

Published September 7, 2022

## Want Kids to Be More Responsible Online? Start Early

By Alyson Klein

**M**ove over Itsy Bitsy Spider. Here's a nursery rhyme for the 21st century: "Sometimes with technology, balancing's hard to do. ... Too much of something can make you sad or blue."

That ditty—popularized by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit which focuses on helping children use technology in safer and more meaningful ways—is meant to simplify a lesson that's increasingly relevant for kids as young as two: *Be careful about how much time you spend in the digital world and what you do while you're there.*

Talking to a preschooler about screentime limits, digital literacy, and cyber safety may seem a bit premature. But waiting until later in elementary school—or even middle or high school—puts children at a disadvantage, educators say.

"Can you imagine trying to teach a high schooler to brush their teeth for the first time?" asked Faith Rogow, an independent scholar and author of *Media Literacy for Young Children: Teaching Beyond the Screen Time Debates*, published this year. "It's much harder to instill that habit later on. It's possible, but it's harder."

The longer parents and teachers wait to help children safely explore the digital world, the more they will have to counter what the child has already learned from "people who don't share your values, who may not have a kid's best interest at heart," such as social media companies, she added.

These days, most kids are getting exposure to digital spaces long before they learn to read. The overwhelming majority of children ages two to four—93 percent—spend at least some time on mobile media, according to a 2020 report by Common Sense Media, which has created lessons in digital citizenship for young children.

Device ownership can start even before most kids are toilet trained. Nine percent of children under age two have their own mobile device, according to the Common Sense report. That percentage increases as kids get older. Nearly half—46 percent—of children between ages two and four have their own mobile devices, typically a tablet, Common Sense found.

Once students get to 4th or 5th grade, it is easy to distinguish the kids who received early digital citizenship and literacy training from those who are experiencing the con-



Shawn Poynter for Education Week

cepts for the first time, said Darshell Silva, a librarian and technology integration specialist at Nathanael Greene Middle School in Providence, R.I.

By middle school, children who were given guidance on how to navigate digital spaces early on "are knowledgeable of dangers that are out there," Silva said. "They're not using their accounts to bully people. [They] don't have 10 social media accounts. They have one or two social media accounts. They don't share any personal information. And they also don't believe everything they read on the internet."

Getting that background knowledge early is likely to become even more important now, as more schools provide kids in kindergarten, or even preschool, with a laptop or tablet to use in school and oftentimes at home too. Before the pandemic, less than half of educators reported that their elementary schools—42 percent—had 1-to-1 computing programs. That percentage soared to 84 percent by the spring of 2021, according to a survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center.

### Don't stare at your screen and ignore those around you

Early digital literacy lessons don't have to be complicated, Rogow said. In fact, they don't even have to be digital. It's possible to

encourage kids to begin using their critical thinking skills early on, without ever picking up a device.

Parents or teachers can start by pointing out a piece of media, say a flier posted on a mailbox, and asking, "I wonder who made that?" That simple question will help little children begin to grasp the concept that someone created every piece of media they consume—it didn't just appear out of nowhere. Eventually, children can begin considering how another person's ideas and opinions may shape the messages they produce.

Putting healthy limits on screen time is also a big theme of early lessons, said Leticia Citizen, who works at Hawthorne Elementary School in Beverly Hills, Calif. She gets students thinking about those ideas as early as age four, during what is called "transitional kindergarten" in California.

Citizen often kicks off her lessons by asking students to name at least one fun online activity from the past week, and at least one equally enjoyable offline experience.

She'll direct the youngsters to think about how some of the bright, fast-moving images in virtual spaces make them feel physically. Are their bodies restless after playing a game online for too long? Does it hurt their eyes? Or make their brains "go wonky and wiggly"?

And she emphasizes to the children to pay

attention to what's going on around them, in the physical world, over what's happening in the virtual one. Inspired in part by a Common Sense lesson, "Pause for People," Citizen has students think about what they might do if they are in the middle of a digital game, maybe even about to win, and a parent or sibling comes up to ask a question.

"We talk about like how sometimes you don't even hear them because you're like so engrossed in what you're doing," Citizen said. She'll ask her students, "What are some things that we need to do [to] respect and honor them coming to talk to you and being responsive, and then we can go back and play our game?" And she asks them to name a time when they missed out on something fun—like playing outside with a friend—because they were too wrapped up in a digital game or television show.

