

When Should Kids Get a Smartphone? The Research, the Risks, & a Better Way Forward

By Dr Justin Coulson

As a new school year begins, many parents find themselves facing a familiar dilemma: **“Is it time to give my child a phone?”**

The pressure can feel enormous — socially, logistically, and emotionally. Children insist that “everyone has one,” other parents reassure us “it’s what happens in Year (X)”, and we wonder whether refusing is unreasonable or outdated.

But before making the jump; pause. While smartphones are part of modern childhood, **the age a child receives one matters — a lot.**

The Stats That Make You Shudder

A recent peer-reviewed study in [Pediatrics](#) followed more than 10,000 children aged 10–12. They found that:

Earlier acquisition of a smartphone is associated with significantly worse outcomes.

Children who received a smartphone during their 12th year had:

- **57% higher odds** of clinical-level mental health difficulties by age 13
- **62% higher odds** of insufficient sleep
- **40% higher odds** of obesity
- **31% higher odds** of depression

The tween and teen brain — particularly the prefrontal cortex responsible for impulse control, planning, and decision-making — isn’t mature right now. The never-ending whirlwind of apps, games, notifications, and distraction (plus time on social platforms that isn’t technically allowed anymore) can be overwhelming for a brain still under construction.

Research internationally suggests a similar theme: **Every year we delay smartphone access tends to reduce risk.**

Why Parents Usually Say Yes — And Where It Goes Wrong

Parents give me four reasons for handing over a smartphone to their child:

1. **Safety** (“What if they need help?”)

Response: **Smartphones are not required for safety.** A basic ‘dumb phone’, watch-phone, or even a household landline solves the safety problem without handing over social media, messaging apps, games, or endless internet access.

2. **Logistics** (“I need to coordinate pickups and plans.”)

Children survived without phones for generations. Clear communication ahead of time works better than constant messaging, and it builds resilience and independence. Set a pickup time and place. Teach children how to ask an adult for help. Make a simple backup plan (“If I’m late, you start walking..”). Or buy a dumb phone.

3. Social Connection (“They’ll be left out without one.”)

Group chats and digital friend circles *feel* social, but they often *increase* comparison and competition, exclusion, anxiety, cyberbullying, and sleep disruption. In-person friendships are better developmentally.

4. “They Need to Learn Eventually”

Giving a 12-year-old a smartphone to “learn to manage it” is like giving that same 12-year-old a bottle of vodka to “learn to drink responsibly.” Children **aren’t developmentally ready** for that level of access.

A Framework that Actually Works

The standard in our family is simple: **“When you can afford it and pay for it yourself — it’s yours.”**

That includes: ✓ the device ✓ the monthly plan ✓ repairs ✓ replacements if lost or broken

This framework works because it:

- **Delays acquisition naturally**
- **Builds financial responsibility**
- **Shifts entitlement to initiative**
- **Reduces peer pressure**
- **Introduces natural consequences**

Most children don’t have \$800–\$1500 for a device plus monthly fees until somewhere between **15–17** — which aligns with many child psychologists’ recommendations.

“But My Child Already Has a Smartphone...”

If the horse has already bolted — please don’t panic. You haven’t “ruined” anything.

Instead, create **clear, developmentally appropriate boundaries**. If possible, consider stepping back from smartphones to simpler options — plenty of families do this successfully.

The Real Question

Smartphones aren’t evil, and technology isn’t the enemy. But early access creates problems that are harder to undo than they are to prevent. Delaying smartphone access — even by one year — can make a meaningful difference to mental health, sleep, and learning.

If you’d like more info about setting screen boundaries, check out [The Screen Smart Series](#).



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