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A PARENT'S GUIDE

TO

Smartphones

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When to allow children a smartphone has become among the most pivotal of parental decisions in the decade since Apple Inc.'s iPhone remade daily habits.

—Betsy Morris, *The Wall Street Journal*

There Are Trends,
and There Are Cultural Shifts

Smartphones aren't just a fad like the latest TV show or social media app. [One journalist believes](#) that smartphones have, in fact, "revolutionized society." While extreme, this statement might not be an exaggeration.

The phone used to be a device whose main purpose was communication. Now, smartphones help us do just about anything: shop, socialize, read a book, do our devotions, take care of finances, date, and maintain our health, to name a few. They are shaping the world in unexpected ways. It's easy to react out of fear of the challenges that smartphones present. It's also easy simply to mimic the habits of those around us. Neither of those responses is healthy. Instead, we need to recognize the legitimate benefits and dangers of the smartphone and assess those within a biblical framework while teaching our "digital natives" to do the same.

── What's a digital native?

Your child, if he/she was born after 1998! Modern teenagers have grown up in a world, not in which they had to adapt to technology, but in which it was assumed. They've never known a world without it. Because of this, they're considered "digital natives" (as opposed to us oldies, who are "digital immigrants," i.e. we had to learn to use it later in our lives). Because smartphones are so ingrained in every part of their lives, it's normal for digital natives to think of their devices as extensions of themselves.

[As of June 2017](#), over 75% of adults in the U.S. own a smartphone, and a growing number of people rely on smartphones for accessing the internet. In 2015, [Pew Research Center](#) did a study on American teenagers' use of technology and social media, defining teens as anyone aged 13-17. 88% of U.S. teens use either smartphones or cell phones, and 73% own smartphones. 91% of teens use smartphones for accessing the internet, and a majority of teenagers go online more than once a day.

── Smartphones aren't all bad, right?

It's fair to say that the smartphone is an incredible tool for making our lives better. For example, the iPhone allows you to share your location with another iOS device. We know of a father whose daughter was supposed to meet up with him, but was running late. Because she had shared her location, he saw that she was on one of the roads that was on the way to him, but that she was stationary. He decided to go to her to find out what was going on and ended up discovering that she had been in a serious car accident. Smartphones made it possible for him to get help in an emergency faster than he could have otherwise.

Smartphones dramatically improve the ease with which we can do a lot of tasks. Hotspotting (using a phone as a source of wi-fi) allows people to work or attend online classes anywhere, even while they're in transit. Mobile apps enable people to exchange money without needing cash or a checkbook. Friends and relatives can easily communicate with each other across the the world. We can take pictures of important events without having to remember a camera. We can entertain and educate ourselves anywhere through music, videos, or podcasts. If we end up

stranded somewhere, we can use our phones to order transportation. Really, the activities the smartphone makes easier or more convenient are too extensive to continue listing.

Discussion Questions:
- What are the benefits of the smartphone? What do you think is its greatest advantage?
- What do you enjoy most about smartphones? What do you think people in general enjoy most about smartphones?
- How have you seen people use smartphones for good?

How exactly do smartphones complicate our lives?

The main benefits of smartphones have to do with the ease with which we can **accomplish tasks**. But we start to run into trouble when we use our devices as the primary way we **relate to people**. When our tools become the main way we conduct our relationships, we expect our relationships to have the same instant gratification that our tasks do. The only problem with this mentality is that people aren't machines.

People or Things?
Probably the most obvious concern people point out about smartphones is how much we tend to rely on them to the neglect of our relationships. Most of us have likely experienced friends or family members being distracted by their phones when we're having a conversation with them. It's not unusual to go out to eat and see families where the parents and children are all on some kind of device. Because we *can* be constantly connected, we feel like we *should* be. We are afraid of missing something if we put our machines away, even for a few minutes.

But when we prioritize our devices over people, we remain relationally immature. We communicate to those around us that we care more about what's on our phones than we do about them. A few years ago, Inc. published an article titled "[Why Successful People Never Bring Smartphones Into Meetings](#)." Whether in meetings or in social interactions, continually looking at our phones communicates disrespect, disinterest, self-centeredness, and an inability to pay attention for very long. Even in this digitally motivated, information-oriented world, people still perceive personal contact as highly valuable, perhaps even more than in the past because it is becoming increasingly rare.

