

Why Tech Execs Don't Rush to Get Their Children Smartphones

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The *New York Times*' [article](#), "Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent," reveals that leading tech executives set strong limits on their own children's tech use. One such limit is that kids aren't provided smartphones until they reach between the ages of 14 and 16. This contrasts with the overall trend of giving

younger and younger children smartphones, as many elementary- and middle-school-age kids now carry them.

Why do tech exec parents think so differently on the issue of smartphones? In all likelihood, their insiders' knowledge allows them to see through the false promise that smartphones bring the family closer. Kids I work with as a child and adolescent psychologist rattle off their typical afternoon schedules: "Well... I come home, grab a snack, and then I'm upstairs on my phone for most of the night." Even when families share the same space, e.g., at restaurants or around the house, kids' heads are down, focusing less on family and more on social media posts, online videos and endless texting. Parents also give their kids' smartphones based on the widely-held, but false, belief that peers should take precedence over family once kids reach their preteens and teens. Of course, children should have friends, and good ones at that. But the truth is that even older kids need their parents more than peers. Consider life on the American frontier in 1850, which is representative of how humans have long lived and struggled to survive. Would teens of this era occupy themselves primarily by chatting with peers? Of course not. Instead, they lived alongside their parents from dawn until dusk, sharing work, laughs and occasional sorrows.

Why are preteens and teens better served by parents than peers? Parents' more developed brains and greater life experience better equip them to guide kids through what are often rough times. Parents also help children more because they are invested in them in a way that peers can never be. Most parents would give their lives for their kids. The sad truth is that teens can arrive at school to find that overnight online

drama has destroyed the peer relationships they have become dependent on.

High-tech parents also don't provide their younger children smartphones because they understand the devices promote a life focused on digital entertainment at the expense of academic success. Smartphone-fueled teens now spend an astounding eight hours each day between *entertainment* screens (video games, social networks, online videos, TV) and texting and talking on the phone. It's a confusing message to tell kids that school should be a priority when their phones provide continuous access to addictive digital entertainment.

Clearly, the smartphone limits provided by tech exec parents benefit children. Yet as the parent of a preteen, I understand the challenges of raising kids with tech rules that are more rigorous than is typical. To overcome these challenges, parents and others who care for children should take the following actions:

- **Practice hands-free parenting:** When parents attempt to care for children with one hand constantly clutching their own smartphones, they communicate to children that technology trumps the parent-child relationship, and they encourage kids to seek comfort in their own devices. So put your phone away, as much as you can.

Schools should support children's learning with smartphone limits: Considering that teens use their phones almost solely for entertainment, it's not surprising that a recent London School of Economics [study](#) found that a ban on smartphones at school considerably improved kids' test scores. The formula is simple: Putting phones away makes for better schools.

Provide healthful alternatives to smartphones: A recent Pew [study](#) found that high levels of smartphone access among African-American as compared with white teens (85 percent to 71 percent) is driving extremely high online use among kids of color: 34 percent of African-American teens are online "almost constantly," while only 19 percent of white teens report using the Internet this often. Because teens' [top online](#) activities are gaming and social networking (both associated with lower academic grades), high smartphone use among teens of color is dragging down their academic success. Afterschool homework clubs and other positive alternatives to wasting time on smartphones should be made available to all children.

Be the strong, wise parent your child needs: Are you unsure if you can set limits on your child's tech use? Don't be, as kids need our help. *Authoritative parenting*—which describes being highly engaged and setting strong expectations/limits with children—produces the best emotional health and academic outcomes. To practice

authoritative parenting means not letting kids disappear to their smartphones at the expense of family and school. Of course, preteens and teens will resist limits on smartphones, as they don't have the brain development/judgment to fully understand why such limits are in their best interests. You can respond by being gentle but firm in your limit setting. Also, reach out to parents in your network to encourage them to be on the same page.

Limit phone functions to promote children's connection to family and school: As kids' reach their preteen years, many parents appropriately decide children need a phone to be in touch with family. To provide kids phones without Internet access, ask your cell phone provider to set up your child's phone without a data plan, which allows kids to have a nice-looking phone without distracting Internet access. To prevent kids from incessantly texting peers, have them keep their phones off at home. Allowing kids to call their friends on a home phone is a much better option.

When children get a smartphone, set limits on it: When should kids get a smartphone? The tech exec parenting guideline of between 14 and 16 years of age is a good guide. But take notice that high-tech parents set strong limits on their teens' smartphones, often requiring that phones stay out of kids' bedrooms and limiting their use to weekends.