



Smartphone Smarts for Summer and Beyond

Helping Young People Rediscover Curiosity, Connection, and Real-world Fun

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Each year, summer arrives with the same promise: more time, fewer scheduled events, and the freedom to explore and experience new things. Unfortunately, for many young people today, summer just means more hours spent on phones, tablets, and gaming consoles.

According to emerging research from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the experiences that most strongly support youth wellbeing are surprisingly simple: time outdoors, face-to-face friendships, creativity, movement, and a sense of purpose. Yet those experiences are increasingly crowded out by digital distractions.

Summer offers families and communities a powerful opportunity to reset habits. A smartphone-free or screen-light summer doesn't mean rejecting technology entirely. Instead, it means making intentional space for the kinds of activities that help young people grow, connect, and create memories.

It can also be a natural moment to consider when smartphones enter a child's life.

For Children: Why Waiting Matters

When children receive smartphones at very young ages, they gain access not only to communication tools but also to social media, endless entertainment, and a digital world designed to capture attention. For younger children (under age 13) who are still developing self-regulation and decision-making skills, that environment can be overwhelming.

Delaying smartphone access gives children more time to develop important life skills: managing boredom, resolving conflict with friends, building independence, and learning how to focus their attention. Waiting also makes it easier for families to establish healthy digital habits before smartphones become part of daily life.

Many parents find that simple

alternatives—like basic phones for calls and texts, shared family devices, or watches with communication features—can meet practical needs without introducing the full digital ecosystem too early.

While age 13 is a helpful guideline, readiness for smartphones is also about maturity. Some families use a simple readiness checklist like this one before introducing a personal smartphone device. This checklist is designed to strengthen family conversations and support healthy technology habits. It also assists in establishing family parameters and expectations.

For Teens: A Screen-Light Summer

Of course, many teenagers already have smartphones. For them, the goal is not eliminating technology entirely but creating healthier boundaries around it. Summer offers the perfect opportunity to reset habits. During the school year, screens often

dominate free time. But summer brings something many young people rarely experience: long stretches of unstructured time.

Instead of filling every spare moment with scrolling or gaming, teens can experiment with what a screen-light summer looks like. That might mean setting daily device-free hours, keeping phones out of bedrooms at night, or choosing activities that naturally draw attention away from screens.

Re-Experiencing the Outdoors

One of the easiest ways to reduce screen time is to spend more time outside.

Neighborhood parks, community pools, trails, and open spaces provide a setting where movement, conversation, and curiosity happen naturally. A bike ride with friends, a pickup soccer game, or simply reading quietly under a shade tree offers the kind of unstructured freedom that many young people rarely experience during the school year.

Rediscover Offline Fun

A screen-light summer also makes room for activities that engage the hands and imagination. Drawing, painting, journaling, playing music, cooking, gardening, building, or learning a new skill all help young people develop focus and creativity.

These types of activities also strengthen attention, problem-solving abilities, and persistence – skills that support long-term success in school and beyond. Just as importantly, they help young people discover interests and talents they might never find through a screen.

The Value of Boredom

Parents often worry when kids say they are bored, but boredom actually can be one of the most valuable parts of summer. Many innovators, artists, and entrepreneurs credit boredom as the starting point for their best ideas. When constant digital entertainment disappears, the brain starts looking for something new to do. That curiosity can lead to creativity, exploration, and discovery. Giving young people space to experience it

may be one of the greatest gifts a summer can provide.

A Community Effort

Encouraging families to delay smartphones until age 13 and embrace screen-light summers is not about rejecting technology. It is about making choices that promote health and restore balance.

Both children and teens need time to explore their neighborhoods, build friendships, develop independence, and discover who they are away from constant digital input. Communities play an important role in making that possible. By supporting families, investing in parks and recreation, and creating spaces where young people can gather, play, and connect, communities directly contribute to the well-being of the next generation.

The Health Foundation of East Texas is supporting a broad, collaborative effort to transform our community into a place where youth can thrive, with digital wellness as a central component of our efforts. Please visit us at healthfoundationet.org to learn more.

Smartphone Readiness Checklist

Use this checklist to help decide if you and your teen are ready to manage the risks and responsibilities.



Parent or Guardian Am I Ready?

- ☐ Can I have calm conversations with my teen about their tech use?
- ☐ Am I comfortable having ongoing conversations with my teen about online dangers such as cyberbullying, predators, sexting, and phishing?
- ☐ Do I know how to use parental controls and safety settings on my teen's phone?
- ☐ Am I willing to set limits on screen time – either on my own or in conversation with my teen – and enforce them?
- ☐ Has my teen developed a healthy foundation of screen-free activities to purposely devote their time to?
- ☐ Is my teen responsible with their belongings?



Teen Am I Ready?

- ☐ Can I have calm conversations with my parent or guardian about my tech use and who I interact with online?
- ☐ Do I understand that my parent or guardian will monitor my phone use to keep me safe?
- ☐ Am I willing to talk to a trusted adult if something online feels off or makes me uncomfortable?
- ☐ Do I have hobbies or things I like to do that don't require screens?
- ☐ Do I complete my homework and household chores on time?
- ☐ Do I feel comfortable communicating with others in-person?