

Everything

SMARTPHONE

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SMARTPHONE CHARTER

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Is your teen
ready for a
smartphone?



THE TABLE

You're holding this magazine because someone chose to give.

This beautifully designed publication exists because of a community we call **The Table**.

The Table is made up of monthly supporters who believe in the next generation and are committed to helping parents, grandparents, teachers, pastors, and mentors disciple teens in a world that rarely makes it easy.

Thanks to the generosity of our Table members, Axis is able to create gospel-centered content that's always **free**—so that every family can engage their teen in meaningful conversations about faith, culture, identity, and Jesus.

To our Table members: **Thank you.**

You are the reason this magazine—and the life-giving conversations it sparks—exists. Every page you've made possible, is an investment in legacy.

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Everything SMARTPHONE

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The decision
to give your child
a *smartphone*
is one of the
biggest decisions
you will ever
make ...

WELCOME TO *Everything* SMARTPHONE

At Axis, we believe that the decision to give your child a smartphone is one of the biggest decisions you will ever make, and one that will change both of your lives. This is why we're passionate about helping to equip you to do so as well as possible.

This toolkit includes:

1. **Bible-based perspective** on how we think about smartphones, safety, and digital limitations
2. Perspectives from **real teenagers** on how they feel about their phones
3. A free **downloadable PDF** (available at the end of this book) that includes a family smartphone charter, **the 5Ws and the H** of talking about smartphones, and our comprehensive plan to gradually increase your child's level of freedom on their phone
4. A dozen **essays and reported stories** by writers like Erin Loechner, Evan Barber, Hannah Lane, CJ Fant, Abby Perry, and many more



Is There a Perfect Age to Get a *Smartphone?*

**“SO, WHEN SHOULD I GET
MY KID A SMARTPHONE?”**

This is the number one question that I get asked at Axis about phones.

And please rest assured, we are going to definitively answer that newly “age-old” question that arose in parent’s minds starting shortly after January 9, 2007 when Steve Jobs announced the first iPhone. But let’s see how others answer it first.

In his book, *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt says that parents should wait until **9th grade** for a smartphone and **age 16** for social media access.

The Wait Until 8th organization answers the question in the name of their group, urging parents to wait until **8th grade**.





In one **survey**, a group of teens suggested that adolescents should get their first phone between the **ages of 12 and 13**, out of “necessity.”

The general public in the United States answers this question with their wallets when they buy their **11.6 year old** their first phone, according to Consumer Affairs.

So, let’s get to Axis’ immediate answer. Drumroll please. The answer to this dilemma is... **it’s the wrong question.**

At face value, that might sound discouraging. We 100% get that. So let’s be clear: It’s a natural question. It’s a good question. But it is perhaps the wrong place to start.

Phones are an astonishing tool—a tool that is complex, multi-faceted, and traverses many of the domains of the human experience including productivity, relationships, finance, leisure, travel, health, and in almost every way: connection.

So your kid will absolutely need your wisdom over time to learn how to use a phone (much like learning how to drive a car), and we are going to be here for you every step of the way.

Here’s why “When should I get my kid a smartphone?” is the wrong question. It makes two assumptions that are false.

False Assumption One: It assumes your kid has to go from having no phone to having full access to 100% of a phone. This assumes there will be a massive leap that happens on a Christmas morning or on a birthday when your kid gets a cellophane-wrapped box from the Apple Store with an iPhone in it instead of a gradual progression of gaining more responsibility over time.

The truth is there are **many, many, many** “training phones” that aren’t smartphones. And there are ways to slowly give your kid more rope, so to speak. They may start with only the ability to make a call and then gradually add texting, social media, an internet browser, etc. And for that “ramping up” process, we are here to help you to be confident, ahead, and equipped.

False Assumption Two: It assumes your kid doesn’t already have access to a phone... which is probably not true.

As a mom once said to us, “My kid is only as safe as their friends’ phones.”

Even if you hold out on your kid getting a phone until they are 18, they will be influenced by the content on their friends’ phones. They may even maintain a social profile on their friends’ phones.

Having a teenager in your home can be like having a live-in IT guy who is capable of hacking your entire system at any time. You can’t beat them. That’s why the most important thing you can do is not try to create a water-tight, sin-proof, phone decalogue.

The best set of laws, firewalls, and tech-savvy protections will never redeem your kid’s heart. What will is a heart-level, Holy Spirit-led connection between you and your teen.

Okay, so given those two false assumptions, what is our actual answer? What age is the best age to get your kid their first phone?

The Answer: We think you could get your kid their “first phone” during the middle school years (think 12 or 13). If they are young enough, they might even be excited to get a phone that is not an iPhone but one of the many products on the market that are designed to be a kid’s first phone.

Once you’ve moved past the “first phone,” there are many ways to limit smartphones access to the more dangerous areas of the internet. We recommend the organization Protect Young Eyes for comprehensive, up-to-date guides on how to customize their phone settings to slow-roll the app store, internet browsers, and social media.

The most important recommendation from Axis with any phone is to provide clear expectations within your family. That means physically writing down or typing out how your family answers the eight phone domains we will mention later. This is not meant to be a contract written in blood, but a work in progress “same-page” document that can be referred to often.

We’ll talk more about this in future articles, but **our charter** is a great starting place:



Family Smartphone CHARTER

_____'s Version

As your parent, I am responsible to God as the ultimate steward of your phone. As long as the phone is paid for by me, and/or while you live under my roof, here are our **non-negotiables**:

- ✓ All passwords are public and accessible, including for apps
- ✓ Parents have full access to any phone at any time
- ✓ No sneaky apps designed to hide or keep secrets
- ✓ No pornography or sharing of images
- ✓ No dating apps
- ✓ No bullying
- ✓ No abusive language
- ✓ If this phone is broken or lost, [_____]

Our grace policy

5 Essential Conversations to Have First

Who pays for the phone? **Ownership and responsibility**
When and where can this phone be used? **Basic ground rules**
How do we know what to trust online? **Representation does not always equal reality**
Why do we avoid harmful content? **A Christian ethic for deciding what's appropriate**
What if everything goes wrong? **Positive motivation, consequences, and support**

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8 Smartphone Domains

Phones are very good, useful, & can be redeemed. God owns everything & He owns all phones.
Parents are responsible to God as the ultimate steward of the family phones.

	START HERE	THEN WHAT?	WHAT'S NEXT
1 Non-Responsibilities			
2 Money			
3 Location			
4 Time			
5 Internet			
6 App Store			
7 Texting			
8 Social Media			

PHONE FREEDOM

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You'll be surprised at the generational differences assumed by you and your kid around phones. The non-negotiables, financial investment, location tracking, time limits, internet, App store, texting, and social media all need to be spelled out before that first phone gets unboxed. Even if it is informal, putting it in writing and making it public makes all the difference.

Finally, and this is an easy step to forget, your goal is for their phone to become fully their phone before they move out of your home. Start with the end in mind. You want them to grow in wisdom, responsibility, and self-awareness so that the phone becomes a great tool that serves them, enhances connection, and brings freedom into their lives.

It's a process—but the most important part of that process is your relationship with your kid.

You are not adversaries. You are on the same team and together God will work through your family to help your kid grow in wisdom.

Oh, and for those of you who are asking, "But what if I already got my kid a phone... like four years ago?" We will help with that too in the next few pages.

You've got this. When you're ready, let's jump in.

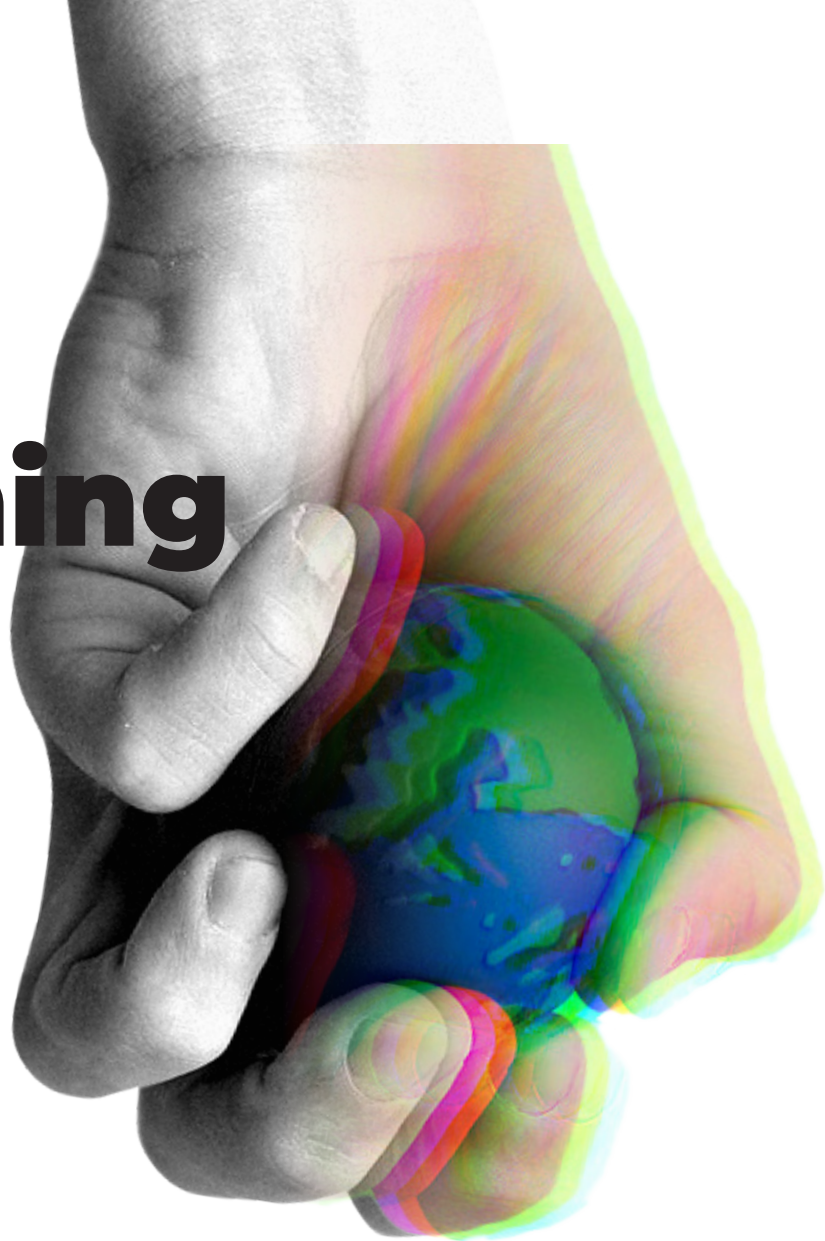


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BY KATE WATSON

Anxious for Nothing

To end the phone-based childhood, we must address our own *anxieties.*



This summer, a family of robins made their nest in the eaves under my deck.

My daughter and I would visit them every morning and late afternoon. She's not quite three, so I would put her on my shoulders and lift her up so that she could see. First it was just their mother, sitting on four eggs. Then there were the babies, wet and impossibly small, with their thin cries and open beaks, begging for worms. Only a few days later they grew speckled and downy, puffing up their chests at us from their spot in the nest.

And one day, we looked up, and the nest was empty. They were gone.

For a second, anyway.

Then we looked down, and they were on the ground. One juvenile hopped out from a stray piece of plywood. Another peeked from behind a gardening shovel. My daughter was so excited, she charged in their direction, her hands spread wide. And before I could blink, both robins jumped to a low-hanging shrub, flapped their wings, and flew away.

I was slack-jawed at how fast they were, and how determined. Less than ten days ago, they were pecking through their delicate baby blue eggshells. And now, a little spook from a toddler had sent them soaring.

I reached for my phone. It wasn't in my back pocket. And strangely, its absence felt like a mercy. I moved on with my gardening and smiled at my girl. The moment would be our secret for now.

You've probably noticed the tsunami of research and expert commentary that has emerged on the subject of teens and smartphones. Jonathan Haidt's book, **The Anxious Generation**, seems to have arrived at the crest of the wave. People are talking about this book in podcasts, an excerpt ran in the **Atlantic**, and profiles of Haidt

splashed across the pages of **New York Magazine** and **The New York Times**.

But the book has also become a sort of ideological litmus test for parents to discuss with one another when in private. "Have you heard about The Anxious Generation?" one parent might ask another, somewhat sheepishly, and feign disinterest as they wait on the answer.

What they really mean to ask is, "Are you as worried about giving your kids a phone as I am?"

Some pundits **have suggested** that reports of the teen mental health crisis are greatly exaggerated. *The Anxious Generation* makes a compelling case that they aren't. Through a compilation of data, charts, anecdotes, and reviews of the medical literature, Haidt does a pretty good job of explaining that smartphones are designed to steal our attention and invite unhealthy comparisons to others—and why things designed for that purpose are especially terrible for young people.

