managed under the school's firewall and device management system?
- If parents are expected to provide devices, are these kept at school under teacher supervision and managed by the school's firewall and device management system?
- Where devices are taken home, how does the school ensure they are treated strictly as educational devices or "electronic textbooks"? For example, is the school's mobile device management system (such as JAMF) applied 24/7 to restrict access to only school-approved educational apps, and prevent learners from downloading VPNs, non-educational apps or bypassing controls after hours?

 **Enquire about staff development and best practices**

- How does the school support teachers in staying up to date with new educational technologies?
- Are there regular staff training sessions on digital safety, privacy and responsible tech use?
- What best practices guide teachers when selecting and using digital tools in their classrooms?
- How do staff members encourage and model mindful technology use for learners?





Engage, Listen, and Share:

Share your family's approach to tech

- We're committed to slow-tech, low-tech choices and mindful digital habits at home. How can we partner to keep childhood protected?
- If we have chosen to delay smartphones until high school, what solutions can we find to avoid having to introduce a laptop or tablet at home?

Express interest in future-ready learning

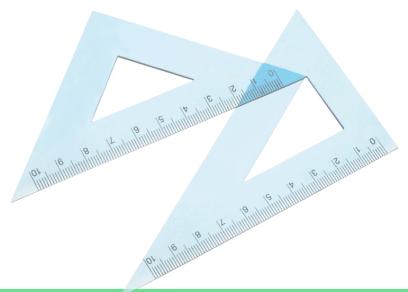
- How does the curriculum build both digital and social-emotional skills?

Offer supportive resources

- Would you be open to exploring SFC-SA research and guidelines with us?

Advocate for transparency and co-creation

- Can families collaborate with the school when reviewing and choosing new EdTech tools, platforms or policies?



Stay Connected and Involved:

Get involved in school tech policy and events

- How can parents participate in review forums or parent advisory groups?

 **Keep home-school conversations going**

- We're building safe digital habits at home. Does the school have any resources or tips we can share with our family network?
- Can we collaborate to promote the sign up by parents to the SFC-SA Parent Pact to delay smartphones?

When Things Go Wrong: Handling Challenges Together

Even with thoughtful planning, issues such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, or data breaches can occur. Schools and families should work together to safeguard learners and respond quickly.

 **Ask about response policies**

- If there is a digital safeguarding issue or data breach, what steps does the school take to protect learners and inform families?

 **Ensure open communication**

- How do learners or parents report digital incidents, and how does the school respond?

 **Review resolution processes**

- What is the process for investigating and resolving digital challenges or breaches?

 **Emphasise learning and wellbeing**

- How does the school support learners and families when things go wrong?

 **Promote ongoing improvement**

- How does feedback from families influence updates to digital safety and EdTech policies?



In Conclusion

Families and schools can co-create technology experiences that empower every child, both online and offline, by nurturing open dialogue, trust and a shared commitment to learner wellbeing. SFC-SA celebrates these partnerships, reminding us that thoughtful, intentional use of EdTech flourishes when parents and educators work together with understanding, care, and a spirit of collaboration to safeguard the children in their care.

Effective EdTech integration depends on confident, well-trained staff. Schools can foster digital excellence by providing ongoing professional development, sharing best practices in digital safeguarding, and encouraging staff to model positive digital behaviour.



Let's continue building these relationships, supporting safer, smarter and happier childhoods, one conversation at a time!

