Children, Screens, and Staying Connected

A caregiver’s guide to everyday use and thoughtful device choices

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About This Publication

This research-informed guide offers general educational information and possibilities for reflection. Individual needs, circumstances, and responses vary. It does not promise outcomes or replace individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, or educational advice.

At a Glance

Central idea: Thoughtful screen decisions consider what a child wants, what they need, and what an experience or device offers. Caregivers can explore ways to support learning, enjoyment, and connection while considering sleep, movement, relationships, safety, and family resources. Features, limits, and shared responsibilities can reflect the child’s abilities and circumstances.

This guide considers developmental guidance, learning claims, physical comfort and sleep, screen use in everyday family life, choosing movies and games, exploring devices and services that meet communication needs, and caregivers’ ongoing responsibility to review devices, supervise their use, and respond to safety concerns.

A Starting Point That Fits Your Family

Screens are part of everyday life at work, school, and home. They can support learning, accessibility needs, contact across households, staying connected with friends, shared enjoyment, or a pause during a demanding day. Children notice how adults use screens, while work and family responsibilities often require caregivers to use phones, computers, or several devices at home—even after the usual workday. These demands can make boundaries complicated.

Decisions about children’s screen use bring additional challenges: strong opinions, changing guidance, persuasive marketing, and children who want what their

friends have. Understanding what different recommendations address may help caregivers consider what fits their children's needs and their family's circumstances.

Learn: Making Sense of the Guidance

Why the Recommendations Can Sound Different

Several national and international organizations offer recommendations about screen use, drawing on research about children's development, health, and well-being. Their guidance may address different ages, activities, or concerns. Understanding the purpose of a recommendation can help caregivers consider how it applies to a child's needs, abilities, and circumstances, including what the screen is being used for and what support is available.

The **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)** offers guidance that looks beyond a single time limit. Its 2026 guidance considers the child's experience in the context of daily life. Its five considerations are **Child, Content, Calm, Crowding Out, and Communication**: who the child is, what they encounter, how media relates to calming, what it displaces, and how families communicate. [1]

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** addresses movement, sedentary behavior, and sleep together. Its 2019 guidance recommends no screen time for infants and no sedentary screen time for one-year-olds; for ages two through four, no more than one hour daily, with less preferred. These age-specific limits are one part of the guidance; the content, context, and child's response also matter. [2]

When advice seems inconsistent, a useful question is: **What age, activity, and concern is this recommendation addressing?**

Development Changes the Experience

Age guidance reflects changes in learning, understanding stories, recognizing persuasion, and managing attention. A birthday alone does not establish readiness.

- **Infancy and early toddlerhood:** Responsive exchanges, movement, and direct exploration are central. Prerecorded media does not respond as a person does. Live video contact with a familiar adult is different, especially with a caregiver nearby.

- **Ages two to five:** Children may need help connecting screen stories with everyday life, understanding feelings, and stopping. Content, pacing, and adult availability matter alongside time.
- **School-age children:** Operating a device is different from understanding advertising, privacy, purchases, or unfamiliar contacts. These remain areas for adult guidance.
- **Preteens and teens:** Belonging and independence become increasingly important. Their perspectives belong in discussions of access, sleep, peer pressure, privacy, and supervision. [1, 3]

Temperament, individual abilities, sensory and communication needs, and life experiences also affect what fits. Support can change over time while remaining respectful of the child's age and dignity.

Learning Claims and "Interactive" Media

A label such as "educational," or a baby's sustained gaze, does not demonstrate learning. Studies of infant videos examined word learning and found that watching alone did not produce the vocabulary benefits suggested by the marketing. These findings give caregivers reason to look beyond promotional claims when choosing media for young children. [4]

"Interactive" also needs a closer look. A child can think deeply about a story without tapping a screen, or tap repeatedly with little meaningful choice. A game may involve problem-solving while the body remains seated. A video call may offer genuine social responsiveness. Thinking, movement, and relationship are separate considerations.

