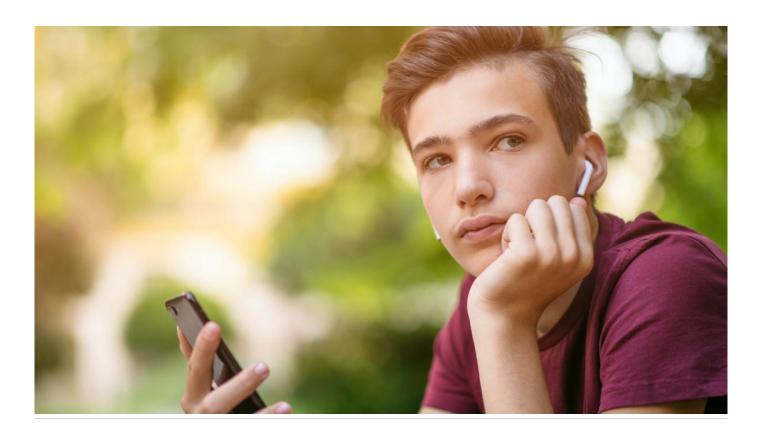# Parent Map _(/)_

FAMILY MEDIA/KIDS + MEDIA

Teaching Kids to Navigate the Information Superhighway

Rules of the road for kids and cell phones

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One of the many aspects of normal life that broke down in the pandemic was parental standards for kids and technology. Limiting screen time and restricting access to the internet are hardly possible, or even fair, when nearly everything must be mediated through technology. Remote learning, virtual playdates and so much Netflix have led many parents to give their kids phones or tablets sooner than they had planned. But even — maybe especially — now that the old rules no longer make sense, parents need to be mindful about their kids' access to technology.

It's not binary

The digital world consists entirely of zeroes and ones, but giving your kid a cell phone (or tablet or any other internet-connected device) does not have to be all or nothing. In fact, Christy Keating, owner of parent education business Savvy Parents Safe Kids (https://www.savvyparentssafekids.com/), says it shouldn't be.

"A great approach is to go really gradually in steps. It shouldn't be like we're off one day and on the next. It should be a process where we are starting to teach our kids how to use these devices safely and how to communicate over social media," she says. "But too often, I see parents just hand over a smartphone with no parental restrictions, no monitoring and no real discussion."

Instead of treating a cell phone like a toy that doesn't require supervision, Keating suggests thinking of it like a car — and teaching kids how to drive before turning them loose on the information superhighway. There are tools parents can use to manage their kids' internet use.

Affordability becomes a key consideration when parents are looking to get their kid's first phone, as the average family phone bill in the United States ranges between $120–$220 per month for multiple lines. Companies such as Tello Mobile (https://ad.doubleclick.net/ddm/clk /491214026;270177411;u) offer low-cost family plans with data and minutes customizable for each family member and "talk and text" plans that don't allow kids to access the internet. Such frugal, flexible and no-contract phone service alternatives can save families up to $1,000 per

year for four lines. Refurbished phones are another money-saving option, and there are now "dumb phones" that look like smartphones but aren't internet-capable.

Establish rules of the road

The rules for screen time, permissible apps and internet access will be different for each family and child, and should change over time. They should be informed by your child's age, maturity and history of responsible use.

For most teens, borrowing the car from their parents is a privilege that can be withheld until responsibilities are met, and can be revoked for bad grades or unsafe driving. Keating recommends the same approach to cell phones. Formalizing the rules in contracts avoids misunderstandings and arguments.

Contracts should include:

- When and how often the phone can be used: *Meal and class-time bans are common.*

- Where the phone charges and is stored at night: *It's harder to keep track of what kids are doing when phones are in their room.*

- A requirement that kids answer texts and phone calls from parents promptly: *There really isn't much justification for letting kids have a phone if parents can't reach them.*

- Rules about content: *For these rules to be helpful, parents need to teach kids about safe searches and dangerous behaviors such as sharing private pictures.*

- How much parents will monitor online activities: *It's only fair for kids to know how much privacy they have, and knowing that parents are checking up may encourage better choices.*

For her own kids, Keating also has a rule against arguing online — all disagreements must be handled face to face.

Digital citizenship

Keating suggests four foundational, values-based principles for online behavior.

1. Understand that the people on the other side of the screen are humans with feelings. Don't say anything online that you wouldn't say to a person's face.

2. Not everyone you meet online is who they say they are, and some of them can mean you harm.

3. Anything and everything digital should be considered permanent and public.

4. Pornography is not for minors.

Parental control

It's natural for kids to push boundaries, but there are tools to help parents enforce the rules. Learn how to set parental controls on the phone itself and in its internet browser. Remember to check them occasionally, as kids can also learn how to change these settings.

"We have to be on top of the technology. We have to know what it is and how it's used," advises Keating. She recommends Jo Langford's podcast "APPropriate (https://www.beheroes.net /appropriate-podcast)" as a resource.

"Our children are deserving of a degree of privacy, particularly as they get older. So, the nature and degree to which we are monitoring will change. It's not that we don't trust them," says Keating. But digital monitoring is a parent's job, as is checking that kids have done their homework or riding along in the car while they practice for their driver's test.

Tools such as Bark (https://www.bark.us/) assist parents in monitoring their kids' online activity with email alerts for flagged words (this generates a lot of "false positives" for harmless and even educational searches). Spot-checking who they connect with online and scanning texts and emails for kind behavior are also good ideas.

Tech trouble

Despite our best efforts, problems can occur online, just as in real life. Children can be exposed (accidentally or intentionally) to pornography, affected by cyberbullying (https://www.parentmap.com/article/bystander-power-how-kids-can-prevent-bullying) and lose sleep while compulsively scrolling the 'gram. Treat these problems as teaching opportunities.

"Whatever issue has come up, if we are doing a lot of lecturing, shaming, scolding or punishing, we're not likely to get a great response from our kids," says Keating. "We need to focus on being both kind and firm."

If that seems like too big of an ask, "Help is not a four-letter bad word. This is hard. So, reaching out and getting some help is certainly valuable."

Back to the future

As kids return to in-person schooling and activities open up, many parents want to wean their kids off of pandemic screen habits.

"Our kids do understand that we're in a weird time right now, and we can remind them that different times call for different rules," says Keating. As pandemic rules relax, off-screen opportunities to fill the needs — boredom relief, creative outlet, connection to peers — previously met online may be as welcome to our little pandemic veterans as to us. With a little guidance, our kids can learn to safely navigate life online and off with equal ease.

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