THE PARENT'S GUIDE TO
SMARTPHONE SECURITY

Keeping your child safe online is a modern problem that many parents face today. After all, technology is moving faster than many people can keep up with. If you have a child, then you are well aware of the new devices that are becoming integrated in a child's life. It may begin with your child using your personal device to play games, watch videos, read books, and learn about new topics online. That routine can quickly turn into a situation where your kids may have their own tablets and, before you know it, are asking for their own Apple iPhones and/or Google Android devices. When stress and overwhelm sets in, remember one thing: this is not a unique challenge that only your family faces. It's something that families around the world are grappling with, and unfortunately, there isn't a lot of history or experience to draw from.

With any connected device, regardless of age or experience using the device, security is a top concern. There are hackers looking to steal information, criminals looking to connect with people online, and a growing concern about the availability of information and the types of information that people may be accessing. Since children are inexperienced online, learning more about their world, and developing their own understanding of themselves, these factors can pose an even greater risk.

So, how do you, as a parent, ensure that your child is safe and secure when using a smartphone? Other than banning your children from using mobile devices, there is no way to completely remove this risk. With the right education for both yourself and your children, however, smartphones can be powerful, positive tools for both learning and connectivity.

How many children are actually using smartphones?

The growth of the smartphone industry has been nothing short of amazing. More than 80% of American adults now have smartphones, which is more than double the rate from surveys conducted in 2011. Essentially, almost every household in the country has at least one Internet access enabled smartphone, and those numbers are only expected to continue growing as the remaining holdouts move from so-called *dumb phone ownership* to smartphones.

But how has this growth affected children? Smartphone ownership among children is lower than adults, but this rate is increasing rapidly year over year. Around age 9 or 10, many parents begin purchasing smartphones for their children. In fact, nearly half of kids between age 10 and 12 have a smartphone with their own service plan. This age makes sense as children become more independent around this age. They may begin walking home from school alone, spending some time alone while parents are out, and visiting friend's homes. Most parents want to be connected to their children at all times, and the best way to accomplish this is with a mobile device.

As kids enter their teenage years, smartphone access spikes. In fact, up to 95% of teens have regular access to their own smartphone. This is a rate that actually outnumbers adult ownership in the United States. By the time kids are in their high school years, nearly every student will have their own smartphone, which means that smartphone security is something that should concern nearly every parent in America.

Why do your kids need smartphones?

A lot of parents take the stand that their child doesn't need a smartphone. However, this point of view often changes as children get older and becoming more independent. The most common reason to give your kid a smartphone is to stay connected when they may not always be in a location where you can easily reach out to them, like at school or at a daycare. A smartphone is a simple and effective way to keep a point of contact as kids begin to do things on their own like go to the park, visit friends, join sports teams, or take on volunteer opportunities. Location services alone can offer peace of mind that simply wasn't available a decades ago.

It's also important not to look past the usefulness of a smartphone when your child begins to increase their homework workload. Older kids can use smartphones to help them do research for papers, as an example. Plus, with many schools moving more towards online systems, a smartphone is a great way for kids to manage their class schedule, communicate with teachers, plan group projects with other students, and check their own grades or due dates on assignments.

Of course, there are some situations where you, as a parent, may not have complete say in the matter. For example, teens that work part-time jobs often have the means to purchase their own smartphone, without the help of a parent. Being proactive about smartphone security and online safety can help you and your family prepare for the inevitable day when a working teen has saved up enough money to buy a smartphone of their own. Plus, the smartphone can be very helpful for working teens as they manage work schedules, communicate with their employer, and organize transportation to and from work.

What are the concerns regarding children and smartphones?

Not all scenarios involving smartphone use and children are positive. Smartphones have become powerful communication tools that essentially open up the entire Internet to your child, which also means opening up opportunities for risky situations to arise. It's important to take all necessary precautions to try and keep your kids safe.

One of the main concerns when it comes to children being online is the potential for interacting with online predators. The Internet has made it easy for people to communicate and that includes those who may have negative intentions. Adults can use social media apps like Facebook and Snapchat to connect with children and pressure them into sharing information, engage in inappropriate relationships and send explicit content, and participate in illegal activities. Worst of all, many of these online encounters can become real life encounters if predators are able to advance the relationship in such a way. Startling numbers show that there may be as many as 500,000 predators online that target children, and more than half of younger children share personal information with strangers online.

Another growing epidemic in many countries around the world is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying can come from other children, people your child may know, and also complete strangers. There was a time that bullying was confined to the classroom or playground and children could escape bullies at the end of the day. With the growth of smartphones, your children can be contacted by a bully at all hours of the day, and bullies can – and often do – share information with others easily to make the problem even worse. Sadly, nearly 40% of children in the United States have experienced cyber bullying at some point, yet only 38% of those kids are comfortable going to their parents about the issue.

One extremely important concern you may have regarding your child using a smartphone simply comes down to privacy. While sharing information online doesn't necessarily mean something bad is happening, many people of all ages are unaware just how much of their data they are putting out there. As kids sign up for online services, download specific apps, and make posts on social media, they are creating a detailed online footprint that can be used by advertisers, governments, and hackers. Plus, in most cases, this data cannot be taken back once it has been published.

