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Electronic Media and the Developing Brain

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Screen limits for children and young people.

- The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health UK urged parents to show “tough love” in setting age-appropriate limits. Screen time should not replace sleep, exercise and face to face socialising.
- Without healthy limits, children are left to practise behaviours that will be taken into adult life.
- Cris Rowan (Paediatric occupational therapist), Dr. Andrew Doan, Dr. Hilarie Cash – **Guidelines for screen limits – see below:**

Technology Use Guidelines for Children and Youth

Developmental Age	How Much?	Non-violent TV	Handheld devices	Non-violent video games	Violent video games	Online violent video games and/or pornography
0-2 years	none	never	never	never	never	never
3-5 years	1 hour/day	okay	never	never	never	never
6-12 years	2 hours/day	okay	never	never	never	never
13-18 years	2 hours/day	okay	okay	limit to 30 minutes/day	never	never

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Consider writing a **Family Screen Time Contract** for teens who already have phones / ipads. It will also set the scene for any younger children. This could include:

- Clear limits on screen use (e.g. we do not use our devices during meals, family or friends visiting, family outings, while speaking to another human being, at school, do not use your device to hurt yourself or anyone else).
- No screens in bedrooms. When outside the time allowed, screens will be stored in a certain place (where parents can monitor).
- Phones not allowed until homework completed and chores done.
- Have tech free days/holidays.
- Put away screens an hour before bedtime, replace with calming activities.
- Set consequences if terms breached and sit down and talk about it.
- Empathise but allow them to experience real life disappointment, don't worry it builds resilience and coping strategies.
- If / when they challenge the rules, connect with them first emotionally (right brain) and make them feel heard, then depending on age, explain why there are rules (left brain).
- Make a list of the specifics that you are worried about (family time, sleep, homework, face to face friends). Stay confident and calm. You are the parent.
- Protect them from information overload.
- Protect their sleep. This is crucial to their mental health and learning.
- Provide a healthy diet. There is a strong correlation between diet quality and depression in adolescence.
- Keep them physically active (sport, out-door free play) and out in nature at every opportunity. Set up obstacle course in the garden.

- Depending on their age, talk to them about your own screen use and how they feel about it.
- Talk to them about their vision for their life (age dependent)
- Talk to them about how the manipulative algorithms are designed to hook and control them (age dependent).
- Ask them to contribute: What boundaries would help them keep focused on their life vision.
- Get them involved in advising / helping younger siblings / friends on screen management.
- Teach them to delay gratification.
- Give them opportunities to socialise with all age groups and encourage their face-to-face friendships. Model the values you want to instil.
- Consider a block phone / nokia as a first phone. Delay social media and smartphones to protect the early teens.*
- For all ages, music, singing, art, dance, boardgames, puzzles, handwork, cooking, gardening, farming, storytelling, poetry, reading.

*Study of age and smartphone ownership: The younger the child's age at smartphone ownership, the lower their mental wellbeing later between 18–24 years. (**Sapien Labs 2025, 65 countries**). Toddlers' ability to speak damaged by screen use (**Fish et al., 2026**). Smartphone ownership at 12 years or younger linked to suicidal thoughts, aggression, detachment from reality, poor emotional regulation & low self-worth. Thirteen year olds smartphone ownership, 57% more likely to meet diagnostic criteria for mental illness (**Thiagarajan et al 2025**). Smartphone ownership at 12 years associated with depression, obesity, insufficient sleep compared to non-ownership (**Barzlay et al., 2026**).

As a parent, what would you do if your child's phone came with a warning:

- ...may be addictive
- ...may cause attention deficit
- ...may cause memory impairment
- ...may have negative effect on school performance
- ...may have negative effect on mental wellbeing
- ...may cause obesity and shortsightedness.
- ...may cause aggressive behaviour
- ...may contribute to undeveloped social and emotional skills
- ...may decrease self-regulation
- ...may cause learning difficulties
- ...may delay development
- ...may reduce parent / child contact
- ...provides access to inappropriate material
- What will we think when we look back in 20 years

Recommended Books

- Glow Kids – Nicholas Kardaras, Ph.D.
- Reset your Child's Brain – Dr Victoria Dunckley
- iGen – Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D.
- The Anxious Generation – Jonathan Haidt

See smartphonefree.ie and parentpower.planetyouth.ie

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