

Help Guide: Parenting In the Digital Age¹

Articulate WHY

Start by articulating a “why” for your approach to technology. Why informs how. A “Why” enables you to (a) make good decisions and (b) explain them to your children – which is crucial for helping them move from following rules to making the approach their own. For consideration:

1. **Intentional:** we want to act based on thoughtful decisions, rather than impulse.
2. **Interior freedom:** we avoid addiction to technology to be intentional and present in the moment.
3. **Social skills and empathy:** these are crucial to our happiness and developed through in-person conversation and socializing.
4. **Our devices are tools:** to be used as such, not entertainment devices.
5. **Entertainment is legitimate:** when healthy, limited and timely. Seeking it constantly significantly retards maturity.
6. **We protect our heart:** so that we can truly love (our spouse, children, friends and God). Sexually explicit images and messages can destroy our heart.
7. **I decide because I love you, and I am responsible for you.**
8. **A thoughtful approach is important:** technology is addictive and often harmful, so we (parents too) follow a thoughtful approach.
9. **Helpful not controlling:** this approach does not imply a lack of trust or a desire to control, rather it acknowledges both the use and allure of technology and provides guidelines that help you (and us) develop.
10. **We maintain open lines of communication:** we explain our decisions and welcome our children to talk to us about anything – if they wish – without fearing our judgement.

¹ Compiled by Rob Dunikowski (lawyer and father) and Niall Fagan (Headmaster, Northridge Preparatory School) with help of many others.

Articulate WHEN

When - and if - you provide a smartphone to your child is a distinct decision from when (if) you permit access to social media. Consider access to the phone in stages. For consideration:

1. When can you get a smartphone? When you are ready.

- a. A smartphone is a tool. You can have one when you are ready to use it as such.
- b. Using a smartphone well requires a high level of maturity and self-control. Signs you have reached this maturity are:
 - i. Material order: in your room, bed, clothing, book-bag, etc.
 - ii. Manage schedule: Do you procrastinate or are you diligent in doing what you ought? (wake up on time, ability to focus, homework well done, test prep planned and done in advance)
 - iii. Moral toughness: Do you do what you want or what you should?

Not having this maturity is normal in high schoolers. It's not a sign they are "failures" but simply that they still are growing up.

In our experience, many high schoolers do not achieve this maturity until several years of high school – some achieve it earlier.

2. When can you have Social Media (Youtube, etc.)? When you are ready.

- a. Social media easily becomes addictive, anti-social and self-focused. Also, they deliver appropriate content. You can have it when you show you are ready to use it for intentional communications and connections. Signs you are ready:
 - i. *All items above, plus*
 - ii. **Emotional control**: You handle anger and mood swings well. You don't retaliate – both at home and with friends.
 - iii. **Control of your comments**. You don't gossip or speak ill of others; you don't make fun of others.
 - iv. **Desire for acceptance**. What your peers want or think does not exert a strong influence on you.

In our experience, most of us do not achieve this maturity until college (or later). That is normal.

Develop Family Rules

Establish age-appropriate rules for your family. For consideration:

1. Time

- a. Only after homework, chores, and other responsibilities complete
- b. Not after a certain hour of the night (neither computers nor phones)

2. Place

- a. Common areas only - not in the bedroom
- b. Not at dinner table (parents too)
- c. At night and when not in use (eg, before homework): all devices left in specific place (e.g., charging station by the door or parents' room)
- d. Car: have an approach

3. Duration

- a. No more than certain amount of time per day. Consider:
 - i. Weekdays: 1 hour / day
 - ii. Weekends: 1.5 hours / day

4. Consider your consequences

- a. What happens if rules are broken (loss of screen time is a typical consequence)? How should you (parent) react when this happens?
- b. How does your child earn more screen time as he matures?

Obviously, we parents need to model the behaviors we want our children to live.

Should I use a contract? Our perspective: They can be a helpful crutch as a start or if you're feeling desperate. Find a possible template [here](#). The risk with a contract is the focus on the rules rather than the child making decisions. In addition, it puts power in the hands of your child and removes your flexibility in assigning the degree of consequence appropriate.