# **How to Limit Kids' Tech Use**

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No one cares more about your child's well-being and success than you do. In today's digitally-fueled times, that means guiding him or her not just in the real world but in the always-on virtual one as well. Teach your children to use technology in a healthy way and pick up the skills and habits that will make them successful digital citizens. From 2-year-olds who seem to understand the iPad better than you to teenagers who need some (but not too much) freedom, we’ll walk you through how to make technology work for your family at each stage of the journey.

**Top 3 tips to remember:**

A few basic parenting guidelines will help you establish ground rules and maintain tech harmony at home.

### **1. Aim for Balance**

It's clear that technology is here to stay and the world is becoming only more digitally driven. In many ways, that's a good thing. Technology can be empowering for kids of all ages, with tools that help children learn in fun and engaging ways, express their creativity and stay connected to others. Children who are tech-savvy will also be better prepared for a workforce that will be predominantly digital.

At the same time, parents naturally worry about their kids accessing inappropriate content online, the impact of too much screen time on healthy development and their children becoming tethered to technology.

As with most situations, a balanced approach to these new challenges works best. "The most important step is to establish a balanced or sustainable relationship with tech," says the social psychologist Adam Alter, author of “Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked.” You can liken it to aiming for a healthy diet, Dr. Alter explains: "Older kids understand the concept of balance intuitively -- they know that it’s important to eat healthy foods alongside candy and dessert, and the same is true of the 'empty calories' that come from spending too much time passively gazing at screens. There’s a time for screens, but not at the expense of time for physical activity and connecting with real people in real time."

Some things to keep in mind as you try to strike this delicate balance:

**There's no single recipe for success, but you'll know it when you see it.**Balance for your family will look different than it will for your neighbor because every family is unique and parenting styles and values vary. In general, though, if your family can reap the benefits of technology without feeling many of the harmful effects and you feel confident in how your children are using technology, you've likely found balance.

**Watch for the warning signs of unhealthy tech usage.**The psychologist Jon Lasser, who co-wrote "Tech Generation: Raising Balanced Kids in a Hyper-Connected World," says parents should note when:

* Kids complain that they're bored or unhappy when they don't have access to technology
* Tantrums or harsh resistance occur when you set screen time limits
* Screen time interferes with sleep, school and face-to-face communication

**Be prepared to revisit this topic again and again.**As your children grow, so will their involvement with technology. Also, it's difficult to predict what the digital world will look like even just a few years from now. Your definition of healthy and unhealthy tech usage will need regular updates. Fun times ahead!

**Some tips to evaluate the quality of your children's digital interactions (which you should do regularly):**

* Are they accessing age-appropriate content?
* Are the apps they use interactive and thought-provoking rather than passive? Not all screen time is equal. Going back to the food analogy, 100 calories from a doughnut is not the same as 100 calories from a salad; an hour watching YouTube videos isn't the same as an hour spent in a digital art program.
* Are the privacy settings for older children's social media and other online accounts set to restrict what strangers can see and who can contact your children?
* **Still set screen time limits to balance online and offline activities.**Although quality is most important, you'll probably still want to set some screen time limits for your family to preserve time for activities beyond screens and tech. While the debate on exactly how many hours kids can spend on their screens before it becomes unhealthy rages on, you can draw firm lines for tech-free times, such as during dinner, in the car, or on school nights.

### **2. Be a Role Model**

* Technology's irresistible pull draws in parents as much as it does kids. We check our phones every hour, log late hours working or surfing the internet on our laptops, binge watch our favorite shows, and even engage in dangerous "[distracted walking](https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/28/dangers-of-distracted-walking/)." Children are likely to not only copy our behavior, but they also feel like they have to compete with devices for our attention. Nearly half of parents in one study reported technology interfering with interactions with their child[three or more times on a typical day](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cdev.12822).

Google and Apple are starting to address this growing concern about tech taking over our lives by adding new phone features such as[time limits for specific apps](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/technology/google-io.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer) (for Android) and[statistics on time spent on devices](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/technology/personaltech/apple-iphone-screen-time.html) (for iOS). While digital tools can help us curb excessive gadget usage, practicing and demonstrating mindful use of technology ourselves will be the best way to teach children the critical skill of unplugging.

