wired parents

not children

FREE GUIDE

Checked October 2026

The Download

The guide to the eight technology conversations every parent will have.



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.

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.

What's inside

01	**Can I have a phone?**	Smartphones and readiness
02	**Can I have WhatsApp?**	Group chats, encryption, bullying
03	**Can I have Instagram?**	Body image, Meta's research
04	**Can I have TikTok?**	The algorithm, attention, data
05	**Can I have YouTube?**	Shorts, autoplay, rabbit holes
06	**Can I have Roblox?**	Contact risks, spending
07	**Everyone's using AI**	Chatbots, companion apps
08	**More screen time?**	Quality vs quantity, sleep

01



“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. 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.

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.

WATCH FOR

- Sleeping with the phone in their room or under the pillow
- Becoming anxious or upset after looking at the phone but not saying why
- A sudden change in friendship groups that coincides with getting the phone

DO THIS WEEK

If your child already has a phone, sit down together and review what apps are installed. If they don't have one yet, write down your conditions before the conversation happens.

TRY OPENING WITH

"*I'm not saying no. I'm saying let's talk about what having a phone actually means — not just the device, but everything that comes with it.*"

02

“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 and no safety net unless someone inside the chat reports 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.

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.

Delay until secondary school.
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. For under-13s, WhatsApp now offers parent-managed accounts, where you decide who they can message and which groups they join.
SETTINGS TO CHECK	Privacy → Groups → "My contacts" Privacy → Last seen → "Nobody" Privacy → Profile photo → "My contacts" Privacy → About → "My contacts"
WATCH FOR	Being added to group chats with people they don't know well Checking messages compulsively or getting anxious when they can't Reluctance to show you the phone when asked casually
DO THIS WEEK	**If they already use WhatsApp, sit down together and check the privacy settings. It takes five minutes and none of the defaults are safe.**
TRY OPENING WITH	"*Before we set this up, let's go through the settings together. Some of the defaults aren't great — I want to show you why.*"

03

“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, and France passed an under-15 ban that its constitutional court struck down in August 2026. The research supports waiting.

Allow with strict conditions.
Private account, following only people they know in real life, no location sharing, regular check-ins. 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.

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 now puts under-18s into restricted Teen Accounts and uses AI to estimate age, but it starts from the birth date a child types in. Internal Meta documents showed the platform knowingly had millions of under-13 users for years.

SETTINGS TO CHECK (IF YOU SAY YES)

- Account privacy → Private account → on
- Who can message you → "People you follow"
- Activity status → off
- Sensitive content control → "Less"

WATCH FOR

- Comparing themselves unfavourably to what they see online
- Spending time curating how they look in photos before posting
- Mood changes after scrolling, particularly around body image
- Following accounts they don't know personally, especially "influencers"

DO THIS WEEK

Search your child's name on Instagram. If they already have an account you don't know about, that's the conversation to have first.

TRY OPENING WITH

"*I want to understand what you'd actually use it for. Not to catch you out — I just want to know what the draw is for you specifically.*"

04

“Can I have TikTok?”

TikTok is the platform that generates the most anxiety among parents. The national security debate is real but largely outside your control. 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 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. 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 family pairing. 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 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 to do when the algorithm serves something that makes them feel bad about themselves.
SETTINGS TO CHECK (IF YOU SAY YES)	Family Pairing → link your account Family Pairing → Screen time → set daily limit Family Pairing → Restricted Mode → on Family Pairing → Direct messages → "No one"
WATCH FOR	Losing track of time — "just five more minutes" that becomes an hour Recreating trends that involve risk, embarrassment, or cruelty Difficulty concentrating on longer tasks after extended scrolling Repeating opinions or claims they can't explain the source of
DO THIS WEEK	**Ask your child to show you their For You page. Watch it together for five minutes. What the algorithm has learned about them tells you a lot.**
TRY OPENING WITH	*"I know TikTok is fun. I'm not pretending it isn't. But the algorithm is designed to keep you watching longer than you meant to — that's literally what it's built to do."*

05

“Can I have YouTube?”

YouTube is often the platform parents worry least about. But YouTube Shorts, added in 2021, changed the picture significantly. Shorts is YouTube’s answer to TikTok — short, vertical, algorithmically driven videos designed to keep you watching. 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.

