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## Parents' Biggest Dilemma: When to Give Children Smartphones

The battle for the attention of America's children pits parents against some of the world's most advanced companies. It is a fight as lopsided as it sounds

*By Betsy Morris*

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BOSTON— Gabriel Krause-Grosman, 12 years old, spent family dinners for the greater part of a year on a smartphone offensive. He hounded. He pleaded. All his friends had one, he prodded. Yet his parents stood firm.

“Who the hell would give a junior-high schoolchild a gaming platform to walk through the world with?” said Ellen Krause-Grosman, his mother. “It feels a little like trying to teach your kid how to use cocaine, but in a balanced way.”

She and her husband worried if they could shield their son from addictive videogames, pornography, online bullying or predatory strangers.

Then they folded. Gabriel got an LG Aristo and has since bent to its demands, sometimes at the expense of playing violin or going outside. “I spend way too much time on it,” the boy said.

When to allow children a smartphone has become among the most pivotal of parental decisions in the decade since Apple Inc.'s [AAPL 0.99% ▲](#) iPhone remade daily habits. For many families, the choice is as significant as when to hand over the car keys. It pits parents and teachers against some of the largest and most advanced companies in the

world—a fight as lopsided as it sounds.

Experience has already shown parents that ceding control over the devices has reshaped their children's lives, allowing an outside influence on school work, friendships, recreation, sleep, romance, sex and free time.

Nearly 75% of teenagers had access to smartphones, concluded a 2015 study by Pew Research Center—unlocking the devices about 95 times a day on average, according to research firm Verto Analytics. They spent, on average, close to nine hours a day tethered to screens large and small outside of school, according to Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that promotes safe media use for children.

The goal of Facebook Inc., Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Snap Inc. and their peers is to create or host captivating experiences that keep users glued to their screens, whether for Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat or Facebook. A child can understand the business model: The more screen time, the more revenue.

“Average time spent” is a tech-industry metric that helps drive advertising rates and stock prices. Snapchat users 25 and younger, for example, were spending 40 minutes a day on the app, Chief Executive Evan Spiegel said in August. Alphabet boasted to investors recently that YouTube's 1.5 billion users were spending an average 60 minutes a day on mobile.

Departing from that message can be costly. Facebook's stock slid in early trading Friday after CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced plans Thursday to overhaul the Facebook news feed in a way that could reduce the time users spend.

Tech companies are working to instill viewing habits earlier than ever. The number of users of YouTube Kids is soaring. Facebook recently launched Messenger Kids, a messaging app for children as young as 6.

Apple said its mobile software includes parental controls to govern content and applications. Devices powered by Google's Android software allow parents, in effect, to monitor and limit screen time until age 13, reflecting government regulations that say that is old enough. A Google spokesperson says the company provides help for parents seeking to navigate its offerings.

Hoping to forestall a looming social backlash, Jana Partners LLC and the California

State Teachers' Retirement System, which together control about \$2 billion of Apple shares, urged the company in a Jan. 6 letter to offer more choices and tools for parents to control and limit iPhone use.

"Many parents feel they cannot keep up with technology and are looking for more control," said Antigone Davis, Facebook's global head of safety.

For children and teens, mobile devices are a social lifeline, and many wage a relentless lobbying campaign at home for permission to join the crowd. It turned out to be the pitch that delivered Gabriel his smartphone.

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Out for ice cream after the school play last spring, Gabriel's father, Michael, saw some of his son's friends use their phones to make plans to meet. "I knew how I would feel if I were left out," said Mr. Krause-Grosman, an accountant.

He and his wife performed their due diligence in advance of the arrival of Gabriel's new smartphone. They completed an online course for parents and downloaded sample contracts. The family hammered out policy agreements on hours of use, location of use, as well as for sleepovers and homework.

The parents found an app to monitor the time Gabriel spent on his phone and the sites he visited. Ms. Krause-Grosman said she told Gabriel and his 10-year-old sister, Rachel, that everyone was "under surveillance by big companies that are mining big data. Everything we do can be seen."