Connect: The Child's Experience and Family Life

Comfort, Movement, Sound, and Sleep

For computer use, roughly an arm's length, readable text, reduced glare, and a screen at or slightly below eye level are starting points for comfort. With handheld devices, caregivers can notice how close the screen is to the child's face and whether the child spends long periods looking down. Supported positioning, looking away, and changes of position deserve consideration; some children may need a different setup for comfortable, accessible use. Persistent pain or visual symptoms warrant professional attention. [5]

Seated viewing is generally sedentary even when mentally engaging. How much room does the day leave for movement and rest?

Sudden volume changes can startle or overwhelm, and hearing risk depends on loudness and duration. Low listening levels and breaks matter. Flashing images can trigger seizures in susceptible people; stop exposure if symptoms occur and follow individualized medical guidance. Rapidly changing content may be difficult for some children to process. The child's comfort, questions, and signs of overwhelm offer useful information about how the experience fits. [6, 7]

Screen use may delay sleep, introduce upsetting or exciting content, or prolong evening light exposure. The AAP recommends a screen-free hour before bedtime. Family arrangements must also preserve necessary communication, medical, and accessibility functions. Reducing screen use before bedtime may support sleep by leaving time to wind down and limiting stimulating content and evening light exposure. If sleep difficulties continue despite a screen-free hour before bedtime, other factors may also need attention, and a healthcare professional can help caregivers explore them. [1, 8]

Screen Use in Everyday Family Life

In-person interaction gives children opportunities to practice communication, share attention, explore, and experience someone responding to their feelings and interests. A caregiver can notice a gesture, expression, or change in tone and adjust what happens next. Everyday moments—talking, playing, preparing food, or sharing a book—can support language, learning, and emotional connection. Watching or playing on a screen together can also become a shared experience, but it offers a different combination of opportunities. When considering screen use, caregivers might ask what room remains for these everyday interactions.

During a long car ride or flight, a selected movie may be one way to pass time when children have limited room to move. A built-in screen or portable device can offer entertainment, while conversation, music, and other activities may also fit the situation. Caregivers might consider the content, sound level, viewing comfort, and how the child responds. Screens do not replace supervision, and a driver's attention must remain on the road.

When choosing a movie or program, it may help to consider how viewing will end. Could the car ride or another activity end before the story does? If so, a brief explanation beforehand—and, when possible, discussing another opportunity to finish—can give the child context. What happens when the program ends? Autoplay may introduce another video that a caregiver has not reviewed. Checking that setting and considering what comes next can be part of choosing the

experience. Even with preparation, a child may feel disappointed about stopping and need time, understanding, or support with the transition.

Choosing and Revisiting Movies and Games

Preview unfamiliar movies before sharing them with young children whenever possible. A caregiver's childhood favorite also merits a fresh look. Beyond a rating, considerations include frightening scenes, separation, death, humiliation, language, family values, sensory intensity, and story complexity. Detailed content reviews for families can help when a full preview is impractical. [9]

For games, trying the activity and playing alongside the child reveals more than a promotional description. Adults need to review advertising, purchases, player communication, and privacy as well as content. An online game can change through updates, new levels, player-created material, and unfamiliar participants. A game that seemed suitable at first may need another look as its content or features change. [10]

Repeated requests for a favorite movie can resemble requests for a favorite book. Familiarity may offer anticipation and opportunities to notice more. Research with a preschool television program found that repeated viewing supported children's understanding of that program. The value of repetition depends on the content and experience; shared reading and screen viewing offer different opportunities. Caregivers can consider whether repeated viewing leaves room for play, movement, conversation, and other experiences. [11]

Children can be reminded that they may stop watching a movie or playing a game if something feels uncomfortable, and ask an adult for help—even when siblings or friends want to continue. A choice suitable for an older sibling may not fit a younger child. Shared expectations with other caregivers can clarify these boundaries.

