



## Shots

LIVING BETTER

# So your tween wants a smartphone? Read this first

JULY 12, 2023 · 11:57 AM ET

HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



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Transcript



Are smartphones safe for tweens? Parents should be aware of the risks, a screen consultant advises.

*Elva Etienne/Getty Images*

Your tween wants a smartphone *very* badly. So badly that it physically hurts. And they're giving you *soooo* many reasons why.

They're going to middle school ... they need it to collaborate with peers on school projects ... they need it to tell you where they are ... when they'll be home ... when the school bus is late. It'll help *you*, dear parent, they vow. Plus, all their friends have one, and they feel left out. Come on! Pleeeeeeeze.

Before you click "place order" on that smartphone, pause and consider a few insights from a person who makes a living helping parents and tweens navigate the murky waters of smartphones and social media.

Emily Cherkin spent more than a decade as a middle school teacher during the early aughts. She watched firsthand as the presence of smartphones transformed life for middle schoolers. For the past four years, she's been working as screen-time consultant, coaching parents about digital technology.

Her first piece of advice about when to give a child a smartphone and allow them to access social media was reiterated by other experts over and over again: Delay, delay, delay.

### **"I wish I knew then what I know now"**

"I have talked to hundreds of parents," Cherkin explains, "and no one has ever said to me, 'I wish I gave my kid a phone earlier or I wish I'd given them social media

access sooner. Never."

In fact, parents tell her the opposite. "I always hear, 'I wish I had waited. I wish I knew then what I know now,' " she says, "because boy, once you give a child one of these devices or technologies, it is so much harder to take it back."

Smartphones, social media, and video games create large spikes in dopamine deep inside a child's brain. As NPR has reported, those spikes pull the child's attention to the device or app, almost like a magnet. They tell the child's brain that this activity is super critical – way more critical than other activities that trigger smaller spikes in dopamine, such as finishing homework, helping to clean up after dinner, or even playing outside with friends.



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Thus, parents set themselves up for a constant struggle when a child starts having their own smartphone, Cherkin says. "It's the dopamine you're fighting. And that's not a fair fight. So I tell parents, 'Delay all of it just as long as you can,'" she emphasizes.

That means delaying, not just a smartphone, but *any* device, including tablets, she suggests. By introducing a tablet at an early age, even for educational purposes, parents can establish a habit that may be hard to break later, Cherkin has observed.

"A child using a tablet at age 6 to 8 comes to expect screen time after school," she says. "Flash forward to age 12, and now they have a phone. And when they come home from school, they're likely engaging with social media, instead of educational videos."

Neurologically, children's brains haven't developed enough to handle the magnetic pull of these devices and the apps on them, says neuroscientist Anne-Noël Samaha at the University of Montreal.

"It's almost as if you have the perfect storm," Samaha explains. "You have games, social media, and even pornography and shopping online, and the brains of children are just not yet ready to have the level of self-control needed to regulate their behavior with these activities. Even adults sometimes don't have enough self-control to do that or handle some of the emotional impact of them."

### **Right-size your parenting fears**

Parents often feel like once their tween starts moving around more autonomously through their neighborhood or town more, the child needs a smartphone to be safe, Cherkin says. "They may think, 'Oh, my gosh! My kid is going to be kidnapped on the way to school. They need a phone to call me.'"

But Cherkin notes that parents tend to overestimate the dangers of the "real world" and *underestimate* the dangers of a smartphone.



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"I think our fears are very misplaced," she says. "We need to think about what is statistically really likely to happen versus what's really, really unlikely."

Each year in the U.S. about a hundred children are abducted by strangers or people or slight acquaintances, the U.S. Department of Justice reported. Given that 50 million children, ages 6 to 17, reside in the U.S, the risk of a child being kidnapped by a stranger is about 0.0002% each year. (By comparison, the risk of being struck by lightning each year is about 0.0001%.)

On the other hand, giving a child a phone comes with a whole new set of risks and dangers, Cherkin says. They can be difficult for some parents to understand because they may not have much firsthand experience with specific apps, and the new threats that are emerging.

Back in March, the nonprofit Common Sense Media surveyed about 1,300 girls, ages 11 to 15, about their experiences on social media. Nearly 60% of the girls who use Instagram, and nearly 60% of those who use Snapchat, said they had been contacted by a stranger that makes them uncomfortable. The same was true for 46% of those who use TikTok.

### **Disturbing online encounters and influences**

The same survey found that these apps often expose girls to content they find disturbing or harmful. For those that use Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat, 12% to 15% of girls see or hear content related to suicide on a daily basis. About the same percentage also said they see or hear content about eating disorders, on a daily basis as well.

