Raising Kids With Screens



(Without Letting Screens Raise Them)

This is not anti-technology. It's pro–brain development.

Kids are growing up inside devices engineered to capture attention.

Our job isn't to panic. It's to pace exposure in a way their brains can handle.

Scan here to access a developmentally structured approach you can actually defend.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Raising Kids With Screens



(Without Letting Screens Raise Them)

This is not anti-technology. It's pro–brain development.

Kids are growing up inside devices engineered to capture attention.

Our job isn't to panic. It's to pace exposure in a way their brains can handle.

The following pages are a developmentally structured approach you can actually defend.

→

MURRAY CENTER
FOR BEHAVIORAL WELLNESS

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Ages 6–10 (Elementary School)

Goal: Exposure without immersion.

At this age, kids are concrete thinkers. They struggle with nuance, advertising, manipulation, and long-term consequences. They believe what they see.

Devices



Appropriate:

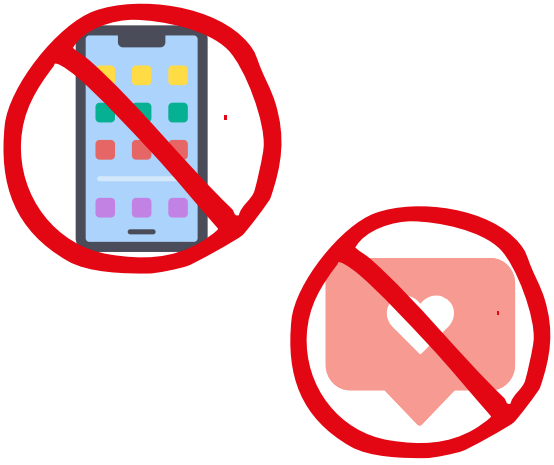
- Family TV (in shared space)
- Shared tablet (parent-controlled)
- Basic gaming console (no public chat)
- School-issued Chromebook (for school)
- Smart watch with parent-controlled contacts and without internet access

Not Appropriate:

- Personal smartphone
- Personal tablet with unrestricted access
- Smartwatch with internet access
- Any device in the bedroom

If it connects them to strangers, it's a no.

Social Media



No.

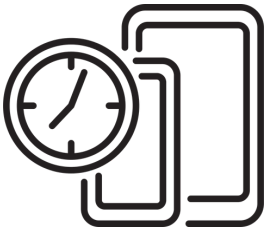
They are not neurologically equipped for:

- Social comparison
- Public feedback loops
- "Likes" as validation
- Online social hierarchy

The minimum age most platforms set is 13 - and that's not because 13 is optimal. It's because of data privacy laws.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

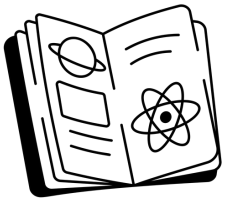
Time Guidelines



- 30–60 minutes school days
- Up to 1–2 hours weekends
- No screens before school
- No screens at meals
- Devices charge in common areas

Screens follow responsibilities, not the other way around.

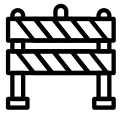
Science Bite



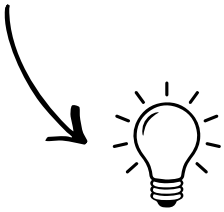
Young brains are highly sensitive to fast reward cycles. Rapid scene changes, bright visuals, and quick dopamine hits train attention toward novelty and away from sustained effort.

Translation: Too much fast content makes real-world tasks feel dull and harder to persist through.

Common Barrier



"But screens are the only way I get anything done."



Use them intentionally. Set a timer. End predictably. Avoid "just one more." The power struggle usually comes from inconsistency, not the limit itself.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Ages 11–13 (Middle School)

Goal: Skill-building under supervision.

This is where many families feel pressure to hand over a phone. This is also when emotional reactivity spikes and impulse control dips.