**Set boundaries for work time and family time.** A few[key times to stay unplugged](https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/how-to-cut-childrens-screen-time-say-no-to-yourself-first/) include:

* when picking up or dropping children at school, as this is a transitional time for them
* After coming home from work, as that's time to reconnect with your family
* during meals, including when dining out
* during outings like trips to the park or zoo, or vacations when the focus is on family time

**Know when you're really busy and need to be plugged in and when you don't.** Often, it feels like there's a work or social emergency and you have to take that call, respond to a message, or check your email — but when you really think about it, it could wait until after you've finished that movie or game with your child.

**Use media the way you want your children to**.  Follow common sense rules around tech like never texting while driving and avoiding oversharing on social media.

By practicing what you preach instead of the hypocritical "do as I say not what I do" approach, you emulate the habits you want your children to pick up and show them that there are times for using technology and times when we should be present in the real world.

### **3. Make Tech a Family Affair**

Your family likely discusses important decisions that affect the group day-to-day, such as who's responsible for doing the dishes and where you should go for your next vacation. Technology use should take the same type of planning, so everyone's on board with the same expectations.

**Set rules as a family.**When you set limits with children, Dr. Lasser says, kids can start learning how to self-regulate and know when screen time is interfering too much with the rest of their lives. As a bonus, he adds: "Kids are also less likely to balk at limits if they have a role in creating and establishing them." You can create a [family media use plan](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx#wizard) at the American Academy of Pediatrics' website.

* **Be involved with your child's tech experiences.**Playing or watching alongside with your children offers several benefits. You'll be able to vet the content they are accessing, the child will learn more from the activity through your interaction, and you'll bond through the shared experience. If your children seem to be light years ahead in tech acumen compared with you, let them teach you — it's a confidence-booster for them and important for you to keep up with the new experiences they're having. This might mean sitting through dizzying Minecraft builds, Fortnite games or learning[teenspeak](https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/26/weekinreview/26belson.html), but at least you'll experience the virtual world together.
* **Tailor your approach to each child.**As with other areas of parenting, what works for one child won't necessarily work for another, depending on their ages, personalities, and needs. Your 10-year-old might be more careful about not playing inappropriate games or keeping your computer free of viruses than your 12-year-old. Your 12-year-old might not want a phone even though her friends all have one.
* Age ranges aren't hard guidelines (including the ones in this guide). Instead, consider them a general roadmap for mentoring your children from an introduction to technology to making their own decisions about how to use it wisely.

**Babies Under 2:**

They're surprisingly adept at tapping and swiping, but keep the phone and tablet away as much as possible (chats with Grandma are O.K.).

One second you're holding your cooing, happy baby and the next she's bawling in the restaurant. Hand over a smartphone, though, and all is well again. It's no wonder parents often resort to electronicn devices to distract. With their endless array of dazzling apps and cartoons on YouTube, gadgets grab babies' attention.

The problem is, a child's brain[grows fastest](http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/why-0-3/baby-and-brain) in the first three years of life, which makes this period the most critical one for lingual, emotional, social and motor skills development. Being able to experience the real world with all of her senses and through live interaction with others will be far more beneficial to a baby than interacting with a screen. A picture of a ball, even if it bounces and makes a sound on the screen, isn't as rich an experience as playing with an actual ball.

It's O.K. to introduce your children to technology, but it should be a tiny percentage of their time at this age and ideally be shared with you since babies are social learners. The majority of their awake time should be spent doing what babies do best: Absorbing everything around them and developing their big brains.

### **For Any Screen Time, Focus on Quality**

The jury's still out on the long-standing debate of "How much screen time is too much?" In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [revised its previous recommendation](https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/21/a-reconsideration-of-children-and-screen-time/) of no screen time for children under 2. The [new guidelines](https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/American-Academy-of-Pediatrics-Announces-New-Recommendations-for-Childrens-Media-Use.aspx) were broadened a bit, with recommendations for only video chatting for children under 18 months, co-watching high-quality programs, such as the classic Sesame Street or Wonder Pets! for children ages 18 to 24 months, one hour a day of screen time for childrenages 2 to 5 years, and "consistent limits" on screen time for children ages 6 and above.

