

## **Surviving in the Digital Era**

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I will never forget the day I received my first phone when I was only ten years old. I downloaded lots of games and even got Snapchat, but I had no idea about what I was getting myself into. After I showed it to my friends at school, they thought it was super cool because I was the only kid in the fifth grade to own a phone. I was able to talk with anyone and take as many pictures as I wanted, and while it seemed harmless to me at the time, I was unaware of the negative effects it would have on me as I got older. If I could have prevented myself from becoming so attached to an artificial source of excitement at such an early age, I absolutely would have. I cannot express enough how determined I am to raise awareness about the risks kids are taking when they languish in the captivity of smartphones. Children should have limits on these devices because the majority of them are not knowledgeable about the affects they can produce, and without appropriate supervision the vast capabilities can be abused.

One of the largest benefits of owning a smartphone is the immediate and easily accessible information that is provided to us right from our pockets. Although this is true, I think that kids under the age of 13 will rarely come across situations that require them to have instantaneous access to information that is also readily available on a computer. With that in mind, I would argue that there is no urgency to supply a child with the privilege of owning a smartphone. In *The New York Times* article “What’s the Right Age for a Child to Get a Smartphone?” lead consumer technology writer, Brian Chen (2016) informs us of the advantages and disadvantages that children have when it comes to owning smartphones. He claims that a multitude of dangers follow the benefits of mobile devices and may even surpass the useful qualities that they possess, such as “education tools” and the abundance of information on the internet. Chen’s (2016) findings have led him to believe that it is a worthwhile decision to wait if you can before

presenting children with a smartphone. He argues that this choice will prevent kids from entertaining themselves with “addictive distractions” and being more productive with schoolwork. An English teacher named Lola Okolosie (2023) published an opinion article for *The Guardian* called “I’m a teacher – and this is why I’m not giving my son a smartphone yet” stating why she will not allow her ten-year-old son to have the device. She says, “He’s nowhere near ready to wade through the confusing and harmful detritus that he will no doubt find on the internet. [...] why would I assume he could navigate terrain many adults struggle to get a handle on?” The essence of Okolosie’s (2023) parental judgments come from the encounters that she has had with the kids in her classroom, and having the role of a teacher allows her to see the characteristics among students who own smartphones. Although she includes how even “adults struggle” with the domain of smartphones, the traits within kids in her classroom directly correlate to her own kid, and that is why she refrains from letting him own one.

Admittedly, smartphones can be very convenient devices for communication purposes, especially in the case of an emergency. On the other hand, they pose the risk of unwanted engagement with online strangers who could potentially be cyber bullies or child predators. Covered in the news post titled “Your kids are at risk on social media. Do you know how to help?” by the *Detroit Free Press*, a writer and health educator with a doctorate in philosophy named Kelly Rogers Victor (2019) shares details about the online harassment that young people experience. She reveals how predators use social media as one of the primary ways to contact and connect with children to exploit them. Often, these perverted individuals will disguise themselves and take on the identity of someone that might seem more trustworthy to a young person. Furthermore, she warns us that after the child’s guard is down, the predator will request an explicit picture from them, and upon receiving it, will threaten to “go public with the photo” if

they do not provide more personal details. Altogether, Victor (2019) believes that early parental involvement is crucial in stopping this problem. A father of a seven-year-old girl named Madi Summer made a Facebook post in 2017 about his family's experience with an online stranger. This person attempted to manipulate Madi and persuade her to send obscene photos of herself over the social media app called Musical.ly. The father, Brad Summer remarks, "I never thought of someone pretending to be 9 to gain access to my child." Unfortunately, this was precisely the case, and it happens far too often. Brad's objective for the post was to warn parents of the unsuspected strategy used by many child predators to reach young individuals. Further steps in the right direction would include setting necessary restrictions and explaining what the possible dangers of online exchanges are to your children.

