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SANTA'S TOUGHEST CHOICE

SHOULD YOUR CHILD GET THEIR FIRST SMARTPHONE FOR CHRISTMAS? A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

With Christmas only 8 weeks away, many children are busy 'creating lists for Santa' and/or actively dropping hints as to what they're hoping to find under the tree this festive season. Inevitably, high up on many of these lists are requests for first smartphones, presenting parents once again with what is undoubtably an important decision to be made.

Beyond the eye watering cost, deciding to give your child their first smartphone is not something to be taken lightly. At Digital Tweens we would argue that giving a child their first smartphone kick-starts a digital life transition, that we refer to as digital puberty. A smartphone can present new digital opportunities and support greater independence and responsibility, but it also brings substantial risks that require careful evaluation, thoughtful preparation and ongoing guidance.

It's been a hot topic in 2024, with high-profile debate spreading across the globe about children and smartphones, with particular concerns over social media and its effect on children's mental health. This has fuelled demands to wind back the trend for increasingly young children being given phones. Publication of *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt has added momentum and profile to these concerns, with a growing number of schools implementing phone bans, and movements emerging such as *Wait Mate* (Australia), *Smartphone Free Childhood* (UK) and *Wait until 8th* (USA), all encouraging parents to commit to delay giving their children smartphones. So, what to do?

Trust Your Instincts: You Know Your Child Best

As a parent, we believe you're the expert on your child's maturity, needs, and readiness. Even if they insist that 'everyone else has one,' remember: it's okay to say 'not yet' if you feel the time isn't right for them. It's not about a particular age but rather your judgement as a parent.

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Look beyond the peer pressure and evaluate your child's readiness based on all that you know about your child, and your family context. Sometimes, taking a 'not yet' approach will give children time and space to grow in ways that prepare them better for the responsibilities that a smartphone brings and will help them to be safer and more fully equipped with the skills necessary to thrive in life with a phone.

Parenting isn't, and has never been, a popularity contest. Standing firm in the boundaries you set to protect and support your child's development to is a gift in itself (albeit one which won't necessarily be appreciated at the time!) Connecting with other parents facing the same decision can be helpful and reassuring but remember it's about your child and their readiness. Similarly, discussing the decision with your partner, researching online, and talking to other parents in your child's peer group can strengthen your confidence; but ultimately, it's your decision.

Setting Expectations Early

If you've decided to wait, set this expectation before Christmas Day to avoid disappointment and upset on Christmas morning. Framing it as a 'not yet', rather than simply a 'no' keeps the door open for future discussions, allowing them to prepare for the responsibility when the time is right. Sharing your decision in advance helps manage your child's expectations and allows you to focus on celebrating Christmas together.

Key Considerations for Your Child's First Smartphone

If you're still weighing up whether this Christmas is the right time for your child, here are some considerations to help guide your decision:

Consider Their Current Tech Use

Observe how they handle other devices, like tablets or family computers. Are they able to balance their screen time without frequent reminders? If not, they may benefit from additional preparation before handing them the additional independence and self-management a smartphone requires.

Discuss Why They Want a Smartphone

Ask your child what they hope to gain from a smartphone. Is it primarily for staying connected with friends, playing games, or accessing social media? What are their expectations and how well do these align with yours? Knowing their motivations can help you evaluate if a smartphone is necessary or if there's an alternative solution.

Gauge Their Understanding of Online Safety

Are they aware of basic online safety principles, like protecting personal information and behaving respectfully online? These skills are essential for navigating the digital world safely.

Evaluate Their Respect for Boundaries

A smartphone brings new freedoms and requires boundaries, like screen-free times and limits on apps. If they (fairly) consistently respect family rules, it may be a sign they're ready to handle these responsibilities.

If You Decide to Say 'Yes': Five Steps to Help Them Succeed

If you choose to give them a smartphone this Christmas, setting up for success will help your child use it responsibly:

Co-Create Guidelines and Boundaries

Sit down together to set up agreed guidelines. These may include screen-free times, device-free spaces, and limits on social media and other apps. It's also important to ensure your child understands your expectations about having access to their device and any monitoring you will be undertaking. If you will be reviewing your child messages and other data on their phone, mutually agreeing this upfront can preserve trust and help your child to understand why this will occur. Involving your child in creating these rules fosters responsibility and a shared understanding of expectations. They can be changed and adapted as your child matures, grows in experience and skill, and demonstrates their capacity to handle the responsibility of having a smartphone.

Set Up Parental Controls Together
Use features like Screen Time on iPhone or Family Link on Android. Walking through the setup with them opens a conversation about why each boundary exists, helping them see controls as supportive tools rather than restrictions.

Regularly Check in on Their Experience
Make sure there are regular check-ins to ask how they're finding smartphone use, address any challenges, and offer guidance. This ongoing mentoring and walking alongside their child in their smartphone journey is crucial for building healthy digital habits.

Model Positive Digital Habits Yourself
Show in your phone usage that smartphones are tools to be used, not there to control us. By limiting your own screen time, avoiding constant phone checking, and being present in the moment, you can model healthy behaviours that they'll likely follow. *Check out our blog Actions Speak Louder: Be the Digital Role Model Your Child Needs.*

Plan for a Trial Period
Consider the first few months as a trial phase, where you both assess what's working and what needs adjusting. This can take pressure off and create a more flexible approach to building healthy habits.

You can find further help and guidance in supporting your child with their smartphone on our website www.digitaltweens.com

Alternatives to a Smartphone
If you decide your child isn't ready for a smartphone, here are some alternatives that encourage independence with limited features:

A Non-Smart or Dumb-Phone: Provides some phone features without the internet access. A range of options are available, varying depending on which country you live in.

Kids' Smartwatches: some options offer only call, text, and GPS tracking, allowing for communication without the complexities of a smartphone.

Tablets with Parental Controls: A tablet provides opportunities for digital exploration with more control and potentially less exposure to social media.

This Christmas, the gift of readiness can be as valuable as the smartphone itself. If you choose to wait, reassure your child that it's about their development and safety, not you just being mean. And if the answer is yes, prepare to support them actively as they learn to navigate this new responsibility. It's not just about handing over the phone, you need to be ready to provide ongoing and active support over the coming years as they mature with their use of digital technologies and learn to use a smartphone responsibly and healthily

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