Discussion Questions
- Does your phone make it hard for you to pay attention when people are talking to you? Why is that?
- Do you feel like you need to be checking your phone all the time? What are you afraid is going to happen if you don't? Are those fears realistic?
- Have you ever been talking to someone who kept checking his or her phone? How did that make you feel? How would you want to be treated in that situation?
- What habits can you build that will help you show people that you value them more than you value your phone?

Sleep Deprivation and Mental Health
There is evidence indicating that increased screen time might contribute to mental health problems and depression. [Psychology professor Jean M. Twenge](#) noticed in her studies that not only has smartphone use recently increased among teenagers, but teen depression and suicide have as well.

[Some people are also theorizing](#) that teenage smartphone use is contributing to a decrease in

the risky behavior commonly associated with teenage rebellion. For example, as smartphone use has increased, teen drug use has declined. Teens overall are less likely to want the independence that accompanies driving. Why? Because they are more content to conduct their social lives at home through their phones, instead of going out and partying.

It's poor reasoning to observe trends and assume that one is causing another. But it is possible that there are some connections between teen smartphone use, a decrease in risky behavior, and increased loneliness. At the very least, it's fair to conclude that "new media screen time should be understood as an important modern risk factor for depression and suicide."

Studies have also linked smartphones to an increased lack of sleep among teens. Screens and LED lighting can make the brain think it's still daytime and alter its sleep-inducing chemistry. Research indicates that using a device right before trying to fall asleep is the worst possible time to use it. Such a habit is particularly detrimental to teens, who are in a phase of life when they need a lot of rest. Also, more time with screens means less time spent outside on physical activity, which can help to make people feel sleepy at night. If smartphones are indeed making depression worse, that itself will affect how well teens are sleeping and vice versa.

Discussion Questions
- Have you noticed that using your phone (or any device, including the TV) right before bedtime makes it harder for you to sleep?
- Has spending time on your phone caused you to spend less time with people or God or on your own self-development?
- Do you ever turn to your phone to avoid loneliness, awkward situations, or conflict with others?

Distracted Driving
The need to always be connected is contributing to teens being more dangerous drivers. Of course, it's dangerous for anyone to check his smartphone while driving. One study found that 70% of people admitted to doing just that. But teens in particular have expressed a need to check their text messages while driving because of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found in 2015 that distracted driving contributes to 60% of moderate-to-severe teen accidents.

Discussion Questions
- Do you check your phone while you're driving? Are there any good reasons for checking your phone while driving?
- Do you think you need to change your habits in this area?

Pornography
Pornography is incredibly easy to access online, and smartphones provide the perfect vehicle for stealthy viewing. PornHub, one of the biggest porn websites online, tracks the means by which people are watching porn on its site. The website has found that mobile porn viewing is on the rise. In the year 2016, 61% of users who visited the site did so on mobile phones. A study done by researchers in the U.K. found that by age 15, 65% of children were likely to have seen pornography online and were as likely to see by it accident (such as through pop-ups) as they were to view it because of deliberately searching for it.

Social media makes it pretty easy to "stumble on" porn. The content in featured Snapchat stories, for example, tends to be sexual in nature. Even on Instagram and Twitter where users can report inappropriate content, people are fairly vulnerable to viewing something they don't want to see. On Instagram, anyone can tag any type of image with any kind of hashtag. So you could search for something as innocuous as #california and see a sexually graphic image. On Twitter, all that has to happen is for an explicit account to follow you. These kinds of accounts

can be reported and blocked, but it's not that hard to encounter them if no one has caught them yet.

Discussion Questions
- Have you ever come across sexually graphic content online, particularly while using your smartphone? If so, how can you avoid that happening again?
- How can you help yourself stay accountable for your actions if you see this type of content in the future?

Additional Resource
If you'd like more help dealing with the appeal, effects, and dangers of pornography, check out our virtual conversation kit. With an expert interview, a whiteboard training, and a Virtual Presentation specifically for teens, this digital resource will help you in your quest to disciple your kids to avoid the lies, emptiness, and devastation the porn brings. You can also try the content absolutely free for 15 days!