Conversely, there are ways to limit the capabilities of cellular devices through certain software that blocks adult content and apps that are not appropriate for kids. Many parents find it easier to give their children phones because this method enables them to monitor their activity. As great as that sounds, I think if they need that amount of supervision to operate a smartphone, it is a bad idea to allow them one. Additionally, this management strategy will likely form distrust in the relationship between kids and parents. An article called "Apps to Keep Children Safe Online May be Counterproductive" from the University of Central Florida written by Barbara Abney (2018) and Zenaida Kotala (2018) contains studies and information about the adverse effects of parental control apps. Despite the increasing popularity of apps designed to ensure the safety of kids online, research conducted at the University of Central Florida by Arup Kumar Ghosh, a doctoral student in UCF's College of Engineering and Computer Science, and Pamela Wisniewski, an assistant professor of engineering and computer science, who is an expert on adolescent online safety underlines that young people are worried these apps are hindering the

relationship they have with their parents. “Teens, and even younger children, told us loudly and clearly that they would rather their parents talk to them than use parental control apps,” Ghosh said. “Not because they wanted to get away with something bad, but because they wanted their parents’ trust and respect.” As someone who has had parental control apps on my smartphone in the past, I can confirm that there was a feeling of doubt in my parent’s sureness of my ability to resist making poor choices with the device. There were times when I considered getting rid of the phone completely because it only caused frustration. Not only was the functionality of the smartphone severed, but also the faith I had in my parents to believe that I could exercise self-control.

As the development and expanse of digital technology becomes more prevalent in our society, we feel pressure to conform to this increasingly electronic age. It is undeniable that we must adapt, but I strongly believe that children should avoid being exposed to it as long as they can. Sudheer Kumar Muppalla (2023) authored an article for the National Library of Medicine called “Effects of Excessive Screen Time on Child Development: An Updated Review and Strategies for Management” where he exhibits the harmful effects of screen usage among kids. Muppalla (2023) states, “Excessive screen time and media multitasking can negatively affect executive functioning, sensorimotor development, and academic outcomes. Early screen exposure has been associated with lower cognitive abilities and academic performance in later years.” Mupalla (2023) cautions that the quickly developing brain of a child is subject to change, notably from involvement with screens. Overstimulation can cause children to have a weaker thinking capacity and ultimately will affect their academic prowess.

One of the largest attractions for smartphone users is social media, which can be attributed to the limitless connectivity that the apps allow. The endless interactions we have with

people seem to be fine in moderation, but given how addictive it is, you cannot expect someone, especially a younger, more susceptible individual, to have total self-control all the time. For that reason, I suggest that we become more aware of the constant consumption of unrealistic content that the impressionable minds of children endure. Rachel Ehmke (2023) is an independent writer and previous managing editor of the Child Mind Institute who drafted the article “How Using Social Media Affects Teenagers”, published by the Child Mind Institute, where she explains the damaging impact that social media has on kids. Ehmke (2023) points out the main distinctions between interactions online and face to face. She outlines how the lack of emotion and expression through online engagements can cause confusion, and similar feelings to social anxiety. She also reports that children have a hard time handling the unrealistic portrayal of other individuals. Altogether, Ehmke (2023) insists that kids require exposure to direct communication without any barriers, otherwise they will not be properly prepared for serious, conversational scenarios later in life. In her writing, Ehmke describes the common tendencies of kids before social media was a thing. She says, “It may have looked like a lot of aimless hanging around, but what they were doing was experimenting, trying out skills, and succeeding and failing in tons of tiny real-time interactions that kids today are missing out on.” In correspondence to Ehmke’s (2023) pretension, I believe that there is only a limited amount of companionship that can be reached through online contact. The desire for real community has been diminished because of the fast-paced interactivity that smartphones allow.

Overall, this entire issue can only be prevented by having the individual determination to restore a generation that has become so immersed in the enthrallment of simulated satisfaction. There was one theme that stood out to me because I found it extremely difficult to invalidate. The implication of responsibility that comes with owning a phone was an area I considered

beneficial. Although I firmly believe that the result of a child having a smartphone is disastrous, this appears to me as an opportunity to practice self-regulatory skills. When I got my first phone, I was immediately captivated by the infinite possibilities that it held, and because I was so unfamiliar with them, I had trouble identifying the dangerous ones. I was not taught the correct way to use a smartphone, so I had no understanding on how to regulate myself, and as a result, I still find myself overindulging in media which causes me to get distracted and overwhelmed. The lasting impression that these devices have had on me from when I was younger is not something I want to gratify, but it has aided me in my understanding of the consequences that follow, and because of that, I have discovered a passion inside of me to raise awareness about this topic.

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