

A gentle plan for real families

The Phone-Free Childhood Playbook

Simple scripts, playful alternatives, and a family plan for delaying smartphones, without making technology the enemy.

For parents of children about 5 to 13

Includes scripts, agreements, and a first-phone contract

A note before you begin

For every parent feeling the pressure.

If you're reading this, you've probably felt it: the pressure to hand your child a smartphone earlier than you'd like, because everyone else seems to have one.

You're not anti-technology. You just want your child to have a childhood with room for boredom, outdoor play, real friendships, and enough sleep, before the most powerful attention-capturing devices ever made arrive in their pocket.

This playbook is practical. It gives you the research, presented honestly, including where scientists disagree. Then it gives you a plan: when to introduce what, how to build a village of like-minded families, what to say when your child pushes back, and how to make the transition when the time comes.

Phone-free doesn't mean tech-free, and it doesn't mean forever. It means on purpose.

You do not need to do everything at once. One small change tonight is a good start.

Delay is a gift. You can't get childhood back.



What the research says

Here's what the evidence shows, and what it doesn't.

What the research says

53% by age 11

of American children have their own smartphone, rising to 69% by age 12.

Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2019

What the research says

Nearly 40%

of children aged 8 to 12 use social media, even though 13 is the minimum age on most platforms.

U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, 2023

What the research says

Double the risk

In a study of 6,595 adolescents aged 12 to 15, those who spent more than three hours a day on social media had twice the risk of depression and anxiety symptoms.

Cited in the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023

What the research says

2.17 times

the odds of inadequate sleep were linked to using media devices at bedtime, in a meta-analysis of 125,198 children.

Carter and colleagues, JAMA Pediatrics, 2016

Associations, not proof

Most of this research shows links rather than proving cause and effect, and scientists actively debate how big the risks are. Page 9 lays out the debate fairly.

What's inside

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The evidence, and the debate.

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Readiness and the first phone.

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Family agreement, first phone contract, offline planner.

Start here

- The debate, fairly
- Sleep and devices
- 'Everyone else has one'
- The tech ladder



Start here tonight

You do not need to read this cover to cover. Begin with one small, visible change.

1. **Choose the overnight home**
   Pick a kitchen basket or charging spot. Adults put their phones there too.

2. **Put one good thing in the gap**
   Choose an easy offline invitation for tomorrow: a walk, cards, baking, or ten minutes outside.

3. **Say the why, briefly**
   “We’re making more room for sleep, play, and family time. We’ll figure this out together.”

Then skip to what you need

Research: page 6 · Family plan: page 13 · Pushback scripts: page 34 · First phone: page 40

Already gave your child a phone?

That’s okay. Page 38 has a gentle reset plan.

Part 3 5-min read

Why community matters

The hardest part of delaying a smartphone isn't the technology. It's that your child doesn't want to be the only one without one. When several families in a class or friend group wait together, that pressure largely disappears.

A collective problem needs a collective answer

When most children in a group have smartphones, the others can feel left out of plans and conversations. Coordinating with other families removes much of that pressure.

Community pledges

Groups like Wait Until 8th invite parents to pledge to wait on smartphones until at least the end of eighth grade, and only activate once enough families in a class have signed on.