While these recommendations are looser than the group’s 2010 ones, they might still be too restrictive for many families—and possibly unnecessary. A[study from Oxford University](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-12-14-children%E2%80%99s-screen-time-guidelines-too-restrictive-according-new-research) published in December 2017 found no consistent correlation between parents who followed the A.A.P. screen time guidelines and young children's well being. That study’s lead author, Dr. Andrew Pryzbylski, said in a statement, "If anything, our findings suggest the broader family context, how parents set rules about digital screen time, and if they’re actively engaged in exploring the digital world together, are more important than the raw screen time."

**Here are some tips for finding the right balance for your baby:**

* **Limit tech usage to the bare minimum.**The A.A.P. recommends limiting tech use to video chatting — for example with a traveling parent or relatives who are far away. The one-to-one conversations, even on screen, can help babies as they develop critical language skills.
* **Skip the "educational" videos.**Products like Baby Einstein DVDs and other videos marketed as helping babies' brains grow have been [linked to](http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/articles/policy-briefs/infants-toddlers-and-television) developmental issues, sleep problems and delays in learning essential skills like vocabulary.
* **Co-view and co-play.**Parents are busier than ever, with work, meals to make, household chores, and taking care of other family members. Still, instead of using technology as an electronic pacifier or babysitter, if you're unable to tend to the baby for a moment, give the baby toys or books that will help her use all her senses. When using a tablet or phone with your baby, talk, read, sing or play with them to nourish their brain development. [Interactive books](https://www.nytimes.com/guides/books/how-to-raise-a-reader) can be engaging, as can musical apps or ones that teach children to recognize letters, numbers, colors, and shapes.

### **Protect Your Devices**

While too much technology exposure can be dangerous for your baby, your baby can also be hazardous for your technology. The best protection is prevention: Lock down your devices so kids can't accidentally make in-app purchases or destroy your devices.

* Kid-proof your phone and tablet with protective cases that have thick padding, are easy to clean, and are easy for small hands to hold.
* Set up parental controls on your devices. For Android, use the[Family Link app](http://families.google.com/familylink/) to manage apps and set screen time limits. For iOS, go to Settings > General > Restrictions to[limit apps and features](https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201304).
* Once your child is old enough to understand basic instructions, start teaching how to take care of these devices, with rules like: "Don't eat or drink around the computer,” “Don't leave the iPad on the floor, “Your phone is not a coaster.”  And when they are older, consider when it’s appropriate to ask them to help pay for any damage that results when they disregard your warnings.

**Toddlers and Preschoolers (2-5 Years):**

Play, watch and browse together — while carving out more tech-free time.

Once your child is running about and eager to learn all the things, it'll be hard to keep electronic devices away. A[survey by Erikson Institute](http://teccenter.erikson.edu/publications/tec-parent-survey/) found that an overwhelming 85 percent of parents allow their children under age 6 to use technology at home and 86 percent of parents surveyed said they found benefits for their young children's tech usages, including literacy, school readiness and school success.  While there are more apps and gadgets than ever before explicitly designed for toddlers, you'll still want to make tech a small slice of their larger learning and activities pie.

### **Make Tech Time Bonding Time**

At this age, children are learning prosocial behavior: sharing, helping, donating and benefiting other people. It's the age when kids learn to give and take. Technology can help with this developmental stage when you co-play with them, taking turns and exploring a game or digital book or video together. Now (and, honestly, at every other age), children want your undivided attention — even when their focus seems to be mostly directed at a screen.

### **Choosing Games and Apps**

 You'll want to do this for your kids in any age group, but as soon as possible, get into the habit of checking age ratings for digital content. Stephen Balkam, the founder and C.E.O. of the [Family Online Safety Institute](https://www.fosi.org/), a nonprofit that represents members such as Amazon and Verizon with the aim of making the online world safer for children and families, recommends checking the[International Age Rating Coalition (IARC)](https://www.globalratings.com/about.aspx) ratings versus app store ratings. Google, Microsoft, Nintendo and many other major tech companies use IARC ratings when producing user content, and these ratings are linked to national age rating systems.