Devices







Appropriate:

- Family computer
- Basic gaming console (friends they know in real life)
- Tablet (with parental controls)
- Watch-only smartwatch (no internet browser)
- Flip phone or call/text-only phone if needed for logistics

Not Appropriate:

- Smartphone with internet and app store access
- Personal device in bedroom overnight
- Disappearing message apps

If your child needs to reach you, they need communication - not TikTok.

Social Media





Still no.
Yes, many peers may have it. That does not mean it is developmentally wise.
Why wait?

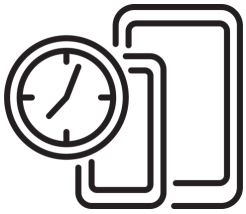
Early adolescence is marked by:

- Heightened sensitivity to peer feedback
- Strong emotional swings
- Underdeveloped impulse control
- Increased risk-taking

Social media intensifies all of it.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

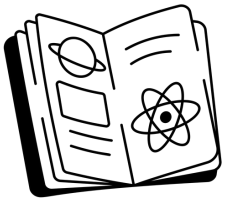
Time Guidelines



- 1–1.5 hours school days
- Up to 2 hours weekends
- No devices overnight in bedrooms
- No scrolling after 9–9:30 pm

Sleep disruption alone is a strong reason to delay smartphones.

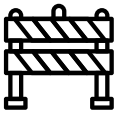
Science Bite



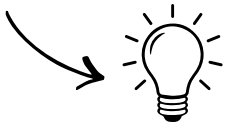
The reward centers of the brain become highly reactive during puberty. Peer approval activates these centers intensely. Rejection feels amplified.

Social media platforms are built around public feedback. That's not neutral for a 12-year-old brain.

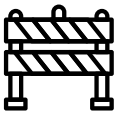
Common Barriers



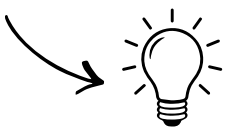
"They're the only one without a phone."



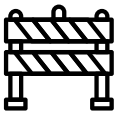
Often untrue. But even if it were - leadership is uncomfortable.



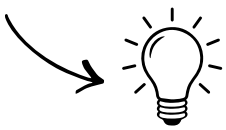
"They need it for social connection."



They need connection. They do not need 24/7 algorithm-driven access to it.



"We'll just monitor it."



Monitoring doesn't eliminate exposure. It only lets you see it after it happens.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Ages 14–18 (High School)

Goal: Gradual autonomy with structure.

Fourteen is a reasonable minimum for smartphone introduction. Not because 14-year-olds are fully mature. But because they are closer to being able to think abstractly and understand long-term consequences.

Devices





Appropriate (at 14+):

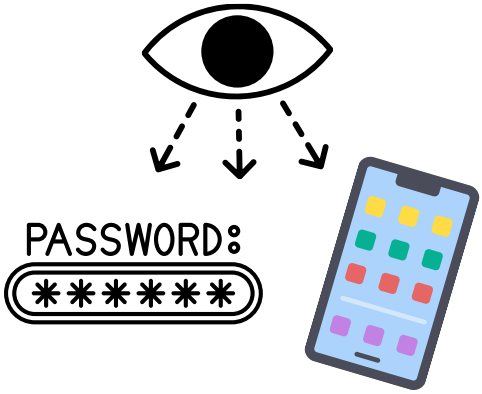
- Smartphone
- Laptop
- Gaming console
- Streaming platforms



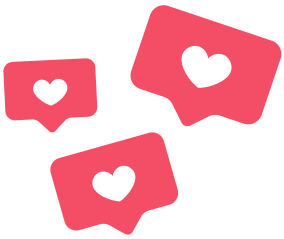
With Boundaries:

- Devices charge outside bedrooms
- Parents retain passwords
- No secret accounts
- Parental follow on social platforms
- Periodic phone audits

If that feels intrusive, remember: this is training, not surveillance.



Social Media



Not before 14.

Start with:

- One platform
- Private account
- Ongoing conversations about digital footprint
- Clear expectations about posting

Explicitly teach:

- Screenshots are permanent
- Sexting laws are real
- Algorithms push extreme content
- Comparison is curated illusion

Do not assume they "just know."

