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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.

Family Tech Guide



Parents, you've got this! As you embark on your journey to lifetime family digital well-being, remember that your relationship with your child is the ultimate defence for keeping them safer and saner online. What kids need most is a loving, connected, but firm parent — not another friend! Use this step-by-step practical guide adapted for South African families to navigate healthy tech boundaries..

First, delay!

Giving a primary school child a smartphone or tablet is like handing them the keys to a high-performance sports car before they've learned to ride a bike. Their young, developing brains are just not ready - the executive functioning skills needed (like impulse control and risk vs consequence assessment) are only fully developed in mid-20's. Research has shown that owning a smartphone before age 13 is strongly linked to worse mental and physical health, including higher rates of depression, anxiety and poor sleep. That's why SFC chapters around the world encourage parents to delay smartphones (and tablets) until high school!

Introduce technology gradually based on emotional maturity - and your readiness to manage the device and install the necessary protections!

- **Stage 1:** Landline / Basic feature phone / GPS Smartwatch
  Calls, SMS, and essential location tracking only. Keeps communication open without internet exposure.
- **Stage 2:** Smart feature phone / School tablet (Wi-Fi only)
  No web browsers or social media apps. Locked down strictly for educational tools and curated audio/reading.
- **Stage 3:** Controlled smartphone / tablet / gaming console
  Introduced later in adolescence with strict parental controls, monitored app downloads, and no unmoderated social media, chats or messging.



Pact over peer pressure: Connect with parents in your child's class or grade by signing the Parent Pact. Delaying smartphones (and social media) is easier when you are part of a like-minded tribe!

Be Mindful of Screen Time, Quality & Balance

SFC SOUTH AFRICA

To help parents understand the recommended maximum time spent on screens, SFC-SA has developed a **Screentime Guide** based on World Health Organisation standards.

The reality is that modern living requires screens for educational and functional reasons. So, in addition to the **quantity** of screen time, we need to evaluate the **quality** - is it:

Passive use: Mindless scrolling, short-form auto-play videos (high risk for habituation).
Interactive use: Family movies, messaging, video calls with family.
Creative or educational use: Coding, digital art, language learning, research.

With only our given 24 hours in each day, our aim is to ensure that screens don't displace essential pillars of child development and growth, namely:

😴 Sleep
🏃 Physical exercise and outdoor play
📚 Focused homework and reading
🗣️ Face-to-face socialising and family time



Click to check where screens are eating into your life

Family boundaries & tech-free zones

Start good habits early for the whole family, and establish clear tech expectations co-created with your children. When kids participate in setting boundaries, they're far more likely to respect them!



Designate a family charging station: No devices in bedrooms overnight. Plug all phones and tablets into a central charging station by a set time every evening. Turn off all screens 30–60 minutes before bedtime to prevent cognitive arousal and melatonin suppression
Create sacred tech-free zones: Declare mealtimes, family car rides, social events and face-to-face conversations 100% screen-free zones for children and adults alike.
Decide ages for access to devices, apps and games: Clarify rules around when and what tech will be allowed based on age and maturity of children.

Create a Family Tech Agreement and stick it up on the fridge. Hold the whole family accountable and agree consequences for when a boundary is over-stepped - parents included!

📍 WHERE we don't use devices	⏰ WHEN we don't use them	🔞WHAT happens if we do
e.g. Bedrooms, dining table, bathrooms	e.g. After 7 PM, meals, homework time, car trips	e.g. Device surrendered for 24 hours, extra chores

Model Good Digital Habits

Children do what we do, not what we say - and they are always watching! Setting the right example and being conscious about our own device use is the vital first step.

Track your own screen use: Use built-in tools like Screen Time (iOS) or Digital Wellbeing (Android).
Put some friction between you and your apps: Put your phone into a basket or a drawer when you come home or use a Swiitch tag.
Narrate device usage: Tell your kids what you are doing on your phone - "I'm checking a work email," or "I'm looking up a recipe".
Distinguish functional vs. fun: Explain the difference between practical utility and mindless scrolling.
Be aware of "Phubbing" (phone snubbing): Never look down at a screen while your child is speaking to you.
Use one device at a time: Digital multitasking sends our brains into overdrive - practice watching family movies together without phones or tablets!

Remember: If managing screen time is tough for adults with fully formed frontal lobes, consider how much harder it is for a child's developing young brain!

Protections & Controls



Parental controls provide vital although not foolproof guardrails against accidental exposure to harmful and explicit content, and must be set up across three layers:

Home Router & Wi-Fi

Passwords: Change default admin passwords on home Wi-Fi routers
DNS Filtering: Enable free web filtering solutions like NextDNS or Cloudflare Family at router level to block adult content across devices connected to home Wi-Fi.
Specialised routers: Install a router like TP-Link with built in parental controls.

