



ParentingNI  
Supporting Families

# Connected Children: How Young is “Too Young” for a Smartphone?

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## Introduction

Smartphones have become an unavoidable icon of modern life. They are as pervasive and as integrated into modern culture as cars or computers. The pace with which they have established themselves is remarkable. Blackberry, arguably the first “modern” smartphone was seen as a high-end business gadget when it was first released in 2006. Today around 30% of Children aged 9 own a smart phone, rising to more than 90% by the age of 16 (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2015). In the UK, 1 in 8 children have a mobile by the age of 8 (Aviva, 2017).

While there are a range of benefits to children of owning and making use of technology, there are also a number of undeniable risks. One of the most common questions Parenting NI receives from parents of young children is “what age should I give my child a phone?” Even the most cursory of searches online suggests that this question –striking the balance between keeping children safe from the dangers of technology and keeping them from being socially isolated- is on the minds of parents from Belfast to Melbourne.

It is also important to remember that every child is different and will experience smart phone and internet usage differently. What is deeply worrying or troubling for one child is not necessarily for another. Only parents will have the personal knowledge to understand the unique circumstances relating to their families and children.

The report will examine the statistics, give an overall picture of the state of smartphone usage in children and weigh up the pros and cons for parents and children.

## The Impacts of Phone Use on Children

### Very Young Children

It is important to set a lower floor for the use of technology in children. While there is no hard and fast rule as to when precisely children are “ready” for smart phones, research has noted that children of less than 30 months old cannot learn from videos in the same way as real-life (Anderson & Hanson, 2013). As such, one of the most significant positive factors relating to the usage of technology does not apply to them. When the other beneficial elements are considered, it is reasonable to suggest that toddlers do not realistically benefit from smart phones.

However, at what age do the benefits (or negatives) first start to manifest in children? The truth is, researchers have not yet reached a hard consensus. A review for the London School of Economics in 2013 noted that studies were “unclear about possible benefits and opportunities” for 0-8 year olds regarding internet usage. Some research has suggested that “mobile device ownership may provide opportunities to enhance school readiness and address educational inequality for young children in low-income communities” (Kabali et al., 2015). These reports

suggest that access to educational apps and games can help with the development of skills that might otherwise be difficult or impossible for parents.

However, many other reports have suggested almost precisely the opposite is true. There have been several articles suggesting, for example, that young children struggled to hold pencils properly “because of too much tech” (Guardian, 2018). The suggestion is that because they had been playing with phones or tablets, rather than with pencils or crayons they had not developed the necessary hand-eye coordination. This then impacted their education, as they started behind other children who had not made use of smartphones as extensively.

In addition, a report authored by the University of Toronto found that “infants with more handheld screen time have an increased risk of an expressive speech delay” (Birken, 2017). They found that every 30 minute increase in the daily use of handheld screens in very young children translated into a 49% increased risk of speech delay.

There are also number of risk-related concerns. Access to smartphones and the internet puts young children directly or indirectly into contact with a wide range of individuals. The more obvious elements of this are texting and phone calls, communication apps like skype or whatsapp or e-mail. Possibly less obvious are potential dangers from interactions which are secondary to the purpose of the app. For example, in November of 2017 Youtube admitted that part of the system they had in place to report sexualised comments left on children’s videos “not been functioning correctly for more than a year” (BBC, 2017). This left children vulnerable to grooming, despite chatting not being the primary function of Youtube. When this is combined with a smartphone, there is even greater potential harm as the child may give away their own contact details.

In short, when discussing pre-school aged children, it is difficult to argue that they benefit greatly from ownership of a smartphone. While there are certainly some advantages to making judicious usage of educational apps, excessive or unrestricted access is highly detrimental. This is not to say, however, that parents are somehow “failing” their children by occasionally allowing them to watch a YouTube video or skype with their grandparents!

### Primary Age Children

This is perhaps the most difficult period of a child’s life for a parent with respect to smart phones. For very young children, most parents agree that phones are unlikely to be appropriate. Around 68% of parents think children should be at least 9 before they get their first phone, and around a third suggesting 12 as a minimum age (Opinium, 2016). Equally, most parents will feel that it is appropriate for teenagers to have access – though not without any qualification.

But what about primary school aged children? Research suggests that 11 is the most common age at which children are given a phone (Aviva, 2017). However,

there is some debate regarding this age. Many of the online services which a child may seek to access via their new phone, such as Facebook or Twitter require you to be at least 13. As such, children given a phone before this age may be exposed to content for which they are not ready.

Giving your primary aged child a phone could also give them a first-hand experience of a new and unpleasant situation – cyberbullying. Whereas younger children were more likely to report being the victim of physical bullying, “older pupils reported experiencing (as a victim) significantly more types of cyberbullying than younger pupils” (Monks et al. 2012). While not having a phone is by no means a guarantee of protection from online-bullying, nor is giving your child a phone a definite sentence, the link is significant.