She helps them understand why keeping devices on at night—considered bad sleep hygiene by child development experts—can be harmful. One of her favorite tools: A story about a family of rabbits kept awake by the sounds of various tablets and phones. (Spoiler alert: the mother bunny throws the devices out the window so everyone can get some shuteye.)

### What to do when you find yourself in an unsafe space online

Online safety is part of the picture too. Most preschoolers and kindergarteners aren't proficient readers, but they can still look at the pictures in online app stores. That means they're bound to see ads that take them to digital products that might not be age appropriate.

Citizen shows students an online ad designed to appeal to children and asks how many of them would be drawn in by picture of, for instance, a cute elephant. Hands go up. Advertisers, she'll explain, may catch their eyes with flashy images, but they want something in return, typically money.

Other strangers that students might encounter online may want access to private information, or to track down a kid in real life. Citizen tries to put that danger in terms young children can understand.

"We talk about how there are adults and some kids who don't always make the best choices, and sometimes their goal is to try to hurt us," Citizen said. They may ask for a child's password, or want to know their name. She's trained children not to give out any information—not even their favorite color—and to reach out to a parent or older sibling if they stumble on a corner of the internet that makes them feel unsafe or overwhelmed.

To be sure, it's tough to tackle digital citizenship for the youngest children without parent outreach.

Part of that can just be about teaching caregivers how to use technology with their kids. For instance, some of Citizen's youngest students play an online game, Roblox, which has a chat feature.

She helps the kids—and their parents—understand that they can use controls to disable the chat feature, and explains why it's not a good idea to talk to strangers online, the same way it's smart to be careful about unfamiliar people in the physical world. They can also agree on screen time limits and set timers that will go off when a child should stop using a device and move on to another activity.

Some school districts offer parents formal training in helping their children navigate the online world, including the Los Angeles Unified School District, which will offer a course in the subject in its newly created Parent Academy.

### By the time they get to high school, 'their digital footprint is crazy'

Children also need to understand that what they do online will leave a digital record that can be difficult to erase.

Silva has done Google searches on her name to show her students—and, with permission, repeated the exercise with a student. They're often surprised to see how much information about them is already available on the internet.

This kind of training can come too late for some kids. "A lot of kids [go] to middle school" without the digital citizenship lessons "and then before they get to high school their digital footprint is crazy," Silva said.

Cyberbullying is another focus of digital citizenship lessons later in elementary and middle school. For the most part, children as young as four or five aren't using their tablets for social media. Instead, they're playing games, sometimes with other children they may or may not know in the real world.

That creates an opening to talk about how to treat others in a digital space.

"That's new for kids to think about, that these are actually other people in the screen," particularly if they are represented by avatars, said Kelly Mendoza, the vice-president of educational programs for Common Sense Media. When it comes to things like kindness, taking turns, and being a gracious winner or loser, children need to understand that "behavior in the digital world needs to mirror our behavior in the in-person world." ■

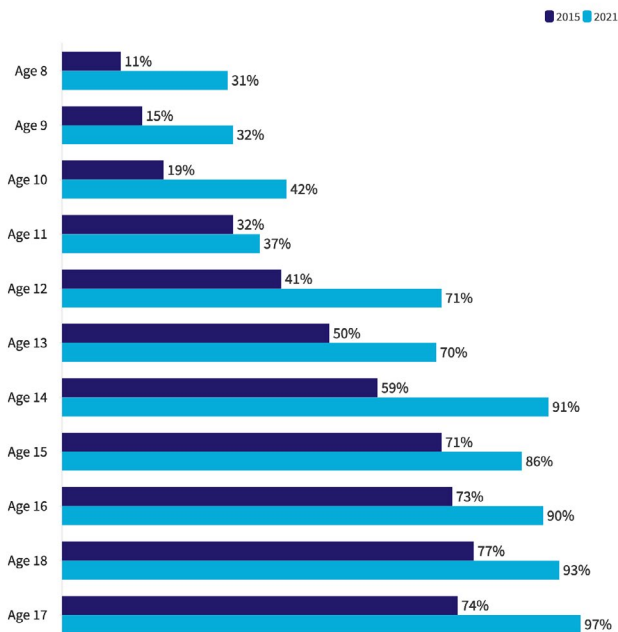
Published June 28, 2022

# What Is the Right Age for a Kid to Get a Cellphone?

By Apoorvaa Mandar Bichu

## Children and Smartphones

The proportion of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds with cellphones nearly doubled from 2015 to 2021, says Common Sense Media.



