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NOT CHILDREN

The Download

This is the Wired Parents guide to the questions children ask most on their journey through digital life.

Every parent I know has been ambushed by at least one of these conversations, usually at dinner and usually when you least expect it and usually when you're pretty sure they're not ready for what they're asking.

This guide won't tell you what to do, but it will make sure you're not going in blind. Use the sections that are relevant to where you are right now and come back to the others when you need them.

So if your child hasn't asked yet, get reading and get on the front foot. Understand what the reality is in what they're asking for before the conversation lands - because it will.

Each section follows the same structure: what you're actually deciding, what the research says, what your options are, and one thing worth knowing. Different families make different calls — what matters is that yours is based on what's actually happening.

This guide gives you the foundations. The Wired Parents newsletter keeps you current, because the platforms change, the research moves on, and what's true today may look different in six months.

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"Can I have a phone?"

There is no universal right age. Research points to risks that increase with earlier access, but the decision depends on your child, your family, and what you're actually agreeing to when you say yes.

The question most parents are really asking isn't "what age" — it's "am I ready to manage what comes with it?" Because a smartphone isn't just a device. It's unsupervised access to the internet, social media, group chats, and content you haven't seen. The age matters less than whether you and your child are ready for that.

What the research says

Studies consistently show that children who receive smartphones earlier show higher rates of anxiety, depression, and sleep problems than those who wait. The risks aren't from the device itself — they're from what the device provides access to, and how much of that access is unsupervised.

What your options are

Wait longer than feels comfortable. Most parents give in earlier than they planned because of social pressure — other children have one, their child feels left out. That pressure is real — most parents feel it. But it's worth asking whether it's the right reason to say yes.

Set clear conditions before you hand it over. What apps are allowed? What are the rules around bedtime? Who can contact them? Having those conversations before the phone arrives is significantly easier than having them after.

Say yes with active supervision rather than passive permission. Knowing your child has a smartphone and knowing what they're doing on it are different things.

Wait until secondary school. This is increasingly the position parents worldwide are taking — not because of a rule, but because the research supports it and the social pressure is easier to manage collectively at that transition point.

"Can I have a phone?"

One thing worth knowing

The decision you make now isn't permanent. Parents who realise they said yes too early can change the terms. It's harder than getting it right the first time, but it's not too late.

"Can I have WhatsApp?"

WhatsApp is often the first social platform children ask for, and it feels lower stakes than Instagram or TikTok. It's just messaging, right? But it's worth understanding what you're actually agreeing to before you say yes.

WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted, which means nobody — including Meta, who owns it — can see the messages. That's good for privacy. It also means there's no moderation, no safety net, and no way to report what's happening inside a conversation to anyone outside it. What goes on in group chats stays there.

Group chats in particular can move fast and turn quickly. Bullying on WhatsApp — exclusion, screenshots shared without permission, pile-ons in group chats — is something many parents only discover after it's already happened. By the time you know about it, it's often been going on for weeks.

What the research says

Group chat dynamics are where most of the problems emerge. Exclusion, pile-ons, and the pressure to be constantly available and responsive are consistently cited by children and adolescents as sources of anxiety. The issue isn't usually who your child is messaging — it's the group chats they get added to, often without choosing to join.

What your options are

Allow contacts only, no group chats. This is a reasonable middle ground that gives your child one-to-one communication without the group dynamics that cause most problems.

Allow with a family visibility agreement. Some families agree that parents can check the app periodically — not reading every message, but knowing it's a

possibility. Whether that works depends entirely on your child and your relationship.

Delay until secondary school. The same logic that applies to smartphones applies here — the research supports waiting, and the social pressure is easier to navigate when more families are making the same call.

Say no for now and revisit. A basic phone with calls and texts solves the "I need to contact you" problem without WhatsApp's group dynamics.

One thing worth knowing

The default settings on WhatsApp are not set up with children in mind. If you do say yes, spend twenty minutes going through the privacy settings together before they start using it. Who can add them to groups, who can see their profile photo, whether their last seen is visible — none of these are set safely by default.

"Can I have Instagram?"

Instagram is where the conversation about children and social media gets most serious. The internal research Meta has tried hardest to keep private — now emerging through court cases — is about Instagram specifically. What it shows is that the platform knew about the harms to teenage girls' body image and mental health, and chose not to act.