There are potential benefits to the use of smartphone by primary aged children. The first is safety. As a child begins to take part in semi-independent activities such as after-school clubs, youth clubs or social outings with friends, there is a value to having a child be contactable. Additionally, access to services like Google Maps or the internet more generally could assist if the child is lost, or unsure of where to ask for help.

The skills that children develop in the use of technology, including smart phones, is also increasingly important in later life. A report by the Education Technology Action Group for the Department of Education in England noted that building digital skills were “an essential contemporary skill set”. By depriving a child of this parents may also inadvertently disadvantage them.

Additionally, there is a social aspect to smartphone ownership. All parents are familiar with the cry that “everyone else in class has one”. However, statistics suggest that children may not be exaggerating in this regard. The Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne Australia released a report in 2017 unequivocally stating that “Young children owning smartphones is the new normal”. Numbers for the UK broadly align with this. In effect, when deciding when a child should first receive a phone a parent is making a difficult choice that affects not just their safety or education development, but also their social status.

### Teenagers and Young Adults

In some ways, this period of a young person’s life is the least complicated with regards to smart phone usage. Simply put, most teens use smart phones, and most use them a lot. It is also a demographic whose use is skyrocketing – by 2013 the use of devices was already becoming ever-present as around 80% of teens had a smart phone (eMarketer, 2013). They are also extremely avid consumers of online content via their phones, with over a third claiming to be online more than 6 hours a day on weekends and almost a quarter spending this amount of time on week days. UK usage in both cases is above the OECD average (Frith, 2017) – meaning that parents in the UK face a greater challenge than parents of the rest of the world.

As previously explored, there are certainly some benefits to phone usage. These can rise with age, as the young person becomes increasingly independent. Additionally, given the likely access to their own money, particularly among over 16's levels of potential parental control are less in this regard.

That being said, there are a number of concerns regarding phone usage for teens – ranging from irritating habits to genuine concerns. For example, many parents admit struggling to control total screen time of their teenage children. Around 41% of parents said that they find it difficult to control their child's screen time (OFCOM, 2016). As a result of this excessive use, teenager's mental health and sleep quality has been impacted.

A report looking at over a thousand teens in Australia found that poor-quality sleep associated with late-night texting or calling was linked to a decline in mental health (Vernon, 2017). The reasons given for such use, particularly late at night, were a “fear of missing out” on content. Additionally, the reasons can be gendered – for example, many girls note that the major social media influencers whose content they consume are US-based, and time differences account for the “need” to be awake and active late at night. Conversely, boys note that major video game content creators are based in East Asia, again complicating sleep (Lloyd, 2018). This poor sleep, coupled with potential cyber-bullying can have negative effects on teenagers. When they are put into stressful or difficult circumstances without the defence of being well-rested, it is easy to see how it can impact physical and mental health.

While online gaming via phones is something that children of all ages can take part in, it is particularly popular with teens. Around 70% of teens play video games, and 84% of teenage boys do (Lenhart, 2015). As explored in a previous paper, online gaming comes with its own pros and cons, but when considering smart phone use by teenagers it is important to remember gaming. The most popular phone games can have millions of users worldwide, and some argue that they are highly addictive – the regulation is also more lax than more traditional gaming consoles or PCs.

Teens of course also have a particular concern regarding both the creation and viewing of sexualised content. A report by JAMA paediatrics found that almost 1 in 5 young people had either sent or received sexual content of themselves, and as many as 12% admitted to forwarding such an image without the consent of the individual (Madigan, Ly & Rash, 2018). This suggests not only that sending of this content is common, but that there may be negative social pressures on teenagers to engage in it. Similar to the issues of access to phones for parents of primary-aged children, teens may feel socially “isolated” if they perceive themselves to be the “odd one out” by not engaging in it.

There are serious issues regarding this – not least moral and ethical, there is also a real danger of legality if the content is of an underage individual. While conversations regarding this content are extremely difficult for parents – but it is equally vital.

When one considers that many of the concerns regarding younger children do not necessarily disappear at teenage years, it can be argued that the concerns of when to expose children to smart phones becomes increasingly complicated.

### **Conclusion**

It is undeniable that smartphones are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Therefore, parents will have to decide for themselves whether their children should or should not have access, as well as when. While this can be a difficult or even frightening prospect, it is important to remember that help is at hand.

Parents are not alone in their struggles with technology. In addition to a wide range of online and issue-specific support, Parenting NI's website and helpline can support parents on a range of issues and concerns. By giving a call to Parenting NI, parents can get bespoke one-to-one support relevant to their own circumstances.