SOURCE: Common Sense Media



Children are getting cellphones at younger and younger ages.

That's according to a report from Common Sense Media based on data from its 2015 and 2021 surveys on children's cellphone and social media use. The research and advocacy organization found that the proportion of 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds with smartphones nearly doubled in those years. But the majority of parents give their children a cellphone around the ages of 12 and 13. The percentage of 12-year-olds owning a cellphone has leaped from 41 percent in 2015 to 71 percent in 2021.

Does that mean that 12-13 is right age for children to own cellphones? Some pediatricians say they are agnostic on that point.

"As a pediatrician, I don't recommend one specific age [since] I think much of it depends on the reason for the need for the cellphone," said Dr. Nusheen Ameenuddin, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Mayo Clinic, and the chairperson of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Council on Communications and Media.

According to Ameenuddin, if the reason for providing children with a cellphone is safety, then it is advised to give them one with fewer features, just enough to connect in case of an emergency.

"You can also disable certain features of smartphones with certain plans, so that's something I would encourage parents to look into and take advantage of so that a cellphone is not an all-access pass for a child who might need some boundaries in place," she said.

The pediatrics academy recommends "parents and caregivers develop a plan that takes into account the health, education, and entertainment needs of each individual child as well as the whole family." It provides a customizable family media plan on its official website for families to follow together, which the family can revise as needed.

According to the report, The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Teens and Tweens, released in 2021, 8- to- 12-year-olds use about five

and a half hours of screen media everyday while 13- to-18-year-olds use about eight and a half hours. Social media use has increased in 8- to-12-year-olds, from 31 percent in 2019 to 38 percent in 2021, and almost 1 in 5 tweens say they use social media every day.

"Kids who have increased screen time, which is now something that smartphones can provide, [that] can affect sleep, mood, and academic performance, especially if they are using the time to compare their lives to what they see online and feeling less than adequate as a result," Ameenuddin said.

According to Mike Robb, Common Sense Media's senior director of research, "when we look at the effects of media and technology, it oftentimes has as much, if not even more, to do with what [kids] are doing with that time."

"So if you are, for example, on social media, and you're exposed to content that promotes negative body comparisons, or cyberbullying, or hate speech; that can have negative impacts on your mental health. Conversely, those kids who are using social media to connect with their friends and be artistic and creative ... are more likely to say that social media is having a positive effect on their mental health," he said.

Experts say that while technology can have some positive impact on children through the use of educational apps or by providing ways to stay connected in times of limited face-to-face interaction, there isn't enough evidence of benefits for development related to screen time or apps.

"There is far more evidence that shows that passive consumption of media, including so-called educational media, can actually have the opposite effect on development for very young children," Ameenuddin said.

According to experts at Common Sense Media, it is unlikely that media use is going to go down, which is why it is imperative to ensure both a high-quality and a safe media experience for children.

"I think it's really on parents, schools, and other stakeholders in kids' lives, to help children learn how to use the technology responsibly and safely," Robb said.

At the end of the day, pediatricians say that waiting until 13 to give children cellphones is a good rule to follow as a general guideline, but since "parents know their children and their level of maturity and ability to handle a cellphone the best ... that takes precedence over general recommendations," according to Ameenuddin. ■



— Josh Richie for Education Week

Published October 5, 2021

## How Much Screen Time Is Too Much? The Answer Is ‘It Depends’

By Alyson Klein

One of the biggest critiques of full-time virtual and blended learning is that kids spend way too much time on screens. Students have complained about getting headaches, and educators have suffered from “Zoom fatigue.”

So how worried should educators be about all that time students spend staring at a Chromebook, iPad, or cellphone screen, especially if it’s followed by hours of television or video games? How many hours of screen time per day is too much?

