



FREDERICTON
Christian Academy
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WHEN SHOULD YOU GIVE YOUR CHILD A SMARTPHONE?

Your kids called and the answer is: Now. The general feeling is you should have given them one last year, but they are willing to forgive this offense if you act immediately and right this wrong. They would also like you to relax a little about things like cleaning their room, getting their homework done on time, and they'll let you know when they're tired and ready for bed. Now you're both on the same page! Unfortunately, that is somewhere you and your child might never arrive: the same page about when they're ready for a smartphone. However, as is the case with many things in parenting, we can still do what is best for our children, even without their complete, or sometimes even partial, buy-in. We know there is a lot of information out there when it comes to kids and smartphone use, and we don't want to just reiterate commonly discussed concerns and add to the noise. It's tempting to talk about the downsides of kids' being connected with their friends 24/7, the fact that most bullying happens online, or the statistic that the average age to view pornography for the first time is lower than the average age of a first kiss, but we are going to focus on the experiences smartphones block rather than the risks they pose.

Smartphones Raise the Bar for Experiencing Pleasure

In parenting, we have to choose our battles, and when we decide a battle we are fighting is not actually that important to our overall goal, we concede it is perhaps "not the hill to die on." After reading about the impact of smartphones on the brain's reward system, however, you might consider "delaying the smartphone" the hill to die on.

The endless, and effortless, entertainment smartphones provide actually rewire our brains to be less sensitive to pleasure, and more sensitive to pain. In *Dopamine Nation*, psychiatrist Dr. Anna Lemke explains the neuroscience behind the addictive nature of smartphones, and helps us understand why prolonged exposure leaves us unsatisfied and unhappy, but somehow still wanting more. When we engage in highly pleasurable experiences, dopamine, the neurotransmitter that acts on the reward pathways in our brain, delivers the "feel good" sensation that leaves us wanting more of whatever we just did to get that feeling. While experiencing pleasure is of course enjoyable to us, the brain prefers a more

balanced state: the mid-point between pleasure and pain, which can be thought of as a neutral baseline. To get back to this neutral state, neuroadaptation occurs. This is an automatic response where the brain “tips to pain”, and you consequently feel dissatisfied and unhappy. Over a period of time, a sort of recalibration occurs, which means a greater amount of the pleasurable experience is required to release the same amount of dopamine. The bar for experiencing pleasure has been raised. Anna Lemke explains this in Chapter 3: “With prolonged and repeated exposure to pleasurable stimuli, our capacity to tolerate pain decreases, and our threshold for experiencing pleasure increases... By raising our neural set point with repeated pleasures, we become endless strivers, never satisfied with what we have, always looking for more... The net effect is that we now need more reward to feel pleasure, and less injury to feel pain.” In a *Common Sense Media* report from 2023, one grade 11 student described this phenomenon: “[On TikTok] I would find myself skipping videos that were over 30 seconds because I couldn’t [sustain attention for that long]... I just wanted to keep on scrolling, keep on scrolling.” Engaging in the activity that used to bring enjoyment no longer satisfied the desire, and she was kept in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. We all know what it feels like to spend time scrolling on social media, and look up from our phones feeling worse than before we started.

Kids and teens who spend too much time on addictive apps – and they *are* designed to be addictive even in very small doses – are training their brains to need more stimulation in order to be content. There are also important spillover effects to other areas of life, as these brains are more vulnerable to other addictions in the future. Jonathan Haidt makes the distinction between fast-dopamine, and slow-dopamine: Fast-dopamine requires very little effort, and the reward is instantaneous, where slow-dopamine is earned after sustained effort, and often the result of delayed gratification. We want our kids to experience the deep satisfaction that comes from slow-dopamine, to enjoy the simple pleasures that life has to offer, and find contentment in enough being, well, enough. Freya India is a Gen Z writer who

grew up with social media and now writes about how it has impacted her generation. In her essay “A Time We Never Knew”, she writes, “I am grieving something I never knew. I am grieving that giddy excitement over waiting for and playing a new vinyl for the first time, when now we instantly stream songs on YouTube, use Spotify with no waiting, and skip impatiently through new albums. I am grieving the anticipation of going to the movies, when all I’ve ever known is Netflix on demand and spoilers, and struggling to sit through a[n] entire film. I am grieving simple joys—reading a magazine; playing a board game; hitting a swing-ball for hours—where now even split-screen TikToks, where two videos play at the same time, don’t satisfy our insatiable, miserable need to be entertained.” As much as possible, let’s avoid having our children grieve this loss as well.

