

Phones, screens and growing up.

Today, you're doing a hard job in a world none of us grew up in. There's no rulebook for raising children alongside smartphones, and no parent gets it perfectly right. This isn't a lecture; it's a summary of what the latest research is telling us, so you can make the choices that feel right for your family.

● Where things stand

Phones arrive earlier than most of us realise.

56% → 83%

own a smartphone from age 10 to 11: secondary school is the tipping point

~4hrs

a day online by 13–14, up from ~2 hours at 8–9, before gaming

13

average age a child first sees online pornography; some as young as six

By 13–15, **97%** own a mobile, and nearly **1 in 5 aged 3–5** have their own phone. Most are on social media before the minimum age of 13: **81% of 10–12-year-olds** already use at least one app, where harmful content is usually stumbled upon rather than sought out.

● It's not just social media

Group chats carry risks too.

Not all harm comes through public feeds. Group chats can carry bullying that follows a child home, and messaging apps like **WhatsApp**, which sit outside the new under-16 social media rules, can share files and images (including inappropriate content) and let strangers make first contact. Knowing who your child talks to matters as much as which apps they have.

● In the school day

Why phones don't belong in lessons.

Since 2024, UK guidance asks schools to keep phones out of use all day. Phone-free schools see better focus and stronger results, with the **biggest gains among the pupils who struggle most**, and the pressure of group chats is paused for a few hours.

A phone in a pocket is a tug on attention even when it's silent.

● Outside school too

The bigger picture is shaped at home.

A large 2025 UK study found that banning phones in school **on its own** didn't improve wellbeing or grades, because what matters most is **total daily use**, most of which happens outside the school gates. That's not a criticism of parents; it means **your choices carry real weight**. Researchers point to lost sleep, time pulled from friendships and play, and knocks to mood. The evidence isn't unanimous, but it points to a low-regret approach: **delay**.

● A simple approach many families are choosing

You don't have to do everything, or do it alone.

The **Smartphone Free Childhood** movement has seen **over 140,000 UK parents** agree to hold off. The rough consensus is easy to remember:

- 1 A basic phone first**
If location services, contact management and basic apps are not required, calls and texts cover most of what a younger child needs.
- 2 No open smartphone before around 14**
A controlled, child-specific phone can bridge this stage; it's the full, open internet that's worth holding back.
- 3 No social media before around 16**
Now set to become UK law for under-16s, expected from 2027.

A few small habits help a lot

- ✓ **Charge phones overnight outside the bedroom.** This one change protects sleep, which protects almost everything else.
- ✓ **Keep meals screen-free**, for the adults too, and turn off non-essential notifications.
- ✓ **Model the right behaviours yourself**, where possible.
- ✓ **Set the device up together** and talk early and often, so you're who they come to when something troubles them.
- ✓ **Talk to other parents in your child's class.** When a handful agree to wait together, no child feels like the only one.

● Choosing a device?

You have more options than you think.



Basic / "dumb" phones

Calls and texts only, no internet or apps. Great for the walk to school.



Child-specific smartphones

Look normal, but with location sharing, approved contacts and apps, and controls built in.



Smartwatches for younger children

Call or message trusted contacts and share location, with no screen to get lost in.



A standard smartphone, controls on

Set it up *with* your child using built-in screen-time and content limits from day one.

"Wait a little longer" doesn't have to mean "give them nothing."

● If you'd like more help

Smartphone Free Childhood: Practical guides & local parent groups · smartphonefreechildhood.org

Internet Matters: Age-by-age advice & parental-control setup · internetmatters.org

Papaya Talks: Expert-led parent talks for schools & communities · papayatalks.com

Health Professionals for Safer Screens: Clinician-led evidence & family guides · healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org

UK Safer Internet Centre: Report harmful content & get support · saferinternet.org.uk

Sources: Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes 2025*; Children's Commissioner for England (2023, updated 2025); Department for Education, *Mobile Phones in Schools 2024*; Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, under-16 social media plans (2026); Goodyear et al., *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, 2025; Smartphone Free Childhood. Findings are not unanimous; this flyer summarises them fairly to support your own decisions.