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Time Guidelines



If:

- Grades decline
- Sleep drops below 8 hours
- Mood worsens after scrolling
- They cannot disengage independently

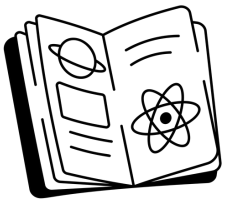
Usage is too high.

General structure:

- 2–3 hours recreational use school days
- Later limits on weekends
- No devices after a set hour

A phone in a bedroom at 1:30am is not independence. It's sleep deprivation.

Science Bite



The prefrontal cortex is responsible for impulse control, planning, and risk evaluation, and continues developing into the mid-20s.

High emotional states + permanent digital platforms = risk.
Structure reduces long-term harm. It does not prevent growth.

Common Barriers

"They say you don't trust them."

Trust and supervision coexist. Independence is earned through demonstrated responsibility.

"You're afraid of damaging the relationship."

Clear, consistent limits are stabilizing. Inconsistent, reactive limits are what erode trust.

"They need it for school."

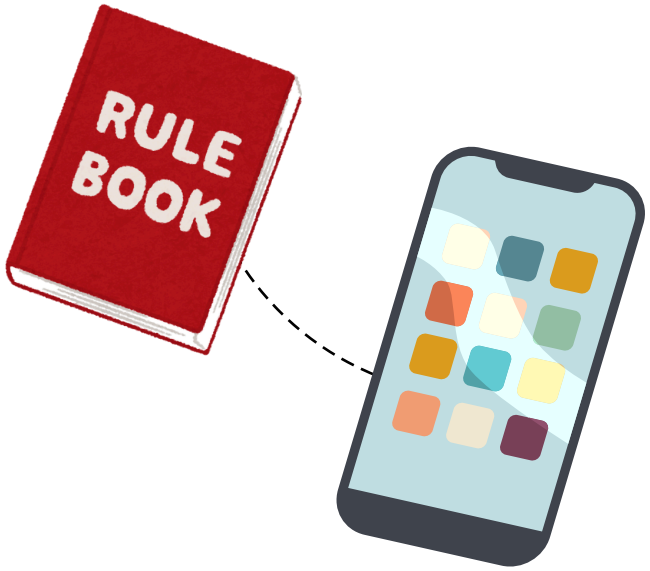
Then it's used for school. Tools can have purposes.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Universal Family Standards

Across all ages:

- Devices charge outside bedrooms.
- No screens during meals.
- No screens before school.
- Responsibilities come first.
- If you are in trouble online, you are not in trouble with us.



Fear makes kids **hide**.
Safety makes them **disclose**.

Final Perspective

Delaying smartphones until 14 and social media until 14 is not extreme.

It aligns exposure with brain development.

You are not depriving your child. You are staging access in a way their nervous system can handle.

The culture will always push earlier. You get to decide what your child's timeline is.



Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Why We're Waiting Until 14:

A Script for Real Parents Having Real Conversations



You don't need a TED Talk.
You need 3–4 sentences you can repeat without getting pulled into a courtroom debate.

Here's how this might actually sound.

The First Conversation

"Hey. I know you really want a phone. I'm not pretending you don't."

Pause.

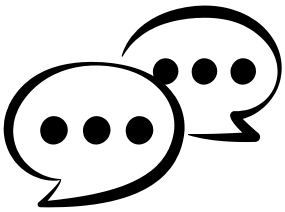
"And I know it probably feels like everyone else has one."

Pause again.

"But in this house, we're waiting until 14 for a smartphone and social media."

Then stop talking.

Let it land.



Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

If They Immediately Say: “WHY?”

Because they will. You can say:

> “Because having a smartphone isn’t just texting your friends. It’s social media, group chats, constant notifications, and stuff you can’t unsee.”
>
> “And your brain is still growing. I’m not rushing you into something that even adults struggle to manage.”

Keep it simple. No neuroscience lecture required.

If They Say: “But I Really Want One.”