Throughout the book, Haidt compares growing up online to growing up on Mars. Sure, it might be possible for people to survive in a hostile environment, but why would we choose kids to be the ones to test that theory out on? He points out the dangers of "safety-ism," a sociological phenomenon that leads us to be overprotective of our kids in the real world—and shows how when combined with the sweeping, swift adoption of brand new technologies, safety-ism may have led us to be under-protective of kids in the digital world.

Starting in the 1990s, our loss of shared societal values has led to a culture of suspicion towards strangers. This declining trust in other people

has led us to parent from a place of panic, scheduling our children down to the minute and redefining supervision so that it looks more like surveillance.

But this level of suspicion has come at a cost. By alienating others in our communities, we've ended up in a place where parents are often under-supported in their efforts to raise capable, self-reliant, morally sound adults. According to the Pew Research Center, **only 54%** of Americans say that they feel close to other people in their communities. Parents don't want to make the iPad or television into the de facto babysitter for their children. But **without an actual babysitter** for their children, they may feel like they have no choice.

Unfortunately, spending time with a touchscreen is a sickly, unsettling substitute for a group of other adults who would presumably have a child's best interests at heart.

In our anxiety over neighbors lurking too close to the playground, we let strangers have full reign of the digital playground where our kids spend arguably more time.

The result is teens who are doing poorly. It's hard for them to regulate their emotions. They face difficulty with routine tasks and expectations. They don't seem suited at all for the world they are inheriting—in fact, nobody does. It is an unknown technological frontier that seems more hostile to humans by the day.

Haidt says that smartphones are the unequivocal culprit and his suggestions (which basically boil down to banning phones

from academic environments, encouraging free range play experiences, and enforcing age restrictions on social media accounts) offer a practical solution. Haidt suggests sane solutions that communities can implement.

But if “safetyism” is fundamentally adult overprotection motivated by anxiety, enacting these solutions won't necessarily heal the underlying root of that.

Sometimes we worry so much about parenting “rightly” that we no longer worry about how our children will learn how to do what is right.

For some parents, our biggest concern has become raising a child who will turn out to be someone who sins—an outcome that is not only out of our control, but is actually guaranteed to come true.

This isn't just bad for them; it's bad for us. It robs parenting of all its joy. We could be introducing our teens to the raucous tumult of God's world and the people, flawed and fantastic, who inhabit it with us. When we parent from a place of fear and dread, it turns us into rigid chaperones who insist on keeping life at a predictable, comfortable level—a place where it's hard to hear the Spirit whispering His wild beckoning to become the full expression of who God created us to be.

Some parents worry that they aren't spending enough time with their children. But as Haidt points out, parents actually spend more time with their children now than at any time in recent human history. We may spend that time

distracted by our own devices. We may be working from home or driving to hockey games. We may be preoccupied with stresses our grandparents would have a hard time conceptualizing. But we still have the opportunity of a lifetime—the chance to be there.

To have conversations with our children as we walk down a dusty road. To share wisdom with them that they can choose to embrace or reject. To offer them what we have, and to love them hard. And to give them opportunities to know the God who somehow loves them more than we ever could.

The Anxious Generation gives us a good baseline for figuring out what handheld technologies have done to our teens' attention spans, self-esteem, and mental health. Taking all the suggestions it outlines might leave a better world for the next generation.

But it doesn't solve the problem of an anxious generation of parents—parents whose human hearts have been led astray by the idea that safety is preferable to courage, that following the letter of the law is preferable to truly living, and that only a fool would forsake the cozy nest for a short flight to the shrub next door.

It's the kind of lesson we need to internalize as we try to set the standard for the adults we're trying to raise.

Because a juvenile may watch you from its perch, puffed and preening. They may jump out onto the ground below and leave you worried for a time. But without that terrifying first free-fall, they never can learn how to fly.



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It has never been easy to be a teenage girl. Unrequited crushes, disloyal best friends, a first menstrual cycle that always seems to arrive far later or far earlier than everyone else's (at the perfect time to feel completely horrible, in any case); these are features of the time-honored gauntlet of female adolescence.

But with the advent of smartphones and their current saturation point among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, there is a new dimension to "growing up girl" that not only brings its own host of issues but amplifies what's already there to a nearly unbearable degree.

Essayist and poet John Berger **wrote this** in his 1972 book **Ways of Seeing**:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

Berger wrote this in the 1970s, far before the advent of the smartphone. But, given the way social media—and the accompanying eyes of the world—now lives in our pockets at all times, it feels more true than ever. Especially when it comes to young women.

In one scene of the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, new student Cady is invited into a rite of passage by the titular mean girls. They gather around a mirror and immediately begin launching critiques at their reflections (“My hairline is so weird,” “my pores are huge,” “I have man shoulders”), before turning portentously to Cady to see what she’ll contribute. Social media has put that same expectation for self-loathing and comparison right into the palms of teenage girls today, only instead of three popular girls waiting to hear their assessment, it’s potentially millions.

Lola is an 18-year-old freshman in college. She got a smartphone when she was 12 or 13. When asked what impacts from smartphone use she’s noticed among her female peers, she said, “Girls normally compare themselves to people around them. They always have. Social media allows them to compare themselves to people on the other side of the world to a way more extreme degree.”

A new study published in Finland’s *Archives of Disease in Childhood* found that teenage girls spend an average of almost six hours per day on their smartphones. 17% of the girls surveyed likely had social media addictions, and 37% showed symptoms of an anxiety disorder. The results are shocking, but maybe not surprising. The **suicide rates for young people** have been steadily rising, and for girls between 10 and 14, the numbers have risen by 131% in the last fifteen years. **Several studies** show this increase is most likely tied to smartphone and social media use.

Perhaps the most complicated part of these trends is that young people can identify the negative impacts of smartphone use, but can’t seem to cut back or stop.

In another survey conducted by the **Journal of Medical Internet Research: Pediatrics**, high school students were asked whether they would rate their smartphone use as “excessive.” 59% of girls said yes. Of that 59%, more than a quarter reported feeling low or anxious, almost half say they experience sleep issues, and overall they were more likely to have tried substances like alcohol and nicotine than those who didn’t report excessive smartphone use.

Interestingly, these numbers weren’t the same for boys of the same age. Approximately 36% called their smartphone use excessive, and although they did report worse sleep and higher rates of substance use, the number of boys who said they experienced negative emotional impacts related to excessive smartphone use fell within the normal range of emotional variability among that age group. More simply: smartphone use just doesn’t seem to hurt high school boys in the same way it hurts girls, even among groups who both say they use their phones excessively.

“I’ve noticed girls spend less time on their phones but feel more guilty,” Lola said. “Boys spend generally 2 to 3 more hours on their phones but don’t feel like it decreases productivity, hinders body image or hurts their relationship with God. I think girls tie their worth far more to social media than guys. Men tend to use it as a tool and nothing more.”

Assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto Dr. Taryn Grieder **told** the Toronto Star that these outcomes could be connected to the unique cultural space women are expected to inhabit. “The societal expectations of women to bond with others and seek out social support are so ingrained... The main driver of increased usage is likely that we’re just more likely to spend time connecting with other people.”

Much has been said about the “**male loneliness epidemic**,” but there’s a counterpart that might be worth considering when it comes to women’s social lives. Just because someone is connected doesn’t mean they aren’t lonely, and in fact the sheer number of inherently shallow “relationships” social media offers might increase a sense of isolation. As Oregon Health and Science University psychologist Bonnie Nagel **told the New York Times**, “They’re hanging out with friends, but no friends are there... It’s not the same social connectedness we need and not the kind that prevents one from feeling lonely.”

Lola’s mom, Lori, noted that the pressures of visibility, comparison, and performance young women experience now are not only different from what she experienced as a teenager but even different from what Lori’s older sister experienced. Lori said,

There is a high expectation of being current in everything, of staying on trend, of curating themselves, and comparing how others curate themselves. There is also that constant activity, access to entertainment, movies, YouTube, TikTok, etc. which can hinder the ability to focus on one thing. So yeah, the pressure to constantly be current and connected, and the comparison to others I think is a double whammy and can cause a lot of anxiety and insecurity.

Not everything about smartphones poses a problem for women. The communication smartphones facilitate really is unlike anything that’s come before it. Lori recently became a grandmother and said she wouldn’t know what to do without daily pictures and videos of her grandbaby. And Lola says that her smartphone offers her a real sense of safety, especially as a woman attending college away from home, knowing that others can track her location during a date or a night out.

The ability to reach friends and family from far away keeps people involved in their loved ones’ lives no matter where they are. The tools smartphones offer—from music and maps to, as Lola pointed out, an on-the-go Bible—can add real richness and depth to people’s lives.

So that leaves the question: is there a way that young women can experience the benefits, without falling into the pitfalls, of having their own smartphone?

We closed our interviews with Lori and Lola by asking this question: If you could describe your ideal relationship with your phone, especially as a woman, what would that look like?



"I have had many periods in my life where I find myself turning to Instagram any time I'm bored or uncomfortable," Lola said. "My screen time often rises and falls... for Lent I gave up all social media and realized how little I wanted it back. My productivity was much better and I found myself being more present in social circumstances." Her takeaway was that she "would love to use [her] phone only as a camera and to contact people in case of emergency," but that that's difficult when so many of her loved ones live in a different state.

Lori said, "If I could describe my ideal relationship with my cell phone, I don't think it would be much different than the relationship I have now, using it as a necessity to keep up with things."

Maybe the answer to how to help parent young women towards using their smartphones well is less about finding the perfect formula for raising them, and more about trying to use our smartphones better ourselves. After all, though they might define it differently, both Lori and Lola had the exact same goal of using their smartphones only for necessities—and defining together what "necessities" are creates the perfect opportunity for conversation.

There's no guarantee that kids will copy their parents, or even that they'll listen to and act on everything we try to teach them. But when we do what we're encouraging them to do, they get to experience an ongoing case study of what that kind of life looks like.

For girls, the confusing and stressful experience of growing up female can mean that role models make all the difference. In many ways, the nitty gritty parts of being a woman—from menstruation to motherhood to makeup to meal planning to marriage to making money—are passed down from one to another.

Rather than just drawing boundaries and hoping they stick, we should talk about what impacts smartphones have on women and on the world with honesty and realism, neither preaching doom and gloom nor drawing a sunnier picture than would be accurate. By doing this, we create space for the girls in our lives to feel safe and ask questions, growing strong and confident, and becoming the kind of women God wants them to be.



***Hannah Lane** is a writer and theology student. She has worked as a research fellow for the Billy Graham Special Collections Library, pioneered the Humanities as Science research initiative at Wheaton College, and has written for faith-oriented literary publications since 2015.*

Nobody Wants to Be an *iPad* Kid

When toddlers embrace tech, it's teens who roll their eyes the hardest.



*"We don't want them
to turn into iPad Kids."*

Despite being tinged with sarcasm, the disdain in her voice was real. I was moderating a debate between a group of 11th graders about their fellow students being allowed to use AI in their school district. Despite opinions about AI still being unsettled, everyone in the group knew exactly what they thought of the "iPad Kid." The way she said it made me laugh, but it also marked a shift in the group. To this teen, and her peers, turning into iPad Kids would be a *problem*.

"iPad Kid" is a colloquial term that teens use to describe toddlers or elementary school-aged children who are so utterly consumed by their devices (i.e. an iPad) that they only seem to be happy if they have one in their hands. The kid who can't sit still at Chick-fil-A unless they're watching Bluey? iPad kid. The six-year-old asking if you have games on your phone as unwiped snot remains on their face? iPad kid.

When we hear about how teens react to these tech-addled toddlers, our instinct may be to quote old adages about rocks in glass houses or sentient pots speaking poorly about their kettle brethren. Yet, if we suspend judgment for a moment, we might just spy a glimpse of how teens think about their devices, and, more specifically, their smartphones.

Part of what defines Gen Z is that they've never really lived in a world without smartphones—but, contrary to popular belief, teens are not in love with their phones.

They use them, they like using them, but they also understand some of the dangers of these powerful pocket rectangles, sometimes better than adults do.

This can create a disconnect between teens and their parents or the caring adults in their life. The continued conversation about smartphones, boundaries around them, and the ways they impact their and our lives is one of the most important conversations in the parenting or disciplining journey. Yet, both sides often make assumptions about what the other group thinks.

I wanted to capture some of this complexity, so I sat down with some teens. I wanted to know how they saw their phones, the good and the bad. I wanted to know how their perspectives on phones diverged from their parents or the caring adults in their life—not to create division, but to enable a deeper, more mutual conversation. Lastly, I wanted to know why so many teens seem to hate “iPad Kids” so much.

