



Cell Phone Use Among Kids and Teens



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

“Just over half of children in the United States — 53 percent — now own a smartphone by the age of 11. And 84 percent of teenagers now have their own phones, immersing themselves in a rich and complex world of experiences that adults sometimes need a lot of decoding to understand.”

—NPR.org, <https://n.pr/3B5usz8>

Mobile devices are an important part of modern life. Today's students never knew a time before smartphones were commonplace. The rest of us remember that era but don't necessarily want to go back to when maps, phones, social connections and streaming entertainment were not at our fingertips.

Still, most agree that these powerful devices should be regulated for the youngest users.

Focus on balance

A majority of kids and teens have a smartphone. It's hard for parents to say no when phones are so pervasive among kids. And they are convenient. Mobile phones provide parental piece-of-mind when kids need to walk home alone, call for a ride or check in during social gatherings. They offer homework help in the form of easy internet research and access to a calculator.

Mobile devices are useful tools, and all tools are most effective when users understand limitations, safety rules and best practices.

According to Anya Kamenetz, author of “The Art of Screen Time; Digital Parenting Without Fear,” the answer for parents is to balance the amount of time kids use screens with other activities, share screen activities with kids, model technology use for creation, discovery and connection, and help kids understand the media they access. Experts agree that this last point is the most important one. “The best thing you can do generally is talk to your kids about media,” said researcher Eric Rasmussen. “Kids need to know what you think about the media they're consuming.

The mental health impact of screens on kids

Knowing what to think about how online content affects our kids isn't easy, but it is a question that is currently in the national spotlight. Recent news about congressional hearings involving Facebook and Instagram revealed Facebook's strategies to increase membership among minors despite knowing that its platforms could be harmful to young users' mental health.

The company released internal research that indicated possible harmful effects on girl's mental health related to body image and self esteem

(Over)

through Instagram use (<https://bit.ly/2YidI9u>). According to an investigation by the Wall Street Journal, Facebook leaders were aware of the research showing addictive and harmful risks to kids from the social media platform. Read more: The Facebook Files, A Wall Street Journal Investigation, www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039

Smartphones and mobile devices have come a long way, and we are all learning about them as they evolve. Now that they have been widely adopted, it is important to look carefully at the side effects of regular use.

Restricting phone use in schools

Some parents have organized policy changes in their schools and districts to restrict phone use during the school day. The Away for the Day (www.awayfortheday.org/) campaign promotes parent advocacy activities to support policies limiting access to phones during class. The website states:

“Research shows that kids and teens do better with phones away during school hours... When students do not have the freedom of accessing their phones during school hours, they are more engaged socially and academically.”

Phone-free school policies may not be right for every community, but the information can help parents think critically about the way kids use their phones. The site includes research, sample policies, common pushbacks and tools for action. If a policy change isn't the right approach, there are several items in the materials that could prompt a conversation with schools, other parents or even within families.

Guidance for responsible phone use

Common Sense Media helps parents navigate the challenges of the modern media environment. Their website has a section on cellphone parenting that provides tips by age, a question and answer section and articles and videos on topics on more than 100 phone-related topics.

Even if you haven't faced these sticky issues (yet), reading through some of the issues they list can help parents plan ahead. Popular questions are about privacy settings, whether parents should demand passwords to social websites and apps, the right ages for phone ownership, and how to limit the amount of time kids spend texting and interacting on social media.

Resources

Away for the Day

www.awayfortheday.org/

Common Sense Media

www.commonsensemedia.org/cellphone-parenting

Screenagers: The time for less phones in schools is now

<https://bit.ly/3uxvktQ>