You might say something like:

> “Honestly, if I were your age, I’d probably want one too.”
>
> Pause.
>
> “I get why you want it. It’s how people talk, it’s how people share things, and it probably feels like you’re missing out.”
>
> Then the boundary:
>
> “But wanting something and me saying yes to it right now are two different things.”
>
> Or:
>
> “I can understand why you want something and still decide the timing isn’t right yet.”

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

If They Push Again

You can stay calm and repeat the same idea in slightly different words:

> "I'm not confused about why you want it. I get it."
>
> "But my job isn't to give you everything the moment you want it. My job is to make decisions about when things make sense."

If They Say: "You Don't Trust Me."

This one hits parents in the guilt center.
Respond calmly:

> "I do trust you. I don't trust the internet."
>
> "It's literally designed to keep people hooked. If grown adults can't put their phones down, I'm not expecting you to be the exception at 12."

That lands better than "your prefrontal cortex is underdeveloped."

If They Say: "Everyone Else Has One."

Try this:

> "Some kids do. Some kids don't. I'm not raising everyone else."
>
> **Or:**
>
> "If 'everyone else' jumped off a cliff, I'd still say no."

Yes, it's cliché. Yes, it still works. If they push:

> "I get that it's hard to be one of the kids without it. That doesn't mean it's the wrong decision."

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

If They Say: “You’re Ruining My Social Life.”

Stay steady.

> “If a friendship only works because you have a smartphone, that’s not a strong friendship.”
>
> **And then:**
>
> “You can still text from a basic phone. You can still hang out. You can still call people. You are not being exiled from society.”

Keep your tone dry. Not sarcastic. Just factual.

If They Get Emotional

They might cry. They might slam a door. They might give you the silent treatment.

You can say:

> “I can see you’re upset. That makes sense. Waiting is frustrating.”
>
> **Or:**
>
> “This decision isn’t changing tonight. But I’m here when you want to talk.”

The Brain Explanation (In Kid Language)

If they’re actually listening, you can say:

> “The part of your brain that helps with impulse control and long-term thinking is still growing. Social media is permanent. Screenshots are permanent. I’m not putting you in situations you’re not ready to handle.”

Short. Concrete. Done.

If They Say: “You’re So Strict.”

Smile slightly.

> “Probably. You’ll survive.”
>
> **Or:**
>
> “My job isn’t to be the most relaxed parent. It’s to be responsible.”

You don’t need to defend it further.

The Reassurance Piece

This matters.

> “We’re not saying no forever. We’re saying not yet.”
>
> “When you turn 14, we’ll talk about it. And when we do, we’ll set it up in a way that helps you succeed.”

That gives them a timeline. Timelines reduce anxiety.

What Parents Should Avoid Saying

Don’t say:

- “Because I said so.” (Even if you want to.)
- “You’re too immature.” (That becomes a character attack.)
- “You’ll thank me someday.” (They will not appreciate that in the moment.)

Keep it about timing and readiness - not their worth.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026

Why 14, In Plain English

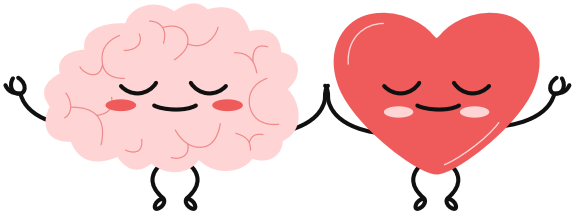


Because:

- Middle school is already emotionally intense.
- Sleep is fragile.
- Social drama spreads fast online.
- Impulsive mistakes become permanent quickly.

Fourteen isn't magic.
It's just more aligned with where their brain is developmentally.

What You're Really Doing



You're buying:

- More sleep
- Fewer comparison spirals
- Fewer impulsive posts
- More time for real-world social skills

You are not behind. You are pacing exposure.

The Bottom Line Line (The One You'll Repeat 47 Times)

> "I know you don't like it. You don't have to like it."
>
> "But this is the decision."

Calm. Boring. Repeatable.

The more emotionally neutral you are, the faster this conversation loses steam.

Murray Center for Behavioral Wellness © 2026