To answer those questions, Education Week spoke with Lisa Guernsey, a senior fellow and strategic advisor with the Education Policy Program at New America, and Michael Levine, Senior Vice President, Learning and Impact, for Noggin, Nickelodeon’s online interactive learning service for preschoolers.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### How worried should educators and parents be about screen time?

*Guernsey:* The research doesn’t match up with the sensationalized headlines. The research actually shows that there are many things at play in a child’s life and what they’re

learning from a screen interaction. It’s not just about the amount of time that they spend in front of a rectangle slide screen.

Instead of time, we really have to look at the three C’s. And those three C’s are looking at the Content on screen; understanding the Context in which the child is playing, watching, or observing what they’re seeing on screen; and then the third C is the [individual] child. There’s so many different needs that children have at different ages and different stages of development in their own context of their family but also in their community.

### Can you talk about the fears that parents, and even kids, have had about too much screen time during the pandemic?

*Guernsey:* I think it’s completely valid that there were concerns, because in the pandemic it was certainly the case that a lot of things were not available to our kids. Being able to be with their peers, or running around outside, or for the older ones being able to go to a concert or a football game. [Kids were] not being able to get together with friends. It was not a good year. To stay inside and to have to try to find ways to entertain yourself or to keep your kids learning is really, really difficult. So I do think that we need

to recognize that we want something different than what we had last year and we want that to be something that’s engaging for children.

The science of how children learn really points to how much social interaction matters. How much just getting engaged with new content and exploring new things and being able to ask questions and have some critical inquiry about what you’re seeing and exploring that really leads to even more engagement for kids. That can happen through great TV shows, through really cool [digital] games. That can also happen offline.

Instead of asking the question, ‘how do we get kids off screens?’ Let’s turn the question around and ask ‘how do we make next year so much more interesting, engaging, interactive for our kids?’ I think that that may very well mean for families that have the means and the ability to do so that their kids do some things off screen now. But it doesn’t mean that we’re going to suddenly go back to this world in which all screens are bad.

### Are there any health issues related to screen time?

*Levine:* It’s really important that parents and educators realize that screens can be disruptive to sleep. I think a lot of kids did get out of their sleep routines [during the pandemic] and very young children need quite a lot of sleep. We do need to be concerned about screens [being used] late into the night.

### Can you talk a little more about how content figures into screen time?

*Levine:* When you think about the digital media diet that your child should have, there are things that really are more like treats and then there are things that are wholesome, you know, fruits and vegetables [of television shows or games]. It’s extremely important that the parent monitor and review the quality of content as well as the context and the needs of that individual child. Once you’re getting into the kids who are parts of peer culture, Pokemon Go and Minecraft or more violent video games, there’s quite a lot more work that needs to be done.

### How can you improve the context in which your child or student is experiencing screen time?

*Guernsey:* [When teachers or parents watch with their kids], they’re learning together, they’re having fun. There’s a positive emotional experience that comes out of that.

We build on that in communication with teachers, and having more of a two-way street. But [it's] also just recognizing, 'Hey, it can be fun to talk to your kids about that game that they just played or to maybe play along with them. If it sparks something that they might want to do offline, that's great too, like maybe that character was so much fun for them they want to draw a picture of it.'

**How can teachers help parents navigate their child's use of digital media now that most schools have resumed in-person instruction?**

*Guernsey:* Continued communication between families and teachers can really go a long way to helping children themselves feel like they're supported both in school and then back at home. Maybe that means continuing to use Zoom, at times, with parents to connect over the best thing for [the] child or having moments where there are songs and stories that are told together through virtual spaces so that parents can be engaged in that, especially for those parents who cannot get to those parent teacher conferences at 4 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon. The most underserved kids, in communities that haven't had the resources they need, they really need that ecosystem of support more than ever. ■

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OPINION

Published February 10, 2021

# Helping Students Outsmart Their Smartphones

By Angela Duckworth

**H**ow do I get my students to stop looking at their phones? We can all use some help to put a little distance between ourselves and our vices. Here’s something I wrote recently on the topic for Character Lab as a Tip of the Week:

Question: What temptation is hardest for teenagers to resist?