What your options are

Allow YouTube, disable Shorts.
YouTube Kids removes Shorts entirely. For older children, it’s worth having an explicit conversation about why the two things are different. On a supervised teen account you can now set the Shorts limit to zero, which blocks Shorts completely.

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. Settings → Autoplay, thirty seconds to turn off.

Allow YouTube Kids instead of the main app.
Curated content, no Shorts, more robust parental controls. It works as a transitional platform for younger teenagers.

Say yes to YouTube, no to Shorts specifically.
This requires trust, but 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. Knowing what your child watches matters more than knowing that they watch YouTube.
SETTINGS TO CHECK	Autoplay → off Restricted Mode → on (bottom of Settings) Remind me to take a break → set a reminder Family Link: review watch history, set daily time limits Supervised account → Shorts limit → zero
WATCH FOR	Watching Shorts for extended periods when they started with a specific video Becoming agitated when asked to stop mid-scroll Referencing content they can't remember choosing to watch
DO THIS WEEK	**Check whether autoplay is on. If it is, turn it off together and explain why. It takes thirty seconds.**
TRY OPENING WITH	*"There's a difference between choosing what to watch and letting the algorithm choose for you. Let me show you what I mean."*

06

“Can I have Roblox?”

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 more than 120 million daily active users, around a third of them under 13, the scale makes moderation genuinely difficult.

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 England and Wales received 664 reports mentioning Roblox in 2025, up from 355 the year before.

What the research says

The risks in gaming fall into two categories: content and contact. Content risks vary by game. Contact risks — strangers communicating with your child through in-game chat — are consistent across any multiplayer game. 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.
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.
PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo, Steam all have parental controls that limit spending, restrict content, and control communication.

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.

Say yes to single-player games, no to multiplayer for now.
A reasonable intermediate position for younger children — it removes the contact risk entirely.

ONE THING WORTH KNOWING	The friends your child makes online feel as real to them as friends they know in person. The risks that come with those relationships deserve the same conversation you'd have about real-world friendships.
SETTINGS TO CHECK	Parental Controls → link your own parent account Chat → restrict to "No one" or "Friends" Spending → set monthly limit or require approval Content maturity → restrict to age-appropriate
WATCH FOR	An adult they don't know trying to befriend them or send gifts Being asked to continue a conversation on a different app Spending real money through in-game currency without realising the cost Playing games with clearly inappropriate content for their age
DO THIS WEEK	**Set up Roblox parental controls with your child present. Check the friend list together. If there are names they don't know in real life, talk about why.**
TRY OPENING WITH	"*If someone you don't know in real life asks to be your friend, or asks you to chat on a different app, I want you to tell me. You won't be in trouble — I just want to know.*"

07

“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. And AI isn’t just a standalone app they download. It’s already embedded in platforms they’re using — Snapchat has My AI, Roblox has in-game chatbots, and homework help sites like Brainly and Photomath use AI to generate answers. Your child may already be interacting with AI daily without either of you framing it that way.

What the research says

The research on children and AI is newer and less established than on social media, but what is documented is concerning. AI chatbots have been used to shift conversations toward inappropriate topics. AI-generated images using children’s photos have been used for exploitation. And the line between AI as a tool and AI as a relationship is one many children find difficult to navigate. Character.ai, a platform where users create and interact with AI personas, has faced lawsuits after teenagers developed intense emotional attachments to chatbot characters, with some cases linked to self-harm. The distinction between a tool that helps you write an essay and a companion that talks to you at midnight when you’re lonely is significant — and most children encounter both without any guidance about the difference.

What your options are

Know what tools your child is using.

Many parents aren't aware whether their child is using AI, let alone which platforms. Ask directly — not accusatorially, but as a genuine conversation. Check the app library on their phone, tablet, and laptop for ChatGPT, Character.ai, Replika, Chai, and Poe. Check browser history on any device they use — including school-issued ones — for chatgpt.com, gemini.google.com, and character.ai.

Allow for homework and creativity, with boundaries around conversation.