### Some toddler-friendly apps include [Kiddle](https://www.kiddle.co/), Google's visual search engine for kids, and [Kidoz](http://kidoz.net/parents-corner/), a curated collection of children's apps and content. It's important to keep in mind that age recommendations in app stores and sites like YouTube [haven't always been accurate](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/business/media/youtube-kids-parental-controls.html), though (some providers go out of their way to infiltrate the listings with disturbing content masquerading as child-friendly) so the best recourse is to **vet the content your kids are exposed to yourself.**

### **Set tech-free times and spaces**

Establish rules for when the family should not be on their devices, such as two hours before bedtime and during meal times. Similarly, set up screen-free zones in your home. For example, mobile devices, computers and TVs are not allowed in the dining room or bedrooms. Firm rules like these — that everyone in the family follows — make sure everyone gets tech breaks and family time.

**Young Children (6-12 Years):**

Now's the time to set up and reinforce healthy tech habits.

Children at the grade school age level will likely be using technology on a daily basis. As they still look to you for guidance, this is a pivotal time to establish and reinforce the appropriate use of technology and the benefits your family can gain from it.

### **Set Up Child Accounts**

Kids in this age range may need to use a computer for homework. The built-in parental controls in Windows (called[Microsoft Family](https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/help/12413/microsoft-account-what-is-family)) and macOS (called[Parental Controls](https://support.apple.com/kb/PH25799?locale=en_US) in system preferences) can help you set time limits and also limit apps and web usage.

As much as you might try to train them, there will be accidents: a laptop dropped on the floor, milk spilled on the keyboard, screens broken from mysterious "I didn't do that!" causes. The best protection is to designate certain devices specifically for children to use (maybe your old ones); if you have a mission-critical computer or tablet that you use for work, keep your kids off it.

Chromebooks are inexpensive laptops, so those might be a good choice for young children. And if you keep devices in a central location, such as a family room, you'll be better able to monitor your kids' tech usage and be more engaged with them when they go online.

### **Encourage Creativity**

Technology has a lot to offer children, but the apps you choose to expose your kids to make a difference.

### **Privacy and Security Best Practices**

Start the safety conversation early and speak about it often. Remind kids that what goes online stays online and that they should never share personally identifiable or sensitive information. "It may not be realistic for parents to become experts on every new app that becomes popular," Mr. Balkam says, "but by establishing an open conversation with their child from the start, they can help them stay safe. Children who are used to talking about what they do online are more likely to tell someone if they are worried or upset by something that happens in their digital life."

### **Watch Out for Cyberbullying**

Bullying — both online and offline — becomes a potential issue for children once they're in grade school. "The research on this topic generally shows that kids' online lives mirror their offline lives," says Lisa Damour, author of "[Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood](http://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/246248/)." Her general guidance for parents to give their kids:

* Do not be a passive bystander if you witness bullying, online or in real life.
* Alert an adult.
* Stand up to the bully on behalf of the victim.
* Go out of your way to support the victim, such as including the person in your activities or checking in to see they're O.K.

### **Their Own Phone?**

At this age, your kids might be clamoring for a phone of their own, since it's likely some of their friends have them. According to[Nielsen research](http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/mobile-kids--the-parent-the-child-and-the-smartphone.html), the most predominant age when kids get a phone with a service plan is 10, followed by  8, and then 9 and 11 (tied for third). Most parents give their children phones so they can easily get in touch or to [track kids' location for safety reasons](https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/what-parents-should-know-about-popular-location-sharing-apps/).

But just because all the other kids have a phone doesn't mean your child is ready for one. Things you'll want to consider before buying them phones:

* Are they responsible with their belongings?
* Will they follow your rules around phone use?
* Can they be trusted to use text, photos and video responsibly?