For most of human history, adults have looked at the upcoming generations with distrust and disdain, lamenting the ways they're being corrupted by new technology and a shifting culture. But smartphones are different. Unlike the teens who rejected their parents' hand-wringing about rock-and-roll, video games, or Dungeons and Dragons, when it comes to phones, many modern teens are standing alongside adults with their criticisms and fears.

Jonathan Haidt (notably, not a teen) is a social psychologist and professor who is well-known, in part, for his analysis of how culture is shaping Gen Z. More recently, he's become vocal about creating social and legislative restrictions around giving teens smartphones and social media access.

Haidt has said he was surprised at the lack of pushback he received from teens themselves when he started publishing his arguments, putting it this way in a 2023 post in his **After Babel newsletter**: “When I speak to high school and college audiences, I usually ask those who think I got the story wrong to raise their hands and then come forward and ask the first questions. I rarely get a hand raised or a critical question.”

What I found in my own conversations with students backed this up. While they quickly came to the defense of their fellow teens, they didn't have much desire to defend smartphones. Yet, in true Axis fashion, I wanted to know both the bad and the good.

And the discussion around the good of smartphones generally landed in one of two places: *utility* and *connection*.

Most high schoolers can't remember a time where you had to print out driving directions, but that doesn't stop them from appreciating how miraculous the smartphone is in terms of utility.

It's sometimes easy to forget that smartphones really are magical, 37-in-1 devices. It does everything from coordinating schedules, checking grades, managing their own calendar, listening to music, checking the weather, and, yes, pulling up directions. (Rest in peace MapQuest.)

Yet this talk of utility was quickly eclipsed by their desire to talk about connection.

The smartphone provides a tangible portal through which their social connections can grow, widen, and deepen. One student, as both a military kid and a missionary kid, talked about how her phone allowed her to stay in touch with friends who lived in different states and different countries. College students appreciated the way their phones kept them connected to their friends, families, and lives back home, even if this sometimes aggravated their homesickness.

Most notable, however, was the way the students saw their phones as a way to enable their embodied relationships, not necessarily replace them. They saw their phones as deepening connection, not diminishing or replacing it. At the same time, however, they spoke candidly and honestly about how these positives could quickly turn sour.

With utility comes reliance. With connection comes the pressure to be available. With an abundance of information comes the potential for endless distraction.


Even if it's old news at this point, it's worth reiterating: our phones are designed to distract us. Tristan Harris at the Center for Humane Technology has spoken at length about the ways smartphones' visual design, user interface, and software have all been purpose-built to capture and hold our attention.

So avoiding distraction while using a phone is tantamount to standing in the rain and trying to not get wet. No one is immune to it, adults and teens alike. Picking up your phone to respond to a text from your mom could turn into doom-scrolling Instagram or TikTok for an hour. A well-timed, or maybe poorly-timed, notification from another app while checking your calendar for school could turn into a thirty minute rabbit trail of a distraction.

So it wasn't surprising that every student was aware of the potential for distraction and spoke about a desire to resist it. They identified that they didn't often feel like the choice to be distracted by their phones was a conscious one—something many adults can probably also identify with.

Some students had developed strategies to weaken or slow the distracting effect, to try to create friction between the transition of using their phone for utility to distraction. One student kept distracting apps uninstalled from her phone. Another student limited his social media use by keeping those apps on a tablet or laptop instead of a handheld device. Some mentioned trying to use the built-in screen time limitations on their phones, but these were often too easy to ignore to be truly effective. Still, there was a tangible desire from every young person we interviewed to feel more in control of their screen time and phone usage.

But truly limiting screen time is difficult for these teens, because it doesn't solve the problem of others' expectations. We live in a culture that presumes teens and adults will have access to smartphone technology at all times.



Avoiding
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A study done by **Pew Research** found that, “Roughly three-quarters of teens say it often or sometimes makes them feel happy (74%) or peaceful (72%) when they don’t have their smartphone,” but also found that “teens say not having their phone at least sometimes makes them feel anxious (44%), upset (40%) and lonely (39%).”

At first glance, these numbers may seem to be oddly contradictory, but when taken all together, they actually make a lot of sense.

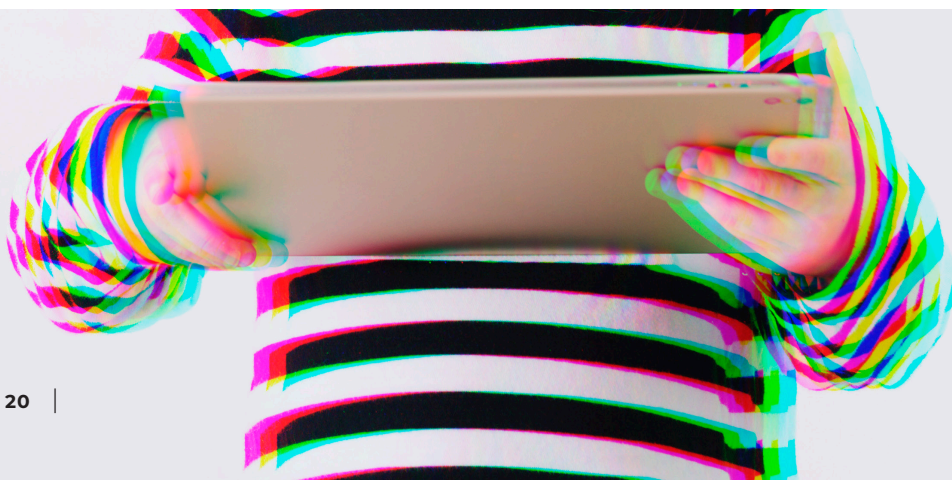
Not having access to the utility and connection smartphones provide can be stressful for teens, but having the option to disconnect can be reassuring for them.

One college student I talked with sounded exhausted as she detailed her morning routine of waking up and hopping on her phone, to respond to the thirty, forty, fifty or more text messages, Snapchats, and Instagram DMs she may have received within the last several hours. Sure, as adults, we can take the perspective that this is a prison of her choosing—but it’s also the cultural consequence of a decision her generation had no hand in choosing.

And this is where we have to address how parents sometimes contribute to this pressure to be always connected. A teen’s smartphone provides their parents with instant and ongoing access to them. This is an incredible evolution in parenting. In the 1980s, TVs would gently remind adults of the time and that they should probably check on their children. Now, with apps like Life360 and FindMy, those PSAs seem quaint.

These tracking apps can certainly be useful. They help parents encourage boundaries in life and friendships and romantic relationships. Tracking can help parents know if their kid is safe driving to work or school or sporting events.

Yet perhaps an unintended consequence is that teens feel like they need to be tied to their phones in order to reassure their parents. At no point in history have parents had as much access to their teens, and those teens feel the eyes of their parents constantly.



So it makes sense that teens might feel a complex, confusing, contradictory mixture of anxiety and peace when they set their phones down. Again, this is not to speak poorly about parents who are engaged with their teens' lives. That's wonderful! But sometimes it's worth asking: are we allowing our teens moments of freedom to put down their phones and to disconnect?

Of course, the answer to this question depends on the teen and the situation, but now we need to return to our original topic: iPad Kids. If teens feel so inescapably tied to their smartphones, why do they feel such disdain for toddlers who are similarly tied-up by devices?

Maybe it's because they see a little of themselves in the toddler staring slack-jawed and empty-eyed into Cocomelon. Maybe in iPad Kids, they see a generation who is also growing up into a life dependent on smartphones and smart devices in a way that they, themselves, have come to resent.

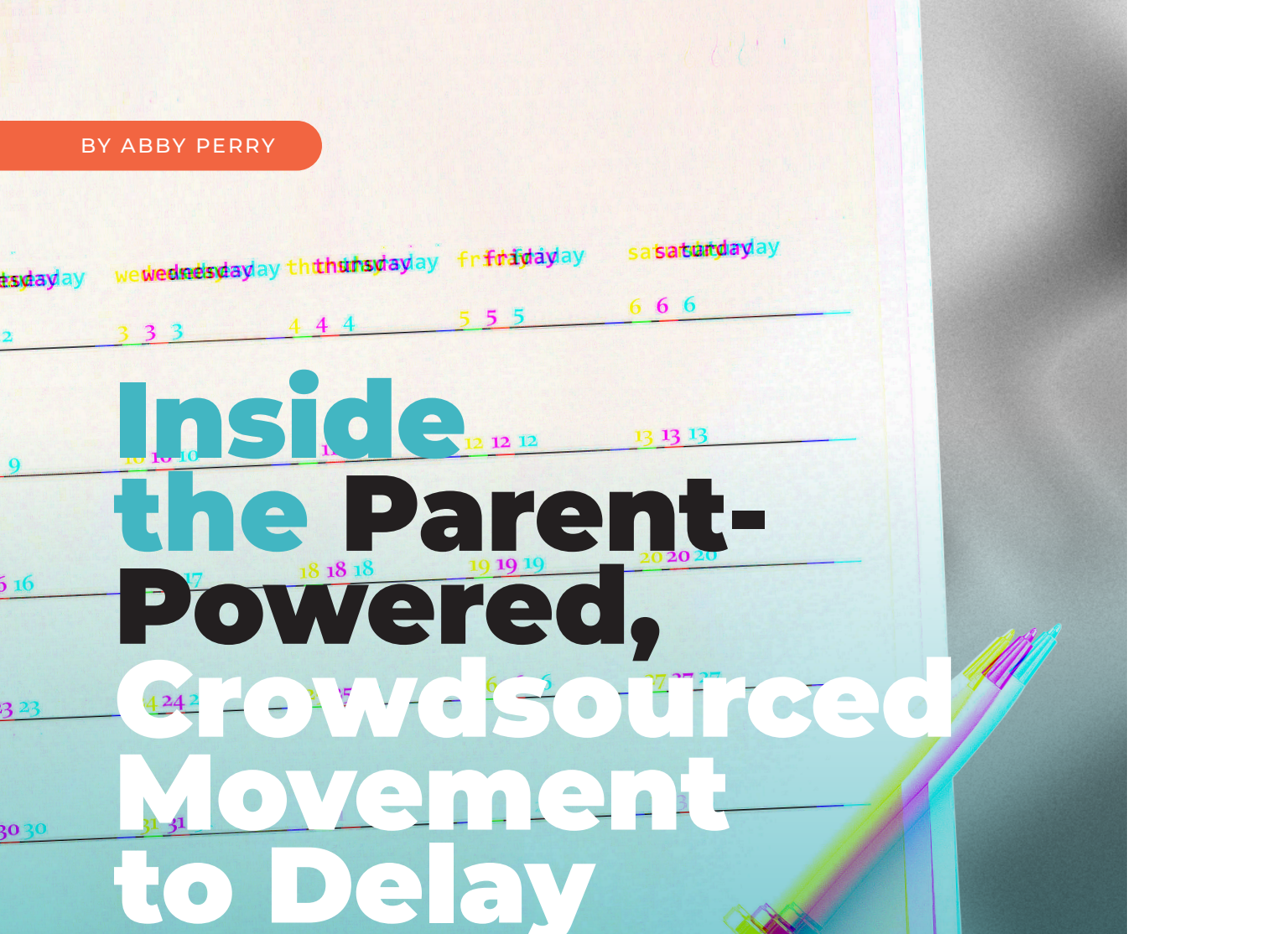
Gen Alpha and younger might never experience a world without the allure of flickering screens and social media and influencers. This frustrates teens, and rightfully so. These are teens who know the good sides and the bad sides of the technology; who were the first generation of children to really understand the addictive nature of the smartphone; who simultaneously feel inexplicably tied to their devices but also desire freedom from them.

Maybe they see iPad Kids and grieve for them—and also, for themselves.



CJ Fant is a writer, video producer, and podcast host at Axis. He's worked with teens for his entire professional career and has a deep desire to bridge the gaps between generations to kickstart discipleship and inspire a deeper love for Jesus. He also loves keeping up with the ever-changing landscape of culture, with a particular focus on music and video games.

BY ABBY PERRY



Inside the Parent- Powered, Crowdsourced Movement to Delay Phone Use

And how *you* can get involved

Most of us probably aren't expecting profound, relatable parenting advice about technology when we watch daytime TV. But in a recent clip from *The Drew Barrymore Show*, the host confessed that she was struggling—and when she explained why, parents everywhere resonated with her words.

Barrymore said that her tween daughters are constantly asking her for their own phones. Despite their begging, and their escalating anger, Barrymore has yet to relent.

“A lot of parents are giving their kids phones at very young ages,” she said. “And it’s just access to everything. It’s really tough. I’m like, very overwhelmed.”