That context matters when you're making this decision.

What the research says

The evidence on Instagram and adolescent mental health is more consistent than for almost any other platform. Girls are disproportionately affected — studies link Instagram use to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and body image issues, particularly among those aged 11-15. The mechanism isn't just time spent. It's the specific combination of social comparison, algorithmic content, and the performance of identity that Instagram is designed around.

What your options are

Delay until 16. This is increasingly the position governments worldwide are moving toward — Australia has legislated it, France has restricted under-15s, Germany is debating it. The research supports waiting, and knowing that policy is heading this direction makes the conversation with your child easier, not harder.

Allow with strict conditions. Private account, following only people they know in real life, no location sharing, regular check-ins about what they're seeing. This requires active ongoing involvement, not a one-time setup.

Allow with a trial period. Some families agree on three months with full visibility before deciding whether to continue. It gives your child a chance to demonstrate they can handle it and gives you real information rather than assumptions.

Say no entirely. The Meta trial documents show the platform knew about harms and chose business priorities over child safety. That's a reasonable basis for refusal, not overprotection.

One thing worth knowing

The age limit of 13 is self-reported. Instagram has never meaningfully verified it. Internal Meta documents showed the platform knowingly had millions of under-13 users for years. The age limit offers no protection on its own.

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"Can I have TikTok?"

TikTok is the platform that generates the most anxiety among parents, and for understandable reasons. But the concerns worth paying attention to aren't always the ones that get the most coverage.

The national security debate — whether TikTok's Chinese ownership means data is accessible to the Chinese government — is real but largely outside your control as a parent. The concerns that are within your control are about the algorithm, which is the most effective ever built at keeping people watching, and about what that means for a developing brain with limited capacity to disengage.

What the research says

TikTok's algorithm is designed to serve content that maximises engagement, not content that is good for the viewer. For adolescents, this means the algorithm quickly learns what creates an emotional response — anxiety, outrage, social comparison — and serves more of it. Studies link heavy TikTok use to shortened attention spans, disrupted sleep, and increased anxiety, particularly in girls.

What your options are

Delay until 16. The same logic that applies to Instagram applies here — the algorithm is specifically designed to be difficult to disengage from, and younger adolescents have less capacity to manage that.

Allow YouTube instead. For children who want video content, YouTube with restrictions is a more controllable environment than TikTok's algorithmically driven feed. It's not without risks but the mechanics are different.

Allow with time limits and content restrictions. TikTok has parental controls — screen time limits, restricted mode, and a family pairing feature that links your account to your child's. These are imperfect but worth using if you say yes.

Say no on the basis of the algorithm alone. You don't need the national security argument. The documented effect of the recommendation algorithm on adolescent mental health is sufficient reason.

One thing worth knowing

TikTok's restricted mode filters some content but not all. It is not a substitute for a conversation about what they're likely to see and what to do when the algorithm serves something that makes them feel bad about themselves — which it will.

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"Can I have YouTube?"

YouTube is often the platform parents worry least about, and in some ways that's justified. YouTube started as a platform parents associated with educational content and harmless entertainment — and for a long time that

reputation was largely deserved. But YouTube Shorts, added in 2021, changed the picture significantly.

Shorts is YouTube's answer to TikTok. It's the same format — short, vertical, algorithmically driven videos designed to keep you watching. The same concerns that apply to TikTok's algorithm apply to Shorts. The difference is that Shorts sits inside a platform most parents have already said yes to, which means it often gets less scrutiny than it deserves.

What the research says

Long-form YouTube — a child choosing to watch a specific video or channel — functions differently from algorithm-driven short-form content. The concern isn't YouTube as a whole. It's the shift from active choosing to passive consumption, which is what Shorts and autoplay are specifically designed to encourage. Studies on short-form video content link heavy use to shortened attention spans and disrupted sleep, consistent with findings on TikTok.

What your options are

Allow YouTube, disable Shorts. This is a reasonable middle ground. YouTube Kids is available for younger children and removes Shorts entirely. For older children, it's worth having an explicit conversation about why the two things are different.

Allow with autoplay off. Autoplay is the single setting most worth changing — it removes the algorithm's ability to keep serving content after a video ends. It's in Settings → Autoplay and takes thirty seconds to turn off.

