

CO-DESIGNING SMARTPHONE EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR TWEEN

COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION AND CURIOSITY



Giving your tween their first smartphone is an exciting milestone. It represents new possibilities for connection, learning, and independence. But with this step also comes the responsibility to help them manage this new tool in a healthy way. Rather than imposing strict rules from the start, a collaborative approach can make your tween feel heard and respected while ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

At this developmental stage, tweens crave independence and the feeling of being grown up. They are also still looking for guidance and boundaries from you to help them feel safe as they navigate new experiences (even though they'd never admit it). They are not yet ready for autonomy, especially when it comes to navigating the complexities of the digital world. Setting clear expectations, co-designed with your child, helps foster responsibility while giving them room to grow.

Here are eight key points for setting smartphone expectations with your tween.

1

ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR NEED FOR INDEPENDENCE

Tweens want to feel mature and independent, and having a smartphone is often seen as a rite of passage. Begin the conversation by recognising their desire to feel grown up. Let them know that setting guidelines doesn't undermine their maturity but rather supports their journey toward becoming responsible, independent individuals.

This conversation isn't about imposing decisions but about understanding each other's perspectives. By listening to them, you show that their voice matters. Their answers can give you a lot of insight into how you might shape the boundaries together.

Discuss your own concerns too. Whether it's about screen time, online safety, or being respectful to others. Remember, the goal here isn't to impose your rules but to share perspectives. When your child feels heard, they are more likely to engage in the process of setting mutual boundaries and then in turn stick with them (most of the time!)

2

START WITH AN OPEN DIALOGUE, NOT A LECTURE

Before setting any expectations, have an open discussion with your tween. Ask them what excites them about having a phone, what they're concerned about, and how they see themselves using it. Let them voice their opinions.

3

CO-DESIGN EXPECTATIONS TOGETHER

Once you've had a good conversation, work together to set clear expectations. Think of it as a co-design process. What does responsible phone use look like in your family? How much screen time is reasonable? When should the phone be put away (meals, family time, or bedtime?)

Frame these questions as open-ended and ask your child for input. Let them help set some of the boundaries. For example, you might agree together that phones should be away during family dinner or that certain apps are off-limits for now. This approach encourages your tween to take ownership of their decisions and helps them feel that the boundaries are fair and balanced.

Instead of dictating guidelines, ask your child for their input, and discuss why certain guidelines may be necessary. This approach helps your tween take ownership of the guidelines, making them more likely to follow them.

5

SET GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISION, NOT SURVEILLANCE

Make it clear that part of the guidelines will involve your ability to check in on what they are doing, not because you don't trust them, but because you want to support them. Let them know that your involvement is about helping them navigate challenges, not about spying or invading their privacy. Framing it this way reinforces trust while still giving you the ability to ensure their safety. Your goal should be to become a trusted partner in their smartphone journey, not just a rule enforcer.

At the heart of this conversation is trust. Let your tween know that you trust them to use the phone responsibly and that the boundaries are there to support their growth, not restrict their fun. By involving them in the decision-making, you're helping them practice responsibility, an essential life skill that extends far beyond phone use.

4

APPLY GUIDELINES TO THE WHOLE FAMILY

For guidelines to be effective, they should ideally apply to everyone in the household, not just your tween. This shows that the boundaries are about healthy phone use for all, not about singling out your child. If there are differing expectations for them, then explain why and that in time, as they become more experienced, develop new skills and show readiness, the expectations will change.

Parents, in particular, play a crucial role in modelling good phone habits. If you agree that phones are put away during family meals or at bedtime, these expectations should be followed by everyone. In families with older siblings, this is also an opportunity to talk with them about being positive role models. They can set a good example by showing responsible, mindful use of their phones around their younger sibling.

6

SHOW GENUINE INTEREST IN THEIR DIGITAL WORLD

Stay curious about what your tween is doing with their phone, and approach it with genuine interest rather than judgment. Ask them to show you their favourite apps or explain what they find enjoyable about certain online activities. This can open up new areas for bonding and even allow you to learn something new from your child. By showing interest, you create a positive atmosphere for ongoing conversations about their digital experiences.