Gabriel now has Instagram, Snapchat and a one-hour daily limit for the online multiplayer videogame Clash Royale. His parents denied his request for an Amazon debit card. "I am not monitoring your online shopping," Ms. Krause-Grosman told him.

In a few instances, Gabriel has blown past his allowed screen time. The boy, who turns 13 at the end of January, said he sometimes wished the phone wasn't quite so tempting.

## Gone astray

In November, Agnes Ho joined more than 100 parents in an auditorium at Palo Alto High School in Palo Alto, Calif., the city where the late Apple Inc. CEO Steve Jobs raised his children, and where Mr. Zuckerberg is raising his.

The parents gathered to hear advice from Devorah Heitner, a consultant and author, about how to raise children with smartphones. She warned that trying to micromanage use of the devices can prompt children to become more deceptive, especially in a fast-shifting digital environment where young people often maintain the upper hand.

Ms. Ho's 16-year-old son, Brian is an Eagle Scout and chorister, who at times finds it hard to break away from online videogames, even at 3 a.m. The teen recently told his mother he thinks he is addicted. Ms. Ho's daughter, Samantha, 14, also is glued to her device, in conversations with friends.

Ms. Ho, a registered nurse, and her husband, Philip Ho, an otolaryngologist, are trying to teach their children self-control. Brian volunteered to give up gaming until after final exams.

Meantime, Ms. Ho said, "He can't sleep. He can't sit still."

Four years ago, Kristin Braun, of Austin, Texas, got iPhones for her daughters, Ella and Clare, now ages 9 and 11. Her husband works in tech, and the couple were gung-ho about mobile devices, Ms. Braun said. As babies, the girls had iPod shuffles pinned to their crib blankets.

Ms. Braun planned to teach her daughters to use their iPhones gradually, with a short contact list and a few apps. "I was like, 'Oh yeah. We've got this. It's fine,'" she said. "Well, it's not fine."

Right away, Clare received a barrage of unsolicited texts. She was included in a group text from a friend's soccer team that connected her to a circle of children she didn't know. Ms. Braun believed it was too much, too fast.

Then Clare received an email chain letter, decorated with heart-shaped emojis, that threatened bad luck if she didn't forward it to 15 friends. Ms. Braun said her first response was to take away the phones for good.

Instead, she took a deep breath, figuring the devices were a part of life, and she asked her daughters to share with her any disturbing content or messages. She started a class to tell other parents what she learned so far.

Tina Shepardson, a 6th-grade teacher in Syracuse, N.Y., said the attention span of students has shrunk in the years smartphone habits have grown. She saw it at home with her daughter, Payton, 15.

When Payton was in seventh grade, she asked to join Instagram. "As nervous as you are, you have to jump in," Ms. Shepardson said.

The next year, Payton wanted Snapchat, which features disappearing messages that defy parental monitoring. "I had to trust her," Ms. Shepardson said.

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Now a high school sophomore, Payton wants to keep her smartphone through the night, a common teen plea. When Payton has to turn over her

phone at 10 p.m., she resists.

"You think you're buying a piece of technology," Ms. Shepardson said. "Now it's like oxygen to her."

Psychologists say social media creates anxiety among children when they are away from their phones—what they call "fear of missing out," whether on social plans, conversations or damaging gossip teens worry could be about themselves.

Ms. Shepardson said nighttime texting hurts grades and digital screens impede sleep, according to what she has read. Payton gets the phone overnight on weekends and while doing her homework. She does well in school, her mother said, so "you pick your battles."

About half the teens in a survey of 620 families in 2016 said they felt addicted to their smartphones. Nearly 80% said they checked the phones more than hourly and felt the need to respond instantly to messages, according to Common Sense Media, which sponsored the research.

## Either or

“I have no idea how much inappropriate stuff they watch,” Allison Dady said of her sons, Reed, 18, a high school senior, and Lane, 15, a freshman. Each boy received a smartphone in sixth grade.

Ms. Dady, a real-estate agent in Austin, took a tough stand against nighttime use. Once, after she caught Reed sneaking into her room to retrieve his device from her night stand, she slept with it under her pillow for two weeks.

Yet she doesn't set limits on her son's online activities. When she asks about pornography, she said, “They vehemently deny looking at any,” which she doubts.