AI as a research tool is different from AI as a companion. The distinction is worth making explicit. A useful rule of thumb: if they're using AI to help them think, that's a tool. If they're using AI to replace a person, that's a relationship — and it's a relationship with something that isn't real.

Ask your child's school what their AI policy actually does.

Some schools use tools like Flint that refuse to give direct answers and instead ask questions back, preserving learning rather than replacing it. Others have blocked AI entirely. Many haven't decided yet. Knowing where your child's school stands matters, because school-issued devices may have unrestricted access to AI chatbot sites even when social media is blocked.

Say no to dedicated AI companion apps.

Apps that simulate friendship or romantic relationships with AI are a different category entirely. Character.ai, Replika, and similar platforms are designed to create emotional bonds with AI characters. Several have been linked to serious harm in adolescents. These are not homework tools.

ONE THING WORTH KNOWING

AI tools are developing faster than the regulations designed to govern them. Most platforms have no meaningful age verification, and parental controls are either basic or non-existent. Whatever rules you set now will need revisiting — probably sooner than you expect. The good news is that this is a conversation where you can be honest about learning alongside your child. You don't need to be the expert. You just need to be in the room.

SETTINGS TO CHECK

- Snapchat: My AI can be removed via Snapchat+ or by long-pressing → Chat Settings
- ChatGPT: Settings → Parental controls → link your teen's account
- iPhone: Screen Time → App Limits → add limits for ChatGPT, Character.ai, etc.
- Android: Digital Wellbeing → set app timers for AI apps
- School device: ask your school whether AI chatbot sites are filtered or accessible

WATCH FOR

- Treating an AI chatbot as a confidant or emotional support
- Submitting homework that's noticeably different from their usual standard
- Using AI image generators with photos of themselves or classmates
- Spending time on AI companion apps designed to simulate relationships
- Referring to an AI character by name or describing it as a friend

DO THIS WEEK

Ask your child to show you what AI tools they use. No judgement — just understanding. Check their phone for Character.ai and Replika specifically, as these are the apps most likely to create emotional dependency. And check whether their school's devices allow unrestricted access to AI chatbot sites — many do, even when Instagram and TikTok are blocked.

TRY OPENING WITH

"Show me what you've been using AI for. I'm genuinely curious, and I probably need to understand this better than I do."

08

“Can I have more screen time?”

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 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 among researchers 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 genuine boredom.

What the research says

Passive, algorithm-driven screen use correlates with poor sleep, attention difficulties, and emotional regulation problems. Active screen use — creating, communicating, learning — shows far weaker negative associations. The American Academy of Pediatrics updated its guidance in 2026 to reflect this distinction, moving away from blanket time limits toward quality-based assessment.

Sleep is where the clearest evidence sits. Screens in bedrooms at night are consistently linked to later sleep onset 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.”

Keep screens in shared family spaces.
Laptops, tablets, and phones used in common areas rather than bedrooms. The awareness that someone might glance over is often enough.

Establish a device curfew.
Phones and tablets charge outside bedrooms overnight. This is the one boundary research most consistently supports.

Use built-in tools rather than relying on willpower.
Screen Time on iPhone and Digital Wellbeing on Android let you set app limits and see what's actually being used.

Have the conversation about boredom.
Children who have always had a screen available when bored have less experience finding their own way through discomfort. That capacity matters.

ONE THING WORTH KNOWING	The goal isn't zero screens. It's making sure screens aren't crowding out sleep, movement, real relationships, and time to think.
SETTINGS TO CHECK	iPhone: Screen Time → App Limits → set per-app limits iPhone: Screen Time → Downtime → schedule screen-free hours Android: Digital Wellbeing → set app timers Android: Digital Wellbeing → Bedtime mode → set schedule
WATCH FOR	Reaching for a screen the moment they're bored, without exception Difficulty winding down at bedtime after screen use Becoming irritable or argumentative when asked to stop
DO THIS WEEK	**Check the screen time data on your child's phone together. Review it as a conversation, not an interrogation. The numbers surprise most families — parents and children both.**
TRY OPENING WITH	"*Let's look at the numbers together. I'll show you mine if you show me yours.*"

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.

Subscribe at wiredparents.beehiiv.com

Every Thursday.