Impact on the Church
Whatever cultural changes occur will inevitably affect the Church, and this principle holds true with smartphones. Whereas bringing a smartphone into a church service used to be stigmatized, now the practice is normal.

Smartphones can benefit the church, just as they can benefit society. Churches can connect and communicate within their congregations more easily because of smartphones. The Bible app makes it possible to read the Bible wherever your smartphone has internet access. But a downside of this ability, as one religious leader observes, is that it's easier for people to use the Bible as though it were something more like Wikipedia than holy Scripture. It also makes it easier for people to pick and choose what they believe, instead of wrestling with everything the Bible says. There's also the possibility that while reading the Bible on our phones, we'll be distracted by notifications from other apps (can we get an amen?!).

Our tendency to be distracted means that it's hard for us to focus on pursuing God and practice the spiritual disciplines. The fact that information is abundant, fragmented, and not always credible makes it more difficult for us to conceive of our lives as part of a bigger story. And again, our relationships suffer. It's easier to hide behind technology instead of experiencing an authentic community and discipleship.

Discussion Questions
- Do you think your phone helps or inhibits your relationships with God and other Christians?
- Assess your current habits in the areas of prayer, Bible study, being involved with church, fasting, etc. What are ways you can grow in these areas?

━━━ So is there hope?!

The challenges we've mentioned above all relate to our desire for life to be quick and convenient. We want to accomplish tasks more easily—and that's great, so long as we have a healthy work-rest balance. But we also want easy validation, easy community, easy sexual gratification, and easy spirituality. Life, lived in this way, hurts us and those around us and is ultimately unsustainable. But rather than running away from the smartphone as if it were the devil himself, we have to learn to put boundaries around it and let it do what it does best, rather than take over our lives. Then we also need to disciple our children into in a healthy relationship with their technology.

—— How should we view smartphones?

[Sherry Turkle](#), author and founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, once said, "Technology is not good or bad. It's powerful, and it's complicated." And that's how we tend to think of smartphones. They're not inherently bad or good; they're merely a neutral tool that can be used for either purpose. But is that actually true?

In Genesis 1, God commanded the man and woman to cultivate the earth. Smartphones, like all tools we have created, are just one way humans have cultivated the earth. That cultivation is part of the way God designed the earth to flourish, so any act of cultivation is part of that "very good" order He created. But, as we all know, this very good world has been subjected to the curse since Adam and Eve choose to rebel against God's very good commands. Thus, cultivation—and therefore all technology—is affected by the curse. So rather than being neutral, smartphones are very good, but cursed.

Recognize that when we misuse our phones, we are trying to fulfill desires that God gave us, just in wrong ways. God made us to worship Him, to seek His approval and validation. He made us for community. He wants us to live for something beyond ourselves. He made us to create and to participate in culture. Let's allow that knowledge to help us be compassionate as we try to disciple our teens meet those desires in healthier and more biblical ways.

—— How should that inform how I parent my kids?

We know people who have decided to raise their children in device-free households. While this choice might seem drastic, we think it's a valid decision for families to make and has a lot of positive aspects to it. But most families will instead try to figure out how to use smartphones wisely. Here are some suggestions for how you can foster good smartphone habits in your families.

Model Good Smartphone Behavior
Anything we want to teach our kids we need to live out ourselves. It might hurt a little, but let's first take an honest look at our own phone use. Do we have our phones with us constantly? Do we check it all the time, no matter where we are or who is around us? Our kids are more likely to adopt the behavior that we model for them over what we explicitly teach them. We need to behave how we want them to behave.

When to Get Your Child a Smartphone
There is no single, black-and-white answer to the question of when to get a child a smartphone. Besides considering the following list of factors, you'll also need to take into account what you know about the personalities and integrity of your children.

