

Your child's first smartphone – are they old enough?

Children often have access to devices, including smartphones, from a very young age. Whether it's watching their favourite program through streaming services on your phone, using educational apps or simply viewing photos with you and the family, they are engaging with devices in one form or another.

But when is my child old enough to be given their own mobile phone?

In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed children as young as five years old owned a mobile phone – two percent of children aged between five and eight years old, and 29 percent for children aged five to 14 years. This figure is likely to be higher now!

For many parents and carers, five years old would seem too young. For others, it might offer them peace of mind and security to know they can keep in touch with their child—especially in an emergency.

The right age for your child will depend on their level of maturity. It's worth asking yourself the following questions before handing over a digital device.

- Does my child have a good sense of responsibility?
- Are they able to stick to the rules?
- Do they show a good understanding of actions and consequences?
- Do they come to me or another trusted adult when they are distressed or encounter problems?



For younger children it's best to start with a mobile phone without internet access, and introduce a smartphone when they demonstrate an appropriate level of maturity. Some younger children might argue that they are ready for a smartphone, especially if their friends already have one. But it's worth holding out until you feel confident that your child is mature enough.

My child has their first smartphone – now what?

When your child receives their first smartphone it's a great opportunity to instil safe online behaviours early on, so they can carry these skills through to their teens and beyond.

Here are some tips for getting them on board with good online habits.

Establish rules at the outset with clear boundaries

Talk about expectations and the consequences for not meeting these rules. Depending on the age of your child, you might want to set up a written signed agreement which lists the rules.

Here are some you may want to agree on:

- No phones after a certain time (i.e. 8.00 pm) – unless in an emergency.
- Keep to daily screen time limits (i.e. 1 hour per school night).
- Family time is a no-phone zone (i.e. dinner).

- Do not share your passwords with others – apart from parents.
- Do not share your real name (or full name), age and address when posting, talking to strangers or on sites where anyone can see it.
- Be kind to people – treat people on the phone as you would face-to-face.
- Do not take or share photos of others (including friends) without their permission.
- Tell a parent or another trusted adult if anything makes you feel uncomfortable, or if a stranger contacts you online.
- Do not purchase or download an app or game without talking to a parent first—especially as these often have minimum age requirements.

Use technology tools to help set the boundaries to keep your child safe

Use parental controls to help manage your child's device and the types of content they can access. Most devices come with parental controls and offer a range of features:

- iPhone: Go to Settings > General > Restrictions. Here you can disable apps or features, prevent access to explicit content and specific webpages.
- Android (Google Play): Go to Play Store > Settings > Parental controls. Most Android phones use Google Play as the digital marketplace for purchasing apps and accessing content. Through Google Play you can restrict the content your child can download or purchase from Google Play.
- Google's Family Link is an app for parents to help manage their child's device and account and offers additional layers of protection. It enables parents to set screen time limits, review app permissions (such as their camera, location, contacts), block apps and approve downloads, block sites and filter content.
- You can also check with your mobile service provider if they offer any parental control tools.

Activate any privacy settings and safety features available on the device, in web browsers and apps. In some cases you can do this through parental controls or when installing apps on their phone. Carefully consider permissions and whether apps really need to access your child's location, contact list, messages and other features.

Help your child set up a pin or password to lock their phone. In addition to protecting their personal information, this will ensure that no one else can use their phone.

Help your child set up strong and unique passwords for their apps and websites. Even if the phone is locked, apps and websites can be accessed from other devices.

Communicate openly with your child, establish and maintain trust

Most importantly, communicate openly with your child about their phone and online use. It's not possible to supervise your child 24/7 and no technology tool is 100 percent effective in protecting them from online risks. So it's really important to establish and maintain trust.

- Talk openly and regularly with your child about their online activities. Show them that you are interested in how they connect with friends, who they talk with and the type of sites they visit.
- If you are using parental controls, be upfront about this and get them on board. Let them know that these can be reviewed and changed as they get older and they continue to demonstrate responsible behaviour.
- Talk about positive online behaviour and about respecting others online. Encourage your child to think carefully before they post, text or share comments or photos so they don't hurt or upset others. Remind them there is a real person at the end of the screen.
- Encourage your child to come to you (or another trusted adult) if they are upset because of an online experience, even if they think they are to blame.