“I go back and forth,” Ms. Dady said. “I worry about it, and then I think that I've let it go on so long, can I really do anything about it now?”

Many parents are thrilled with the benefits technology delivers for their children.

Programs and games teach arithmetic, foreign languages and logic. Online books are nearly limitless.

Smartphones offer children greater independence, with apps that allow parents to locate them instantly. They also make it easy to keep parents at bay.

Children set up Instagram accounts under pseudonyms that friends but not parents recognize. Some teens keep several of these so-called Finsta accounts without their parents knowing.

An app called Secret Calculator looks and works like an iPhone calculator but doubles as a private vault to hide files, photos and videos. For homework, point an iPhone camera at an algebra problem and Photomath solves it.

Serious troubles also loom: from the exchange of sexually explicit photographs or messages—which Dr. Heitner called modern-day flirting—to what the American Psychiatric Association calls “Internet Gaming Disorder” among gamers unable to pull away from their screens.

Apple iPhones allow parents to control their children's downloads and temporarily disable distracting programs. Apple and other tech companies offer ways for parents to monitor their children's travels. Most have parent instructions online, though they are

often difficult to find or follow.

Snap and Instagram have online parent guides and tip sheets. Netflix and YouTube Kids give parents control of when, how much and what children watch. Keeping children away from disturbing content, though, is easier than keeping them off their phones.

Mr. Zuckerberg told investors late last year that Facebook planned to boost video offerings, noting that live video generates 10 times as many user interactions. Netflix Inc. chief executive Reed Hastings, said in April about the addictiveness of its shows that the company was “competing with sleep on the margins.”

## Friendly fire

Social media can boost self-esteem, research shows, as well as trigger a sense of inadequacy. Social media users can experience conviviality or hostility, popularity or disfavor—feelings easily amplified by adolescence.

Gretchen Tolbert recalled feeling helpless in the fall of 2016 when her daughter Haley was a freshman at a new high school in McKinney, Texas.

Haley joined the soccer team and attracted followers on Snapchat and Instagram. Then, some classmates turned on Haley, taunting her and circulating disparaging texts and snaps, Ms. Tolbert said.

By Thanksgiving, Haley, normally headstrong and sure of herself, had a hard time getting out of bed. “I’d never seen her so lethargic and hurt,” her mother said. “It was gut-wrenching.” Haley saw a counselor, took medication for anxiety and tightened her social-media circle.

As a sophomore, Haley is much stronger, but she no longer plays soccer and plans to finish high school as soon as she can, Ms. Tolbert said: “It changed the course of her life.”

About 16% of the nation’s high-school students were bullied online in 2015, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Children who are cyberbullied are three times more likely to contemplate suicide, according to a study in JAMA Pediatrics in 2014.

Tony Prophet, chief equality officer at Salesforce.com Inc., the San Francisco-based

business software company, limits screen time for his second-grader, Falco. Mr. Prophet, whose two college-age sons played videogames growing up, worries what today's fast-paced video on high-resolution screens does to the attention span of children.

How can children learn to solve problems in an age when smartphones provide instant answers? he said. Falco recently asked what God looked like.

When Mr. Prophet said nobody knows, Falco asked without irony: "Why don't we just go on God's Facebook page and see?"

Felice Ahn, 43, of Palo Alto, doesn't plan to give smartphones to her daughters, ages 9 and 10, even when they reach high school, an unusual restriction in this affluent corner of Silicon Valley.

Ms. Ahn and her husband listen to music and podcasts on their smartphones, but they worry the devices might hobble their daughters' development or create unnecessary social pressures. Instead, Ms. Ahn got the girls LG GizmoGadget watches, which allow calls with a few family members.

"Maybe the pendulum will begin to swing," Ms. Ahn said. "Maybe this approach won't be so much like a fish swimming upstream."

For now, she said, "I don't care what the other moms think of me. We're happy to be different."

Smartphones "bring the outside in," said Ms. Ahn, whose husband works for a major tech company. "We want the family to be the center of gravity."

—*Stephanie Stamm contributed to this article.*

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