A child's response may emerge later as questions, worry, or difficulty settling. A possible invitation is, "Was there anything you kept thinking about?" Feelings can be taken seriously even when the story is pretend. Drawing, retelling, or play may interest some children; conversation need not become a test. [12]

Grow: Support for Decisions That Change Over Time

Considering a First Phone

A request for a phone may involve practical needs, friendships, and a wish for independence. Group conversations can be part of making plans and staying included in everyday exchanges. Understanding who a child wants to reach, and how, can help caregivers explore options that fit both the child and the family. [13]

In response to a child's request for a phone, a caregiver might begin: "I'd like to understand what appeals to you about having this phone. Who would you like to connect with, and what would you like to do? Let's talk about what you want, what you need, and which options might work for our family." If the child already has access to a phone, the conversation can begin with how it is working now.

Jonathan Haidt's The Anxious Generation highlights a useful distinction: a child can have a phone for communication without having a smartphone with broad internet access. He recommends basic phones with limited apps and no internet browser before high school, delaying smartphones until roughly age 14 and social media until 16. These are his proposed norms; professional recommendations differ, and age alone does not establish readiness. [17]

A shared home phone, basic personal phone, or calling watch may meet some communication needs. The reference guide near the end compares these and other options, including features, costs, support life, and device care. A useful starting question is: Which functions would meet this child's needs? What support would help the child use those functions safely? [13]

Adult Responsibility for Online Safety

When a child has access to a phone, their caregiver is responsible for supervising its use for health and safety and maintaining ongoing conversations about the child's experiences. Children should not be left to navigate unrestricted web access or contact with unknown people on their own. The level of supervision can evolve with the child's age, abilities, and demonstrated judgment, while caregiver involvement continues. The same applies to connected tablets and games.

Adult involvement includes knowing the apps and contacts, using child accounts and appropriate settings, approving downloads and purchases, and reviewing unnecessary camera, microphone, and location permissions. For young children, open chat and unknown contacts should be disabled or restricted to

caregiver-approved people. If features cannot be managed adequately, a different activity is needed. Settings need review as services change. Controls are one layer of protection, alongside adult involvement and conversations that welcome children's questions and concerns. [10, 14]

When several adults share care, clarity about who manages settings, approves contacts, and responds to concerns can help coordinate supervision.

Caregivers can explain how supervision works and why it matters. Younger children need adults available to see, hear, and respond; growing privacy and independence remain part of the conversation as children mature.

A profile, picture, voice, or claimed age does not prove identity. Someone may pretend to be another child; harmful behavior can also come from a known person. Requests for secrecy, personal information, pictures, private contact, gifts with conditions, or meetings require adult attention. Ongoing conversations and informal safety check-ins are part of the caregiver's responsibility. Adults can ask about enjoyable exchanges as well as anything confusing, uncomfortable, or difficult, without waiting for the child to raise a concern. Children need not decide whether someone is dangerous before discussing an experience or asking for help. [15]

Whether a concern emerges during a check-in or the child brings it up independently, a supportive response might be, "Thank you for talking with me about this. You are not in trouble for asking questions or telling me what happened." Listening calmly and explaining what will happen next can support continued openness. Stop unsafe contact and use appropriate blocking, reporting, and child-protection support. Do not ask a child to keep engaging to investigate. In the United States, suspected online child sexual exploitation can be reported to the NCMEC CyberTipline. Immediate danger requires emergency assistance. [16]

Observations and Considerations

What is working well? Enjoyable conversations, useful learning, transitions that go smoothly, and growing responsibility can offer starting points for reflection. What seems tiring or difficult? What do the child's perspective and daily patterns suggest about sleep, comfort, movement, and relationships? Adult habits and available support are part of the picture too.