Despite her overwhelm, Barrymore is holding fast.

“It’s amazing to have wanted so badly for my kids to love me and to love their environment and feel safe... None of us want our children to resent us. And we don’t want to be their enemy,” Barrymore says.

“It’s such a hard choice to say, ‘I don’t care if you hate me for this. I don’t care if you’re mad at me for this. I know that I am doing the right thing by you and I accept your anger.’”

For Barrymore’s children and other young people whose parents have said “not yet” to smartphones, that anger tends to be rooted in a sense that they are missing out on what everyone else is doing. And the difficult thing is—they might be. Conversations are had and plans are made via smartphones, especially among younger generations who have been exposed to technology since birth. **Research shows** that 42% of American children have a phone by age ten, and 91% of American children have a smartphone by age 14.

While most American teenagers have phones, **three-quarters** of them say that they feel happy or peaceful when they don’t have their phones with them. Even still, most teens do not self-limit their phone or social media usage, which prompts concern among many psychologists, policymakers, and advocates for children. The relationship between young people and their phones is often characterized by traits that indicate addiction—such as a teenager continuing to use a smartphone even when they know they feel better without it.

While peer pressure isn’t typically an advisable place to start for making decisions, a sense of community and togetherness can form a beautiful foundation. That’s why organizations such as **Wait Until 8th** and the **MAMA Movement** are encouraging families to unite in a reclamation of childhood—one that revolves around play, relationships, and focus rather than screens.

These organizations, as well as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, New York columnist-turned-movement leader **Lenore Skenazy**, and authors **Erin Loechner** and **Hannah Brencher**, offer practical steps for families who want to embrace technology on their own terms.

Why limit smartphone usage for children and teens?

It’s important to note that some of the reasons why teens and children enjoy having access to smartphones are positive. Many of them cite access to creative outlets or hobbies as reasons for using their phones, and the internet offers large amounts of educational content. But, Haidt

points out, tech companies and social media platforms offer young people a “firehose of addictive content,” which drives them to spend time in isolation, damaging their social skills and reducing their impulse control.

Children and teens aren't just experiencing damage, they are missing out on what Haidt refers to as “the play-based childhood.” Instead of playing, children and teens are performing their lives online. Instead of relishing their lives—which includes moments of boredom, making mistakes, and acting silly with minimal consequence—they are recording them. While they are developmentally still children, kids and teenagers are using tools that even the most mature adult brains often struggle to manage properly (how many times have you sat down to read a book and scrolled your phone instead?). He relates this phenomenon to an “opportunity cost”—it's not just about the time that is lost, but what could have been done with it, instead.

A Word of Caution

From improved mental health to strong relationships, the reasons to delay smartphone and social media usage are many. In our fervor to protect our children, though, let us “take heed lest ye fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Just like DARE initiatives failed to eradicate addiction and purity culture could not produce a sustainable sexual ethic, steps to change digital safety norms can't fully redeem teenagers' hearts and minds.

The desire behind these movements was one of protection and concern for a generation that seemed to be under threat from a dangerous culture. In seeking that protection, however, the movements often became rigid and harsh, becoming a new law rather than encouraging



people to live according to love and grace. Even as we make challenging, countercultural decisions regarding technology, may we do so with a spirit of grace.

How can I talk to other families about delaying smartphone and social media usage?

In the spirit of letting kids be kids longer, Brooke Shannon, the founder and executive director of **Wait Until 8th**, initiated **a pledge** to encourage her family and others in their community to delay smartphone and social media usage. The pledge is simple and straightforward: “I agree not to give my child a smartphone until at least the end of 8th grade as long as at least 10 families total from my child’s grade and school pledge to do the same,” it reads. Parents or guardians fill out some basic information about themselves, then add their child’s name, grade, and school.

“Our idea was to combat this social norm by flipping the script on peer pressure and using group momentum for good,” explains Shannon. “We designed the pledge with the community in mind.”

How so? First, the Wait Until 8th pledge is organized by school and grade level. Once a grade-level at a specific school hits ten pledges, Shannon explains, the pledge is activated.

“This helps alleviate any type of worry of ‘what if I am the only one who commits to this pledge,’” says Shannon. “Since the plan only is activated when ten families from a grade commit, parents can sign without concern about being the only ones.”

The pledge has been activated at more than 58,000 schools thus far, meaning at least ten

families at each campus have committed. Shannon and her team regularly hear from parents who say how helpful it is to have community support around their family’s decision to delay smartphones.

“Our top priority is to encourage more parents to delay the smartphone by signing the Wait Until 8th pledge,” Shannon said. “Giving children four more years of a childhood free of a smartphone and social media is one of the most effective ways to help protect our youth’s mental health and provide true connection to family and friends.”

Similarly invested in helping families reclaim childhood, the Mothers Against Media Addiction (MAMA) movement encourages “immediate, coordinated action from parents.” Founded by Julie Scelfo, a former New York Times staff writer, media ecologist, and mother of three, MAMA encourages reduced technology usage in homes, at schools, and in legislation. They offer a **technology use manifesto** that says, in part:

- In the morning, we wait until after we’ve fully woken up, brushed our teeth, and eaten breakfast before we check our devices.
- We enjoy the outdoors without devices for at least 30 minutes every day.
- When we go out to eat, we color, play games, or talk to pass the time (and learn the value of boredom) instead of using screens.
- We put devices away completely for 24 hours once a month.
- We don’t sign up for social media until high school.

In his book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Haidt offers practical advice for rolling back the phone-based childhood and restoring the play-based childhood. His four basic recommendations include:

- No smartphones before high school.
- No social media before 16.
- Phone-free schools.
- More independence, free play, and responsibility in the world.

Haidt's [website](#) offers a parent action guide, an email template for initiating this discussion with other parents, and a sample text message for getting the group chat on the same page.

Starting such a conversation can be as simple as saying, texting, or emailing something like:

Have you seen all the data and research coming out about kids and smartphones? I've been thinking a lot about it, especially when it comes to the ways smartphones and social media seem to be affecting mental health. It seems like delaying smartphones until high school and keeping kids off social media until 16 can be really beneficial for them. What do you think?

In addition to restricting or delaying smartphone usage, Haidt, the MAMA Movement, and Wait Until 8th place a high priority on what to do instead. In that spirit, parents might consider how they can model rich, phone-free community life as part of their regular routines.

This might look like:

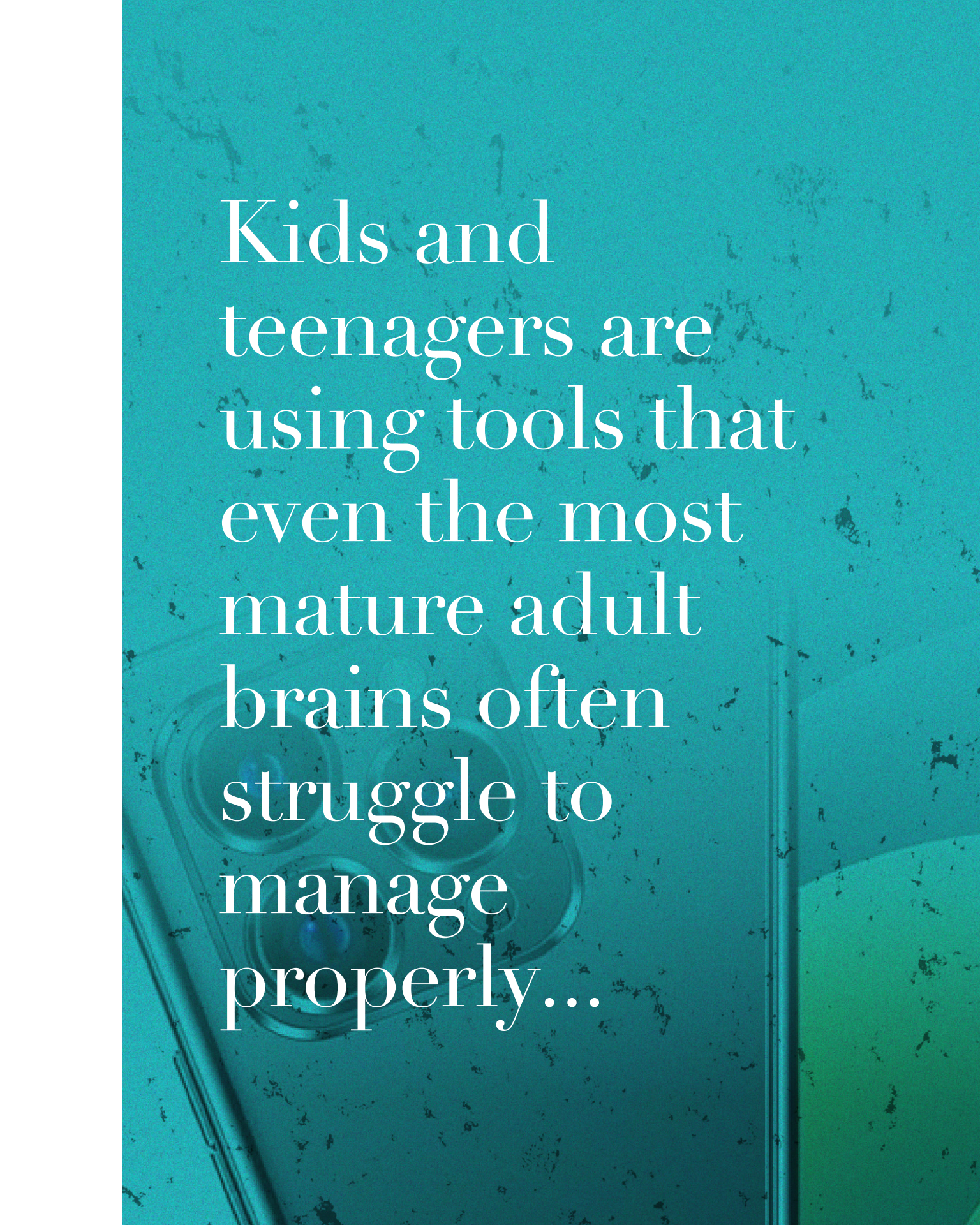
- Inviting a few families to the park for a picnic and outdoor games.
- Having people over for dinner and encouraging everyone to put their phone in a basket for the evening.
- Facilitating a group outing to an artistic or cultural community event then enjoying a meal or dessert together to discuss the shared experience.

Delaying technology usage is, undoubtedly, a radical choice in our current moment. But it doesn't have to be a lonely one. By intentionally building relationships and enjoying our communities, families can cultivate the connection and fulfillment that smartphones so often promise while so rarely delivering.



Abby Perry is a contributing writer at *Common Good* magazine. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Christianity Today*, *Sojourners*, and *Texas Monthly*. She lives just outside of Dallas with her husband and two sons.



The background of the image is a solid teal color with a subtle, grainy texture. In the lower-left corner, there is a faint, semi-transparent image of a smartphone, showing its camera lens and flash. In the lower-right corner, there is a faint, semi-transparent image of a book, showing its spine and a portion of its cover. The text is centered in the upper half of the image, written in a white, serif font.

Kids and
teenagers are
using tools that
even the most
mature adult
brains often
struggle to
manage
properly...

BY EVAN BARBER

The Five Conversations You Have to Have Before Handing Over that *Smartphone*

**How to
lay the
foundation
before they
open that
shrink-
wrapped
box.**



The decision to give your child a smartphone is one that will change both of your lives.

As one mom named Sarah put it, "It's such a small device, but it can have an impact on a life that is like a weapon of mass destruction. There's this huge gamut of topics that parents have to think about, consider, study, worry about, and talk about."

So what exactly are those topics?

Here are **five conversations** we believe parents *have to have* before getting their teens a smartphone.

CONVERSATION #1 **Who pays for it?**

A new smartphone can cost around \$1,000—and the newest, biggest, baddest models can cost almost double that. Add to that the cost of the monthly phone plan, in-app purchases, and any repairs that need to happen, and for most of us, this will feel like a significant investment. Who foots the bill?

There are a couple of ways parents can think about this. If you are the one making the purchase, then this smartphone is actually *your* device that your son or daughter gets to steward. This means they don't get to set the rules for how it gets used. Perhaps part of their stewardship also means that if they throw it against the wall and the screen cracks, it's up to them to pay for the repairs.

Some parents may require their teen to save up over time to purchase their own smartphone—and there's nothing like having to pay for something yourself to encourage you to take care of it. But the truth is, even if your son or daughter saves up their own money and pays for it, you're still their parent. They might own the phone on paper, but you still get to determine what kind of behavior you will accept under your roof.

