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.

SFC-SA Family Digital Wellness Guide

Kids need help with their online lives

Your child is now in high school, and you want to introduce them to a smartphone and the online world. As you embark on your journey to lifetime family digital well-being, remember that your relationship with your child is the best defence in keeping them safer and saner online. With all that your kids are exposed to and navigating online, what they need most is a loving, connected but firm parent - not another friend! When it gets hard (and it will), keep going. It will be so worth in the long run!

Step One — Be mindful of screen time

We need to think beyond "how much" screen time.

Modern life requires screens, for school, work, and staying connected. Tech is great, but the real question isn't just how long we're online. It's what we're consuming, when we're online, where we use our devices, with whom, and at what cost.

Every hour spent scrolling is an hour not spent building real-life skills, relationships, confidence, and wellbeing. So the challenge isn't to remove technology, it's to use it intentionally, and to protect what matters most.

Balancing the wheel of life

The Wheel of Life is a tool that helps us see whether we're living in balance. It divides our day-to-day life into different areas, like sleep, school/work, friendships, family time, hobbies, exercise, and rest. When one part gets too much attention and others get ignored, we feel stressed, tired, or off-centre. The goal isn't perfection, it's noticing what needs more care so we can stay healthy, calm, and well.

A balanced wheel rolls smoothly. A balanced life does too.!

Click here to download a worksheet where you can assess the time spent on your current activities and see how balanced your *Wheel of Life* really is.

Step Two   Agree on Family Tech Rules

A good start is to get away from screens for a few hours every now and then, and enjoy a meaningful, screen-free family experience. Then, take turns talking about how tech is used in your home to build up a guide on your families tech engagement rules :

- Discuss and agree on boundaries around device use — think where, when, how, and how much
- Plan how to keep devices out of bedrooms at night, so everyone gets better sleep
- Decide together what happens when the family tech rules aren't followed, so expectations are fair and consistent

Tip:

Talk about what you love and don't love about tech. Listen to your teen(s) and get their buy-in!

Click here to download a worksheet to note down your agreed family tech rules

Step Three   Model Good Digital Habits

Children and teens are more likely to **do what we do, rather than what we say**. They're watching, so set the right example:

- Check your own screen time use
- Tell them what you are doing on your device
- Explain the difference between *functional* and *fun* tech use.
- Use Screen Time (iOS) or Digital Wellbing (Android) to keep track of your own screen time

Click on the icon to learn more

Digital Wellbeing

Use your own journey to digital well-being as an important reminder of how difficult it is to manage tech use, and now consider how much harder it is for your children who do not have fully formed adult brains.
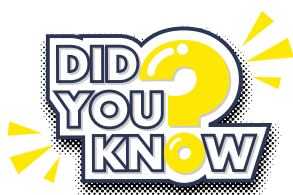
Step Four   Install parental controls

Parental controls are an absolute necessity for the modern parent. We have to protect our teens from accidental exposure to adult content and the harm that strangers online intend for our kids.

We recommend premium parental controls that are harder to work around, provide additional layers of protection, and send alerts on what parents need to know.

DID YOU KNOW

A 2025 study found that among parents with children aged 10–17, only about 47 % use parental controls on smartphones, and just 51 % on tablets, showing that many families still don't take advantage of available tools. Read more about the study *here*.

SFC-SA Recommendations:

Bark

Bark is a parental-control tool that helps parents keep teens safe online without reading every message.

It monitors texts, emails, social media, and 30+ apps for signs of cyberbullying, self-harm, sexual content, or predators, sending alerts only when something concerning arises.

Parents can filter websites and apps, set screen-time limits, and even track device location if needed. Bark supports multiple children and devices under one account

Safe Surfer

Safe Surfer is customized protection for mobile and home devices.

It blocks blocks 50+ categories like porn, ads, malware, and popular social media sites.

Parents can see which sites each device visits, view which sites have been blocked. know when a device is active on the internet, restrict access to internet or particular sites, an amount of screentime per day, reward/deny screentime for some amount of time.

Step Five   Understand age restrictions

App developers are largely unregulated, which means the age ratings you see in app stores are often unreliable. These ratings are usually self-assigned by developers and don't always reflect the real content or risks inside the app.

As a parent, you can't depend on store labels alone. It's important to understand the "real age" suitability of apps and games, including exposure to mature themes, in-app chat with strangers, addictive design features, and unfiltered content, before allowing them on your teenager's phone.

For a more accurate picture, visit **Common Sense Media**, where apps and games are parent reviewed in detail, including real age suitability, themes, and potential risks.

Step Six   Change settings

Your child's device was designed by adults, for adults.

The default settings on smartphones, apps, and games prioritise data collection, engagement, and connectivity — **not teen safety!**. If you don't actively change these settings, your teen's device may share personal and location data, allow unrestricted communication, and leave open pathways for strangers to contact them online. Taking time to adjust privacy, communication, and content controls is one of the most important steps you can take to protect your family.

For trusted, independent guidance, two resources stand out. Used together, these resources help parents both understand the risks and take meaningful action to protect their children online. **Click on each logo for quick access.**

Common Sense Media helps parents understand what apps and games actually contain, offering detailed reviews on age suitability, themes, and potential risks that go far beyond app store ratings.

Internet Matters complements this by providing step-by-step, practical guidance on how to set up parental controls across devices, apps, and platforms, with clear explanations and visual walkthroughs.

For parents unsure where to start, **Bark-O-Matic** provides a quick, guided check-in to help align app access with a child's stage of development. **Bark-O-Matic** is a readiness assessment tool designed to help parents think critically about which apps may be appropriate for their teen at different ages.

![SFC South Africa logo]

Step Seven

Know passwords & check up

As parents, our first responsibility is always our teen's emotional and physical safety. **It's important to remember that true privacy does not exist online.**

A helpful mindset is to treat smartphones and smart devices as **loaned, not owned**, with clear expectations attached. This includes parents having access to passwords for devices, apps, and games as part of responsible use. Agree on family tech rules or a simple smart device contract, and commit to ongoing check-ins and check-ups around your teen's online activity and conversations.

Safety is not a one-time setup, but an ongoing conversation.

Click here to download our suggested Parent-Teen Tech Agreement, a simple contract to help set clear expectations and boundaries around device use.

Trust and Guidance

Introducing a phone to your teen is about more than technology, it's about teaching responsibility, setting boundaries, and guiding them safely into adulthood. While our instinct as parents is to protect them, we must also trust them to make choices and learn from their experiences.

Mistakes are part of this process, and learning to navigate challenges online and offline helps teens develop the skills they need to become responsible, resilient adults.

Remember, your role is not to control every interaction, but to support, guide, and have open conversations as your teen grows. By combining clear rules, active check-ins, and a foundation of trust, you give them the tools to handle difficult situations safely while building confidence in their decision-making.