Shared responsibility works best when everyone understands their part. Across devices, caregivers and children can discuss who handles charging when needed, careful use, storage, and reporting damage or problems. What can the child manage independently, and where are reminders or adult help needed? Who would arrange and pay for repairs or replacement? These understandings can

evolve with the child’s abilities and circumstances, while adults remain responsible for safety oversight and financial decisions.

Questions about screen use will evolve as technologies change. As children grow, their interests, needs, and circumstances will change too. Caregivers can return to these considerations over time, drawing on what they notice, what children share, and what support is available.

Persistent pain, hearing or vision concerns, significant distress, or disruption of daily life deserve professional attention. Safety concerns require prompt action.

Key Takeaway

Thoughtful screen decisions bring together reliable information, the child’s experience, and the realities of family life. Caregivers can consider both what an experience offers and what else needs room in the day.

Our goal is not to offer one right answer—it is to help you notice, reflect, respond to individual needs, and keep learning along the way.

Learn · Connect · Grow

Learn
Which guidance addresses your child’s age, activity, and needs?
Connect
What matters to the child, and what support would be useful to the adults?
Grow
What questions might inform your family’s next conversation?

Choosing a Communication Device: Reference Guide

Use this section when exploring a first device or reconsidering an existing one. The chart introduces the options; the questions that follow can help families compare their fit. Website links offer places to explore further.

Device Options

Options range from voice-only calling to broader digital access. Features vary by model and service; more features do not necessarily mean a better fit.

Device or option	What it can offer	What to check
Shared home phone	Voice calls through traditional or internet-based service, without giving the child web access. [19, 20]	Approved contacts, emergency calling, and where it works.
Basic cell phone	Portable calls and texts; some offer cameras, group texts, or location tools.	Whether the model includes a browser or apps; a flip design does not establish limits.
Children’s calling watch	Calls, messages, and often location tools with approved contacts. [21]	Text-entry options, group messaging, battery life, and coverage.
Phone with restricted features	Calls, texts, and selected tools; may include location sharing. [21]	Built-in limits versus caregiver settings; features that can be added.
General-purpose cellular smartwatch	Calls, messages, and location sharing without the child owning a smartphone, on supported setups. [22]	Compatible caregiver phone and accounts; broader app access.
Shared tablet or computer	Voice/video calls and messaging through selected services, often over Wi-Fi. [13]	Compatible accounts and contacts; access to other apps and the browser.
Standard smartphone	Calling, messaging, browsing, and many apps; caregiver controls can restrict access. [13]	What the device can do, which features the child can access, and what adults must maintain.

Comparing Features, Costs, and Care

These considerations may help organize a conversation:

- **Connection:** Who does the child need to reach, and when? Would calls and texts meet the need? Ordinary group texts and app-based chats can require different capabilities; can the option being considered support the conversations that matter to the child?
- **Features and support:** Which limits are built into the device, and which depend on settings adults must maintain? What can the child manage, and where is adult help needed? Even without web browsing, messages, shared content, and contacts need attention.
- **Cost and support life:** What is the total cost of purchase, activation, and ongoing service or subscriptions? How long will software and security updates continue, and is that period measured from release or purchase? Will batteries, parts, and repairs remain available? Does the caregiver app require a newer adult device? An older model may have fewer supported years remaining, even when bought new. [23] Used or refurbished devices may lower the purchase price. “Used” does not necessarily mean inspected or repaired; refurbishment standards vary. Check battery condition, remaining update support, carrier compatibility, removal of prior-owner account locks, return terms, and warranty coverage. Consider the total cost, including possible repairs or replacement.
- **Location sharing and finding a missing device:** Can a caregiver see the current or last known location, or make the device sound when it is nearby—even if set to silent? Check required setup, subscriptions, and what works without power or a connection. Location may be approximate or outdated and identifies the device, which may not be with the child. These tools can help as children learn to care for their belongings. [21, 24]
- **Carrying the phone:** Where will it be kept during travel, school, or activities? What would help the child keep track of it, and whom would they tell if it went missing? If it is lost or stolen, an adult can handle service and account protection. Theft is not proof of carelessness. How would essential communication continue while the phone is unavailable?