It's tempting to want to keep a close watch on everything your child does with their phone, but a better approach is to maintain open lines of communication. Offer guidance when needed and be available to help them navigate any challenges they face.

7

DISCUSS DIGITAL ETIQUETTE AND SAFETY

Help your child understand what respectful, kind and responsible behaviour looks like online. This includes how they communicate with others, how to handle inappropriate content, and how to protect their privacy. Discuss what to do if they encounter something upsetting online and reinforce that you are always there to talk about anything they experience. Helping your child understand the importance of staying safe online is just as crucial as teaching them how to cross the road safely.

8

CREATE A FEEDBACK LOOP

Agree that you'll regularly revisit the boundaries and rules. This gives your child an opportunity to share how they feel about the guidelines and whether adjustments are needed. Perhaps they'll want more freedom after demonstrating responsibility, or maybe a new issue will arise that you hadn't considered initially. Keeping the conversation open shows that you're interested in their growth and capable of evolving the agreement as they mature.

TECH CONTRACTS AND AGREEMENTS

Some families find it helpful to write down the agreed-upon rules in a 'tech contract.' This isn't about locking them into a rigid set of rules but creating a point of reference you can both return to. It might include guidelines about phone use at night, screen time limits, or acceptable online behaviour. If you decide to go with having a tech contract, be sure to make this a living document. As your child grows, their needs and responsibilities will change, and the boundaries you've set need to evolve with them. Also, keep it simple and draft it together, rather than presenting it as your document for them to simply agree to.

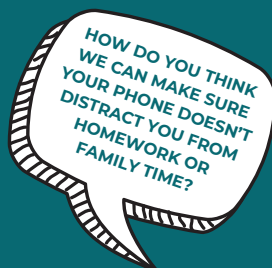
EXAMPLE OF AGREED GUIDELINES

Here's an example of simple guidelines you might agree on together:

- Screen Time: We agree that phone use is limited to X hours on weekdays, with flexibility for weekends.
- Phone-Free Zones: Phones are put away during meals, family time, and at least X minutes before bed.
- Nighttime Use: Phones will be charged outside the bedroom at night to ensure healthy sleep.
- Checking In: We agree that parents can check the phone periodically, not out of mistrust, but to support responsible use.
- Digital Etiquette: We commit to using the phone respectfully and kindly in online interactions, avoiding negative or hurtful behaviour.
- Safety: If anything feels uncomfortable or inappropriate, we agree to talk about it openly.
- Family Application: Everyone in the family will follow these guidelines, including parents and older siblings, to model healthy and respectful phone use.

These simple, focused guidelines are designed to tackle the most important concerns: screen time, family time, sleep, safety, and respectful use.

SOME CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR CO-DESIGNING SMARTPHONE EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES WITH YOUR TWEEN



CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS

- Open Communication: Start with a discussion about their excitement and concerns.
- Co-Designed Guidelines: Create guidelines together, allowing your tween to take part in the decision-making process.
- Supportive Supervision: Let them know you'll check in—not to monitor out of mistrust, but to provide support.
- Be Curious: Show interest in their phone use and digital activities.
- Digital Etiquette: Discuss the importance of being kind, respectful, and responsible online.
- Safety Conversations: Talk about how to handle inappropriate content and the importance of privacy settings.
- Regular Check-Ins: Plan to review and adjust the guidelines as they grow.
- Family-Wide Boundaries: Apply the guidelines to everyone in the household, modelling positive behaviour for the whole family.
- Trust and Responsibility: Emphasise that trust is earned through responsible phone use and through openness and honesty.

COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION AND CURIOSITY

By focusing on open **communication**, **collaboration**, and **curiosity**, you create a framework that supports your tween's independence while providing the guidance they still need. Setting smartphone expectations together will not only help them develop responsible habits but also strengthen your relationship along the way.