An investigation by the Center for Countering Digital Hate also found evidence that content related to suicide and disordered eating is relatively common on TikTok. In the investigation, the nonprofit set up eight accounts ostensibly by 13-year-old children. Each user paused on and liked videos about body image and mental health. Within 30 minutes, TikTok recommended content about suicide and eating disorders to all eight accounts.

In one instance, this content began appearing in less than three minutes. On average, TikTok suggested content about eating disorders every four minutes to the teen accounts.

TikTok declined NPR's request for an interview, but in an email, a spokesperson for the company wrote: "We're committed to building age-appropriate experiences, while equipping parents with tools, like Family Pairing, to support their teen's experience on TikTok."

Emma Lembke, age 20, says these findings line up with what she experienced when she first went on Instagram eight years ago. "As a 12-year-old girl, I felt like I was being constantly bombarded by bodies that I could never replicate or ones that I could try to, but it would lead me in a darker direction."

She remembers just trying to look up a healthy recipe. "And from that one search, I remember being fed constant stuff about my '200-calorie day' or intermittent fasting."

Eventually, she says, her feed was "covered with anorexic, thin, tiny women. Dieting pills, lollipops to suppress my appetite."

Lembke developed an eating disorder. She has recovered and now is a digital advocate and founder of the Log OFF project, which helps teens build healthier relationships with social media.

"When I was younger, I was being prodded and poked and fed material [on social media] that was really leading me in a direction toward an eating disorder," she says. "I think for a lot of young women, even if it doesn't materialize into a fully fledged eating disorder, it painfully warps their sense of self by harming their body image. "

Instagram's parent company, Meta, declined a request for an interview. But in an email, a spokesperson said the company has invested in technology that finds and removes content related to suicide, self-injury or eating disorders before anyone reports it. "We want to reassure every parent that we have their interests at heart in the work we're doing to provide teens with safe, supportive experiences online," they wrote.



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### **A whole world of sexually explicit content**

Many children also come across sexualized content, even porn, on social media apps, Cherkin says.

If you want to get a sense for what your kid might encounter once you let them have a phone and popular apps, Cherkin recommends trying this: Set up a test account in one of the apps, setting the age of the user to your child's age, and then use the account yourself for a few weeks.

"I did that with Snapchat. I set up an account, pretending to be 15. Then I just went to the Discover feed, where it pushes content to you based on your age," she explains. Within seconds, sexualized content and vulgar images appeared, she says. "And I thought, 'No, this is not appropriate for a 15-year-old.'"

Snapchat's parent company, Snap, also declined a request for an interview with NPR. A spokesperson wrote in an email: "We have largely kept misinformation,

hate speech, and other potentially harmful content from spreading on Snapchat. That said, we completely understand concerns about the appropriateness of the content that may be featured, and are working to strengthen protections for teens with the aim of offering them a more age-appropriate experience."

Personally, Cherkin uses Instagram for her business. And back in March, despite all her knowledge about the traps on social media, she says she "got catfished." She engaged with a stranger who seemed to be a teen in her DMs and eventually received obscene and disturbing photos of a man's genitalia.

She writes on her blog: "It's graphic. It's gross. And this is one teeny (lol) example of what kids and teens see ALL THE TIME."

### **What's a parent to do? Consider smartphone alternatives**

In the end, Cherkin says, there are several other in-between options for tweens besides giving them their own smartphone or denying them a phone altogether. You can:

1. Share your phone with your tween so they can text with and call friends.
1. Give your tween a "dumb phone" that only allows texting and calling. For example, buy an old-school flip phone. But if that's out of the question because it's not cool enough (and you have extra cash to spare), you can now buy dumb phones that look like smartphones but have extremely limited functions – no easy-access to the internet, no social media. And very little risk of inappropriate content.

### **Try to limit the apps your child uses, but get ready to be busy monitoring them**

If you do end up getting your tween a smartphone, Cherkin says, you might be tempted to simply "block" children from downloading particular apps on their phones. And in theory, this works. Parental control apps, such as Bark, can notify you when an app is installed.



But, she says, many kids find workarounds to this approach — and really any parental controls. For instance, she says, if you block Instagram on their phone, kids can log in via the web. If you block TikTok, they might watch TikTok videos in Pinterest. Kids can find porn on Spotify.

"Kids are way tech savvier than we are," Cherkin wrote in an email. "Remember how we used to program the VCR for our parents?! Every single parent who comes to me for help has a variation of this same story: 'We had X parental controls; we blocked X sites; our child figured out how to access them anyway.' ... It's impossible to successfully block everything — and once you do, a replacement will pop up in its place."

In other words, once you give your child a smartphone, you will likely be setting up yourself for a whole new series of parenting tasks and worries. Even Meta reveals this in its April ad for parental controls: The mom in the ad is monitoring her son's Instagram account while doing the dishes.

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