Allow YouTube Kids instead of the main app. YouTube Kids has curated content, no Shorts, and more robust parental controls. It's designed for under-13s but works as a transitional platform for younger teenagers whose parents want more oversight.

Say yes to YouTube, no to Shorts specifically. This requires a conversation and some trust, but it's a more nuanced position than blanket yes or no — and it gives your child a framework for thinking about why the two things are different.

One thing worth knowing

The rabbit hole problem on YouTube is real. A child searching for one thing can end up somewhere very different twenty minutes later through recommended videos. Knowing what your child watches matters more than knowing that they watch YouTube.

"Can I have Roblox?"

Gaming is where many parents feel least confident, partly because they didn't grow up with it and partly because the landscape changes faster than almost any other area of children's technology. The concerns are real but they're specific — not all gaming is the same, and the risks depend heavily on what your child is playing and who they're playing with.

Roblox deserves specific attention because it's not really a game — it's a platform where users create and publish their own games, which means the content is largely unmoderated before it goes live. With 80 million daily active users, half of them under 13, the scale makes moderation genuinely difficult. Police in England and Wales recorded over 1,500 Roblox-related crimes between 2020 and 2024, the majority involving contact offences against children.

Predatory behaviour is a documented risk on Roblox specifically. Adults use in-game features — private messaging, gift-giving through in-game currency, collaborative building — to build relationships with children before moving conversations to other platforms. Police forces in multiple countries have recorded significant numbers of contact offences originating on Roblox. This isn't a reason to panic, but it is a reason to have an explicit conversation with your child about what to do if an adult they don't know tries to befriend them online.

What the research says

The risks in gaming fall into two categories: content and contact. Content risks — violence, sexual material, inappropriate themes — vary by game and platform. Contact risks — strangers communicating with your child through in-game chat — are consistent across any multiplayer game. Research consistently shows that children are most at risk not from the games themselves but from the communication features built around them.

What your options are

Allow gaming, disable chat. Most platforms allow you to turn off or restrict communication features independently of gameplay. This removes the contact risk without removing the game. It's worth doing as a default rather than an exception.

Allow with platform parental controls enabled. Every major gaming platform — PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo, Steam — has parental control systems that limit spending, restrict content by age rating, and control communication. They require setup but they work.

Allow Roblox with chat disabled and spending limits set. Roblox's in-game currency system has led to children spending significant sums without parents realising. Parental controls can restrict both chat and purchases — enabling both before your child starts is significantly easier than trying to walk it back later.

Say yes to single-player games, no to multiplayer for now. This is a reasonable intermediate position for younger children — it removes the contact risk entirely while still allowing gaming.

One thing worth knowing

The friends your child makes online in games feel as real to them as friends they know in person. That's not inherently a problem, but it means the emotional stakes of online gaming relationships are higher than most parents assume — and the risks that come with those relationships deserve the same conversation you'd have about real-world friendships.

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"Everyone's using AI - why can't I?"

AI is the area where parental awareness is furthest behind what children are already doing. Most parents are still thinking about social media and smartphones. Meanwhile their children are using AI chatbots for homework help, creative writing, and conversation — often on platforms parents have never heard of.

Unlike social media, AI doesn't require an age-verified account on most platforms. A child can access ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, or dozens of other AI tools without any verification at all. The risks are different from social media but they're real — and they sit outside most of the regulatory frameworks currently being debated.

What the research says

The research on children and AI is newer and less established than on social media. What is documented is concerning in specific ways: AI chatbots on educational and gaming platforms have been used to shift conversations toward inappropriate topics; AI-generated images using publicly available photos of children have been used for exploitation; and the line between AI as a tool and AI as a relationship is one many children — particularly lonely or anxious ones — find genuinely difficult to navigate.

What your options are

Know what tools your child is using. This is the starting point. Many parents don't know their child uses AI at all. Ask directly — not accusatorially, but as a genuine conversation about something new that's worth understanding together.

Allow for homework and creativity, with boundaries around conversation. AI as a research tool or writing assistant is different from AI as a companion. The distinction is worth making explicit with your child.

