

What research tells us about kids' phone use and health

More than half of kids now have a smartphone by age 12 and by the time they're teenagers, nearly all of them do. At this point, it doesn't seem to be a question of if kids will get a phone, but when, and that "when" keeps creeping younger.

The Health Foundation of East Texas (HFET) is supporting a broad, collaborative effort to transform our community into a place where youth can thrive — and digital wellness is a central component of that. There is already growing evidence that delaying smartphone introduction until age 13 or later is an important part of protecting children's physical and mental health.

A recent Children's Hospital of Philadelphia study published in the AAP journal *Pediatrics* helps clarify what's at stake. Looking at data from over 10,000 children across the country, researchers found that children at age 12 with smartphones were significantly more likely to experience obesity, depression, and insufficient sleep, compared to their peers without smartphones. They also found that the younger a child is when they get a smartphone, the greater these risks become.



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These findings articulate what parents and clinicians have long sensed — timing matters when it comes to smartphones. As a mother of four who were teenagers during the rise of smartphones and social media, I personally witnessed the impact both had on my children's social connections, self-esteem and well-being. Early adolescence is a developmental crossroads, when kids are especially susceptible to influences that shape health — and smartphones are a powerful one.

What stood out in the research was how quickly smart phones can impact children's health. Even among children who didn't have a smartphone at 12, those who got one over the next year were significantly more likely, by age 13, to report serious mental health

and sleep problems than peers who still didn't have one. Notably, these shifts appeared within a single year, even after accounting for how children were doing before they got a phone. For parents wrestling with when a child is ready, the findings suggest that waiting until age 13 or later may offer meaningful protection.

While there is no cookie-cutter approach to how to best support your child's digital wellness, there are some clear guidelines for how to prepare them for and support them through their relationship with technology. I know firsthand how overwhelming it can feel trying to navigate boundaries, parental controls, and all the new apps. That's why HFET created a simple checklist to help parents and guardians assess whether their child is ready, and whether they themselves are prepared to take the steps needed to keep their child safe online.

Our checklist isn't about ticking every box perfectly. It's a conversation starter: Do you have a plan for checking in? Does your child know common online risks? Do you know how to manage the parental controls, monitoring, and safety settings on your child's phone? See

our checklist and other helpful resources at HealthFoundationET.org/SmartphoneSmart.

Technology is not inherently "bad." But it does carry clear risks, especially for children and youth. Currently, social pressure and the fear of a child being left out when all their friends are interacting on smartphones — or when their soccer coach or dance teacher shares after-school schedules via text or app — can make early smartphone access seem inevitable. But when so many families and experts share the same unease about early smartphone use, it's a sign it isn't just about individual parenting choices. As a society, we have made delaying feel almost impossible for parents. But working together, we can change that.

The Foundation is proud to support East Texas in developing common sense community approaches to digital wellness that help all our youth thrive.

— Smittee Root is the executive director at the Health Foundation of East Texas where she leads the team in identifying and investing in solutions, initiatives, and partnerships that significantly improve community health and well-being in East Texas.