We Must Protect Boredom

For many generations of parents, providing “enough” (enough food, clothing, shelter, and presents under the Christmas tree) was the greatest struggle. For many parents today, the challenge is the opposite: how to protect against too much. Consider the endless options for on-the-go and pre-packaged entertainment that children have today compared to even twenty years ago. Without much effort, their minds can be stimulated all day. YouTube while waiting at the doctor’s office, vehicles with entertainment systems to replace looking out the window, and a little social media scrolling while waiting to be picked up from practice. While this constant entertainment might seem harmless and even help pass the time, it can prevent the brain from getting the downtime it needs. Our brains have a “default mode network” that is only activated when the mind attunes to internal stimuli, such as daydreaming or just letting the mind wander, rather than the outside world. In this mode, we sift through thoughts and experiences, and draw conclusions about the world around us and our place in it. In her Ted Talk *How Boredom can Lead to Your Most Brilliant Ideas*, Manoush Zomorodi explains that the brain engages in “autobiographical planning” in this mode, where it contemplates problems, generates stories about self, sets goals, and figures out the steps

to take to achieve those goals. This mind-wandering is incredibly important in order for kids to grow and mature. Maturity and wisdom are not the automatic results of life experience. A new perspective, a deeper understanding or sense of knowing: these are gifts gleaned from reflecting, considering, and making meaning from experiences. It is a gift to our children to let them be bored. Your children may have a funny way of thanking you for this gift: their lamenting over a lack of things to do, and the ever popular and succinct “I’m bored”, will let you know you are on the right track.

But...You Didn't Answer The Question

Ultimately, the question about when you should get your child a smartphone is, of course, one only you can answer. If pressed to give a more specific and less political answer, based on the work by Jonathan Haidt and other researchers, we recommend delaying until **at least** the end of middle school and social media until at least 16. Of course, smartphone use is something kids will have to learn to navigate and manage on their own, but it seems wise to let their prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain involved in impulse control, predicting consequences of choices, and other executive functioning skills) develop for as long as possible before giving them that responsibility. Some parents may reason that, well, they will eventually need to manage it on their own, so better to begin the training period earlier, but this isn't consistent with the reasoning we apply to many privileges in life. Consider driving: kids assume the responsibility when it's deemed age appropriate, and we don't let them behind the wheel when they're 10 because, well, it's a skill they will eventually need. As a final consideration, Jonathan Haidt recommends giving your child a smartphone when you are ready for it to become the center of his or her life.

What Can You Do?

Being able to get in touch with your child is an undeniable convenience phones provide, but

there are ways to accomplish this without the unnecessary extras that smartphones offer. Here we will resort to bullet points as our attention spans (writer included) are waning:

- Partner up with parents in your child's friend group to delay the smartphone together. The number one reason kids want a phone is because they have FOMO. If no one in their friend group has one, you will find their desire for one reduced and their acceptance of your decision increased. Also, kids can confuse 3 out of 24 kids with “everyone” in their class having a phone, so question this math and investigate behind the scenes.
- Consider watches such as the Garmin Bounce that allow you to communicate with your child without the smartphone capabilities. These watches are \$200, and can be added to your phone plan for about \$15 a month. The GPS tracking option is a nice feature for allowing them to roam far and wide with peace of mind.
- Consider a “dumb phone” that has talk and text capabilities, but not much else. Parents who have gone this route have reported positive findings, such as the phone's being so unimportant to their child that they often have no idea where it is. Long live childhood!

If you would like to read more about this topic, we have copies of *The Anxious Generation* available for loan from the main office. Stay tuned for a follow up article about how to manage smartphones once you decide your child is ready for one.

Philippians 4: 8-9

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.