Explore the Options

These links are starting points, not endorsements. Manufacturer pages describe their own products; availability, features, and service terms change. Confirm local carrier compatibility before purchasing.

- **Home phones:** Landline Kids setup guide, a community resource covering several services.

- **Basic cell phones:** HMD feature phones, a manufacturer catalog; regional availability varies.
- **Children's calling watches and restricted phones:** Gabb, a device and service provider.
- **General-purpose cellular watches:** Apple Watch For Your Kids, manufacturer information about supported setups.
- **Shared tablets or computers:** AAP's first-phone guidance describes shared-device alternatives; Apple iPad is one manufacturer example of a tablet.
- **Standard smartphones:** Google Pixel phones, one manufacturer's comparison of models.
- **Used devices:** Swappa, a marketplace for phones, tablets, watches, and computers. Review the individual listing and seller's terms.

Research Foundations and Further Reading

These optional resources offer different kinds of support:

- **Understanding media guidance:** AAP's 5 C's of Media Guidance.
- **Movement, sedentary time, and sleep in young children:** WHO guidance for children under five.
- **Choosing and setting up games:** eSafety's guide for caregivers.
- **Thinking about a first phone:** AAP's Your Child's First Phone: Are They Ready?.
- **One author's perspective:** Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness (2024). Related author resources.

The optional Research Source Note at the end of this PDF contains the detailed references corresponding to the numbered citations. Its link opens within this document.

A Final Reminder

Seek qualified guidance when individualized support is needed.

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Research Source Note

Numbers below correspond to citations in the brief. These sources provide background and allow readers to examine the evidence; they do not establish identical outcomes for every child.

Guidance, individual studies, author proposals, and policy examples serve different purposes. Conversation examples are possibilities, not tested interventions. Sources checked October 2, 2026.

1. American Academy of Pediatrics / Munzer, T. (2026). Helping Kids Thrive in a Digital World: AAP Policy Explained; American Academy of Pediatrics. Kids & Screen Time: How to Use the 5 C's of Media Guidance
2. World Health Organization (2019). To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more
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4. DeLoache, J. S., et al. (2010). Do Babies Learn From Baby Media?; Richert, R. A., Robb, M. B., Fender, J. G., & Wartella, E. (2010). Word learning from baby videos
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8. Pickard, H., et al. (2024). Toddler Screen Use Before Bed and Its Effect on Sleep and Attention: A Randomized Clinical Trial
9. American Academy of Pediatrics. Age-Appropriate Media: Can You Trust Parental Guidance Ratings?
10. eSafety Commissioner. How to set up and choose games safely
11. Crawley, A. M., Anderson, D. R., Wilder, A., Williams, M., & Santomero, A. (1999). Effects of repeated exposures to a single episode of the television program Blue's Clues on the viewing behaviors and comprehension of preschool children

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13. American Academy of Pediatrics. Your Child's First Phone: Are They Ready?
14. eSafety Commissioner. Parental controls
15. NSPCC Childline. Grooming and online grooming
16. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. CyberTipline
17. Haidt, J. (2024). The Anxious Generation. Author's four proposed norms. Optional caregiver resource.
18. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024). Social Media and Adolescent Health. Evidence review of benefits, harms, and causal uncertainty.
19. Landline Kids. About the initiative. A community example of shared home phones for children's communication.
20. Landline Kids. Start a Landline. Home-phone service options and setup considerations.
21. Gabb. Phones and watches; Tips for Using Gabb Devices; How GPS Location Works. Manufacturer examples of restricted communication and device-location features; availability varies by model and plan.
22. Apple Support. Set up Apple Watch for a family member. Calling, messaging, location sharing, and setup requirements.
23. Google Pixel Help. Learn when you will get software updates. An example of support periods measured from initial model availability.
24. Apple. Find My. Device-location and finding features.