

Is your child ready for a cellphone? Look for these independence milestones.

DEVORAH HEITNER
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Your child is begging for a smartphone, but are they ready? Are *you* ready? Since writing [“Screenwise,”](#) the most frequent question I get from parents is: “What age is right for a phone?” During the holiday season, this question is laden with urgency, because it could make the perfect gift.

But getting your child a smartphone — or any connected device — is a huge turning point. It gives them access to the entire digital world — good and bad —

and will put them at the center of a powerful communication hub.

So rather than asking the right age, the question should be: “What independence milestones has my child achieved?” And then: “What role will a phone play in my child’s life?” Here are some ways to evaluate your child’s readiness and some ideas for mentoring them through it.

Do you have time for mentoring? Getting a smartphone is not a simple gift or a quick way to stay in touch. It’s a significant event in your child’s life. You will want to help them as much as possible, so consider your availability. Holidays can be hectic, and you may not be able to devote the time required. Will you be in a position to thoughtfully guide your child as they become the owner/operator of a smartphone?

It’s important to establish ground rules and work with your child. Talk about and consider each app before downloading it, and discuss how to mindfully add contacts. Who’s on the approved list for texting? Peers, family members, extended family — it helps to clearly define some guidelines. And set expectations about access. Will this device live in your child’s room overnight, for example? These are discussions to have before the phone is handed over. And if you are already in power struggles over gaming or other digital pursuits, you may want to get to a better place before adding yet another device.

To help set boundaries, treat it as the achievement that it is. Start planning with your child a few months in advance, and make it contingent upon key independence milestones. Set a date with your child to formally hand over and set up the device so you’ll be in a position to really focus on this transition.

[*Feeling like the smartphone has taken over your child's life? Experts talk about how to regain control.*](#)

Can they focus in the face of distraction? Homework routines can tell you a lot

about your child's ability to stay focused and plan their time. A student who can assemble everything that is needed, sit down to do homework and complete assignments independently may still need some rules about homework and phones — but they have a strong foundation to build on.

Consider what your child's homework routine reflects about her time management and focus. How will a device affect that? When you start planning for Smartphone Day a few months or even a year in advance, lay the groundwork by establishing routines that you can help your child start implementing.

Adults in the family should model a proactive approach to distraction. Avoid double screening (for example texting while you watch TV) and talk about other steps you take to reduce distraction.

Does your child exhibit good judgment? A kid who is ready to walk home from school independently or go to the store on their own may be more ready for a phone than a child who can't manage these things. These are helpful indicators. Use them to assess your confidence in your child's good judgment and increasing maturity. If these milestones feel very far away, does your child need a phone? Or is this something to work toward?

Another great clue is how well your child keeps track of their belongings. Are they careful about how they treat their books, toys or other possessions? A smartphone is expensive and needs to be treated with care. Who will pay for it if it gets lost, the screen gets smashed or it goes through the wash in a pocket?

How does your child manage social relationships? A child who will take any dare, or follow peers no matter how dumb their ideas are, is also more vulnerable in a group texting or social media conversation. Can they walk away from a kid who is being mean, or are they repeatedly sucked into conflicts? Kids who have shown themselves to be especially hungry for peer approval will need careful attention in the early years with a phone. Don't take this on until you are

ready.

Setting boundaries with peers is something they can work on, with parents' help. Look for signs of empathy in their relationships. Does your child seem to understand the effect of their words on others? Do they apologize when they hurt someone's feelings? Self-reflection and attempting to make things right are good signs that kids can repair their mistakes.

Technology amplifies social relationships. It is crucial that kids understand there is a person (or a bunch of people) reading their words or watching the video they post. If they tend to go nuclear in conflicts with friends or at home, work on that before getting them a smartphone, and go slow with adding contacts and apps.

Watch their interactions. Kids can be super impatient about waiting for a response. Help them practice patience before getting a phone. You don't want them to blow up their friend's phone with 20 messages when they don't hear back right away. Impulse control is also tough for many kids. Have your child practice pausing before responding — and knowing when to talk in person instead.

Does your child know when to ask for help? Finally, regardless of whether you plan to read your kid's texts or look at the device you give them (if you do, I encourage you to disclose this to them), be sure your child knows what situations require adult intervention. Have they shown good judgment about when to tell an adult about a peer issue? When they do, you should reinforce that they made a great choice.

They need to know they can come to you even if they have broken the rules or made a mistake. Have they ever approached you about something they have heard or a concern they have about another kid? Before giving them a phone, run through some potential scenarios that are too serious to be solved with peer support alone.

There is no perfect time for a phone, and ideally this is a transition you build up to with an eye toward increasing independence in self-care, common sense, organization and empathy.

Parents should expect some bumps in the road. Some mishaps can't be prevented. We're handing over powerful instantaneous communication, documentation and gaming devices to a person whose prefrontal cortex hasn't fully formed. They are still learning their way in the world. But good preparation, along with deep breaths and a sense of humor, will help.

Devorah Heitner is the author of "[Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive \(and Survive\) in Their Digital World](#)." Find her online at raisingdigitalnatives.com.