

News and Perspectives

Is Going Analog Good for Children and Teens' Mental Health and Well-Being?

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Key Takeaways

- More and more parents are waiting to give their children a smartphone.
- Children and teens who spend more time on devices are more likely to develop addictive behaviors, have difficulty sleeping, and experience cyberbullying.
- Parents' smartphone use plays a significant role in how their children and teens engage with their devices.

As children grow older, parents face a mounting sense of pressure to provide them with smartphones. By the time they enter middle school, children who have devices far outweigh those who don't; according to Common Sense Media, 42% have a phone by age 10, 71% by age 12, and 91% by age 14 [1].

Still, a growing body of evidence is motivating parents to hold off on smartphones until the later teenage years. In fact, more and more families are taking a long, hard look at their digital life and trading in their smartphones for flip phones and landlines.

Many Families Want A More Low-Tech Lifestyle

Parents like Paul Jones, a father of three, want to make sure that their children are both educated on device safety and aware of the potential downsides.

"Technology isn't going anywhere, if anything it's advancing so we need to educate children on technology and how to use it safely and properly," said Jones. That's why he started FlippGen [2], a youth-focused organization where young adults go into schools and provide perspective on how teens can positively balance device use.

Jones said that his children will not get devices until age 16, and instead he and a "pod" of friends and family have invested in landlines. According to a recent survey, Gen Z parents are holding off on smartphones, with 28% waiting until their children are between the ages of 15 and 17 to purchase them [3]. Jones' children have a landline provided through a company called Tin Can, a popular Wi-Fi landline for kids that doesn't have apps, texting, or games and only allows kids to speak to those on their approved contact list [4].

Additionally, some teens that already have smartphones have been trading them in for flip phones in order to remain reachable while reducing distractions and time they view as wasted on social media sites. The trend isn't new, but it appears to be persistent: one 2023 report noted an increase in

US flip phone sales [5], and recent 2026 coverage highlights a growing interest in being "chronically offline" [6].

Does Age Matter When It Comes to Responsible Smartphone Use?

The research is mixed when it comes to the best age to give a child a smartphone. One study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that children who had smartphones by age 12 were more likely to suffer from an increased risk of depression, obesity, and insufficient sleep [7], but another study published in the journal *Child Development* showed that grades, sleep habits, and depression symptoms were not impacted by the age that children acquired their first devices [8].

Still, even with these mixed results, current data may still point to holding off—or at the very least, educating on and carefully monitoring device use. More than age, what seems to matter for well-being is how and how much children and teens use their smartphones.

Moderate, intentional, guided use may provide benefits for social connection or support, depending on the kind of use [9,10]—for example, if a child or teen shares about a positive event, achievement, or cause that they're involved in, or finds like-minded peers going through similar trials. Additionally, there may be a level of perceived social isolation, disconnection, and fear of missing out that occurs for some whose parents hold off on getting them smartphones, as well as perceived trade-offs in the other potential practical and logistical benefits smartphones might offer [11-14].

But on the other hand, excessive use without supervision can contribute to loss of sleep, cyberbullying, and exposure to distressing or inappropriate content [15,16]. And even if their well-being doesn't suffer and they're able to keep their grades up, the average American child spends 5 hours daily on their smartphones [17].

"While social media can be used to forge some connections, the type of connections and socialization that occurs on social media is often quite different than the types of conversations and relationships that one would have face to face," said

Jason Nagata, MD, an associate professor of Pediatrics in the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

Potential Risks of Excessive Use

Social media addiction is much more likely to occur in children and teens who are allowed unfettered access to a smartphone. While not a formal diagnosis, it can present many of the same symptoms as substance abuse-related and other addiction disorders, including impaired control, withdrawal, tolerance, and relapse. It can contribute to diminished engagement in other activities and significantly impair a child's daily functioning, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life [17-20].

Sleep disruption is another potential negative for children and teens with unlimited access to their devices. A study published in the August 2023 edition of the journal *Sleep Health* [21] found that 63.2% of 11-12 year olds had a digital device in their room, and approximately 17% of them reported that it had awoken them in the past week. One-fifth of adolescents said that they used their device if they woke up during the night, which was associated with a higher risk of sleep disturbance.

Additionally, according to Nagata, the most likely explanation for social media's impact on mental health results from cyberbullying. A study published in the June 2025 issue of the journal *The Lancet Regional Health – Americas* found

that children ages 11 to 12 years who were cyberbullied were more likely to have depressive symptoms and 2.62 times more likely to report suicidal ideation or a suicide attempt one year later [22].

Modeling Positive Digital Behavior

To mitigate some of the potential negative effects of smartphone use on children and teen's well-being, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends establishing a healthy family media plan that the entire family can abide by [23]. Parents should establish screen-free zones, confiscating phones at a certain hour every night and not allowing them in the bedroom or during meals, recommendations that align with Nagata's research [24].

Perhaps most importantly, however, parents should model these behaviors for their children and teens. The single biggest predictor of a child's relationship with the digital world is not the age that parents provide them with a smartphone, but rather, a parent's own use of their devices, according to Michael Rich, MD, MPH, Director and Founder, Digital Wellness Lab, and associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

"We need to think of smartphones less in terms of entitlement and more in terms of the powerful tools that they are," said Rich. Powerful tools with instruction manuals the research is still writing—making prudent, thoughtful use essential, especially when the users are children and teens.

Keywords: adolescent; child; mental health; well-being; smartphones; social media; digital technology; screen time; health behaviour; parental guidance; media use; sleep; anxiety; depression; health promotion

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

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