Many parents hand one of their own phones down to their teens as a way to avoid splashing out a lot of money. In this case, a conversation will still need to happen about who pays for the monthly service plan and other incidentals.

However you want to frame this, agreeing in advance on who pays for the phone itself, who pays for the monthly phone plan, who pays for insurance, who pays for in-app purchases, and who pays for repairs is important.

CONVERSATION #2

When and where can this phone be used?

As the parent, you have the right (and some would say responsibility) to set significant boundaries around the who, what, when, where, and why of device use. These restrictions and boundaries should be agreed upon before your child powers on the phone they will use, and include clear answers to these questions:

- What parts of the house are phones allowed in? (Just the main floor? What about bedrooms and bathrooms?)
- Where will phones charge? (In shared spaces, like the kitchen or living room? In more private areas, like a home office?)
- What time of day and night will your teens be expected to turn their phones off? (Should all family devices get “put to bed” and in charging stations at the same time?)
- What apps will your teens be allowed to have? (Will the App Store be disabled? What about social media, and internet browsers? Will they have to explain new apps to you before you let them download them?) Will this change over time?
- How much time each day will they be allowed to use those apps? (Will you set up App Limits so they’re automatically disabled after that time is reached?) Will this change over time?
- Will you have access to their passwords? How often will you ask to check their phone?
- Will phones be allowed at the table during meals?
- What are your expectations for phone use during school? How does that align with the school’s policies and expectations? Could that change based on grades/academic performance?
- Will you track their location? If so, how long will you do this?
- How quickly do you expect your teen to respond to you when you text or call? Will you require a “check-in” text when teens arrive at a destination?

We encourage you to come up with clear agreements for each of your rules and decide what the consequences will be if they are broken—as well as potentially what the rewards will be for following them.

We also encourage you to lay out a plan for phasing out some of these restrictions, if you would like to do so.

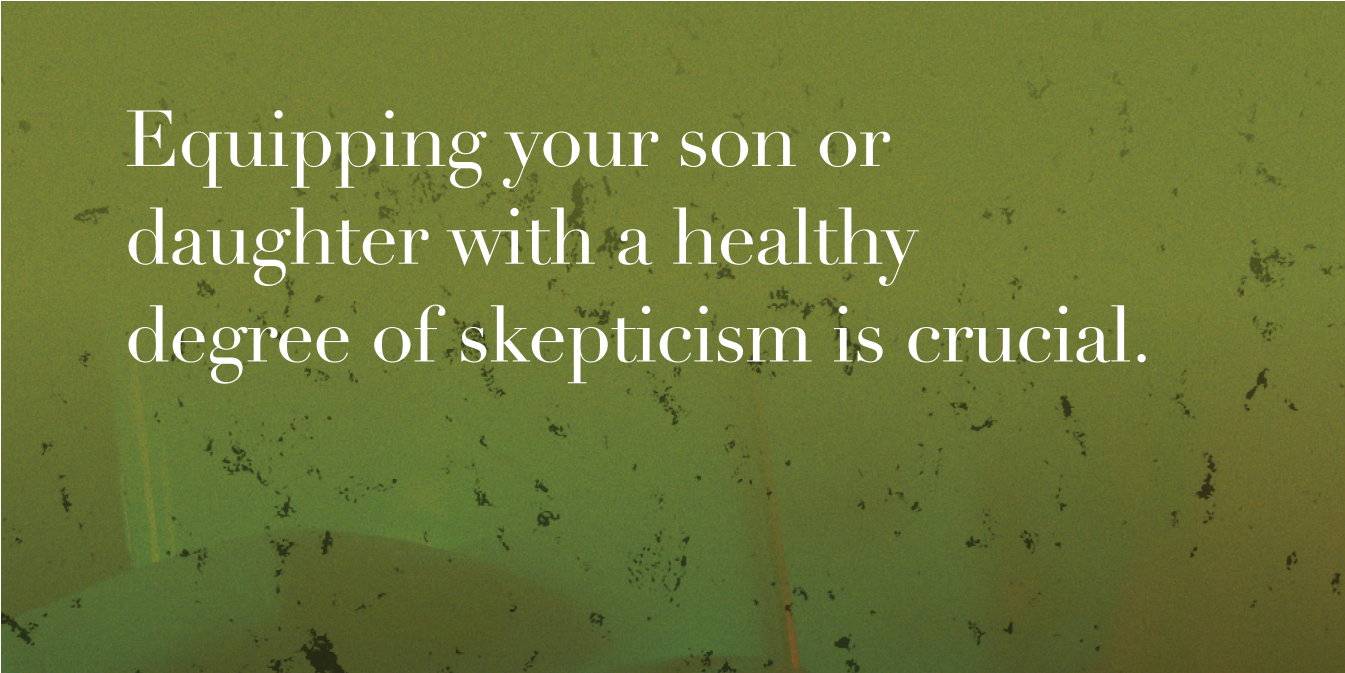
CONVERSATION #3

How do we know who to trust online?

Equally as important as setting up expectations in your home is preparing your son or daughter to navigate the online world with discernment. Given that most social media platforms are technically supposed to be for kids 13 and up, any pre-teens on these apps have started their social media journey by lying about their age. The lack of effective age-verification on these platforms is just one example of how the internet makes it extremely easy for users to lie, misrepresent reality, and to (even unknowingly) amplify falsehoods. Equipping your son or daughter with a healthy degree of skepticism is crucial.

Just because an article includes the phrase “experts say” doesn’t make its conclusions true. Just because a post includes statistics doesn’t mean it represents the entire context of the story it’s telling. Just because a picture or video appears to be real doesn’t mean that it’s actually real.

In one episode of *The Office*, Michael Scott **declared** that, “Wikipedia is the best thing ever. Anyone in the world can write anything they want about any subject—so you know you are getting the best possible information.” This joke about Wikipedia might also be applied to the internet as a whole; though optimists once insisted that the internet was going to “democratize” information, giving everyone equal access to the world’s accumulated wisdom, what actually happened in many cases is that random, unqualified opinions were given the same platform as perspectives based in careful research and thought. And of course, just because someone is an expert in one subject matter doesn’t make them an expert on everything.



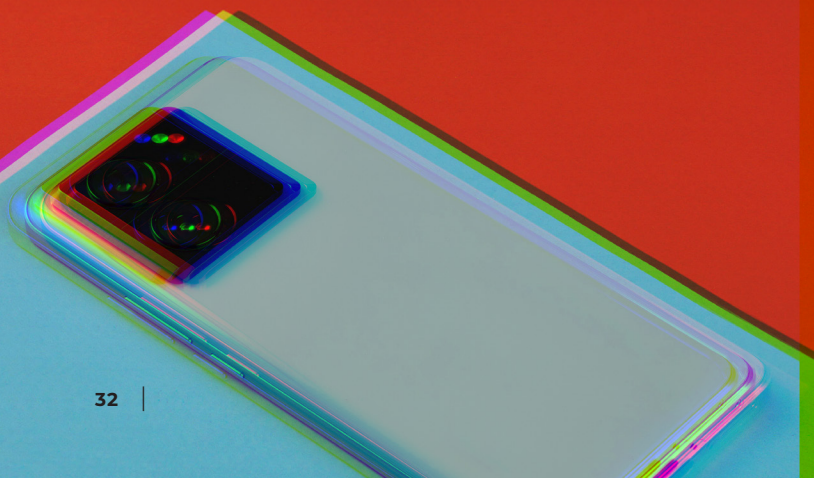
Equipping your son or
daughter with a healthy
degree of skepticism is crucial.

As generative AI becomes more sophisticated, it becomes harder to tell whether the images or videos we come across online actually represent reality. In some ways, this is an extension of how social media was already being used; most users intentionally curated which images or videos they uploaded of themselves to create a highly selective narrative of their lives. But generative AI takes this misrepresentation to a whole new level. A cottage industry of completely fabricated photos of public figures and regular folks has already taken hold—and for the most part, people don't question what they see. To make matters worse, the deluge of infinite novelty designed to maximize “engagement” on most platforms actively discourages users from pausing long enough to consider whether something is fact, or fiction.

There is currently no actionable verification process to prevent a 40-year-old man from constructing an entire profile as if he were a 17-year-old girl; pictures can be easily stolen from a girl's actual page, and a clever use of emojis and punctuation can make it seem like he's her in DMs. We don't need to spell out for you what happens when a lonely young man connects with a “girl” like this online, and eventually tries to meet in person.

The topic of media literacy is a broad one, but here are a few questions hopefully equip your son or daughter to be discerning around the reality (or unreality) of what they come across online:

- How confident are you in your ability to tell whether online content is real?
- Who or what is being left out of this story/post/argument?
- How do you know a picture or video wasn't significantly edited before it was uploaded?
- Are there any signs that a picture or video was generated using AI (unnatural movements, weird text, etc.)?
- What if the poster's point of view is wrong?
- Do you have any offline evidence that this person you met online is actually who they claim to be?
- Who are the “experts” this article is referring to?
- How does what you're seeing online stack up against the revealed wisdom of God in Scripture?



CONVERSATION #4

What do we avoid, and why?

Our friend Shelley at **Pinwheel** described the internet world as like going to see a well-made educational movie in a theater that's next door to a combination strip club/casino/illegal dog fighting ring with a bouncer who is clearly ignoring IDs. The internet gives us access to everything.

The idea that there are pro-suicide, pro-self-harm groups on social media may sound like a fearmongering conspiracy—but many such groups exist. Some of these are networks of broken people addicted to self-harm, or who see suicide as a way to gain agency; others are **groups** which, often by flattering vulnerable young men and women into sending nude or sexualized photos, then blackmail them into documenting more and more depraved acts, sometimes culminating in suicide or self-harm.

As has been said many times, the bullies of previous generations typically stayed at school—today, someone who wishes someone else harm has 24/7 access to that person on social media. On the flipside, other groups online may promise undying love and friendship—if only your son or daughter will reject their biology and/or declare an attraction to the same sex. We were made for a sense of community and belonging, so relational forces like these can have powerful effects on teens' behavior.

There's also the matter of pornography and other sexualized content. Author and apologist Josh McDowell said that pornography was “probably the greatest problem or threat to the Christian faith in the history of the **world**.” While that may sound dramatic, consider these effects of porn use:

- Porn teaches us to regard our fellow human beings not as people to be loved, but as **objects** for sexual gratification.
- Using porn **enables** emotional and spiritual immaturity, allowing us to cover over issues in our life and relationships with an artificial sexual release.
- Using porn **siphons sexual intimacy away** from its intended place in marriage, leading to unhelpful comparisons, feelings of **betrayal**, and/or erectile dysfunction.
- The increasingly violent and degrading nature of pornography **normalizes sexual violence**, choking, and **rape**.
- Using porn contributes to an industry of **human trafficking**; it remains impossible to tell whether on-screen participants are doing so willingly or under coercion.

Given the widespread accessibility of pornography, many young women will inevitably feel pressure to compete with what's so easily accessible online. In some high schools, sending nude or sexualized photos has become a sort of relational currency—a way of “keeping up” in a world where sexual attractiveness is considered a cardinal virtue.

There are numerous key conversations to have related to harmful and explicit content. We encourage you to make the following things clear:

- Remember that people you meet online may not be who they seem to be.
- You already have incredible value as our child and as God's child; you do not need to do anything to prove your value.
- Your body is good; God's design for it and for sexuality is good.
- You do not owe anyone access to your body, whether in person or online.
- Pornography is harmful, and not something we want you to look at using this device (or any other device).
- Sending nude or sexualized pictures is harmful, and not something we want you to do using this device (or any other device).

People you
meet *online*
may not be who
they seem to be.

CONVERSATION #5

What if everything goes wrong?

“This is all well and good,” you may be thinking, “but what if my teen breaks all of these rules—or has already broken all of them? What then?”

Your goal should be to create an environment where your kids can come to you and be honest with you about things that they do, or things that happen to them online.

In environments where perfection and “appearing righteous” are seen as paramount, many kids may believe that it’s better to lie rather than to be honest about something that happened, or something they did online—such as falling prey to the sorts of predatory **groups** we mentioned in conversation #4.

Along these lines, the final conversation to have before giving your teen a smartphone (but which is great to have at any point in your relationship) is this:

No matter what happens, you can always come to me. These rules around your phone are in place because I want what’s best for you, not because I’m trying to ruin your life. If something happens to you online, tell me; if you make a dumb decision and are faced with consequences, tell me; I will always love you and will always want what’s best for you, and there is nothing you can do to change that.



Evan Barber is a writer, podcast host, and senior editor at Axis. Over ten years, he’s led teams of gospel-minded researchers, writers, speakers, and content creators, leveraging pop culture to help parents show teens how faith is relevant to every aspect of our lives.