What laws and regulations are in place to protect my child?

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and the same is true when it comes to online activity and mobile phones. Government's around the world have begun to take the privacy and well-being of children online more seriously, which has resulted in a multitude of new laws and regulations being introduced.

In the United States, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) was passed to help set up a framework for companies that may have users who are minors. It outlines rules around providing consent for collecting of information for underage users. For example, parental consent must be given when children sign up for services where their private information may be shared with companies and other users. This includes guidelines for how parental consent is to be verified, the responsibility companies must have when marketing to underage users, and the requirement of a clear privacy policy that parents and their children can review.

Many experts and parents feel the current laws in many places around the world don't go far enough, however. COPPA, as an example, was passed in 1998. While it may have been adequate at the time, a lot has changed since then and many aspects of online interactions may not be covered by the act.

Some countries have taken further steps to protect children online with new laws. In the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was introduced in 2018 with sweeping new rules for online service providers. Within these new rules were laws specifically designed with underage Internet users in mind. Users under the age of 16 have specific protections, and online service providers must seek parental consent before opening accounts for children and teenagers.

The hard truth is that no law will ever be able to completely protect children online, and a lot of the responsibility ultimately falls on you as a parent to ensure that your child is safe.

What can I do to help protect my child?

When your child holds a smartphone in their hands, they are connected to the entire world. As such, protecting your child may seem like a daunting task, but there are a number of things you, as a parent, can do to ensure your child is enjoying the best that their smartphone has to offer while avoiding potential risks.

The most important thing you can do is to have honest and ongoing conversations about smartphone use and online safety. Take time to discuss the risks of communicating online and help your child understand that the people they are communicating with may not always have the best intentions. You can also help your child read and understand terms of service documents or privacy policies so that they are aware of just how much information they are about to share when signing up for a service or downloading apps in app stores like iTunes and Google Play. The same thing goes for in-app purchases. Many people, adults included, simply ignore the important details of these documents and don't consider the reality of what they are agreeing to.

Setting clear rules around smartphone usage can also go a long way in ensuring your child's security. Things like sharing passwords with you, limiting smartphone usage to certain hours, taking away phones before bed, and allowing review or approval of apps and services before they are used can be very effective solutions. Also be sure to make it clear that you are always available to answer questions and concerns for your child. It's unrealistic to expect that any family rules can completely eliminate the risks associated with smartphone use, but if your child feels comfortable coming to you then you are able to help address situations before they get out of hand.

Many companies have also introduced tools to help your monitor and control what your child does with their smartphone. Some apps can be installed that block certain services or websites, limit smartphone screen times, and even monitor conversations for problematic keywords that may indicate your child is at risk. Tracking apps can be helpful in monitoring your child's location. Many online interactions turn into real life meetings. A tracking app can help you verify that your kids are where they are supposed to be.

Ultimately, like implementing new laws, apps and services can only go so far in protecting your child when they use their smartphone. Education at home is key to ensuring that your kid has a positive experience online. Be available, be approachable, and stay up-to-date on the latest news and information regarding online security.

Some apps, services, and resources to consider

There are a number of services you can use to help you keep your child safe and secure when they begin using their own smartphone. Some of these services are free, while others may require a monthly or annual subscription.

Norton Family Premier is a paid service that costs $49.99 per year. With this service, you can protect and monitor an unlimited number of users and device, which is helpful if you have multiple children using smartphones, tablets, and laptops. While the service is one of the more expensive ones available, the peace of mind offered is priceless. Parents can set detailed rules and restrictions for blocking websites and inappropriate content, limiting device usage to specific hours, setting usage limits, tracking device location, and even remotely locking devices. In addition, Norton Family Premier can save a 30-day log of conversations on the device, including texting, so that parents can review who their child is talking to and the content they are discussing. This is an extremely valuable feature, especially if your the parent of a teenager, since sexting is becoming a rampant problem.

Qustodio, much like Norton Family Premier, offers a variety of different monitoring and privacy settings. Plan pricing tiers begin at $39.95 per year and the price increases based on the number of devices you wish to protect. With cross-platform support, Qustodio offers some of the boadest protection available in the industry. You can get detailed reports delivered to you that outline how much time your child is using their device, what services they are using, and the content they are viewing or sharing online. One major downside of Qustodio is the limited social networking monitoring, which only includes major social networks like Facebook. Smaller networks that tend to attract kids who are always looking for the newest trend may not be covered.

Another top rated parental control app is Net Nanny. The web interface on Net Nanny is among the easiest to use and parents can set schedules for device usage much like other competing services. The location tracking feature provides a look into the location history of your child and monitoring of where they are when they're out of the home. The one major downside of choosing Net Nanny is the lack of call or text message monitoring, which means that your child's messages aren't reviewable unless you physically check the device yourself.

In addition to monitoring services and apps, you may want to consider educational tools designed to help children understand their role in their own online security. Many Internet service providers have created their own child-friendly education portals and other companies have developed both paid and free solutions. These services put topics in a way kids can understand and even offer gaming-style elements to keep kids engaged in the content. An online privacy education tool can be a great way to supplement your own discussions with your children and give them the opportunity to explore and learn in a way that may be, dare we say, fun.