> **Legal Issues**
> There is an argument for not letting children have smartphones before age 13 because it's illegal for sites to collect information from kids younger than that without parental consent. In 1999, the Federal Trade Commission enacted the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#) (COPPA), which was updated effective July 2013. The law states that parental consent is required in order for children under age 13 to provide any personal information to pretty much any online service they might find appealing. Find out more about the COPPA law, including guidance for parents and how to report violators, at this [FTC link](#) and at [OnguardOnline.com](#).

Other Considerations

The website Protect Young Minds has an excellent resource at the end of the article "5 Reasons Why Social Media Is Not Smart for Middle School Kids." You can enter your name and email address for a free download of a PDF titled, "Is My Child Ready for a Smartphone?" This resource has 10 questions for you to ask to determine the answer.

Many parents are motivated to give their children phones so they can track their locations or contact them in an emergency. If these are your reasons for potentially getting your child a phone, consider whether a cell phone that is not a smartphone could meet those needs (or perhaps a smartwatch like these for younger kids).

You should also evaluate your child's current attitude toward your rules. All children will cross parental boundaries at some point. But if your kids already don't follow your rules without a smartphone, there's no reason to expect they'll follow them with a smartphone. And there's no reason to reward bad behavior, either.

Expect that both you and your kids will feel social pressure to get a phone. They will have friends who have smartphones at young ages, and you might feel like you're being a bad parent for withholding one. It is difficult to deal with this tension, and it's valuable to empathize with their desire to fit in like this dad did (paywall). But remember that what matters most is honoring God, having wisdom, protecting them appropriately, and discipling your children well.

How do I prepare my child for getting a smart-phone?

Talk About Its Intended Use

Make sure that from the get-go you establish rules for the phone's use, as well as who is responsible for it. Some questions to ask your kids are:

- Why do you want a phone?
- Who's going to pay for the phone (the contract, accessories, applications, online purchases, etc.)?
- What are you going to do if your phone gets lost or breaks?
- What rules does your school have about phones? Are you willing to follow them?
- What should I be most/least worried about when it comes to your smartphone use?
- How are you going to keep yourself accountable for using your phone appropriately?

Protect Young Minds recommends that you make sure your kids have a good understanding of the dangers of sharing information online, of pornography, and of sexting. Ask questions such as:

- Are you ok with me seeing your texts, and if not, why not? (Note: if you're paying for the phone, you should have the freedom to check it at any time.)
- What kind of information should you never share online?
- What are the "red flags" that should warn you against communicating with someone online?
- What's ok to send in a text message, and what's not? (Think beyond sexting here. What types of conversations should never happen over text message, even if they're ok face-to-face?)
- When does texting become sexting?
- Besides the legal issues, what could happen as a result of sexting or cyberbullying?

- How would you respond if you received a sext?
- What are the best ways to protect yourself online?

To help them use the phone as a tool, rather than a substitute for real relationships, you could ask:
- How important is your online image to you? What would be signs that you're too focused on your online image?
- How could your phone interfere with your friendships? How could it interfere with your family relationships? Are there any ways it could help those relationships?
- How could your phone interfere with or help your relationship with God?
- How might your phone get in the way of you learning new skills or hobbies?
- How are you going to steward your phone well and not let it dominate your life?

Communicate Your Expectations from Day One
Consider having a contract with your teens about how you expect them to use their smartphones. Here are some suggestions for what you might, or might not, include in the contract:

- Limit phone use at first. As they get older, allow them to earn more and more freedom by proving they can steward their phone well. Set a goal as to when your teens will have full use of their phones, perhaps by their senior years of high school.
- Don't demand to know all of your teens' usernames and passwords. It's easy to change these, and the request will only bring tension to your relationships.
- Have a family policy to charge phones outside your bedrooms, both for health reasons and for accountability.
- If you are paying for your teenagers' phones, randomly check them to help keep your kids accountable. If you are not paying for the phones, have other, specific guidelines in place for accountability.
- Keeping in mind that filters have their limits, it's a good idea to have some filters for blocking unwanted content and controlling browsing abilities. Some to consider are [Covenant Eyes](#) and [OpenDNS](#). See our list of resources below for further suggestions.

Ok, my teen has had a smartphone for awhile, and I didn't do some or all of the things above. Now what?