BY ERIN LOECHNER

OPT IN TO YOUR

5

Practical Steps for the Tech- Weary Family

**A more analog home can
still be a teen hotspot—
and not the WiFi kind.**

We've all heard the mind-boggling statistics about technology and social media use. The numbers don't lie; our obsession with smartphones and social media is slowly eroding the very essence of our homes and families.

We see it. We feel it. We know it.

So what do we do about it?

We start with the realization that it's not enough to say no to devices; we have to say yes to something better on the other side. Throughout the writing of **The Opt-Out Family**, I tapped over 250 sources both in and out of Silicon Valley to answer a singular question: How can we as parents, and as a society, give our teens what technology can't? The answers collectively led to hundreds of tips, tricks, tools, and resources we can employ to liberate our tech-weary families.

Ready to opt out of tech and opt in to life? Start with five practical steps: O.P.T. I.N.

1 Offer built-in alternatives to technology.

Our tech weariness is, in part, due to the overwhelming presence of plugs, cords, devices, and “smart” products we’ve been told are necessary to survive in our modern world. Sure, technology is the future. But is it the future we want?

Parents have an opportunity to establish a family culture that is entirely, uniquely ours! When it comes to device usage, tech tools, and screen time, we get to (and must) call the shots.

Within your four walls, begin creating a haven from a tech-heavy society by offering an abundant array of built-in alternatives to technology. From record players to Polaroid cameras, newspapers to logbooks, screen-free swaps abound for nearly every tech solution Silicon Valley has sold us as “essential.” After all, what’s a locked diary if not the original Finsta?

2 Protect free play.

Once you’ve created an environment budding with screen-free opportunities, let the games begin! Say yes to backyard Rube Goldberg machines and skate park shenanigans—heck, let your teens host a neighborhood Slip ‘N Slide party with a sundae bar for dessert.

Remember: free play—the unstructured, open-ended, state-of-flow type—takes time. Can you commit to two Sundays a month when nothing is scheduled, nothing is planned, and white space awaits? Can you choose an evening each week devoted to play, exploration, and creativity? Is Saturday morning a good time for tree climbing in the woods? Can you decline a few social invitations? Can you keep extracurriculars to the 1:1:1 rule (one thing per teen per season)? Take a look at the family calendar and get creative.

As our kids grow from footed pajamas to soccer cleats, they need space and time to interact with new ideas and fresh experiences. They need room to breathe, permission to try, license to experiment. If we don’t give them that offline, they’ll—understandably—seek it online.

3 Teach the benefits of being different.

If we want our teens to grow up with a worldview that values empathy, nuance, and a true appreciation for shared humanity, we must offer it to them first. But the ease of technology often lulls us into habits and rhythms that don't support our deeply-held values.

Take note of your family's goals and principles. In what ways might technology aid in supporting these values? In what ways might technology be a hindrance? Get quiet and get honest.

Perhaps you value open and honest communication, active listening, and expressing thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner... but it's far easier to send a text. Maybe you value resilience, challenges, and seeing mundane or difficult tasks through to completion... but when something breaks at home, Amazon is just a click away. Maybe you value togetherness, prioritizing quality time as a family, engaging in shared activities, and creating lasting memories... but everyone's zoned out on their screens.

Review a few shared values with your household. Chances are your principles won't align with culture's most popular stances. That's okay! (Actually, that's better than okay. In the words of my own pastor, if your family looks weird, you're probably doing something right.) By proactively teaching your teen the benefits of being different, you're setting them up to question the status quo and go their own way—untethered and free from an algorithm.

4 Invite varied and diverse social circles.

Want to help your teens and their friends form a vibrant, engaged social circle—totally free from devices? Make your home into the low-tech hangout you wish existed.

Consider a landline (yes, they still exist!) and pass out the number to your kids' friends and/or parents should they need to get in touch. Then collect any personal devices in a fun, unique way: a retro toy dump truck, a busker's open guitar case, a vintage Pillsbury Doughboy cookie jar. Or keep it simple and have everyone kick off their shoes at the door and slip their phone inside one. (Bonus: no footprints, digital or otherwise!). Make it fun, and make it happen.

Start here:

Widen your social circle and explore the **benefits of mixed-age play**.

Utilize our email scripts to **build and engage your own Opt Out social circle** or **Luddite Club**.

5 Neutralize consumption with creation.

Many scientists and child psychologists posit that creative challenges and independent projects can combat depression, anxiety, and mood disorders. In a tech-saturated world that's filled to the brim with opportunities for more consumption—*apps! videos! one-click purchases!*—the very antidote is often creation itself.

What can you use in your own household to spark creativity? It needn't cost a dime. Look around your home for simple ideas to engage your teen or family in a creative project. A used ukulele. A working puzzle (with all the pieces) on the living-room coffee table. Root-beer float ingredients on the kitchen counter. An old digital camera. A broken toaster and a screwdriver. Sticks and strings. Binoculars and a backyard field guide. An old sweater and a pair of scissors. A deck of cards, shuffled and dealt for a rousing game of euchre.

The possibilities are truly endless.



Erin Loechner is a former social media influencer who walked away from a million fans to live a low-tech lifestyle—and is now teaching others how to do the same. Her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Huffington Post*, as well as on the *Today Show*. When she's not scrawling on her trusty steno pad, Erin, her husband, and their three kids spend their days chasing alpenglow, reading Kipling, and biking to town for more tortillas. For even more practical steps for your tech-weary family, check out Erin's book, **The Opt-Out Family**.

BY THE AXIS TEAM

Ask AXIS S: WHAT IF IT'S TOO LATE?

Dear Axis,

My husband and I have worked hard to instill Christian discernment into our three children—all of whom are very different from each other. We decided early on that we wanted to foster an environment of reciprocal trust in our family, and we wanted our kids to have access to us in case of an emergency. For these and other reasons, we gave each of them their first phone as a birthday gift at age 13.

We installed whatever restrictions we knew about at the time to limit their screen time and block certain websites. Our two sons seemed happy enough with what we proposed and, to my knowledge, never worked to outsmart us or go around our ground rules.

Our daughter, however, has been another story.

She became more withdrawn from our family from the first day we handed her an iPhone. We thought she was just excited to talk to her friends via social media and that after the initial excitement wore off, we'd have our daughter back. But in the two years since, she's grown more and more invested in certain TikTok influencers and community forums that frankly, we don't find edifying or valuable. She's lost interest in her hobbies, like sketching and animation, her grades are down, and she has even quit her extracurriculars. I know we should have intervened sooner, but it didn't seem fair to give her different rules than her brothers had at the same age.

And now that she's almost 16, I wonder if there's anything we really can do to help get her off of her phone and back into our family. I'm worried my efforts will have the opposite effect, causing a tremendous fight and pushing her away from us completely. I feel like I've failed as a mom, and I've never felt so helpless about any of my kids. How can we help her?

***Sincerely,
A Mom Who Waited Too Long***

Dear Mom Who Waited,

I'm so sorry to hear that your family is going through this. But as tempting as it might be to feel like you've failed as her parent, or to second guess choices you made years ago, what she needs from you right now is not a careful assignment of blame, but your guidance, your prayers, and your presence.

Even in the high school years, parents are still the biggest influence on their children's lives. Deuteronomy 6:7-9 demonstrates how we are called to impress our values on our children as they grow into adulthood.

It might feel like your daughter cares more about what the latest TikTok trend or influencer is saying to her, but the reality is that you are still a person she looks to for guidance and attention.

You can't force your daughter to reject the relationships and community she has found online. You also probably can't decree certain apps to be off-limits in a way that she will not try to subvert. But you can try to demonstrate an interest in what she's interested in—to care about what she cares about. She likely senses that the way you regard her phone use is through a lens of fear and despair—but if you were to try to ask, in a spirit of genuine curiosity, who she's paying attention to online and why, that could open the door to a real conversation.

As far as not wanting to give her different rules than her brothers had, it's important to maintain an approach that is realistic, but flexible. Every teen needs a different level of support and guidance when it comes to navigating life online (and lots of other things).

As one Axis mom put it, “Our children aren’t cookie cutter—which I absolutely love, I think that’s a huge blessing—but that means that our conversations won’t be cookie cutter; how we experience our children, how they experience the world, and how they respond to the world, will never be cookie-cutter.”

When someone starts to prefer their online avatar to their lived reality, the chances are that they think they are getting something out of being online that they can't get in-person. Part of your job, in addition to caring about what she cares about, is to figure out what that thing is that she thinks she can only get online—and to see how you can offer it in other ways. For example: if she follows a lot of cooking influencers, you could ask if she'd like to try making one of their recipes together; if she follows a lot of makeup influencers, you could offer to take her to Sephora.

Given her prior love for sketching and animation, you could also look up drawing classes, or an in-person anime club. A school yearbook club or newspaper might offer an outlet to share her thoughts and opinions in a more tangible way.

The truth is, she may not be receptive to these ideas—or there may be a lot of pushback at first. Still, that doesn't mean you should stop trying to reach out. We believe in a God who never gives up on us.

Her behaviors might seem to come from a self-indulgent place, but underneath them are also the big questions that teens are always asking: “Am I loved?” “Am I seen?” and “If I disappeared from this family, would anyone care?” Your task is to make sure she knows the answer to all of these questions is an unequivocal YES at every turn.

Finally, do not stop praying for your daughter. She doesn't have to hear you do it (but that might be nice for her to hear). You don't have to tell her about it (though that might be helpful for her to know). But do pray without ceasing. God is the one who fully knows, sees, and loves your daughter more than you could ever believe, and the most powerful legacy you can offer your children is one of sustaining faith even in troubled times.

As you trust your daughter's future to His care, remember that the task of parenting was never a spiritual test for you to pass or fail. You were meant to be their mom, and they were meant to be your kids. And no matter what happens going forward, your love is best expressed through patience, compassion and prayer—the virtues Christ embodied.

***Parenting together,
The Axis Team***



Your love is
best expressed
through patience,
compassion
and prayer—
the virtues Christ
embodied.



BY CJ FANT

WHAT THEY'RE MISSING

Do we *understand* it enough to help?

In his aptly titled book, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, John Koenig created new words and expressions for complicated and unnamed feelings we often experience as humans. One such word, *anemoia*, is defined as “Nostalgia for a time or a place one has never known.” Koenig derived this word from the Greek *anemos* which is used to describe a tree that, battered by wind its whole life, has bent and grown backwards.

Recently Axis sat down to talk with three different teens about smartphones. To conclude this conversation, we asked the students a simple question: if you could go back in time and choose a childhood without smartphones, would you? Two out of three gave an adamant yes.

While the perspectives don't necessarily speak for their generation as a whole, these students are not alone. There's an entire cottage industry online devoted to fueling this *anemoia*. Videos of **high school in the 90s** find odd purchase on social media sites. Vinyl is experiencing a revival, hitting its highest sales numbers in decades thanks to artists like Taylor Swift (who perhaps releases **too many** to keep up with). Polaroids and disposable cameras have seen a resurgence in popularity, with some social media apps like "Lapse" trying to simulate the experience. Even the flip phone is rising from the grave, like a specter strangely obsessed with the 2000s.

Of course, this type of nostalgia is nothing new. Five years ago, modern pop music just sounded like it was ripped straight out of the 80s, and, now, the baggy jeans and grunge-esque music of the 1990s is making a comeback. As Solomon in Ecclesiastes so bluntly puts it,

*What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'?
It has been already
in the ages before us.*

ECCLESIASTES 1:9-10 ESV

As adults who maybe lived through the actual 1990s (or whenever), it can be a surreal experience to see tweens and teens pining after a period of time we embodied. Our lives weren't perfect then. We made mistakes. Life was hard, and we probably wished we could go back to a simpler time, like the 1960s or the 1300s or something.

Think about the Christmas music that's played every year, from Nat King Cole's "The Christmas Song" to Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You." It's all an attempt to place listeners back to a time and place where they were kids, experiencing the magic and wonder of Christmas for the first time. It's a recreation of a real childhood experience.

But this is what makes modern teens' *anemoia* so unique.

**They're feeling a pull toward a childhood they never knew,
a childhood they never had, a time they never experienced.**



We would argue the root of this stems from the object at the center of this entire resource—and arguably the most significant progression in communication since the printing press—the smartphone.

It's easy to forget it's only been 18 years since the first iPhone was released. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are the first generations for whom smartphones were truly present throughout their entire childhood. They've never really known a world without the smartphone, and just like any significant, world-changing technology, they've grown up in its shadow.

To help capture this idea, we need to talk about Subway Surfers.

Subway Surfers is a mobile game where the player runs forward endlessly (it's in the genre “endless runner”) surviving a series of gauntlets by jumping, dodging, and sliding. Not unlike arcade games from the 80s, it's designed to become so difficult that players are destined to fail. You can get better at it and improve your high score, but you can't ever “win.”