Answer: Cellphones

How do I know? I’ve been studying self-control in adolescence for nearly two decades, and increasingly, my data implicate cellphones as the single most potent temptation in the lives of young people.

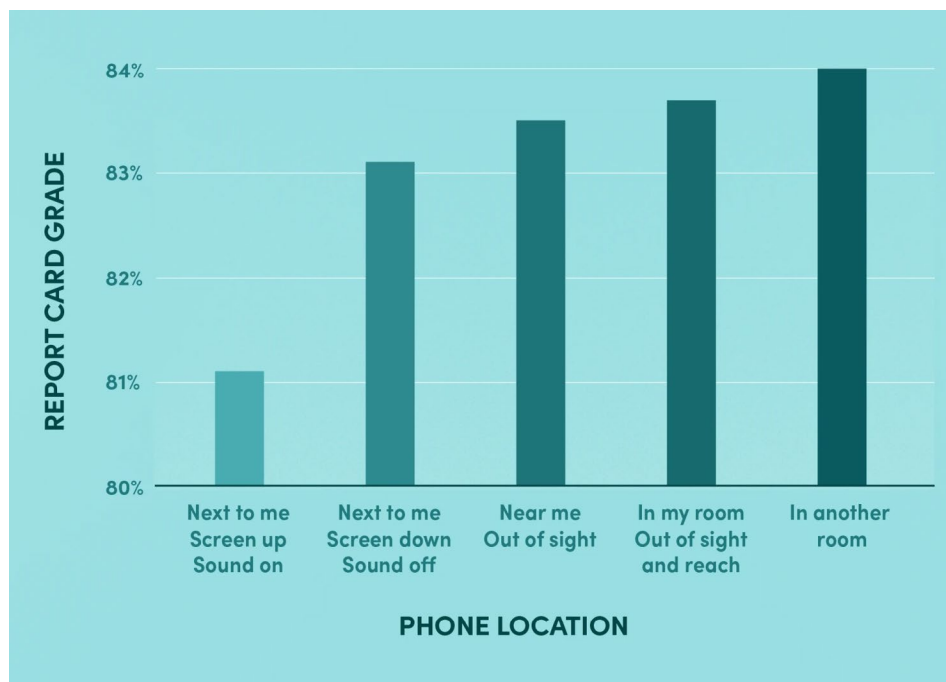
Phones are a limitless source of immediate gratification. Finished scrolling through your Instagram feed? You can rewatch an episode of “The Office.” Craving something else? There’s always Snapchat, TikTok, and ... the list goes on.

When pitted against homework and studying, phones are the “easy” choice because, to paraphrase Aristotle, the fruits of education are sweet, but the roots are often bitter. In other words, thinking hard about things you don’t yet understand is not nearly as effortlessly pleasurable as the myriad diversions you have in the palm of your hand.

It’s impractical to ask teenagers to swear off phones altogether. But it is possible to share evidence-based strategies for outsmarting their smartphones. The trick I like best is also the one most commonly recommended by undergraduates in the classes I’m teaching this year—what scientists call situation modification. It involves intentionally changing your physical surroundings to make it easier to resist temptation.

Consider, for example, this data collected from thousands of high school students on Character Lab Research Network. The farther students reported keeping their phones when trying to study, the higher their report card grades.

Of course, correlation is not causation. Still, my guess is that the young people in your life have already discovered that their phone is less tempting when it’s out of sight, out of earshot, and hard to reach. But it may not have occurred to them that they can, as



—Character Lab

a habit, capitalize on situation modification.

For the middle or high school students in your life, here are suggestions, courtesy of my undergraduates, on how to successfully resist reaching for their phone:

Try ...

... putting your phone in a closet or on another floor.

... downloading the SelfControl app, which blacklists access to websites for a predetermined time period.

... putting the notifications on your computer on “do not disturb” and shutting off your phone for 30 minutes at a time.

... turning your phone completely off and putting it in a random bag somewhere. This will especially help when you have a busy day with lots of plans already set out.

... plugging your phone in across the room before getting in bed so you go to sleep without wasting time on your phone. ■

*Angela Duckworth is a behavioral-science expert offering advice to teachers based on scientific research. She is also the founder and CEO of the education nonprofit Character Lab, and professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.*

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Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.  
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