Start Smartphone Discipleship
Besides praying for them, having ongoing conversations with your teens is probably the most important step you can take. If you get to know them and invest in them spiritually, you will have a better understanding of where their hearts are and a better ability to help them make good decisions. Your teens really do want a close relationship with you, even if they act like they don't.

Be aware that you have a valuable resource if your teens have older, mature siblings. Siblings will often tell each other information they wouldn't share with their parents and will often listen to each other over their parents. We're not advising you to try to pry for information your children have shared with each other in confidence. Rather, recognize the influence older siblings have over younger ones, and do what you can to encourage this influence in a positive way.

Make Prayer Your First Priority

God knows everything that is going on with your kids, and He is faithful and powerful. There are numerous places where the Bible encourages us to seek the Lord in prayer. You cannot control what your kids do or keep all the evils in the world away from them. But you can bring your worries and concerns to the Father, and He will listen. Raising your children is a spiritual battle, and the Lord is on your side.

A Few Other Habits You Could Cultivate

- Establish regular "screen free" time as a family. Make a habit of doing activities together that you all enjoy, and leave the phones at home or in another room.
- Join your teens online. Is there a messaging app they really like using? Communicate with them on it. Sit next to them while they scroll through their social media silliness and photos. Even when they laugh at your attempts to be hip, they'll appreciate the effort.
- Brainstorm ways to use smartphones for good. You could set a goal to text at least one person per day with an encouraging message or do a smartphone scavenger hunt. Be creative and have fun.

Don't Be Shocked If They Push Your Boundaries

If you find out your son or daughter has used a smartphone inappropriately, don't panic. Control your temper, and ask open and honest questions. Do administer consequences, but also use the experience as a teaching moment. We know a mom and dad who did this really well. They found out their teenage son was secretly dating a girl. He had been texting her on his smartphone and bad-mouthing his family. The parents discovered his secret when they randomly checked his phone. They then sat down with him and read the entire history of the conversation aloud. They used the discovery, among other things, as an opportunity to show their son how unhealthy his relationship was and what a healthy relationship would look like.

—— Final thoughts

Teens today need the same assurances as past generations of teens. They need unconditional love and support from their parents. They need healthy friendships. They need to know that their worth comes from God, who wants them to flourish.

Smartphones can help people to connect and can be a wonderful tool for learning and growth. But they are a poor substitute for coping skills, emotional intelligence, worship, self-care, and a good night's sleep. Use the smartphone to grow your relationships with your teens and to faithfully guide them to godly maturity.

Note: For specifics on setting up parental controls on Android and iOS devices, as well as dealing with teens who keep finding ways around parental controls, we highly recommend our "Parent's Guide to iOS" and "Parent's Guide to Android."

—— Additional resources

(NOTE: These links are provided as examples of many available helps for parents. We do not endorse any particular resource and encourage parents to research others, as needed.)

Common Sense Media

"Children and Media: Tips for Parents," American Academy of Pediatrics, AAP.org

"Teens and Distracted Driving": StateFarm.com

Family Online Safety Institute: FOSI.org

"Top 10 Best Smartphones for Teens in 2017": Review168.com

"8 Best Phones to Buy for Kids" from Lifewire.com, July 2017

"5 Best Phones for Kids": DigitalTrends.com, June 2017

"2017 Ultimate Guide to Apps for Parents": NetSanity.net

"50 Monitoring Apps for Parents of Teens": TCCRocks.com

The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place by Andy Crouch, 2017

12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You, by Tony Reinke, foreword by John Piper

52 Ways to Connect With Your Smartphone-Obsessed Kid by Jonathan McKee, 2016

The Teen's Guide to Social Media & Mobile Devices: 21 Tips to Wise Posting in an Insecure World by Jonathan McKee, 2017

Teen Cell Phone Contract, a sample smartphone agreement between parents and their kids in PDF format, JoshShipp.com

"Analysis: Teens are sleeping less. Why? Smartphones": PBS.org

Bark, an app for tracking texting and social media activity

Circle, a device that helps put healthy boundaries on device activity

Forcefield, an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

Qustodio, an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

Screentime, an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

Connect Safely website

Protect Young Minds website

Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey

The Online Mom website

U Know Kids website

We're creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.