Sometimes, when a video posted online isn't quite flashy enough to capture the viewers' attention in the two seconds before they swipe away, people will just shove some footage of Subway Surfers underneath the “boring” video to make it more engaging and keep the viewer watching.

This strategy of splicing informational videos with Subway Surfers has become a meme of sorts, often mocking the shrinking attention span of Gen Alpha and “Zoomers.” And while it may be true that we live in an age of distraction, it's also worth pointing out that these young minds were often handed these devices at young ages by people who didn't know any better. Teens can't help that they grew up in a world where their ability to focus is seen as so compromised, it's meme-worthy. But what if what they've lost goes way beyond their attention spans?

Teens have never known a world without social media influencing and gamifying their friendships. Many have never been free to be truly unavailable, nor have they known a world where they're not constantly at risk of being filmed or being asked to share their location.

They've also likely never experienced the draw and mystery of love without the corruption of ever-accessible pornography.

It's a loss they know and what's more, it's a loss they *feel*. Memes about Subway Surfers (and Gen Z's dislike of so-called “iPad kids”) point to a desperate self-awareness of their habits and behaviors. Like the trees bent back backwards by the wind—like *anemosis*—the winds of technology have forced the eyes of teens backwards in time, to the past.



Parents and trusted adults can acknowledge this feeling and even lean into it as a discipleship opportunity. Provide chances for your teens to set down their phones, to disconnect, to really live like it's 30 years ago. Obviously, as a culture, we're all pretty dependent on our smartphones, but that doesn't mean you can't put them away every evening, at youth group, or just for dinner on Tuesdays.

It's important that we are modeling a healthy relationship with technology to the next generation, while also encouraging them to learn how to have healthy relationships themselves. Teens and their parents may both long for a simpler time in the past, but all of us live in the right now.

Returning to Ecclesiastes, while not a command nor a promise, Solomon gives a way of thinking about this:

Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?'
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

ECCLESIASTES 7:10 ESV

There's nothing new under the sun, even the desire to live in a different time.

We can sit on our hands and wish for a world that no longer exists, or we can get up, and work to make the one we live in right now the best it can be for the next generation.



CJ Fant is a writer, video producer, and podcast host at Axis. He's worked with teens for his entire professional career and has a deep desire to bridge the gaps between generations to kickstart discipleship and inspire a deeper love for Jesus. He also loves keeping up with the ever-changing landscape of culture, with a particular focus on music and video games.

BY EVAN BARBER

Leading with Limitations

Redeeming the way we think about technology.

Google's vision statement is "to provide access to the world's information in one click." Apple's vision statement is "to make the best products on earth, and to leave the world better than we found it." Both statements require data, production, and power. But the vision Jesus had for humanity had little to do with any of these things.

In fact, nobody who has ever lived has been more powerful than Him—and He voluntarily gave all that power up.

Philippians 2:6-7 is a passage about how Jesus came to dwell with us on earth, and why He did it. The Apostle Paul writes that Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

We see here that Jesus purposefully embraced limitations. In Heaven, Jesus is “in very nature God”—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, as is God the Father. Jesus knows everything, can do everything, and can be everywhere at once. But He purposefully stepped down from this exalted position to be with humanity in person.

This type of sacrifice is the opposite of the mindset our smartphones encourage. The whole purpose of a smartphone seems to be to help us transcend our limited knowledge, power, and presence.

But what does this mindset do to our relationships?

It’s hard for some of us to make it through an entire conversation without Googling some sort of factoid to supposedly make the conversation better—or looking for a TikTok as an example of what we’re saying. But conversation is not intended to be only the sharing of information and content. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, Dr. Sherry Turkle writes, “Young people have grown up in a world of search, and information is the end point of search. They have been taught that information is the key to making things better—in fact, to making everything better.”

But as Turkle goes on to point out, conversation at its best is the process of building understanding together with another person and deepening your relationship. Conversations that happen in the context of a family are a perfect example of what this can be. She writes, “Talking to your parents doesn’t just offer up information. You experience the commitment of a lifelong relationship. A parent may have no immediate ‘solution’ for you but may simply say, ‘No matter what, I will always love you.’ And ‘I’m staying around for another conversation; we’ll keep talking this out.’”

When Jesus voluntarily limited His own omniscience, He made space for deep questions and one-on-one conversation with others.

Every question that Jesus asked His disciples was a question He could have already discerned an answer to—but His goal is to cultivate a relationship with humanity, not just to accumulate data.

Omnipotence essentially means being “all-powerful.” When Jesus was on Earth, he clearly retained some of his God-powers (take Him cursing the fig tree as one example). But He limited His use of these powers. When He was betrayed and arrested, the disciples tried to defend Him against the Roman guard. But Jesus says to them, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” Jesus restrained the use of His powers, even up to the moment of His death.

Smartphones set out to give us access to unimaginable power. They enable us to do so much that we couldn’t do otherwise. With a few taps on our screen, practically anything we want can be delivered to our house. We can contact anyone in the world at any time. Using AI, we can conjure up elaborate, believable illusions like mythological wizards.

But power, on its own, is not always a positive thing.

As journalist Robert Caro once put it, “Power doesn’t always corrupt. What power always does is reveal. When a guy gets into a position where he doesn’t have to worry anymore, then you see what he wanted to do all along.”

We can use power for good or evil purposes; but Jesus gives us the example of voluntarily giving up our power in order to make space for closer relationships.

When Jesus became human, He went from being omnipresent to just being present. He went from having an awareness of all places and all times to walking around in the foothills of Galilee and Judea.

When we log into social media and become engrossed in our feeds, we go from being present wherever we are, to launching our attention onto something somewhere else in the world. When we do this, we lose awareness of our immediate surroundings.

At the extreme end, this is why “**distracted driving**” claimed 3,308 lives in 2022. At the less extreme end, this is why, without even looking, most of us can now recognize others’ sudden lack of response in conversation as a sign that they’ve been absorbed by their phone and are now “somewhere else.”

Today, this is the normal state of affairs. To quote again from Dr. Turkle, “We turn away from each other and toward our phones. We are forever elsewhere.”

When the Apostle Paul encourages believers to follow Jesus’s example in Philippians 2, he is talking specifically about Jesus’ humility: Jesus left his exalted position to come walk around on our planet, where he asked thoughtful questions to people, invited others to follow Him, and brought healing to many. But underlying all of this was Jesus’ careful, intentional presence with the people around Him.

In 1942, the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” Her words ring even truer today; in our age of almost continual distraction, taking time to give the people around us our full focus and attention means giving them a rare and precious gift. It communicates to them that they matter, that their perspective matters, and that being with them is the most important thing to us right now.

Smartphones are supposed to make our communication with others clear, instant, and limitless.

In theory, our attention to and understanding of other people should be easier than ever. As we've seen, that's far from the case. And there's biblical precedent to support the confusion and disconnection that this type of power can create.

In Genesis 11, humanity builds what is eventually called the Tower of Babel. In verse 4, the “whole world” is represented as saying, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.” In their disobedience to God, who had commanded them to spread out over the world, they were essentially trying to play the role of God for themselves. And the Lord’s response to this act is to “confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

In other words: in trying to obtain their own God-like status, humanity lost the ability to have conversation with each other.

What we can and should realize is that when we turn to our smartphones, we are trading our awareness of the present moment—and of whoever is with us in that present moment—for an awareness of something somewhere else. When we use smartphones to avoid the present moment, we are trading presence with whoever is around us for information and power.

But when we purposefully embrace limitations, which Jesus did on a much grander scale than we ever will—either by restricting our phone’s settings or by setting our phone somewhere else altogether—we make space for conversation and attention with the people God has placed in our lives.



Evan Barber is a writer, podcast host, and senior editor at Axis. Over ten years, he’s led teams of gospel-minded researchers, writers, speakers, and content creators, leveraging pop culture to help parents show teens how faith is relevant to every aspect of our lives.

Giving Your Teen a *Smartphone:*


In *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, Thomas Hine points to the various ways that different cultures throughout history signified their children had “come of age.” Boys in a few North American indigenous tribes left their families on “vision quests,” returning after an encounter with a guardian spirit who they believed would guard them for the rest of their lives. Girls in the Carrier tribe in what is now British Columbia would be shunned, ostracized, and totally secluded for three to four years after reaching puberty in a practice called “the burying alive.”

The Puritan families who came to the United States would send their teenagers out to apprentice with other families, effectively subcontracting the final years of parenthood to another set of parents. Once the Industrial Revolution was underway, it was popular in some areas for teenagers to leave their homes to work in factories, living in company-owned dormitories and squirreling away their earnings to send home.

These markers of adulthood may be hard to wrap our heads around as we look at our own adolescent children, cocooned as they may be in scattered PlayStation paraphernalia, half-empty bags of chips, and stinking socks. Prepared for a vision quest, the typical American teenager is not.

Earning a driver's license, attending the prom, and graduating from high school were the closest thing to “rites of passage” that American teens post-WW2 ever had. But arguably more significant than all of these combined is the incredibly powerful device in their pockets—a machine they can use to book a flight anywhere they can pay for a ticket to go, learn anything they're curious to know, and indulge in as many concurrent romantic relationships as they can match with on an app.

**THE
NEW
RITE
OF
PASS-
AGE**



For this reason, we'd argue that the moment you decide to hand your child a fully enabled smartphone might be the moment their childhood, as you know it, comes to an end.

(No pressure.) That's why we're so passionate about helping you to choose to make the most of the process.

This article is meant to outline the steps to choosing exactly when to give your child a smartphone and how to give these moments the significance they should have. If you want to call it a modern-day rite of passage, we won't stop you.

Step 1: Initiation

Giving your tween or teen a smartphone doesn't have to feel like you're in a dire situation—you're choosing to do this, after all. The start of this process can, in fact, be a moment of pride.

We recommend starting your child with one of the “dumb phones” (though we prefer the term “training phones”) currently available on the market. These phones don't have browsers or an app store, and even their ability to send texts and make calls can be restricted. The idea is to give your child a phone like this in early middle school, when they are hopefully still young enough to be excited about that kind of device.

The “dumb phone” entry point provides a launching pad into conversations about responsible tech use, positive incentives, and managing screen time with a personal device. [See our “Five Conversations” article for more on those topics.]

When you are gearing up to give your child a device that has more bells, whistles, and oh yeah, opportunities to fall into a gaping moral abyss, you should introduce the idea of the **Smartphone Family Charter**. This is a document that you can fill out in conversation with your teen, identifying your expectations as well as their hopes for what it might be like to have a phone of their own.

During this crucial time, we would also gently suggest modeling responsible phone use yourself as well as you possibly can. You're about to ask a young person to do something really hard—something a lot of adults aren't very good at. As Hine writes, parents often “want our teens to embody virtues we only rarely practice.”

If you're considering giving a child a fully-enabled smartphone at this age but using parental controls, think carefully. You may be able to use parental controls to lock a twelve-year-old out of harmful content and encounters with predators—but there is a non-zero chance that a child in middle school can find other ways to access this sort of content. Make sure you go into this with your eyes wide open.

Some adults have expressed concerns that if children aren't given access to a phone early enough, they won't be able to “learn” how to use the technology properly, and maybe won't learn how to practice self-control with technology either. But it's a safe bet that they will have no trouble learning the technology, no matter when it is introduced. And research suggests that delaying phone access for people whose frontal cortex is not fully developed is probably a good idea. It could even be vital to helping teens form the neural connections they will need to act with self-control around anything or anyone in life, not just phones.

Step 2: Apprenticeship

Many families present a child's first internet-enabled smartphone in a gift-wrapped box that's meant to be a surprise, tucked under the Christmas tree or handed over on a milestone birthday.

It's less exciting, and might feel even more intimidating, but we recommend telling your child exactly when they will get their first smartphone. Pick a date to hand the phone to them, and unless they violate the terms of their training phone, stick to that date.

And we mean “hand the phone to them,” not “hand them a shrink-wrapped box,” because you'll want to open the phone and set the privacy restrictions the way you would like before your child has access to the device. Again, even if this solution isn't bulletproof, we shouldn't neglect to establish rules just because we think they might get broken.

You might be wondering how old your teen should be before you give your teen a (restricted, but still internet-enabled) smartphone. Every family is different, but introducing this around age 14 will allow you to track your child as they explore an ever-widening range of activities. It enables them to foster their fledgling network of personal connections, and to begin introducing social media apps should you choose to do so (we recommend the organization Protect Young Eyes for up-to-the-minute instructions on how to adjust phone settings for teens).