If your child's school hasn't addressed AI yet, it's worth asking. Some schools are ahead of this — using tools specifically designed to preserve learning rather than replace it. Flint, used in some international schools, refuses to give children direct answers. Instead it asks questions back, pushing them to think through the problem themselves. If they still can't get there, it directs them to their teacher. It also flags concerning conversations. The contrast with simply asking ChatGPT for an answer — and copying it — couldn't be sharper. The question worth asking your child's school is not "do you have an AI policy" but "what does your AI policy actually do in practice?"

Check the platforms they're already on. AI chatbots are embedded in gaming platforms, homework help sites, and social media. You don't have to download a separate app to encounter them. Roblox, Snapchat, and various educational tools all have AI features that may not be prominently signposted.

Say no to dedicated AI companion apps. Apps designed specifically to simulate friendship or romantic relationships with AI are a different category from productivity tools. Several have been linked to serious harm in adolescents. They are worth treating differently from general AI tools.

One thing worth knowing

AI tools are developing faster than the regulations designed to govern them. Government bans on social media don't cover AI chatbots. Whatever rules you set now will need revisiting — probably sooner than you expect.

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"Can I have more screen time?"

One thing worth saying upfront: most children today have no choice about screens. Homework is set online. Teachers communicate through apps. Research means Google. The question was never really "screens or no screens" — it was always about which screens, when, and what for. A child doing two hours of homework on a laptop is not the same conversation as a child spending two hours on TikTok, even though both count as screen time. Starting from that distinction makes the whole conversation more honest.

Screen time is the broadest and in some ways the hardest conversation, because it's not really about time at all. Two hours of video calling grandparents is different from two hours of algorithmically driven TikTok. Thirty minutes of Minecraft with a friend is different from thirty minutes of YouTube Shorts alone at midnight. The clock doesn't tell you what you need to know.

The shift in thinking among researchers and paediatricians over the past few years has been away from time limits and toward what the time is spent on, and whether it's displacing something that matters — sleep, physical activity, face-to-face relationships, or just genuine boredom, which turns out to be important for developing brains.

The screen time conversation also looks different depending on how old your child is. For younger children under 8 or so, the question is mostly about how much and what. For older children and teenagers, it shifts to where, when, and what specifically — because the risks change as the content and platforms

change. The principles below apply across ages but the boundaries you set will naturally look different at 7 than at 14.

What the research says

Studies consistently show that passive, algorithm-driven screen use — scrolling, autoplay, short-form video — correlates with poor sleep, attention difficulties, and emotional regulation problems. Active screen use — creating, communicating, learning — shows far weaker negative associations and in some cases positive ones. The American Academy of Pediatrics updated its guidance in 2026 to reflect exactly this distinction, moving away from blanket time limits toward quality-based assessment.

Sleep is where the clearest evidence sits. Screens in bedrooms at night — particularly smartphones — are consistently linked to later sleep onset, shorter sleep duration, and poorer sleep quality. The single most effective thing most families can do is establish a consistent rule about where devices sleep at night. Not as punishment. Just as a rule.

What your options are

Replace time limits with content conversations. Instead of "one hour of screen time," try "one hour of YouTube but not Shorts" or "gaming until dinner but chat disabled." More specific, more honest about what the actual concern is.

Keep screens in shared family spaces. A simple rule — laptops, tablets, and phones used in common areas rather than bedrooms — does more than any parental control app. You don't need to actively monitor. The awareness that someone might glance over is often enough. It also keeps screen use as something that happens alongside family life rather than instead of it. When screens move into bedrooms, they become invisible — and invisible is where most problems start.

Establish a device curfew. Phones and tablets charge outside bedrooms overnight. This is the one boundary that research most consistently supports and that most families find genuinely makes a difference once they do it.

Use built-in tools rather than relying on willpower. Screen Time on iPhone and Digital Wellbeing on Android let you set app limits, schedule downtime, and see what's actually being used. The data is often surprising — for parents and children both.

Have the conversation about boredom. Children who have always had a screen available when bored have less experience sitting with discomfort and finding their own way through it. That capacity matters. It's worth protecting some unstructured, screen-free time not as punishment but as something valuable in itself.

One thing worth knowing

The goal isn't zero screens. It's making sure screens aren't crowding out the things that matter more — sleep, movement, real relationships, and time to think. When you frame it that way to your child, the conversation tends to go better than when it feels like an arbitrary limit imposed from above.

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