Device operating system controls

Set up Apple Screen Time or Google Family Link to manage app downloads, schedule screen downtime, and enforce content filters protected by a parent-only PIN.
Consider adding a third party app such as Bark, SafeSurfer or Quostodia.

App & game controls

Set up available built in controls that allow time, content and messaging restrictions.

Close common bypasses

Block VPN Downloads: Tech-savvy children often use free VPN apps to bypass parental filters. Restrict new app installs and profile modifications via device settings.
Disable Algorithmic Traps: Enable Google SafeSearch, turn on YouTube Restricted Mode, and turn OFF Auto-Play across YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to prevent endless scroll loops.

Age Ratings

App store age ratings are set by the platform developers and not age regulated. The global norm is shifting to 16+ for social media platforms. While we wait for regulation to catch up to science, refer to independent organizations like Children & Media or Common Sense Media for realistic “real age” recommendations and specific platform risks. Remember that apps and games are algorithmically engineered to keep users hooked in, encouraging excessive screen time that can disrupt sleep and daily routines.

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YouTube Kids, Messenger Kids:

Risks: Exposure to unfiltered inappropriate content or algorithmic rabbit holes on YouTube Kids, and early social media habituation, peer pressure, or boundary-pushing via text and video chat on Messenger Kids.
Safety measures: YouTube Kids - turn off search function; handpick specific videos, channels, or collections; set built-in timer; turn off autoplay.
Messenger Kids -monitor activity and control contact list and time using the Parent Dashboard.

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Whatsapp:

Risks: Unwanted contact from strangers, cyberbullying in group chats, and exposure to unmoderated or explicit content. Because the app uses end-to-end encryption and lacks built-in parental controls, parents cannot easily monitor private texts, and features like disappearing messages hide warning signs.
Safety measures: Parent-managed accounts are rolling out gradually. In the meantime, change settings to "My Contacts Only" for group invites to block viral, explicit group chats.

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Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Pinterest, Discord, gaming consoles (Roblox, Fortnite)

Risks: High exposure to viral challenges, self-harm and adult content, and unrealistic comparison. Primary avenues for stranger contact, harassment, online grooming, sextortion and cyberbullying.
Safety measures: Set up built in app and game controls (eg. Instagram Supervision, Snapchat Family Centre, TikTok Family Pairing)

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Anonymous apps, unmoderated video chats, explicit & violent games (GTA)

Risks: Absolute zero-tolerance zone for minors.
Safety measures: None



Bark-O-Matic

If you’re unsure where to start, Bark-O-Matic provides a free quick, guided check-in to help align app access with a child’s stage of development.

Privacy & Safety Settings

Default settings on devices favour data harvesting, continuous engagement, and open access over safety:

Disable location sharing & geotagging: Turn off location permissions on camera apps and social media platforms.
Set accounts to private: Ensure all social accounts, game profiles, and media channels default strictly to Private.
Restrict direct messaging (DMs): Block incoming DMs from non-friends or strangers across all games and apps.
Block in-app purchases: Remove linked credit/debit cards from app store profiles and disable in-app micro-transactions to avoid unexpected charges in games like Roblox.

Check in & Check Up

Child safety overrides a child's expectation of digital privacy. Remember that access to the internet gives the internet access to your child - and that nothing online is ever private!

📱 Loaned, not owned

Treat devices as parent property loaned to the child under the condition of full compliance with family rules. Parents must retain all device passcodes, app store PINs, and reserve the right to perform regular, unannounced Digital Spot-Checks.

🛡️ The "Grace Clause"

Make this explicit promise to your child:
"*If you ever encounter something online that makes you feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused - or if you make a mistake, click a bad link, or send something you shouldn't have - come to us immediately. You will NOT automatically have your phone confiscated for speaking up. We will focus on solving the problem together first.*"
Fear of losing their device or disappointing their parent are the main reasons children hide cyberbullying, explicit exposure, or online sextortion.

🎮 Staying connected

Stay actively involved without embarrassing your child. Normalizing an open dialogue ensures they turn to you when issues arise:
Play together: Join in on their favorite (age appropriate!) video game and ask them to teach you how it works.
Ask open questions: "What's the coolest or weirdest thing you've seen online this week?" or "What would you do if someone in a group chat started sharing creepy content?".

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





⚖️ South African legal realities

Under the Films and Publications Amendment Act and the Cybercrimes Act, sharing sexually explicit imagery (including self-generated content or images shared between minors) or participating in severe cyberbullying carries strict legal penalties in South Africa for youth aged 10 and older.

A last word on trust and guidance

Introducing a smart device to your teen is about more than technology - it's about teaching responsibility, setting boundaries, and guiding them safely into adulthood. It's not a decision to be taken lightly - the whole family needs to ready and prepared for it!

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. Above all, they need to be able to come to us first when things go wrong.

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.

Join the Movement!

- Sign the Parent Pact to delay smartphones
- Sign up as a Phone-Free School
- Join the Whatsapp community

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Contact us!

- Email
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