You'll need to check your child's maturity level here and consider your family's values. For example, if a phone is needed for safety reasons, a "dumb phone" (remember those?) or burner phone might be a solution. There's no magic age number, but most experts recommend[waiting as long as possible](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/technology/personaltech/whats-the-right-age-to-give-a-child-a-smartphone.html) to delay kids' exposure to online bullies, child predators, sexting and the distractions of social media.

**Teens (13 -18 Years):**

Children at this age want more freedom and privacy, but you still need to make sure they're safe. Stay connected while maintaining that trust.

Teens will want more independence, and that includes using their devices without you prying into their social lives. You might move from strict monitoring to mentoring your teen to use tech responsibly.

### **Set Rules**

You should set rules on phone and device usage (if you haven't already).

**"**It is impractical for parents to try to supervise everything teenagers do online," Dr. Damour says, "but it is possible to use periodic monitoring to get a sense of how well a young person is handling the freedom of having access to digital technology. From there, parents can decide how quickly they can expand their tween/teen's freedoms." A[phone contract](http://www.janellburleyhofmann.com/postjournal/gregorys-iphone-contract/%20) can help establish the guidelines your teen should have in mind when he or she is online. Some non-debatable rules might include:

* Never texting while driving
* Never sharing inappropriate photos or videos
* Always texting you when arriving at or leaving from a friend's house

### **Best Practices**

**Teach social media and critical thinking best practices**. Once teens have a phone, they'll be using it primarily as a social tool, so reinforce the positive aspects of that while warning them of the dangers (e.g., something online can follow you through life). And affirm whenever possible that your teen's self-worth shouldn't be tied to likes or shares.

This is also the time to discuss how marketing messages can be used to manipulate people and to encourage your teen to fact-check rumors and be skeptical of anything they come across online.

Friend or follow your kids on social media, so you can [see what they're up to periodically](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/style/teen-apps-bullying.html). Make this a non-negotiable rule — even if your kids balk at it. "Staying involved and not overreacting to every post tends to be a more subtle form of supervision that teens may tolerate even as they get older and want more privacy," Mr.Balkam advises.

### **Establish Trust**

**Spying vs. monitoring.**At this delicate stage, you'll need to balance respect for your kids' need for privacy while also ensuring they're safe. Some ideas for ground rules: You won't listen in on phone conversations or check their emails unless you suspect something is wrong. In return, they will hand over their phone or online account login any time you want to review their activity. This lets teens know that you reserve the right to look out for them, withoutdestroying trust if you were to monitor them without letting them know you were doing that.

The technology and social media researcher [danahboyd](https://www.danah.org/name.html) offers [a smart strategy](https://socialmediacollective.org/2012/01/23/how-parents-normalized-teen-password-sharing/) for establishing trust with your children while having access to their online accounts as needed: "Parents ask children to put passwords into a piggy bank that must be broken for the paper with the password to be retrieved. Such parents often explain that they don’t want to access their teens’ accounts, but they want to have the ability to do so 'in case of emergency.' A piggy bank allows a social contract to take a physical form."

### **Steer Them Into Productivity**

**Channel teens' tech interests into productive purposes.**Digital literacy is a skill increasingly in demand and technology can offer incredible creative and academic opportunities. If your child is interested, see if there are classes on programming, digital design, animation or other tech-related subjects to help him or her benefit from technology and prepare them for the future.

### **Avoiding Tech Addiction**

There are two major early warning signs you should look out for to check if your child has an unhealthy relationship with technology, Dr. Alter says. One is behavioral and the other emotional.

"On the behavioral front, it’s important to recognize when screens are taking up so much time that there’s no time left for playing offline, doing physical exercise, and spending time face-to-face with other people.

On the emotional front, it’s important to recognize when kids experience negative emotions after screen time because they’re feeling bullied, ostracized, or more generally unhappy as a result of their online interactions. That may happen after they spend time on social networks, communicating by text, or when they play multiplayer role-playing games with a social element."

Be on the lookout if your child replaces offline activities he used to enjoy with more screen time, if sleep begins to suffer due to late night tech usage, and if in-person interactions (like having family dinners) get usurped by devices.

As with most parenting topics, constant, open communication is key to helping your family reap the benefits of technology without experiencing too many of the negative effects.