Because this is in the “apprenticeship” process, you should still have full access to your child's phone and passwords. The message should be clear that the phone exists in your space and under your rules. As your teen reaches certain trust markers, you can gradually disable some of the more limiting restrictions so that the device becomes more functional.

Step 3: Closing Ceremony

Your teen is working with you towards an endpoint in this process. That endpoint is a fully-enabled smartphone that is fully theirs to steward. You might not be able to predict when that endpoint will come, but you should do your best to communicate with your teen as that date approaches.

Consider having a “closing ceremony” of sorts where your child’s phone “grows up” and the remaining apprentice-level restrictions are removed.

At this point, it’s not that your teen won’t have any rules on their phone. It’s more true to say that they will abide by the same rules you set for yourself. This would hopefully still imply limits on where the phone is charged at night (in a public area, out of the bedroom) as well as what types of apps are allowed.

Hine writes, “The weaknesses we see in youth are our own, and we know it.”

If you want your teen to still have an accountability app of some sort installed, install it on your phone, too and give them your passwords. This signifies a level of respect and acknowledgement that sometimes, even adults need help being held to account.

Moments on this journey toward having a phone with all of its functions might feel serious, and there may have been tension. This “ribbon-cutting” moment, when your teen is allowed to become a full member of the smartphone-carrying community, should feel celebratory and sweet.

Leading child psychologists and ethicists suggest that giving a teen a smartphone with social media access at 16 might be the “sweet spot” to shoot for. Of course, your teen might think you’re impossibly old-fashioned if you make them wait this long for a “graduated” phone. (Even though, in truth, you’re on the cutting edge of academic research, the medical literature, and proposed legislation.) But every parent has to make the decision they think is best for their kids.

The message should be
clear that the phone exists
in your space and under
your rules.

Final Thoughts

Rituals may seem like anachronisms from another time, but we suspect they hold a power we cannot quite comprehend. The ritual Jesus gave us to remember Him has survived in the Christian tradition for over 2,000 years.

Parents who are raising Gen Z and Gen Alpha have seen plenty of parental panics come and go. The satanic panic, hand-wringing over MTV, and book bans have seized the minds of parents throughout the last several decades. It is debatable whether the rhetoric or rage over these relics contributed positively to anyone's spiritual formation. Falling church attendance rates and a new group of religious "nones" would imply quite the opposite.

If we reframe the way we understand “teenagers” and think of these individuals as adults in training—as people who are working through a winding maturation process that is outside of their control, governed by their surrounding culture and their own rapidly shifting biology—our empathy for their experience deepens.

We become more willing to relinquish some level of our control, and we look for opportunities to cultivate adventure and formally recognize moments of triumph. We can promise that adulthood is something to cherish, to earn, and to celebrate—and that the endpoint of childhood might be bittersweet, but it does not have to be sour.

“Being a teenager is not an identity, but a predicament most people live through,” Hine writes. A predicament that involves learning self-control, making mistakes in front of people you admire, and longing to prove yourself trustworthy. By ritualizing the smartphone onboarding process, we can redeem the way we think about our teens. Maybe in some ways, we can even redeem the little black mirrors we keep in our pockets, too.



Kate Watson is a writer, editor, and mother of three living in New York's Hudson Valley. She writes about culture, community, and parenthood for outlets like *Christianity Today*, *Relevant*, *Insider*, and *Vox*. Kate is the publisher at *Axis*.

It's time to get out your pencils



The key to smartphone success is writing something down with your kid. *We're talking pencil printing, not in blood.*

So you've done your research. You've chosen a device that works for your family. You've set the parental controls, and you've got a general idea of what your guidelines should be. You're ready to hand your young adult their first smartphone, right?

Before you make the handoff, there's one last step: write something down.

You may be able to make the rules crystal clear in your initial comments to your child. You may have a beautiful speech about responsibility and maturity that sounds almost as good as the Gettysburg Address. But after the excitement of getting a device wears off, it's likely... okay, almost guaranteed that your kid isn't going to remember the guidelines as you presented them.

So you're going to need to write the rules down.

We've created what we call the “eight domains” of introducing your kid to their own personal device. These are categories of conflict that come up for everybody, and you've got to get ahead of them right now.

The domains are:

Non-negotiables: What absolutely cannot happen on this phone? What will happen if those rules are broken?

Money: Who pays for this phone? What if it gets lost, or breaks?

Location: Who can track this phone? Can tracking ever be turned off?

Time: What are the screen time limits on this device? Where is it kept at night?

Internet: Does this phone have an internet browser installed? What can be accessed?

App store: Does this device allow access to the app store? Who has permission to approve downloads?

Texting: Which contacts are stored in this device? Who can it be used to contact?

Social media: Is social media allowed on this device? If not now, could it be in the future?

The domains will likely need adjusting, updating, and constant visibility. Fill out the domains according to your kid, your relationship with them, and your personal convictions about how this should go. You could even fill it out alongside your kid and answer questions along the way. When you're done, hang the finished version in a place of high visibility in your household. You might even want to make a few copies.

On the following pages, you'll find a printed example of these domains so that you can understand how they work. We also have a version that you can tear out and fill in yourself to meet the specific needs and expectations of your family.



Scan the QR code if you need another blank copy.

Take your time to really talk to your kid about this and establish yourself as the authority.

When you're done, you'll have a Family Smartphone Charter—a guiding document for how your family thinks about the theology of technology.

The Axis Team

Family Smartphone CHARTER



The Johnson 's Version

As your parent, I am responsible to God as the ultimate steward of your phone. As long as the phone is paid for by me, and/or while you live under my roof, here are our **non-negotiables**:

- ✓ All passwords are public and accessible, including for apps
- ✓ Parents have full access to any phone at any time
- ✓ No sneaky apps designed to hide or keep secrets
- ✓ No pornography or sharing of images
- ✓ No dating apps
- ✓ No bullying
- ✓ No abusive language
- ✓ If this phone is broken or lost, [the repair or replacement will be your financial responsibility.]

Our grace policy

Systems break, technology fails, and sometimes you will find a way around the rules.

You can still tell me anything. I want to know if you are being bullied online.

I care about who you talk to and what you watch. I'm making these rules because

I care about you and want to help you become responsible.

5

Essential Conversations to Have First

Who pays for the phone? **Ownership and responsibility**

When and **where** can this phone be used? **Basic ground rules**

How do we know what to trust online? **Representation does not always equal reality**

Why do we avoid harmful content? **A Christian ethic for deciding what's appropriate**

What if everything goes wrong? **Positive motivation, consequences, and support**

The Johnson's 8 Smartphone Domains

Phones are very good, cursed, & can be redeemed. God owns everything, & He owns all phones.
Parents are responsible to God as the ultimate steward of the family phones.

START HERE

THEN WHAT?

WHAT'S NEXT

1

Non-Negotiables

Parent has access to phone/apps at any time has password, all passwords & logins & can install software. Parent will check phone frequently & know about every app.

NO sneaky apps, hidden accounts, changing passwords, & no secrets. Agreed family response times to calls & texts.

NO porn, sexting, online dating, or "hook-up" apps. NO bullying, or inappropriate (abusive) language.

2

Money

Parent pays for everything (phone plan, data, misc. costs).

Teen starts paying for apps, services, phone repairs, etc.

Maintain trust

3

Location

Establish policies for home use (ie bedroom, bathroom, mealtime, etc).

Establish policies for outside use (with location tracking on).

Maintain trust

4

Time

Parents set and enforce Screen Time limits, phone off at night.

Teen regulates Screen Time limits with parent oversight.

Maintain trust

5

Internet

No web browsers or search engine apps on phone.

Allow native browser with whitelisted websites.

Allow native browser with "limit adult content" web filter and blacklisting certain sites (on Android use "approve sites")

6

App Store

App Store with "Family Sharing" & "Ask to Buy"

App Store with "Family Sharing" WITHOUT "Ask to Buy"

No Family Sharing.

7

Texting

Limit texting to approved list.

Allow texting, but with daily monitoring.

Allow texting, but with spontaneous check-ins.

8

Social Media

Allow one social media account with a shared family login and password.

Allow one social media account with daily time limits.

Allow multiple social media accounts with daily time limits.

PHONE FREEDOM



Family Smartphone CHARTER



_____’s Version

As your parent, I am responsible to God as the ultimate steward of your phone. As long as the phone is paid for by me, and/or while you live under my roof, here are our **non-negotiables**:

- ✓ All passwords are public and accessible, including for apps
- ✓ Parents have full access to any phone at any time
- ✓ No sneaky apps designed to hide or keep secrets
- ✓ No pornography or sharing of images
- ✓ No dating apps
- ✓ No bullying
- ✓ No abusive language
- ✓ If this phone is broken or lost, [_____]

Our grace policy

5

Essential Conversations to Have First

Who pays for the phone? *Ownership and responsibility*

When and **where** can this phone be used? *Basic ground rules*

How do we know what to trust online? *Representation does not always equal reality*

Why do we avoid harmful content? *A Christian ethic for deciding what's appropriate*

What if everything goes wrong? *Positive motivation, consequences, and support*

_____’s 8 Smartphone Domains

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Parents are responsible to God as the ultimate steward of the family phones.

	START HERE	THEN WHAT?	WHAT'S NEXT
1 Non-Negotiables			
2 Money			
3 Location			
4 Time			
5 Internet			
6 App Store			
7 Texting			
8 Social Media			

PHONE FREEDOM





Other Resources:



Protect Young Eyes understands the intricacies of parental controls. For detailed, step-by-step, regularly updated instructions to create safeguards on practically any device, visit their website:

protectyouneyes.com/parental-controls-every-digital-device



For a practical guide to help younger kids understand how to think about what they see online, including sexually explicit content, we recommend the **Good Pictures, Bad Pictures** series by Kristen A. Jenson, available here:

defendyoungminds.com/books



At Axis, we often say the road to smartphone safety involves several steps, including a starter phone/training phone as a first device. But which device should you get, and how do you know the difference between them? Check out the easy comparison chart from **Screen Sanity**, available here:

screensanity.org/tool/first-phone-comparison-chart/



For weekly ideas about spending time as a family offline, check out **Analog Sunday**, an organization that encourages the practice of a digital sabbath to rewire habits and deepen relationships.



Our weekly newsletter, **the Culture Translator**, explains culture trends for parents who are raising the next generation of Christians. Sign up here:

axis.org/culture-translator



CONVERSATIONS

Podcast

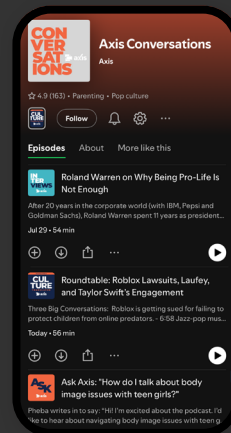
Faith, Culture & Parenting
One Conversation at a Time

Join the hosts of **Axis Conversations** as they sit down with thought leaders, authors, pastors, and cultural experts on the issues shaping teens—technology, identity, mental health, discipleship—so you can talk about them with confidence.

Perfect for parents, mentors, and ministry leaders • New episodes released bi-weekly

Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music

SCAN TO LISTEN HERE



YouTube

The Questions Your Kids
are Already Asking

Short. Relevant. Unfiltered. **The Conversation Starter** delivers weekly videos on the questions teens are asking about faith, culture, and identity—plus practical, gospel-centered ways to spark deeper conversations with your child.

Fresh videos every other week • Insights from teen culture, backed by research • Shareable content made for small groups or one-on-one time

SCAN TO WATCH ON YOUTUBE



One Conversation That Lasts a Lifetime

What if the most important conversation you have with your teen isn't a big one-time talk? What if it's a thousand little ones?

The **One Conversation Model** invites you into a practice of ongoing, meaningful dialogue with your teen—not simply one big, heavy talk. It's about showing up daily, listening well, asking thoughtful questions, and pointing them to Jesus.

1

ONGOING DIALOGUE OVER ONE-TIME TALKS.

Relationships are built not on one single talk, but a lifetime of on-going conversations and everyday interactions.

2

LISTENING WITH HEART AND INTENT.

It's more than talking, it's asking good, open-ended questions, and listening deeply.

3

CULTURAL RELEVANCE THROUGH THE LENS OF FAITH.

Actively engage in culturally relevant discussions, grounding tough topics in gospel-centered insight.

4

LIFELONG INVESTMENT ACROSS ALL SEASONS.

It's the long game perspective. Trusting that seeds planted, in the right time will reap a harvest.

You don't need to have all the answers—just a heart ready to walk with your teen and the rising generation. Even ordinary moments can lead to sacred conversations.

Start your One Conversation today.



Axis equips **parents**
for gospel-centered
conversations with
their **teen** about
faith
and culture.